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Visions of the Nation and Feelings of Loss in the Works of Steen Steensen Blicher

The Napoleonic Wars represented a turning point for the Danish realm due to the loss of its fleet in 1801 and 1807, the destruction of three-quarters of its capital city in the British bombardment in 1807, resulting in nearly a thousand of its inhabitants injured or dead, and the loss of many of its overseas connections, many of its markets and ultimately leading to a declaration of national bankruptcy in 1813. The composite state of Denmark had to cede Norway to Sweden in 1814, which was a severe blow, not least due to Norway's importance as a market for agricultural products. One of the eye-witnesses to the bombardment of Copenhagen was Danish writer Steen Steensen Blicher (1782–1848). He summarizes the losses in his booklet *Danmarks nærværende Tilstand* – actually a tribute to the royal couple Prince Frederick and Princess Wilhelmine Marie on occasion of their wedding in 1828 —¹ in the following manner:

Only when cunning in association with violence attacked the peaceful, innocent country with vastly superior forces, it was drawn — very much against its will — into the millstream that so far just had roared in the distance, and powerlessly streamed past the levee, which the monarch's wisdom and love for his people had erected and protected. — In the course of seven years, our many mighty enemies did everything to tear down this beautiful work of centuries: the fleet was robbed, the ship traffic was put to a halt, and trade and trust in our valuta destroyed; and not before our unlucky ally was toppled could peace be bought by severing a bond that was more precious because of its old age, due to the mutual friendship, the likeness in language, customs, and mindset, which had tied and strengthened it, than it was important in economic or military perspective. — Now, according to sound consideration, Denmark could certainly be regarded by

¹ Blicher, "Danmarks nærværende Tilstand," *SSkr.* 13, 170–89. The complete title is: *Danmarks nærværende Tilstand kortelig framstillet i Anledning af Deres kongelige Højheders, Prinds Frederik Carl Christians og Prinsesse Wilhelmine Maries, Formæling, den første November 1828*, cf. *ibid.*, 229.

our enemies as ruined, and even many disconsolate of our own predicted nothing less for it than national bankruptcy.²

Blicher was directly affected by these calamities which he relates from a more general perspective (for the shaping of individual and collective bodies through emotions, see Jules Kielmann's chapter in the present volume). In the bombardment, he lost his lodging and all his possessions and had to leave the ruined city for Randlev, Jutland, to stay with his father.

It is clear from his autobiography that he had aspired to be and wished to remain a member of the learned circles and urban middle-class of the Danish capital, but the downturn of the economy put an end to these ambitions.³ In addition, when the war was over, he was directly affected by the agricultural crisis, as he had invested in a farm estate called Ødegaardssjorden.⁴ Blicher would never again succeed in becoming established in Copenhagen, and therefore had to follow family tradition and sustain himself and his growing family as a parish clerk in Jutland. Located in the periphery, he became one of the most prolific writers of the Biedermeier period, today mostly known for his Jutish stories such as *Røverstuen* (1827, *The Robber's Den*), *Hosekræmmeren* (1829, *The Hosier and his Daughter*), the canonized crime-story *Præsten i Vejlbye* (1829, *The Rector of Veilbye*) and for his poems, some of which were put to music. In 1824, his story *Brudstykker af en Landsbydegns Dagbog* (*The Journal [or Diary] of a Parish Clerk*) marks the breakthrough of realism in Danish literature.⁵ Still, his work includes many

² My translation. — “[F]ørst da List i Forening med Vold med uhyre Overvægt angreb det fredelige, uskyldige Land, henreves det — haardelig mod sin Villie — i den Malstrøm, der hidtil kun brusede fjernt, og magtesløs skyllede forbi den Dæmning, Monarkens Viisdom og Kjerlighed til sit Folk havde opført og bevogtet. — I syv Aar gjorde vore mange mægtige Fjender Alt for at nedrive Aarhundreders skjønne Værk: Floden ranedes, Skibsfarten standsedes og Handelen og Creditten tilintetgjordes; og først da vor ulykkelige Allierede var styrtet, kunde Freden gjenkjøbes ved Sønderrivelsen af et Baand, der var mere dyrebart for sin Ælde, formedelst det gjensidige Venskab, den Lighed i Sprog, Sæder og Tænkemaade, der havde knyttet og befæstet Samme, end vigtigt i oeconomic eller militair Henseende. — Danmark kunde vel nu, efter rimelig Calcule, af vore Fjender ansees for ruineret, og selv mange Mistrøstige af vor[e] Egne spaaede det intet ringere, end nærforestaaende Nationalbankerot.” — Blicher, “Danmarks nærværende Tilstand,” *SSkr.* 13, 179–80.

³ Cf. Blicher, “Steen Steensen Blicher,” *SSkr.* 25, 83–137. He returned to Copenhagen for his exam in 1808, but had to rush it due to economic difficulties, and when he once more had to move in at his father's, he points to the continuing inflation as the reason (“den nu stedse stigende Foringelse af Coursen”), *ibid.* 89–91.

⁴ Knud Sørensen, *St. St. Blicher: Digter og samfundsborger* (København: Gyldendal, 1985), 217, 57–58.

⁵ Cf. Sven H. Rossell, “From Romanticism to Realism,” in *A History of Danish Literature*, ed. Sven H. Rossell, *A history of Scandinavian Literatures 1* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 219–20.

other genres such as articles in newspapers and journals on various topics including agriculture and political matters, travel accounts and topographical writings, translations and theatrical plays.

In the context of the topic nation and loss, a case study on Blicher is especially rewarding in three aspects: (1) Blicher is an ever-active contributor to the nationalist discourses of his time and focuses on a variety of related issues, such as Danish identity and cultural history, Danish language and dialects, the loss of territory after 1814, the Schleswig-Holstein Question, and Pan-Scandinavism. (2) The themes of loss, change, and alienation are highly prominent in his work, in both his fictional stories and his political writings.⁶ The theme of loss is frequently treated in combination with the questions of “nation” and “Danishness”.⁷ (3) Blicher adds a distinctive regional perspective to the discussion. Being dependent on and confined to his parish in Jutland for most of his life, he writes from the periphery, far away from the Danish capital of Copenhagen, although from a central position with regard to the conflict around the disputed Danish-German borderlands.

This article focuses on the intersection of hybrid discourses around national and regional identities on the one hand and negotiations of feelings of loss within discourses around cultural history on the other hand. It shows how this thread evolves and develops from Blicher’s early works and onwards.

Ossianic Landscape

When Blicher entered the literary scene in his mid-twenties, he stood under the fresh spell of a most seminal work that already had had an immense impact on European

⁶ Blicher’s stories are usually tagged as “tragic” and as being characterized by the role of destiny, cf. e.g. Søren Baggesen, *Den blicherske novelle* (København: Gyldendal, 1965); Sune Auken, “Den moderne tragiker — Steen Steensen Blicher,” in *Dansk litteraturs historie*, eds. Klaus P. Mortensen and May Schack, vol. 2: 1800–1870 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2008), 328–331. As they apply techniques of documentary literature, they create the appearance of authenticity, cf. Thomas Bredsdorff, “Documentarism as a Formal Category in Nineteenth-Century Danish Literature: Structure and Rhethoric in the Classic Novella,” in *Documentarism in Scandinavian Literature. Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft*, eds. Poul Houe and Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam: Rhodopi, 1997), 183–198. For a recent discussion of the complex of destiny, theatricality and melancholy, see Claus Esmann Andersen, “Lutherdom og teatralitet i Blichers ‘Præsten i Vejlbbye,’” *Danske Studier* (2014): 168–199.

⁷ For a combination of ‘loss’ and ‘nation’, see e.g. the hits when doing a search of ‘fædreland’ + ‘tab’ and similar searches in the corpus of *Arkiv for Dansk Litteratur* (<http://adl.dk>), which does not even contain the complete edition *Samlede Skrifter* (33 vols., 1920–34), but the selected works from *Udvalgte Værker* (4 vols., 1982–83).

literate for half a century, and which would also make a lasting impression on him: James Macpherson's *The Poems of Ossian*.⁸ The importance of Blicher's encounter with this work can hardly be overestimated. It seems to have sparked his own literary production. He mentions it in an autobiographical sketch and the printed autobiography;⁹ he translated and published it in two volumes (*Ossians Digte* 1807–1809) and immediately composed some poetry of his own which adopted the somber tone and the imagery of the Nordic sublime, with some works even directly referring to Ossian such as *Ossians Svanesang* ("Ossian's Swan Song") and *Ossianske Elegier*.¹⁰ The Nordic landscape in the Ossianic works is characterized by stereotype elements — "the grave, the memorial stones, the moss, the tree, the whistling wind — all shot through with a profound sense of the tragic mutability of human affairs", and the heroes of the works, despite of being portrayed as Gaelic people of the Old, are "all too obviously late eighteenth-century 'men of feeling'", as Harry D. Watson puts it.¹¹ The melancholic, elegiac tone resounded well with young Blicher; it remained a source of inspiration throughout his production, and one component became an *ostinato* in Blicher's poetry and novels, that is, the lamenting of a changed world and a lost past, in the form of a sad farewell and *Abgesang*. In the preface to *Ossians Digte*, Blicher addresses Ossian's loss of his love Everallin, his friends, brothers, and only son Oscar, and leaves the reader with the picture: "Only the old blind man was left, alone among the graves of all his friends, and he the remnant of his family. So Ossian sang, and down through the centuries the mountains of Scotland resounded with his song."¹²

⁸ Cf. Harry D. Watson, "Steen Steensen Blicher and Macpherson's Ossian," *Northern Studies* 17 (1981): 28–29. On the enormous impact of Ossian and its international reception, see e.g. the detailed timeline (up to 2004) by Paul Barnaby in *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. Howard Gaskill, *The Reception of British Authors in Europe* 5 (London New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), xii–lxviii, and Howard Gaskill, "Introduction: Genuine Poetry ... like gold", *ibid.*, 1–20.

⁹ Blicher, *SSkr.* 32, 51: "[F]ra 1de Nov. 1801 til 1803 [...] *conditionerede* han paa Falster, hvor Fritimerne deltes mellem Jagten og — Ossian." The mentioning of Ossian as a source of inspiration is the more remarkable as the sketch was sent on the demand of Christian Molbech in 1839 who complained in a letter to N.F.S. Grundtvig that it did so to say "not contain a word about his education [*Bildung*] in his youth or about his academic studies, or a clarification of how he became a poet in the first place, from what time his first works were &c." (Blicher, *SSkr.* 32, 208–209). In the printed autobiographical sketch from 1840, Blicher mentions Ossian as a lifelong friend ("*Morvens kongelige skald*") and his work on the Ossian-translation, Blicher, *SSkr.* 25, 86–88.

¹⁰ Cf. Joep Leerssen, "The North: A Cultural Stereotype between Metaphor and Racial Essentialism," in *Northern Myths, Modern Identities: The Nationalisation of Northern Mythologies since 1800*, ed. Simon Halink, *National Cultivation of Culture* 19 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 18–19.

¹¹ Watson, "Steen Steensen Blicher," 28–30.

¹² "Ene var den blinde Olding tilbage, ene blant alle sine Venners Grave, og han den sidste af sin Slægt. Da sang *Ossian*, og gjennem Aarhundrede gjenløde Scotlands Bjerge af hans Kvad." Blicher, "Fortale. Om Ægtheden af *Ossians Digte*," in *Ossians Digte*, *SSkr.* 1, 8. Translation Joel D. S. Rasmussen, "Notes for Paper

A key element of the Ossianic poetry is the agency of the landscape as such:

Yet even when used for the purposes of the Ossianic simile, the landscape tends to become an end in itself [...]. And it is perhaps not so much a question of sympathetic imagery which serves to integrate the landscape into the action, but rather that the landscape often is the action, dwarfing the merely human into pale parasitic insignificance. It does not merely echo the desolate mood of the characters, but it is the characters themselves who are a reflection of the landscape [...].¹³

Indeed, Ossian remained a companion for Blicher throughout his entire life. When his father died in 1839, Blicher wrote *Psalmer ved Oldingen Niels Blichers Jordefærd*. These short psalms, to be performed at the home and in the church, make use of rather conventional Christian metaphors. Still, Blicher added a note to the poem: "My father died in his 91st year after having been completely blind for 6."¹⁴ Anyone receptive to Ossianic imagery and tone could not have missed the resemblance to the figure of Ossian, whose blindness is a core element of his conception as a literary figure, connecting him to the blind seer of the classical tradition.

Fig. 1 KMS395

"Ossian Singing His Swan Song," Nicolai Abildgaard (1780–1782), National Gallery of Denmark

Sentimental Journey and National Peregrination

Blicher was not the first writer to take up Ossian as a source of inspiration and relate it to a landscape within the Danish realm.¹⁵ Both Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg had already done so in German in their bardic poetry of the

95–Paper 245," in *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks 11: 1: Loose Papers, 1830-1843*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn & al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 414.

¹³ Howard Gaskill, "Introduction: Genuine Poetry ... like gold." In *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, ed. Howard Gaskill. The Reception of British Authors in Europe 5 (London New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 5–6.

¹⁴ Blicher, "Psalmer ved Oldingen Niels Blichers Jordefærd," *SSkr.* 23, 44–45.

¹⁵ Cf. Anna H. Harwell Celenza, "Efterklange af Ossian: The Reception of James Macpherson's 'Poems of Ossian' in Denmark's Literature, Art, and Music," *Scandinavian Studies* 70 (1998): 359–96.

1760s, and there were plans to send the likewise Ossian-inspired Danish writer Johannes Ewald to Scotland in order to bring home sheet music to Ossianic poetry.¹⁶ In 1772 and again in the following years, the *Selskab til de skønne og nyttige Videnskabers Forfremmelse* (“Society for the Advancement of Fine and Useful Arts”) had announced a prize for the best loco-descriptive poem about a Danish or Norwegian landscape, finally awarded in 1776. In 1777, the anonymous poem *Horneelen, et Bierg Nordenfields i Norge*, supposedly composed by Peter Harboe Frimann, was published together with others of the submitted poems.¹⁷ The patriotic *Selbskab* had invited submissions for ‘poetry of landscape’ (*Landschaftsdichtung*): more precisely, poems on places in the Danish realm which stand out because of their pleasant or, in contrast, their horrific nature. Peter Frimann’s Hornelen-poem clearly delivered on the latter and provided Gothic or Ossianic aesthetics in the description and characterization of the Norwegian site, in combination with a bardic attitude.¹⁸

One generation later, Blicher’s early works included a poetic travel account, *Jyllandsrejse i sex døgn* (“Travel through Jutland in six days”, 1817), this one also heavily inspired by Ossian. The opening poem (“Forsang”) sets the tone with heather-clad hills, mossy grave monuments, roaring storms and the like and promises a “deep, sombre song”.¹⁹ The stanzas at the end of the work round it off in the same way, and in both

¹⁶ Cf. Anne-Bitt Gerecke, *Transkulturalität als literarisches Programm: Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenbergs Poetik und Poesie*, Palaestra 317 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002); Wolf Gerhard Schmidt, ›Homer des Nordens‹ und ›Mutter der Romantik‹: *James Macphersons Ossian und seine Rezeption in der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2003), vol. 1, 502–542, on the German bards 543–87. Schmidt emphasizes the intertextual character of the processes that can make it difficult to relate specific traits exclusively to Ossian, as the *Poems of Ossian* themselves are “an intertextual collage” (514), and that neither Klopstock nor Gerstenberg would indeed be fully valid representatives of literary genre of bardic poetry (527).

¹⁷ Harald Næss, “Peter Harboe Frimann and the ‘Hornelen’ Affair,” *Scandinavian Studies* 38 (1966), 26–35; Joachim Grage, *Chaotischer Abgrund und erhabene Weite. Das Meer in der skandinavischen Dichtung des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, Palaestra 311 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 198–99, 204–05.

¹⁸ Næss, “Peter Harboe Frimann and the ‘Hornelen’ Affair,” 26–35; Grage, *Chaotischer Abgrund und erhabene Weite*, 224–26. Both emphasize P. Frimann’s use of iambic pentameter which brings out the “gothic mood” (Næss, 33) and connect to the English examples – Alexander Pope and Thomas Tickell – in the announcement of the prize (Grage, 198–99 and 223).

¹⁹ “Eensom jeg laae paa min lynggro’de Bakke, / Stormenes Brusen hen over mig gik, / Mossede Gravsteen var under min Nakke, / Oppe i Skyerne dvælte mit Blik. / [...] / Følte, at Oldtidens dybeste Rune / Hugges i Stenen og er ikke meer; / Ossians Harpe og Shakespears Basune / Ak! ere begge kun Aske og Leer! / [...] / Elsk meg min Ven! naar på Aandernes Hede / Lyder min dybe, tungsindige Sang, / [...] / Skummel og graae er min Fædrene Hede; / Dog under Lyngtoppen Blomsterne staaer; / Lærken blandt Gravene bygger sit Rede, / Og sine Triller i Ørkenen slaaer.” — Blicher, “Jyllandsrejse i sex Døgn,” *SSkr.* 4, 120–24.

cases, Ossian is explicitly addressed. In addition, the final fifteen stanzas are one long series of apostrophes (Selma, Morven, Fingal, Oscar, Cona, Toscar, Ossian).²⁰

The work as such stands clearly in the tradition of sentimental journeys in the wake of Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1775), Danish examples being e.g. Jens Baggesen's *Labyrinten* (1792–93) and, later, Hans Christian Andersen's *Fodreise fra Holmens Canal til Østpynten af Amager i Aarene 1828 og 1829* (*Peregrination from Holmens Canal to the East Point of Amager*, 1829). In these works, factual events are combined with fictive ones in a humorous way, focusing on the subjective experience, on feelings and emotions in contrast to rationalistic and descriptive travelogues.²¹ This connection is, again, very prominent in the "Forsang" with its emphasis on strong feelings²² including tears of joy and vertigo in the encounter with the holy and the sublime.²³

One feeling particularly prominent in the work is the feeling of loss within the context of vanitas. Ossian's harp and Shakespeare's trombone are gone, laments the "Forsang," and the people and places from the *Poems of Ossian* listed in the final stanzas of the *Jyllandsrejse* appear in a lament of loss in form of an *ubi sunt* catalogue. While Blicher introduces himself as the literary character "S. S. Blicher", who is not just the lyrical "I" in some poems but also plays a role in the dialogue, humor and (self-) irony are mostly generated by the dynamics between "Blicher" on the one side and the playful alter ego "S. S. Barbeer i Nibe" on the other. While several features thus point back to the eighteenth century, others are in line with the gradual ideological shift from a patriotic towards a nationalist attitude about history and the state. The rise of the nation as a dominant frame of reference in identity discourses after the Napoleonic wars also changed the perception of landscape and historic monuments. Travelogues and poetic topographies reacted to this shift by adjusting the focus of the feelings: the fear of losing

²⁰ "Selma, Selma! hvor er din Skjald?" etc. — Blicher, "Jyllandsrejse i sex Døgn," *SSkr.* 4, 126–28.

²¹ Andreas Keller and Winfried Siebers, *Reiseliteratur* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2017), 99.

²² "Mægtig jeg følte: den stærkere Flamme / Blev ved hans Ord med den svagere Gnist: / Følte, at Lærken er skabt af den Samme, / Som satte Midnattens Sanger paa Kvist. // Frydede mig, at de tusinde Tunger / Kvæde i evigt, uendeligt Chor; / [...] // Ak! men jeg følte, at jordiske Sjæle / Drømme kun dunkelt om Himlens Fryd / Og at selv Digterens stærkeste Mæle / Er kun en fage hendøende Lyd. // Følte, at Oldtidens dybeste Rune / Hugges i Stenen og er ikke meer; / [...] // Følte, at Skjalderøst svagt ikkun hylder / Ham, som bag Solen og Stjernerne boer" — Blicher, "Jyllandsrejse i sex Døgn," *SSkr.* 4, 121–22.

²³ "Da svam en Taare af Fryd i mit Øje [...]" and "Følte, at Skjalderøst svagt ikkun hylder / Ham, som bag Solen og Stjernerne boer, / Tiden og Rummet alene udfylder — / Svimplende Dyb for en Skabning af Jord! // Rystet som af den Almægtiges Torden, / Svimplende ved hans Uendelighed / Skalv jeg [...]" — Blicher, "Jyllandsrejse i sex Døgn," *SSkr.* 4, 121–22.

one's identity due to foreign influence triggers a national reinterpretation of the landscape and its monuments.

Fig. 2 B255

“Dolmen at Raklev, Røsnæs,” Johan Thomas Lundbye (1839), Thorvaldsens Museum, Denmark

Journeys and travels within the nation become peregrinations of national self-assurance, leading the travelling subject to its nationally defined self.²⁴ Tine Damsholt has shown how this shift played out in Christian Molbech's travelogue *Ungdomsvandringer i mit Fødeland* which appeared in print in two volumes 1811 and 1815,²⁵ and Robert William Rix has recently discussed how travelogues from the beginning of the nineteenth century deal with monuments of the Nordic past, specifically looking at Molbech's travelogue and those of Adam Oehlenschläger, Rasmus Nyerup, and N. F. S. Grundtvig.²⁶ Molbech was Blicher's contemporary, they shared many interests and attitudes and were later even travel companions on a journey to Sweden in 1836.²⁷

This dynamic shift is also observable in Blicher's works. He belonged to the first generation which received proper schooling in the patriotic spirit with works such as Ove Malling's *Store og gode Handlinger af Danske, Norske og Holstenere* (1777), but even if he was in many ways a man of the 18th rather than the 19th century, the logic of nationalist thought began to play out from his earliest works onwards. The national spirit and character, the nationalised and emotionalised landscape, the individuals' strong ties to their nation through their landscape of childhood and mother tongue — and the fear of losing this essentially national identity and of being overpowered by foreign influence are motifs and lines of thought which get stronger over time. Already in *Jyllandsrejsen*, one finds e.g. verses about how, in a clash with Saxons, doubt

²⁴ Cf. Andreas Keller and Winfried Siebers, *Reiseliteratur* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2017), 107–08.

²⁵ Tine Damsholt, “En national turist i det patriotiske landskab,” *Fortid og Nutid* 1 (1999), 3–26.

²⁶ Robert William Rix, “Visiting the Nordic Past: Domestic Travels in Early Nineteenth-Century Denmark,” *Scandinavian Studies* 90 (2018): 211–36.

²⁷ Cf. Blicher's poetic memory from 1837, “Svithiod. Efteraarserindringer fr en Sommerreise i Sverrig i Aaret 1836,” *SSkr.* 20, 178–216 and his prose account from 1840, “Sommerreise i Sverrig Aar 1836,” *SSkr.* 25, 145–220; Tine Damsholt, “En national turist i det patriotiske landskab,” 3–26. — ead., “Fædrelandskærlighed og borgerdyd. Om borgerrolle, moralitet og følelse,” in *Borgerrolle og borgerrett.*, ed. Kirsti Strøm Bull (Oslo: Dreyersforlag, 2015), 53–66. — ead., *Fædrelandskærlighed og borgerdyd. Patriotisk diskurs og militære reformer i Danmark i sidste del af 1700-tallet.* Ethnologiske Studier 6. (København: Museum Tusulanum, 2000).

extinguished Danish courage, and Danish hearts opened for fear and sorrow so that Denmark was on the brink of being enslaved by the enemy from the South and poised to lose both its world-famous name and its ancient language.²⁸ The strong ties of the nationally conceptualised individual to the landscape of childhood and “home” is dealt with in a clear-cut way in *Hiemvee* (1814), which Blicher published as part of a collection of poetry.²⁹ In this poem, “the Swiss in Paris,” “the Provencale in England,” “the Arab in Switzerland,” “the Huron in Arabia,” “the Norwegian in the Netherlands” — they all long for the place they *naturally* belong,³⁰ rounded off by verses in which a lyrical “I” states: “The sun of my childhood has smiled upon the dark heather”, and his bones one day will rest among the heather-clad graves of his ancestors.

Of Danes and Dens: In Search of the Past

In many of his stories, Blicher negotiates the themes of change, alienation and loss, often in an overall melancholic mood, as in *Brudstykker af en Landsbydegns Dagbog* (1824), *Sildig Opvaagnen* (1828), *Ak, hvor forandret* (1828), and *Hosekræmmeren* (1829).³¹ As Cecil in the latter story concludes: “The greatest sorrow, or far or near, / is to be parted from him you hold dear.”³² At the end of his story *Røverstuen* (*The Robbers’ Den* 1827), Blicher recreates the scene of a feast for the reader’s eye, as he evokes the traditional summer festival held by the inhabitants of the parish Vium in Jutland and some neighbouring parishes. Blicher’s father Niels had already related the custom in his *Topographie over Vium Præstekald*: On the afternoon of Whitsunday, young and old alike

²⁸ Blicher, “Jyllandsrejse i sex Døgn,” *SSkr.* 4, 163–64, e.g. “Dit stolte Navn, der lød gennem Seklerne vældigt / Fra Blaamænds solsvedne Marker til isbundne Gandvik — / Dit herlige Navn begyndte at slukke sin Straale; / Dit gode Sprog, hiint Maal for mægtige Aser, / Snart skulle det kvæles af Sydens fremmede Tunger” (164). Concerning the idea of an ‘old language’, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edition (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 44: “print capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation”.

²⁹ Blicher, “Digte,” *SSkr.* 4, 91–171: 130–37, cf. also Anker Gemzøe, “Tyske piger synger bedre, men ... – Den sammenlignende nationalfølelse hos Adam Oehlenschläger med særligt henblik på ‘Hiemvee’ (1805) og med sideblik på St.St. Blicher og N.F.S. Grundtvig m.fl.,” in *Der Norden im Ausland — das Ausland im Norden*. [...], ed. Sven Hakon Rossel (Wien: Praesens Verlag, 2006), 269–80, 275–76.

³⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 141–43 (cf. Jules Kielmann’s chapter in the present volume).

³¹ See e.g. Sven H. Rossell, “Steen Steensen Blicher. The Melancholy Poet of the Jutland Heath,” in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries*. Tome III: *Literature, Drama and Aesthetics*, ed. Jon Stewart. Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 7 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 49–65.

³² St. St. Blicher, *Twelve Stories*, transl. Hanna Astrup Larsen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), 236. The Danish has: “Den største sorg i verden her / Er dog at miste den man har kær.” Blicher, “Hosekræmmeren,” *SSkr.* 14, 33.

gather in a clearing in the forest — the horse pasture — and enjoy themselves with music, singing and dancing until the evening. In *Røverstuen*, the feast is described and then turned into a harmonious tableau: Ten years after the main plot has played out, one sees former adversaries at peace with each other, differences in social class no longer matter, a stranger of Hungarian descent has settled permanently in the village, has married a local bride and is well-integrated. The former poacher Black Mads, now a ranger, sits side by side with the gamekeeper; the owner of an estate, who had disowned his daughter ten years prior after she had eloped with her lover, takes a stroll together with that very daughter, her husband and their children.³³

With this countryside idyll, Blicher elaborates his own nostalgic Utopia, an idealized childhood memory³⁴ — here, there is no vision for the future that takes into account the real problems of his time. Nobody is missing. Nothing challenges the mostly homogenous community, neither internal tensions of a private or social nature nor any other intervention from the outside. In addition, the social external boundaries of the local community converge in a striking way to the spatial ones, that is, the edges of the clearing. Thus, the community is defined by nature.

When compared to Blicher's own characterization of the Himmelbjerg festival of 1839 in a newspaper article, it becomes clear that the final idyllic tableau in *Røverstuen* conjures up the image of an ideal community, or society. Blichers eyewitness report of the festival reads as follows:

*Here, joy was not an imagination, and hope not a dream. — Here, no class difference could be observed — not even in clothing — all was citizen, male and female. He, who has rank and titles for daily use, had on this true folk festival no other than Dane [...]. In this — mostly, one says mixed, but I call this uniform — congregation, there was not the slightest disorder, [...] and not one ambiguous word or crooked expression was to be seen for the whole long, wonderful day. May it return every year for eternity!*³⁵

³³ Blicher, *Twelve Stories*, 118–19; cf. Blicher, “Røverstuen,” *SSkr.* 10, 52–112, 108–112.

³⁴ Steffen Auring & al., *Dansk litteratur historie 5: Borgerlig enhedskultur 1807-48* (København: Gyldendal, 21990), 440.

³⁵ My translation. — “[...] *her* var Glæden ingen Indbildning og Haabet ingen Drøm. - Her saaes ingen Standsforskjæl — ei engang i Klæderne — Alt var Borger — og Borgerinde. Den, der til daglig Brug har Rang og Titler, havde paa denne sande Folkefest ingen anden end ‘Dannemand’ [...]. Der var i denne — ellers siger Man ‘blandede’, men herom siger jeg ‘*eensformige*’ — Forsamling ikke den ringeste Uorden, [...]”

It is fair to assume that this eyewitness report is to be understood as an expression of Blicher's wishful thinking rather than as an objective factual account,³⁶ and the eternal perspective of his wish links it even more closely to the Whitsun festival which he portrays as being as eternal as the cycles of nature (see below). The longing for social harmony and reliability, which shines through, is quite understandable: Already the core of the idyll, the summer festival of a stable local community, the members of which are firmly tied to that place, belongs to the past after Bernstorff's reforms and the lifting of the residential obligation for the peasants,³⁷ which led to greater mobility and progress. What was lost were the positive aspects of a rather fixed and immovable society, the comforting predictability of life in a local community, the feeling of belonging and stable traditions. When Blicher writes: "Every year, on the afternoon of Whitsunday", he thinks of traditions reaching far back in time and deeply rooted in nature, as becomes clear shortly afterwards:

You are in the horse pasture. This is the vespers of Whitsunday in Lysgaard district, the day of homage to beautiful and ever-young Nature, the levee of the forest, the triumph of summer. Thus it is celebrated till the sun goes down, and the forest is once more left to the birds and animals that have been for a time frightened away. Formerly only the peasants in the two or three nearest parishes assembled here. But the innocent, joyous feast itself is surely an old custom, perhaps as old as the forest itself.³⁸

For once, the Ossianic landscape is replaced by a bright and sunlit Danish *locus amoenus*, a vibrant, lively and colourful earthly paradise (cf. Peter Nørgaard Larsen's chapter in

og ikke et tvetydigt Ord, eller en skjæv Mine at mærke den hele lange, herlige Dag. Den komme igjen hvert evige Aar!" — Blicher, "Den første Folkefest paa Himmelbjerget," *SSkr.* 23, 171.

³⁶ Knud Sørensen: *St. St. Blicher: Digter og samfundsborger* (København: Gyldendal, 1985), 217.

³⁷ Cf. Uffe Østergaard, "The Nation as Event: The Dissolution of the Oldenburg Monarchy and Grundtvig's Nationalism," in *Building the Nation: N.F.S. Grundtvig and Danish National Identity*, ed. John A. Hall, Ove Korsgaard, and Ove K. Pedersen (Montreal & Kingston, Ithaca: MQUP, 2015), 110–33, 112–13.

³⁸ Blicher, *Twelve Stories*, 119; cf. Blicher, "Røverstuen," *SSkr.* 10, 109: "Du er i *Hestehaven*. Dette er Pintsefestens Aftensang i Lysgaard Herred, den skjønnne, evig unge Naturs Hyldingsdag, Skovens Courdag, Sommerens Triumph. Saaledes fejres den nu til Solen daler, og Skoven atter overlades til de forjagede Fugle og Dyr; men tilforn samledes her kun de to eller tre nærmeste Sognes Almue. Dog er denne uskyldige Glædesfest sikkerlig en gammel Skik, og ligealdrende med Skoven selv."

the present volume).³⁹ But Blicher would not be Blicher if he didn't add a coda in a minor key, i.e. a return to the melancholic lament of loss and forgetting, the breaking up of what belonged together and the distortion of tradition, as he ends his story by reconnecting it to its topographic beginning:

And so the story is at an end. Several generations lie between it and us. Bells have rung and hymns been sung over many of their descendants since the persons I have written about went to rest. Both the old squire and the young master have long since been forgotten, and no one knows anything about Black Mads. The manor has often changed hands, the land has been sold and divided. Only the robbers' den lives on in a dark and confused tradition. In the great heath, miles west of Karup river, there are some heather-grown hills which are still called, and always will be called by that sinister name. But no one remembers that it was once a refuge for tender and faithful love, a heaven under the earth.⁴⁰

Moreover, in this scene he adds an element of religious teleological thought to the landscape and its elements as he charges the horse pasture and the robbers' den with religious symbolism: the gathering place for the community is visited by all who can see — “even the lame and the cripples [...] must at least once a year enjoy the forest newly in leaf and bring home a light green beech bough—like Noah's dove—to the dark dwelling which is often a Noah's ark in miniature,”⁴¹ and the den, in which the lovers hid, was to them “a heaven under the earth”. Thus, Blicher gives us his ideal of the Danish nation in a nutshell, people and land, history and tradition all united under the beech tree — and then again, in contrast, the rough landscape of the great heath as an archive of a lost

³⁹ As for the perception of these types of landscape, their representation in art and their relation, see ch. 2.5 in Wolf Gerhard Schmidt, ›Homer des Nordens‹ und ›Mutter der Romantik‹: James Macphersons Ossian und seine Rezeption in der deutschsprachigen Literatur (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2003), vol. 1, 132–151.

⁴⁰ Blicher, *Twelve Stories*, 121; cf. Blicher, “Røverstuen,” *SSkr.* 10, 112: “Og saa er da Historien reent ude. Flere Menneskealdre ligge mellem den og os. Der er ringet og sunget over adskillige Slægter, siden de omskrevne Personer gik til Hvile. Baade den gamle og den unge Herre ere forlængst glemte der i Eggen, og sorte Mads veed nu Ingen mere af at sige. Gaarden har ofte skiftet Ejermænd; Godset er frasolgt og adsplittet. Kun om Røverstuen har et mørkt og forvirret Sagn holdt sig vedlige. I den store Hede, en Halvmiilsvej Vesten for Karup Aae, ligge nogle Lynghøje, som endnu bære og stedse ville bære hiint skumle Navn; men Ingen tænker paa, at der engang har været et Fristed for øm og trofast Kjærlighed [, en Himmel under Jorden].” The last words do not appear in the first edition and *SSkr.*

⁴¹ Blicher, *Twelve Stories*, 118; cf. Blicher, “Røverstuen,” *SSkr.* 10, 108: “Halte og Krøblinger [...] maae dog een Gang om Aaret forlyste sig i den nys udsprungne Skov, og hjembringe en lysgrøn Bøgeqvist — som Noahs Due fordum — til den mørke Vaaning, ofte en Noahs Ark i det mindre.”

past. The lovers' hideaway looks very much like a genre painting, with walls of large stones, a log ceiling, some furniture, and in the middle, the family of the *de facto* most honest, helpful and generous poacher Mads with the mother knitting a stocking, three children in a bed, and their friend Renard Foxtail at the table. Mads says about their modest home: "Renard thinks it may have been a robbers' den once upon a time, but it may have been a burial mound, for we found some black pots with ashes and bones in them."⁴²

The heather with the ancient burial mound connects with the beginning of the story, which opens with a panorama over the islands of Denmark and then zooms in on the gentle landscape of the islands and finally pans over to Jutland:

the farther inland we get the more the landscape changes: the valleys become deeper, the hills more precipitous; the forests look older and more decrepit; many a rush-grown bog, many a bit of ground covered with low heather, great rocks on the high backs of the fields [...].

When at last we reach the backbone of Jutland, immense flat plains are spread out before our eyes; at first they are strewn with grave-mounds, but gradually the number is lessened, which would indicate that this region was never cultivated in olden times.⁴³

Fig. 3 KMS355

"A View towards Himmelbjerget, Jutland. Evening," Dankvart Dreyer (1838), National Gallery of Denmark

Thus, the landscape is far more than just a framing element or a stage for the events, it resembles, precisely as Gaskell pointed out in the earlier quoted passage,⁴⁴ the general characteristics of the Ossianic landscape, and end in itself, the action itself, and the

⁴² Blicher, *Twelve Stories*, 116; in the Danish original, Renard's name is Mikkel, as the translator has kept the fox's traditional name in beast epic and fable. Cf. Blicher, "Røverstuen," *SSkr.* 10, 105: "Mikkel mener, det har været en Røverstue i gamle Dage; men kanske har det ogsaa været en Kjæmpebegravelse, for her stod et Par sorte Potter med Aske og Been i."

⁴³ Blicher, *Twelve Stories*, 79–80; cf. Blicher, "Røverstuen," *SSkr.* 10, 53–54: "Men jo længere Man nu kommer ind, jo mere forandres Egnen: Dalene blive dybere; Bakkerne brattere; Skovene see ældre og mere affældige ud; mangt sivgroet Kjær, mangen med kort Lyng bevoxet Jordplet; store Stene paa de højryggede Agre [...]. Naaer Man omsider Rygningen af Jylland, udbreder sig for Øjet de uhyre, flade Heder, i Førstningen bestrøede med Gravhøje, hvis Antal dog stedse aftager, saa at Man med Rimelighed kan formode, at denne Strækning aldrig tilforn har været opdyrket."

⁴⁴ Gaskell, "Introduction," 5–6.

characters themselves. The poacher Mads pops up as an “apparition” and an elemental force of nature as he comes riding on a stag “like a storm” — or one might say, like a master of animals in ancient myth.⁴⁵ The connection to the elements is strengthened by him doing several tricks with fire in the course of the story, also in addition to setting the heather on fire, when required in order to ensure an escape. He and his family live literally inside the earth, i.e. the burial mound from and into which he appears and disappears. All in all, the poacher is portrayed almost as the genius or spirit of the land. This means that he figures as a parallel to the characterization of the Celts in Blicher’s “Fortale” til *Ossians Digte*.⁴⁶ The stratigraphy of the physical nature with its explicitly addressed elements such as the sea-level from which the islands have risen, the den or grave-mound, the plains and hills and the heaven above is paralleled and intimately connected with a horizontally layered complex of culture and time. Prehistory is dug out and brought to light by the poachers, symbolized by the burial mound itself and the grave goods they found. The poachers show an archetypical way of life close to nature and completely dependent on the wildlife of the heather-grown plains. After the individual stories are told, there is another layer, that is, the summer festival ten years after the events, and in the last paragraph, the narrator lets the stories glide into the mists of oblivion, separated from “us” by several generations. Bells and hymns as well as the references “Noah’s ark” and the “heaven under earth” point to an overarching time frame: Biblical time and salvation.

The land forms the people and partly their character, *Røverstuen* says of the great heath: “No hedges, no rows of willows make division between man and man; one might think that all was held in common.”⁴⁷ The individual stories within *Røverstuen* create the impression of a collective novel. In this way, the spatial and temporal elements form the chronotope of Blicher’s short novels, one key element being the ever-present retrospective gaze into the past.

The Loss of Identity and the National Character

⁴⁵ Blicher, *Twelve Stories*, 80–81; cf. Blicher, “Røverstuen,” *SSkr.* 10, 55.

⁴⁶ *Ossians Digte*, “Fortale,” transl. Blicher, *SSkr.* 1, 4–5.

⁴⁷ Blicher, *Twelve Stories*, 80; cf. Blicher, “Røverstuen,” *SSkr.* 10, 53: “Intet Markhegn, ingen Pileplantning gjør mere Skjæl mellem Mand og Mand; Man skulde troe, at Alt endnu var i Fællekskab.”

Both in the idyll at the end of the story *Røverstuen* and the report on the first Himmelbjerg festival, Blicher conjures the image of a community of Danes where the differences and borders are obliterated — including the mostly uniform clothing. This aspect is to be viewed in the light of his revolutionary propaganda for a Danish national costume which goes back at least to the year 1816 (see below).⁴⁸ Ideas like this one were a reaction to the national identity crisis after the loss of Norway in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, and one of the more exotic attempts to deal with the far-reaching impacts of that national trauma. Suddenly, the Danish realm was reduced to that of a smaller European middle-sized power, which triggered Denmark's need to redefine and reassure itself in this new situation. The status was a driver behind the ideological shift from a patriotic stance towards a national attitude toward the state.

A specific identity of the Danish-speaking citizens within the Danish realm developed gradually from the middle of the eighteenth century and onwards, and this process gained momentum after the 16-month period of Struensee-rule (1770–1772) that worked as a catalyser within the transformation of the patriotic self-perception towards a more nationalist self-conception of the Danish population.⁴⁹ Less than twenty years later, the national confrontation under the “German Feud” (“Tyskerfejden”, 1789–90),⁵⁰ directed against the German-speaking fellow citizens of the multicultural realm, was triggered by a wave of urban middle-class excitement about the French revolution and the prevailing irritation about the political, societal and cultural influence of the “Germans” among the Danish citizens who felt side-lined by them. The increasing anti-Germanism and the construction of a bourgeois Danish identity were both a way of legitimizing the claim of acquiring greater political influence and equal economic

⁴⁸ Cf. Björn von Törne, *Zwischen Loyalität und Servilität: Steen Steensen Blichers politische Publizistik und ihre Voraussetzungen*. Skandinavistische Studien 12 (Neumünster: Wachholtz, 1980), 66.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ole Feldbæk and Vibeke Winge, “Tyskerfejden 1789-1790. Den første nationale konfrontation,” *Dansk Identitetshistorie* vol. 2, passim; Anne-Bit Gerecke, *Transkulturalität als literarisches Programm: Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenbergs Poetik und Poesie*. Palaestra 317 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 54–62; Nikolaj Bijleveld, “Germans making Danes: Germans and the German Language in Copenhagen and the Construction of Danish Culture 1750-1880,” *Battles and Borders: Perspectives on Cultural Transmission and Literature in Minor Language Areas*, ed. Petra Broomans & al., Studies on cultural transfer and transmission 7 (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing, 2015), 47–51.

⁵⁰ By the contemporaries, it went under “Holger Feud” as it was sparked off by the criticism of the opera *Holger Danske* by Jens Baggesen (libretto) and F. L. Ae. Kunzen (music) after it was first performed in 1789. Baggesen had adapted Chr. M. Wieland's *Oberon* and replaced the hero Hüon de Bordeaux by Ogier le Danois (*Holger Danske*), the opera was criticized for its eroticism, e.g. by Knud Lyhne Rahbek who condemned it for the “sissifying” effect it would have on the nation and for its “poisoning” of the national character, cf. Anna Sandberg, “Die ‘Holger-Danske’-Oper 1789: Kosmopolitismus und Körperlichkeit,” *Kosmopolitismus und Körperlichkeit im europäischen Theater des 18. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Katharina Müller and Stephan Michael Schröder (München: Herbert Utz, 2016), 213–14.

opportunities. Anne-Bit Gerecke argues that this construction is the expression of unfulfilled emotional needs, an “emotional vacuum” resulting from an enlightened focus on reason and the accompanying gradual secularization.⁵¹

By the 1830s, when Blicher steps up his criticism of foreign cultural influence, the situation had changed substantially, as perceptions of a threat and anti-German sentiments had been additionally charged by the experience of catastrophic events during the Napoleonic wars, especially the seven-year period of 1807–1814. In search for a scapegoat after the national bankruptcy in 1813, the writer Thomas Thaarup turned against the Jews, whom he accused of having pulled strings, and this sparked a literary feud between antisemitic and moderate voices (“Jødefejden”).⁵² Blicher participates in the debate on the moderate side and writes his first political article, *Bør Jøderne taales i Staten?* (1813), followed by another, considerably longer article, *Bedømmelse over Skrivtet Moses og Jesus* the same year.⁵³ In this debate, Blicher adopts a pro-integrational position and argues for enhanced rights for Jews in the state and the permission to choose professions from which they had been excluded up until this point. His argument fits in a line of argumentation where general flaws are attributed to the Jews as a people, but these are interpreted in the light of their difficult situation, as they are excluded from the society in many ways. The flaws would be mitigated, if not vanish completely, if they were allowed to participate in society with rights equal to those of the other citizens, while they now live in “a segregated community” and it is “to a lesser degree seen to their education”.⁵⁴

One of the interesting aspects in Blicher’s article is that he defends the Jews against the accusation of being non-national by stating that, to the contrary, “they keep being a nation” in spite of centuries of diaspora, persecution and all the other forms of suppression and hardship. In Blicher’s view, the basis for the Jews still being a nation is that they have maintained their national character — “and what is attacked? Their

⁵¹ Anne-Bit Gerecke, *Transkulturalität als literarisches Programm: Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenbergs Poetik und Poesie*. Palaestra 317 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 59.

⁵² Cf. Kjærgaard, “St. St. Blicher og jøderne,” 51, see also note 3.

⁵³ Blicher, *SSkr.* 3, 26–33,34–90.

⁵⁴ Blicher, “Bedømmelse over Skrivtet Moses og Jesus”, *SSkr.* 3, 89–90. Cf. Kjærgaard, “St. St. Blicher og jøderne,” 52–53, and Katharina Bock, “Un-unheimliche Juden oder: Warum spukt es im Schloss? Steen Steensen Blichers Novelle über eine jüdische Familie in Jütland,” in *Beschreibungsversuche der Judenfeindschaft II: Antisemitismus in Text und Bild– zwischen Kritik, Reflexion und Ambivalenz*, eds. Hans-Joachim Hahn and Olaf Kistenmacher, 83–107. Europäisch-jüdische Studien. Beiträge 37 (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2019).

national character.”⁵⁵ Others, by contrast, have lost it: “All other peoples, when they were defeated, have lost their religion, or language, or character, or all of these together. The Jews have kept everything, apart from their native country.” These lines are as much about the Jews as they are about the Danish majority – the true danger for a people lies in losing its national character, and thus ceasing to exist.

Here and on other issues, Blicher’s attitudes and ideas oscillate between ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ conceptions of the nation, of citizenship, of common culture. Kjærgaard has pointed to this paradox: Blicher demands throughout his works that the individual ‘ethnic’ groups of the realm respect each other, he makes an argument for giving the Jews rights as fellow human beings — and yet, just few years later, he advocates complete elimination of the “natmænd”, literally ‘people of the night’, that is, travellers including Roma, beggars, migrant workers, criminals and other indigent people whom Blicher deals with as if they were a nation. His suggestions are chillingly radical — he clearly states that they must not be killed; however, he does not hesitate to discuss camps and confined areas, and the removal of the children from their parents. In short, he applies a farmer’s conception of breeding (breeding out what is unwanted; keeping the “natmænd” from having children) and recommends a biopolitical policy to get rid of them completely in the course of 40 years.⁵⁶

Directly before the above quoted lines of *Danmarks nærværende Tilstand* in which Blicher relates the catastrophic events in years 1807–1814, he paints the brightest picture of what was lost:

Before 1807, Denmark had been lifted up to a level of Culture and Prosperity which had to arouse all foreigners’ admiration and the envy of many. The sciences, arts, trade, industry, agriculture were blooming under the aegis of wise laws and a mild government in such splendid way, that the Golden Age as invented by the poets seemed to rise in reality, and the Saturnian period indeed to return to Denmark.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ “og hvad er det egentlig man angriber? Deres Nationalcharakter.” — Blicher, “Bør Jøderne taaes i Staten?,” *SSkr.* 3, 28.

⁵⁶ Cf. Kjærgaard, “St. St. Blicher og jøderne,” 61–63.

⁵⁷ My translation. — “Før 1807 var Danmark hævet til et Trin af Cultur og Velstand, som maatte opvække alle Fremmedes Beundring og Manges Misundelse. Videnskaber, Kunster, Handel, Industrie, Agerdyrkning blomstrede under vise Loves og en mild Regjerings Ægide saa herligt, at Digternes fabulerede Guldalder syntes at vorde til i Virkeligheden, og den saturniske Periode for Alvor at være vendt tilbage i Danmark.” — Blicher, “Danmarks nærværende Tilstand,” *SSkr.* 13, 179.

In spite of this characterization being part of a panegyric booklet made for a royal wedding, it is not just hyperbolic praise of the pre-war state of the realm and, further on in the text, of the royal efforts to reestablish a well-functioning state, e.g. by a large-scale administration reform. Blicher inserts one of his basic convictions that is beyond pure rhetoric: If ranked directly, Blicher puts the values of national identity and tradition even above those of economic prosperity or military power — thus, he indicates that the loss of Norway was worse in terms of the separation of what belonged together due to the age-old similarity in the national character, than in terms of the economic or military consequences.⁵⁸

In *Danmarks nærværende Tilstand*, the Golden Age (“Guldalderen”) is clearly referenced as a lost age, more precisely: as primeval and lost according to classical myth, and then as seemingly having returned up until 1807 and now, in the subsequent years, having been lost a second time — a structure of thought that resembled the overall structure of the most influential of all romantic Danish poems, Oehlenschlägers *Guldhornene* from 1802/03, with the significant difference that the downfall of Denmark addressed by Blicher is the result of envy, cunning and violence exerted by enemies from outside, and that in his panegyrics, he emphasizes the post-war achievements of the monarch. This parallel is additionally supported by the element of ‘gold’ in both names. One has to assume that Blicher was aware of it, as he himself uses it in a close *stretto* in his Description of Jylland: “I rather praise the Age of the Golden Horns, it was at least the Golden Age of the women.”⁵⁹

Blicher criticizes “foreign domination” as it leads to the loss of national identity, which he writes about in his article “Danskhed” (“Danishness”) from 26 Nov 1838:

Long enough, far too long, it has been worked on the erasing of the old character. [...] Danish costume has been altered or cast down to the peasants. [...] [T]he great Danish mother tongue has been despised as the language of the plebs and

⁵⁸ Cf. “[...] Sønderrivelsen af et Baand, der var mere dyrebart for sin Ælde, [...] det gjensidige Venskab, den Lighed i Sprog, Sæder og Tænkemaade [...], end vigtigt i oeconomisk eller militair Henseende,” see above. — Blicher, “Danmarks nærværende Tilstand,” *SSkr.* 13, 179.

⁵⁹ “Da priser jeg Guldhornenes Tid; den var, i det mindste Kvindernes Guldalder. — Vistnok kjendte disse hverken Kniplinger eller Blonder; vistnok bedækkede de deres skønne Legemer med selvvævede Uldsærke, og selvsyede Skindklokker, men deres Omfavnelser frembragte Helte” — For Golden Horns, cf. e.g. Robert W. Rix, “‘In darkness they grope:’ Ancient Remains and Romanticism in Denmark,” *European Romantic Review* 26 (2015): 435–51.

has been cast, as the Danish costume, before the commoners and servants. One 'spreche-d' German and 'parler-d' French. [...] Even our games and amusements had to be exchanged. We do not even know our dances from old times any more — perhaps the Faroese ones belong to them; but we have had *Polish* dances, German waltzes, French dances, English dances, Scottish dances. [...] [W]e are other nations' monkeys — human monkeys.⁶⁰

As this polemical stance shows, Blicher views language, mentality, costume, mores and customs, and last but not least history and literature as belonging to a people in an essential way. Therefore, they have to be preserved, and he declares that returning to them is progress.⁶¹ This preservation also contains the active collection of folklore and heritage, even abroad in the former territories of the Danelaw, if one has reason to believe there would still be traces of it.⁶²

Criteria used to define one's own nation can *ex negativo* be used to identify the foreign, the threatening other. In his journal articles, Blicher takes up the issue of garb and national costume several times (cf. Kielmann's chapter in the present volume), and his ideas go back at least to 1816 when he concluded an article otherwise devoted to the economics of keeping sheep with the wish, that "we one day, *dressed in Danish national costume of Danish wool, could do without foreign countries products, and [without having to] pay them.*"⁶³ In an article in *Jyllandsposten* dated 22 Oct 1838 and published shortly before the above quoted piece on Danishness, Blicher writes that he would like to be able to distinguish a Dane from a foreigner already at first sight, by their dress. In the city, he says, one sees foreign people: "We do not know, whether they are Frenchmen or

⁶⁰ My translation. — "Længe nok, altfor længe er der arbejdet paa at udslette det gamle Præg. [...] Dansk Dragt blev omskaaren, eller hensmidt til Bonden. [...] det danske herlige Modersmaal foragtedes som Pøbelsprog, og henslængtes, ligesom de danske Klædemon, til Almuen og Tjenestefolk. Man sprekkede tydsk og parlerede fransk [...]. Endogsaa vore Lege og Forlystelser skulde ombyttes med fremmede. Vi kjende ej engang mere vore Oldtids-Dandse — maaskee den færøiske hører til disse; men vi have havt *polske* Dandse, tydske Valtser, franske Dandse, engelske Dandse, scotske Dandse. [...] vi ere andre Nationers Abekatte — menneskelige Abekatte [...]." — Blicher, "Danskhed," *SSkr.* 21, 190–91.

⁶¹ Blicher, "Danskhed," *SSkr.* 21, 191–92.

⁶² Cf. Blicher's letter to the king from December 1845 in which he asks for a travel grant to visit Richard Cleasby and collect remnants of Danish lore in Westmoreland, "here unknown and perhaps soon vanishing" — Blicher, "No. 372", *SSkr.* 32, 177–79, and his advertisement in *Randers avis* from 29.04.1846 where he addresses the public for funding, see Blicher, "Westmoreland", *SSkr.* 30, 116–17, 258.

⁶³ "[...] til vi engang, *iførte dansk Nationaldragt af dansk Uld, kunne undvære fremmede landes produkter, eller betale disse.*" — Blicher, "Faarefolding," *SSkr.* 4, 113.

Englishmen or their monkeys. Would it not be better if we could distinguish: ‘That’s a real Dane!’ And not like now: ‘That could be a Dane, or a foreigner, or a mix.’”⁶⁴

Blicher’s focus on, if not obsession with the national costume has its roots in a debate during the 18th century, as the question had been raised both in terms of creating a garb that was suitable to be worn for work that was rather simple and would reduce unnecessary display of wealth and thus save resources, and would be made of home-grown resources to keep money in the country.⁶⁵

Wars of Words: Perspectives on the state and propaganda

In “Danskhed”, Blicher warns against the dangers of the loss of identity resulting from adopting elements belonging to foreign cultures. The punishment would work from the inside, but in the case of smaller nations first be felt from the outside, in other words: The loss of national identity leads to the imminent danger of the loss of territory (cf Janowski’s and Bohlin’s chapters in the present volume).⁶⁶ He is especially suspicious of the Germans and German culture, as he also attributes the dissolution of the empire of Canute the Great to German influence.⁶⁷ Blicher contributed his share to the rising national tensions by writing his national propaganda in capital letters and does not shy away from insinuating images and all sorts of literary devices — he draws a dire picture of Denmark’s future if German influence should prevail:

What shall we do with Germanness up here? Haven’t we already got enough of it? Are we not already full after four hundred years of Germanization? What has it profited us? Mixed and messed up the pure, strong language of our fathers, confused, confounded the Nordic national character, pestered us with foreign, for us unnatural customs and habits. Is this still not enough? Shall Old Denmark become parcelled and chopped up in the same way as poor Germany which,

⁶⁴ “Vi vide ikke, enten det er Franskmænd eller Engelskmænd, eller deres Abekatte. Var det dog ikke bedre, om vi kunde kjende: ‘Det er en rigtig Dansk!’ Og ikke som nu: ‘Det kan være en Dansk, eller Fremmed, eller en Blænding.’” — Blicher, “Nationaldragt,” *SSkr.* 21, 170.

⁶⁵ Cf. Damsholt, *Fædrelandskærlighed og borgerdyd*, 136–144.

⁶⁶ Blicher, “Danskhed,” *SSkr.* 21, 192.

⁶⁷ Blicher, “Nationaldragt,” *SSkr.* 21, 171.

divided up into two hundred parcels of land, is its neighbours' hunting ground?
That is their affair! but we Danes must stand for our unity, our autonomy!⁶⁸

North and South become symbolic oppositions; the latter poses the threat of dominance and fragmentation. Holstein, especially the city of Kiel, plays a major role. Kiel as the place of the fatal peace treaty, is synonymous with the loss of Norway in 1814 and becomes in Blicher's writings a symbol of the threat of a future dissolution of the Danish realm. He engages in word play, as "Kiel" sounds like Danish "kil", meaning 'wedge': "When we made peace in Kiel, we allowed Norway to be wedged away."⁶⁹ In another instance, he uses the same word play to address the Danish resilience: "So, the German wedges from Kiel have not yet cloven our peninsula! No! The Danish wood is hard and robust, it spits the wedges out and sticks together."⁷⁰

In the 1840s, as tensions were rising to new heights (see Bjarne Thorup Thomsen's chapter in the present volume), the influence of countries other than Germany is hardly mentioned; Blicher's focus is exclusively on Germany. In his propaganda, he uses collective symbols and forceful images such as the 'inundation' and 'pests', all too well known from nationalist discourse. Comparing Germans with insects, Germany would look like an anthill or a beehive through a looking glass: with their hills or hives constantly disturbed from the outside, the inhabitants would be ever-busy to build them up again, yet, they would not thrive and would swarm out in masses.⁷¹ Blicher's political writings are full of metaphors and images, such as the Danevirke as a dyke against the (storm)floods from the South.⁷² As he praises the linguistic map of Southern Jutland by P. Chr. Koch in 1840, he comments: "It shows us the scene of the language war. It defines the terrain of the Danes and that of the Germans."⁷³

⁶⁸ My translation. — "Hvad skulle vi heroppe med Tydskheden? Have vi endnu ikke havt nok af den? Har fire Hundrede Aars Fortydskning endnu ikke mættet os? Hvad har den gavnet os? Klinket, kludret paa vort rene, kraftige Fædrenemaal, forvirret, forplumret den nordiske Folkeaand, belæmret os med fremmede, for os unaturlige Sæder og Skikke. Er dette endnu ikke nok? Skal gamle Danmark udparcelleres, søndersplittes, ligesom det stakkels Tydskland, der, deelt i to Hundrede Jordlodder, er Naboernes Jagtrevier? Dem derom! men vi Danske om vor Heelhed, vor Selvstændighed!" — Blicher, "En Tale til alle danske Mænd," *SSkr.* 26, 24.

⁶⁹ "[...] sluttede Freden til Kiel, ved hvilken man lod sig kile Norge fra." — Blicher, "Min Tidsalder," *SSkr.* 26, 234.

⁷⁰ "Saa de tydske Kiler har endnu ikke kløvet vor Halvø! Nei! det danske Veed er haardt og seigt: det spøtter Kilerne fra sig, og holder sammen." — Blicher, "Himmelbjergfesten 1843," *SSkr.* 27, 116–17.

⁷¹ Blicher, "Min Tidsalder," *SSkr.* 26, 182–83.

⁷² Cf. e.g. Blicher, "Opfordring," *SSkr.* 24, 3.

⁷³ "Det viser os Sprog Krigens Skueplads. Det bestemmer os det Danskes Terrain, og det Tydskes." — Blicher, "Kochs Sprog-Kort over Sønderjylland," *SSkr.* 32 [No. 277], 87.

Concluding Remarks

Blicher deals with Danish history, heroes of the Old, local traditions and folktales, and he does so in an elegiac tone informed by Ossian and the Nordic sublime – the portrayal of the distant national past is in itself a tale of loss of origin and unity. In his construction and imagination of communities, Blicher shows a mythicized and culturally loaded landscape, nostalgic utopias, ideals of — ostensibly lost — homogeneity, and political visions of the Danish composite state (*Helstaten*) and a united North. A recurrent thought in his works is that the past gives access to the authentic, unaltered *Volksgeist*,⁷⁴ the national character of the Danes, and that the preservation of the national character is a precondition for the future existence of a Danish people. Thus, Blicher repeatedly ranks the preservation of the true national character higher than, for example, economic growth. As a priest, he is inclined to charge his texts with references to Christian mythology, which adds authority and additional layers of meaning.

At the same time, Blicher adds a distinctively regional perspective to the discourse. Both his stories and his topographic writings map the province of Jutland and construct it as a separate community within the nation.⁷⁵ Like Molbech, who describes the Jutish landscape as sublime, Funen as picturesque and Zealand as beautiful,⁷⁶ Blicher emphasizes the sublime character of Jutland, and he gives it a voice by also writing in the Jutish dialect and by including dialect in the form of direct speech in his stories. He emphasizes that Jutland deserves to be regarded not as a somehow inferior province, but as a Danish heartland, preserving ancient traces of “Danishness,” national character and features of a common Northern identity, as opposed to the threatening “Germanness” in the South. Blicher uses the idea of a tripartite Danish nation to charge it with religious sentiment and authority and to make the claim for unity on a higher level by conceptualizing it as a God-given holy trinity.⁷⁷ Like Molbech, in his travel accounts

⁷⁴ Also focus on the *Volksgeist* is connected to the ‘rediscovery’ of Ossian on a European level, cf. John Hutchinson, “Cultural Nationalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed. John Breuilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 81–82. See also Jules Kielmann’s chapter in the present volume.

⁷⁵ For a comparable phenomenon in Sweden see Anna Bohlin, “Den svenska 1840-talsromanen som nationell kartografi,” *Samlaren* 137 (2016), 58–86 and her chapter in the present volume.

⁷⁶ Grand, “Visionen for Danmark. En politisk landskabskunst,” 96–98.

⁷⁷ Cf. e.g. Blicher’s letter to N.F.S. Grundtvig „Øerne, Nørrejylland, og Sønderjylland ere, eller skulde være, tre som eet, Danmark, Sverig og Norge ligesaa (foederativt), og Symboliken kan udføres baade videre og højere.“ — Blicher, “Breve [255],” *SSkr.* 32, 66.

and other works, he textualizes feelings connected to elements in the landscape —⁷⁸ among these the repeatedly invoked feeling of loss, or the fear of imminent loss. This fear is stirred up and exploited in political propaganda, e.g. in a newspaper contribution from 1843, in which he personifies Denmark and attributes sensations and feelings to the land itself in the context of his Pan-Scandinavistic engagement: Denmark is hurting and needs support from her sisters Norway and Sweden, as the “cure” provided by the German doctor would be the amputation of both her legs, that is, the loss of Schleswig and Holstein.⁷⁹

In the minds and works of Blicher and his nationally-minded contemporaries, landscape, nature, the people, narratives, arts and politics were interconnected. Landscape and nature were treated as a national archive of a lost past in which traces of times of greatness were sought out, highlighted, and used within a national agenda, not least by the visual arts in Golden Age Denmark.⁸⁰ The view on landscape meets the view on history, in the case of Blicher’s Jutland especially prehistory, the Viking Age and the Middle Ages. The act of actualisation of these times of greatness — as forms of prehistoricism and medievalism — serves several functions, as Valentin Groebner has pointed out: It helps to establish a “we” through roots, ancestors, territory, origin, and tradition. At the same time, prehistory or the Middle Ages are a “chiffre of difference”, as they have what we lack and long for, be it primordiality, authenticity, true feelings, or the like — they provide an idea of essential life. Nevertheless, the history is lost and gone for good, it has to be reconstructed from fragments of the past. Herein, there lies an appeal, a *desideratum* for the future — and the potential for these charged images of history to be used, and misused.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Cf. Tine Damsholt, “En national turist i det patriotiske landskab,” 16.

⁷⁹ “Ja den Forkrympning udi mine Lemmer, / Den gamle Skade rigtig meget slem er: / En uophørlig Trækken, Strækken / I orthopædisk Institut / Naturligviis forøger Skrækken / For snart at blive reent caput. / Paa egne Been jeg ei maae staae; / Paa Krykker skal jeg stændigt gaae. / Hvis Du og Søster din endda [i.e., Norway and Sweden] / Mig under Arme kunde ta’e: / Jeg kom maaskee endnu til Kræfter, / Som jeg alvorligt længes efter, / (Den tydske Doctor er en grummere: / Han raaber paa — o Vok og Vee! / At mine Been skal sættes af. / Skeer det, saa kan man kaste mig min Grav).” — Blicher, “En Røst fra Danmark,” *SSkr.* 27, 136–37.

⁸⁰ For the political thought behind and in these works of art, see Karina Lykke Grand, “Visionen for Danmark. En politisk landskabskunst [...],” in *Guld: skatte fra den danske guldalder. Gold: Treasures from the Danish Golden Age*, edited by Karina Lykke Grand, Lise Pennington, and Anne Mette Thomsen, 94–125. Aarhus: Systime Academic, 2013. See also Peter Nørgaard Larsen’s chapter in the present volume.

⁸¹ Cf. Valentin Groebner, *Das Mittelalter hört nicht auf. Über historisches Erzählen* (München: C.H. Beck, 2008), 104.

Outside of the texts, in the physical world, Blicher tried to apply certain practices in nation-building endeavours, the most well-known of which were the Himmelbjerg festivals.⁸² These can be conceptualized not just as festivals here and now, but as rituals of reenactment of the past, linking them to the national landscape in which they were taking part. To Blicher, the past is not a foreign country — it is the true, indigenous, promised land, a paradise lost, to be regained.

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⁸² The striking aspect here is that Blicher seems to have a notion of what today would be called 'national identification', and he seems to understand the role of feelings in this individual process. Thus, he wants to create situations where Danes would experience a "corporeal 'feeling of belonging'" as a step towards the feeling of national identity, cf. Jonathan Heaney, "Emotions and Nationalism: A Reappraisal," in *Emotions in Politics. The Affect Dimension in Political Tension*, ed. Nicolas Demertzis (London, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 243–263, 249, 260–61. Cf. also Dieter Langewiesche, "Gefühlsraum Nation [...]," *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* 15 (2012): 195–215.

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