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# Constructing Danish Identity: Transcultural Adaptation in Peter Høeg's *The History of Danish Dreams*

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This paper discusses the Danish novel *Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede*, published in 1988, or perhaps more accurately, the 1995 American translation of the novel, *The History of Danish Dreams*. That is important mainly because this paper concerns several acts of transculturation both within the novel and in discourses surrounding it. I, like many Americans, came to Peter Høeg's work rather late in the game, specifically after the publication of his international bestseller *Froken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (1992; *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, 1993). The hype surrounding that novel, including its release in a film version in 1997, led to reconsideration, in the international context, of Høeg's earlier work, which in turn led to the translation and publication of the novel considered here, Høeg's debut work.

*Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede* traces the development of one family through the changes of the last few hundred years of Danish history. The project, as set forth in the foreword, is to present an exhaustive yet simple historical account of the dreams, dreads, hopes, and expectations of the twentieth century, but in so doing, Høeg also describes the development of a particular individual, and through the three-part structure, with each part representing a single generation, presents Mads, the narrator, as a representative member of contemporary Danish society. Mads is the product of the history of his family, as well as the events of his time, and as such, represents the development not only of his own identity, but that of the Danish nation as well. The events are representative in their very commonality:

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“Pointen er netop at disse to situationer ligner så mange andre” (Høeg 1988, 8) [“The point is precisely that these two incidents resemble so many others” (Høeg 1995, 2)]. The novel thus presents the idea that a similar description, one of isolated, particular events of one family, can be utilized to present the picture of a nation, or perhaps the century itself. As Mads states, “jeg tror at indlejret i mange—ja muligvis i hvilken som helst—af hverdagens begivenheder ligger der et koncentrat af et helt århundrede” (Høeg 1988, 8) [“I believe that encapsulated within main everyday events—and, yes, possibly any event whatsoever—lies the essence of an entire century” (Høeg 1995, 2)]. Each character’s identity results from a negotiation of ideas and dreams that are presented as either corresponding to societal norms or innate cultural understandings, with those of others—their spouse or parent, or those with whom the character is living, working, or traveling. Catherine Claire Thomsen identifies the novel as “fundamentally, a genealogy: a *post hoc* reconstruction of the random meetings and couplings and marriages that have produced the current generation, of which the narrator turns out to be a member” (Thomsen 2002, 49). However, the novel also presents the means by which these events occur, and the negotiations that happen within these meetings and couplings, a schema that is presented as far from random. In essence, each subsequent generation is formed on the basis of transculturation, and in an ever-repeating cycle that recurs in each chapter, leading to the current identity of Mads, and, by proxy, that of Danes in general. The net result of this negotiation is a constantly varying notion of personal identity, which changes not only with the times, but also with the intermingling of the classes and backgrounds of the carefully selected characters, representative of the whole of Danish culture.

The novel thus provides the opportunity to explore the effects of transculturation through the use of rewriting, social interpretation, and identity construction. It is utilized in identity construction in the formation of a nationalism that seems based on a dialectical process that is not linear but that always forms further elements and interstices of difference. This nationalism reflects neither the complete assimilation nor the refutation of either a social norm or the otherness each character encounters both in relations with others and in themselves. Høeg presents the personal exploration of the narrator Mads, who (re)presents the development of Danish national identity through his own (re)writing of his family’s construction. In the novel, then, Mads stands in for all Danes, and the dialectical construction of his identity

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becomes an alternative narrative of Danish identity as a whole, one in which ongoing transculturation is vital. This paper contends that Høeg's understanding of the modern Danish national identity—and how transculturation, adaptation, and translation, in their various forms, both create and hinder its final development—represents an alternative to the nominal narrative of Danish identity, and opens space for that narrative to be challenged, in what remains an ongoing process in Høeg's understanding and in his novel.

## THE HISTORY

*Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede* was an award-winning novel, well-received in the Danish market when published in 1988. However, in the United States, reviews were mixed (although still mostly positive) when the North American edition came out in 1995.<sup>1</sup> Part of the reservation can be attributed to the comparisons of this novel with the bestseller it preceded, as noted by Jim Shepard in his review in the *Los Angeles Times*:

*The History of Danish Dreams*, Peter Høeg's first novel, follows his second, *Borderliners*, into English translation, which followed his third, the universally admired *Smilla's Sense of Snow*. Which means poor Mr. Høeg will probably have to endure his share of reviews that announce with disappointment that his first novel is different from his third. (Shepard 1995, 74)

Now, despite getting the order of the novels wrong,<sup>2</sup> Shepard criticizes Høeg, as others have done as well, for being both less good than in *Smilla* (the price of fame, perhaps) and also for being derivative.<sup>3</sup>

1. For example, John Skow's review in *Time*, in which he compared *The History of Danish Dreams* with *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, is generally poor (Skow 1995).

2. *De måske egnede* (1993; *Borderliners*, 1994) was the second to be translated into English, but was actually Høeg's fourth work and third novel. Høeg's second work was a collection of short stories, *Fortællinger om natten* (1990; *Tales of the Night*, 1998), and his second novel was the international bestseller *Froken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (1992; *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, 1993; or in the UK, *Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, 1993).

3. The accusation of being derivative was not new to Høeg in Denmark. Both this first work, which was cited as having “clear debt” [“tydelige gæld”] (Høeg 2013a) to Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Høeg's short story collection—described as overly similar to Karen Blixen, the canonical Danish writer—garnered similar criticism, as is alluded to in current descriptions of his work. For instance: “Igen trækker Høeg på den litterære tradition; bogen er en Blixen-pastiche med forbillede i *Syv fantastiske fortællinger*” (Høeg 2013b) [Once again Høeg draws on a literary tradition; the book is a Blixen-pastiche with resonances in the *Seven Gothic Tales*].

It is this latter claim that I take up, since part of either the praise for or criticism of the novel has always been tied to its status as an adaptation. *Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede*, while not being a direct adaptation or translation of a novel like Gabriel García Márquez's canonical *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, does function to adapt the Latin American boom novel and the magical realism of such novels into the Danish context. Adaptation is an interesting phenomenon, as it always produces both an original and a derivative text. And to consider a text *as* an adaptation, as Linda Hutcheon argues, is both to read it as "an autonomous work" and to examine it as a "deliberate, announced and extended revisitation of [a] prior work" (Hutcheon 2007, xiv). She goes on to emphasize the context of the adaptation, specifying that an adaptation "always happens in a particular time and space in a society" (Hutcheon 2007, 144). So, for example, reading from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* at the opening ceremony of the London Olympics has one resonance, while reading the same text in a Mexican American Studies program in Arizona represents a course that, as stated in the first item of Arizona State Law 15-112 (A.R.S. § 15-112), "promotes the overthrow of the United States government" (and is therefore banned from the school). Furthermore, what Hutcheon calls a transcultural adaptation represents "almost always . . . an accompanying shift in the political valence from the adapted text to the 'transcultured' adaptation. Context conditions meaning, in short" (Hutcheon 2007, 145). As Høeg shifts the context of his novel both across space and time, it becomes necessary to consider how the literary techniques of magical realism, as well as the basics of the plot, are re-interpreted in a Danish context in the late 1980s. In this space, a postcolonial writing back against a colonial discourse and creating an alternative and newly independent national identity, as one can argue is a product of Márquez's context, is shifted to the context of a historically European colonial power, one that had a higher influx of immigrants, especially those from outside Western Europe, than it has had in recent memory, a trend that has not abated.<sup>4</sup>

4. According to the "Asylum Quarterly Report," Denmark accepted 15,000 asylum seekers in 2014 and suggested in 2015 that they would not accept more refugees from the ongoing crisis in Syria (quoted in Skærbæk 2015). There were 20,825 asylum seekers in 2015 ("Asylum Quarterly Report" 2016). In contrast, Denmark accepted 14,000 asylum seekers (primarily from the former Yugoslavian states) in 1992 and an additional 15,000 in 1993. These numbers were three times the amount who arrived in previous record-setting years in the 1980s (many of whom were from Iran at the end of the Iran-Iraq war) (US Department of State 1994). Robert Kuttner also claims that non-European immigrants have tripled in Denmark since the 1970s (2008, 86-7).

So, considering the political moment in which this novel was first published in Denmark, in 1988, there is a resonance with the need to have a dialogue about Danish identity. In reaction to social change, the political landscape of 1980s Denmark was affected by the rise of an anti-immigrant sentiment on the political right. This sentiment can be exemplified with the rise of the Danish politician Pia Kjaersgaard (b. 1947), who, both as a member of the *Fremskridtspartiet* (The Progress Party) in which she was instrumental in a policy shift starting in 1987, and, in the decade following 1995, as the leader of the *Dansk Folkeparti* (The Danish People's Party), pushed an anti-immigrant agenda and positioned herself and her political allies as defenders of Danish values and cultural norms.<sup>5</sup> These are presented as inherent values, the legacy of a cultural religion stemming from Denmark's long-established relationship with a Christian tradition, and are often conflated, especially in political discourse, with an ethnic Danish identity. Høeg's novel, and its use of Márquez's familial historical model (*Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede* also tells the history of a single family as a stand-in for the creation of modern Danish identity), engages directly in this dialogue about what it means to be Danish, and suggests that Danish society is not as uniform and homogenous as it is sometimes described. The Danish Arts Agency notes the novel for precisely this reason: "Romanen foregreb de diskussioner om dansk nationalidentitet, der har fyldt meget i offentligheden i de senere år" (Statens Kunstfond 2010) [The novel anticipated the discussions about Danish national identity, which have been so prevalent in the public the last few years].<sup>6</sup>

What allowed Høeg to enter this discourse is precisely his use of transcultural adaptation, with the recognition that his novel mimics the format of a well-known literary innovation (Márquez won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1982) and further that he adapts the techniques especially of magical realism, to a country in which that type of literature had not previously been produced. In fact, some critics "defin[e] [magical realism] as a type of literature emerging exclusively in a postcolonial situation" (Aldea 2011, 4). While I realize this oversimplifies things, and, of course, the examples of Günter Grass and Italo Calvino challenge this notion, in neither Danish nor

5. Pia Kjaersgaard stepped down as leader of the party in September 2012, and then served as the *værdiordfører* (Values Spokesperson) for the party until 2015. She currently serves as the Speaker of Parliament (*Formand for Folketinget*).

6. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Anglophone criticism contemporaneous with the novel's translation in the United States did magical realism have a traditional place in a country or literary tradition such as Denmark.<sup>7</sup> This was based on a common "misconception that all magical realism is Latin American and that it originated particularly in tropical regions of Central America" (Bowers 2004, 33). Denmark arguably didn't have "a reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic," as Frederic Jameson put it in "On Magical Realism in Film" (1986, 311). The use of magical realism allowed Høeg to distance himself, and his novel, from the nominal discourse of Danish identity as uniform and static (especially prevalent in the rising right-wing political discourse), and opened up a means by which he could "anticipate" or enter the discourse about the origins of Danish identity. Magical realism is particularly adept at this recuperation of marginal identities and discourses, and it has become "associated with fictions that tell the tales of those on the margins of political power and influential society" (Bowers 2004, 33). This maps on well to postcolonial projects of writing back, in which previously unrecognized groups present their points of view in literary discourse. While Denmark is not usually seen as such a postcolonial nation (Denmark had colonies in the Caribbean, India, and still has [neo]colonial relations with Greenland, which Høeg considers in *Smillas fornemmelse for sne*), Høeg presents such discourse as happening not between nations, but internally within Denmark throughout the past century.

Essentially, Høeg's adaptation of the Latin American boom novel into the Danish context opened up a transcultural moment, both in a sense of translating the concepts, but also in (re)mediating the differences in cultures and (re)defining Danish identity as less homogenous, no matter the contemporary discourse. This positions *Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede* as a transcultural adaptation, and through this act of what could be called meta-transculturation, the novel also re-narrates a series of transcultural encounters as the process of Danish identity formation within the novel. It is *as* an adaptation that it provides the

7. While Denmark has writers whose works are now referred to as magical realist, or as exhibiting some magical realist traits, this is a retrospectively applied term to artists like H. C. Andersen, Karen Blixen, and even Ib Michael. This also represents the use of the more Carpentier-inspired magical realism, rather than German expressionist-inspired magic realism, which came to Denmark earlier, through the writings of Günter Grass, among others.

critical stance to speak to the contemporary political discourse, and allows Høeg to challenge a prevailing sense of innate cultural identity.

### DANISH DREAMS

*Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede* tells the stories of the ancestors of the narrator, a contemporary Dane, Mads. These stories, set in chapters based upon the relationships of certain couples, in effect recount not only the history of his family, but also the creation of the modern Danish national identity, its dreams and aspirations, and its encounters with and interactions of elements of its own culture and internal (as well as internalized external factors) foreignness in this identity construction. This construction is based upon elements from Mads's history, including the "otherness" of Mads's grandmother, The Princess, who comes from Southern Europe; the class differences between a child of the Christianshavn ghetto-like environment and those who study at the Sorø Academy; and an attempt to eschew both otherness and even the flow of time in a town that closes its walls and claims each day is the same. This paper focuses only on transculturation in an intracultural context, as all of these encounters happen within Denmark, even if not all members are initially accepted as part of the same Danish culture. Following Wolfgang Welsch, I argue that Høeg focuses on the local interactions, the individual and interpersonal connections in which the boundaries of cultures can be explored. Welsch argues that

wherever an individual is cast by differing cultural interests, the linking of such transcultural components with one another becomes a specific task in identity-forming. Work on one's identity is becoming more and more work on the integration of components of differing cultural origin. And only the ability to transculturally cross over will guarantee us identity and competence in the long run. (Welsch 1999, 199)

As we will see in the following sections, *Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede* is in large part focused on a series of interpersonal transcultural encounters that collectively, through the retelling of the "family history" story (adapted from the Latin American boom), construct Mads's identity.

The novel is broken up into three parts. Each part represents a distinct generation and a distinct time period. As the novel progresses, the amount of time covered by each section diminishes, and the story narrows toward a single individual, Mads, who is revealed at the end

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of the novel to be the narrator of the tale in question (a point that I shall return to). In Part 1, the reader encounters the stories of four characters, Mads's grandparents: Carl Laurids, Amalie Teander, Anna Bak, and Adonis Jensen. Each character is presented with his or her own development independent of the others, and is considered in his or her own chapter, with a noted chronological time frame. The characters are paired off, firstly, through the subtitles of their chapters (Carl Laurids's and Amalie's chapters are, respectively, called "Time That Stands Still" and "Time That Passes," while Anna's and Adonis's chapters focus on conventional morality in a similarly contrastive mode). The characters are paired off, secondly, by their future relationships. Part 2 of the novel presents the couples and their developments. Here again, they stand in dialectic opposition, with the chapter of Adonis and Anna representing poverty and that of Carl Laurids and Amalie representing prosperity (specifically listed in the chapter subtitles). Finally, Part 3 presents the story of Maria and Carsten, the children of the respective couples from Part 2, and their twin children Madelene and Mads (the narrator). Essentially, the novel is a presentation of the family tree of the narrator, but at the same time, it represents the history of Danish identity as created through Denmark's diverse elements throughout the past century.

### MØRKHØJ

The first chapter recounts the history of the town of Mørkhøj, a small town walled off from society, and time, by its ruling Count 200 years prior. The time frame for the chapter is 1520–1918, and this use of time points to one of the numerous elements of magical realism in the story: time has come to a standstill through the isolation of the town. This isolation prevents the subsequent development of the townspeople and the other inhabitants of the town, and severely limits, although does not entirely prevent, connections with the outside world. The Count's identity, and subsequently that of his subjects, whose identity was dictated by the actions of the Count, corresponded to specific cultural ideals, "den danske adels- og herregårdsdrøm om at tiden står stille med viseren pegende på feudale forhold og de fås rettigheder over de mange" (Høeg 1988, 15) ["the dream of the Danish aristocracy and landed gentry, of time standing still with the hand pointing to feudalism and the rights of the few over the many" (Høeg 1995, 10)]. This dream, as with many of the dreams recorded in the novel, is presented as a

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historical development, but can also be read as Mads's interpretation of the goals and aspirations of a particular historic element through his understanding of the appropriate cultural documents. In essence, this sets up the Count as having a type of innate Cartesian identity, which he created without reference to encounters and otherness (in contrast to a dialectical Hegelian concept that requires such encounters for identity to be formed). It also provides an intertextual link to canonical magical realist texts, paralleling the repression of the banana workers' strike and subsequent massacre in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In that novel, "García Márquez is playing with the idea of denial, taking it to an extreme where denial is transformed into complete ignorance" (Bowers 2004, 41). Maggie Bowers argues that

this can be seen as an example of the way in which magical realism can reflect the manipulation of reality by a corrupt government, with the willing connivance of the population until there can no longer be a believable version of events, only conflicting accounts or denials. (Bowers 2004, 41)

Høeg's Mørkhøj is similarly veiled in ignorance and denial. It is only through the later intervention of an individual, and the operation of a transcultural encounter, that progress can resume.

The Count's steward (who is also later important as Carl Laurids's father) was the only townsman permitted to leave the town, and introduced, rarely, elements of progress from the outside world. In addition, he conducted correspondence between the Count and the outside world, but rather than send the Count's letters as written to the various governmental authorities and taxation representatives, he translated the letters to maintain the status quo and protect the town of Mørkhøj. As the narrator indicates, "brevene blev afleveret til inspektøren, men Carl Laurids' far sendte dem ikke af sted, selvfølgelig sendte han dem ikke af sted. Han brød dem op og skrev dem om" (Høeg 1988, 16) ["The letters were handed over to the steward, but Carl Laurids's father never sent them. Naturally he never sent them. He unsealed them and rewrote them" (Høeg 1995, 11)]. This rewriting, itself an act of a type of cultural translation, serves as an indication not only of the rejection of the outside world by the Count, who refuses to acknowledge the needs expressed by that world for progress and integration within the society, but further establishes the steward as aware of both worlds simultaneously. The steward has the ability to interpret statements from both worlds, and uses this translation ability to protect the Count, even from the consequences of his own

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correspondence. Through this mediating act of cultural translation, he allows the Count to maintain “drømmen om at det kan lade sig gøre at lukke sig ude fra staten og verden og sin samtid” (Høeg 1988, 16) [“the dream of being able to shut oneself off from the state and the world and one’s own time” (Høeg 1995, 11)], a dream that belongs not only to the Count and his generation, but “som vi også kender” (Høeg 1988, 16) [“(with) which we, too, are familiar” (Høeg 1995, 11)]. The steward serves to mediate the distinction between the outside and inside culture, the “real world” and the mythical, magical space of Mørkhøj.

This boundary presented between the town of Mørkhøj and the outside world of Denmark is perhaps best explained as a transcultural threshold, to use John McLeod’s concept. As he notes, “the transcultural threshold can *productively* be thought of as one of conversation *and* silence, engagement *and* displacement, where cosmopolitan and postcolonial approaches productively inform each other rather than short-circuit an attempt to build ethical, hopeful mondialisation” (McLeod 2001, 11; emphasis in the original). What I would like to emphasize is the notion of both displacement, which I would argue is already partially accomplished through the removal of the individual from his respective cultural context, and engagement. In Høeg’s novel, the steward finds himself in a position of displacement, as he is knowledgeable about progress, but removed from its trappings. In Fernando Ortiz’s original conception of transculturation in his 1940 work *Cuban Counterpoint* (1995), there was no possibility of returning to one’s original context, and true contact with the outside world, or with the world’s progress, would remove Mørkhøj from the map completely. However, in today’s globalized world, the real-world implications of McLeod’s argument are more salient. The productivity inherent in meeting across such a threshold allows for the development of greater understanding. So, while here the emphasis is on the gaps inherent in the encounter across the threshold—gaps that the steward purposefully leaves and that allow some form of communication across the magical wall—it is in a transcultural site, and across a transcultural threshold, that the couples, here and throughout the novel, meet and interact.

### CARL LAURIDS AND AMALIE

The mutability of the narrative is also at focus here. Just as his father, the steward, rewrote the Count’s letters to obscure knowledge of the

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outside world, his son uses the process of translation and rewriting to enhance the story. Carl Laurids, in fact, rewrote the history of the town to recreate “Mørkhøjs kronologi siden den dag, da urene var sat i stå” (Høeg 1988, 24) [“the chronology of Mørkhøj since the day the clocks were stopped” (Høeg 1995, 22)]. This rewriting of history and his reading of the history aloud, in its new form, to the Count, represents the shift from the Count’s generation to that of Carl Laurids. Mads views the situation as “symbolsk: Greven ligger på sygelejet med lammet underliv, og ved sengekanten sidder Carl Laurids, den ny tids mand” (Høeg 1988, 25) [“symbolic: the Count lying on his sickbed paralyzed below the waist, and Carl Laurids sitting on the edge of his bed—man of the new era” (Høeg 1995, 22)]. At this point, Carl Laurids is tasked with reading the history of Mørkhøj aloud to the Count, who has a “mistro til sin egen hukommelse” (Høeg 1988, 25) [“mistrust of his own memory” (Høeg 1995, 22–3)], but instead reads his rewriting, or new interpretation, of history. This rewriting, or translation, by Carl Laurids was perhaps more factual, as interpreted by Mads, but also altered from its “original” form, thus calling into question both versions of history.

In this sense, Carl Laurids becomes the prototype of the new man, the progressive, forward-looking, modern man. Carl Laurids’s development into a man of a new era, as an outsider to the world of Mørkhøj, is prefigured in his relationship with his teacher/governess, Miss Clarizza. Their relationship never attained understanding, and Carl Laurids seems to forget her, or at least their romantic encounters, immediately following each incident in an affair that lasts for three years. Carl Laurids himself was unfathomable to his governess: “Miss Clarizza forstod ham aldrig, det var som om han hver gang han rakte ud efter hende stillede hende den samme uløselige gåde, som sammen med hendes ensomhed bandt hende til ham” (Høeg 1988, 22) [“Miss Clarizza never understood him. It was as though, every time he reached out for her, he posed her the same insoluble riddle and this, together with her loneliness, was what bound her to him” (Høeg 1995, 19)]. This view that Høeg presents of the connection, or lack thereof, between two people, and especially between two lovers, repeats itself throughout the chapters, and seems to constitute an understanding on his part of the impossibility of meaningful connection between two people, other than those located in transcultural sites. Carl Laurids represents complete foreignness to Miss Clarizza, and she is incapable of understanding him, in fact is incapable of anything more than brief romantic

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encounters with him. This proves true throughout Carl Laurids's life, that he has no meaningful connections with women, or anyone else; only in his marriage would the roles be reversed, and he would be unable to understand the foreignness of his spouse, Amalie Teander. Again, McLeod's concept of the transcultural threshold seems relevant, for the relationships that Høeg presents, especially here between Amalie and Carl Laurids, but also throughout the book, represent the "threshold of sound and silence" (McLeod 2011, 4) with its concurrent limitations on communication that he described in his *coutume* experience, a personal experience McLeod had of attempting to understand rituals and ceremonies in an unfamiliar culture and language. Just as McLeod was "unable to understand the words, but gradually learn[ed] the melody and rhythm . . . having no idea what [he] was singing about" (McLeod 2011, 4), so the connections between the couples seem to function. Carl Laurids and Amalie, despite both nominally belonging to the same culture, remain two still essential personalities without the possibility of meaningful connections, two representations of otherness, as true for Amalie as it was for Carl Laurids.

The inability for Amalie to be understood by others recurs in all of her relationships and her relationship with her husband is both premised upon and sustained by virtue of this complete lack of understanding. Their magical (realist) first encounter, where an emaciated Amalie floats to a flying blimp donated by von Zeppelin, culminates in a type of love at first sight, which promoted

ikke århundredskiftets modsigelsesfyldte drøm om smægtende og trofaste hustruer og fyrige stabile og vejefaste mænd, og heller ikke vores ideal om to frie voksne mennesker der går oprejst ved siden af hinanden ind i den lysegrønne fremtid. Det der ventede Carl Laurids Mahogni og Amalie Teander var en sumpkærlighed, et dampende morads af følelser der aldrig nogensinde kunne blive klare. (Høeg 1988, 182)

not the contradictory turn-of-the-century dream of the languorous, ever-faithful wives and spirited but steady and strong-willed husbands; nor yet our ideal of two mature and liberated individuals striding side by side, heads held high, into the pale green future. What faced Carl Laurids Mahogany and Amalie Teander was a romantic quagmire, a steamy morass of emotions that would never become clear. (Høeg 1995, 221)

This romance, and subsequent marriage, maintains its aura of incomprehension for both parties. Carl Laurids, the quintessential businessman

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who is always in control, is constantly found at a loss when dealing with his wife. Amalie, in turn, as most members of the Danish elite circles in which he circulated, has no real understanding of Carl Laurids, apart from her manipulation of him in terms of their sexual relationship, an ability upon which she later capitalizes. She assumes that she and Carl maintain similar ideas about life, about each other, that would persist into the future, that their dreams and sense of time were interlinked, but that proves to be a fatal error that manifests itself with Carl Laurids's final departure without warning.

For når Amalie har behandlet Carl Laurids med distræt overlegenhed, når hun har leget med ham og holdt ham på afstand og holdt hans længsel kogende og smertefuld og ustyrlig, er det ene og alene fordi hun har været sikker på at hun og han svævede i en boble i evighedens verdensrum, hun har været forvisset om at der aldrig nogensinde ville komme et øjeblik som dette hvor alt omkring hende syntes at smelte bort. (Høeg 1988, 223–4)

For when Amalie treated Carl Laurids with distracted disdain, when she played with him and kept him at arm's length and kept his desire simmering, painful and uncontrollable, it was only because she was sure that she and he were floating in a bubble in eternal space. She had been so sure that there would never, ever, come a moment such as this one, when everything around her seemed to be melting away. (Høeg 1995, 271)

Outside of the transcultural encounter, Amalie and Carl Laurids return to their individual roles, the aspects of their personalities (and, returning to the narratorial voice, the characteristics they represent), and their own understanding of their identities. It is the synthesis of their dialectical identity construction that leads to progress, not for these polar opposites, but for the subsequent generation that will benefit from the momentary clash.

### ADONIS AND ANNA

Amalie and Carl Laurids's relationship is contrasted in the story by that of the other two grandparents, Adonis and Anna, and their stories. Adonis and Anna additionally represent different sectors of the historical Danish society. Adonis's parents, Ramses and The Princess, come from the lower classes of society. Ramses descends from a long line of thieves, who pride themselves in the artisanship of their craft.

The Princess, a circus performer from Southern Europe, represents the very epitome of exoticism to Danish society, corresponding to a prevalent ideal. These characters create their identities not by investing themselves with the trappings of their class, as both Carl Laurids (taken from the aristocracy) and Amalie (from the *nouveau riche*) do, but rather they construct their identities in the negative, basing their own identities both on their perception of themselves as outsiders and through the way in which society views and labels them. Ramses's identity could not, based upon his status as an outsider, completely correspond to that of the bourgeoisie, nor would it resonate with the other strata of society, but must be created as an outsider. The Princess, along with her family, similarly maintains her status as an outsider, especially when traveling to Denmark. She rarely corresponds to the picture that others have of her, to the extent that she would alter her appearance to mimic other expectations, as for instance on this occasion, at the end of a performance: "festens kulmination i en pantomime, hvor alle de optrædende klædte sig ud og sminkede sig med cacao og med sod udrørt i fedt for at komme til at ligne danskernes forestilling om de sydeuropæere, de faktisk var (Høeg 1988, 89) ["the climax to the festivities, in which all the performers appeared, dressed up and painted with cocoa and soot mixed with grease, to resemble the Danes' picture of the southern Europeans they in fact happened to be" (Høeg 1995, 103)]. Here, the Princess and her troupe, although identifying as Southern Europeans, need to transform themselves further in order to become such for the Danes, to demonstrate both their otherness and exoticism, as well as increase the separation between themselves and the Danes who make up their audience.

Mary Louise Pratt famously introduced the concept of the contact zone to the academic debate of postcolonialism, where much of current thought of transculturation stems from. The contact zone refers to "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 1991, 34). In contrasting the violent nature of the contact zone (grappling, clashing) of an asymmetrical relationship, with the more symmetrical nature of the relatively positive nature of the transcultural site, I contend there is a position for a more positive outcome of the transcultural encounter. The transcultural site represents a displacement of the individuals, as they stand in and

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for their respective cultures, from their reinforcing cultural contexts. Through this displacement, the transcultural encounter can become one of mutual acceptance, and develop in a positive direction. The outcome of such an encounter, as I argue, is by no means uniform, but through entry into a transcultural site, the power relations inherent in each cultural context are removed, leaving the individuals more vulnerable and open to each other's culture.

The Princess and her troupe are in such a transcultural site at the performance, where they act out a version of cultural translation, reflecting not their own sense of identity but that which was expected of them, and obscuring the lines over which a true transcultural encounter could occur (as it was only the Princess's troupe that was truly displaced). It is only in the individual relationship, the interpersonal encounter between Ramses and the Princess (and in subsequent generations) that the transcultural experiences begin to function on a larger, societal scale. The relationship that develops, however, between Ramses and the Princess is vastly different from that of Carl Laurids and Amalie. While both can be said to be products of love at first sight, Ramses and the Princess share an intimate connection in which they seem able to communicate without words and are inseparable.

Mads has placed each character carefully, even if not historically accurate in a particular mold, representing the diverse sectors of Danish life, and in turn, the diverse characteristics that Mads sees in himself. Each character wears a mask; each of the characters resembles, to a degree, the place or the situation in which they were raised. As outlined previously with Carl Laurids and Amalie, this holds true also for both Adonis and Anna. Adonis, like his parents, is "altid *udenfor*" (Høeg 1988, 125) ["always *on the outside*" (Høeg 1995, 149; emphasis in the original)]. These four characters manifest themselves further in the lives of Carsten and Maria. Carsten, the son of Carl Laurids and Amalie, is the top student of the prestigious Sorø Academy and becomes the counsel to both the Supreme Court and the Royal Family. He succeeds in making money, like his father, and integrates himself into the elite of the society, at least for a time, as is his mother's most fervent wish. Maria, however, is a rogue and supposedly leads a band of degenerate children; she is a consummate outsider, having abandoned even the tenements of Christianshavn, which itself was visited by neither police nor other governmental services. They are, however, similar in that they both create their identities through the viewpoint of others.

## CARSTEN AND MARIA

The combination of Carsten and Maria marks the culmination of diverse qualities and social strata that Høeg presents with the first two parts of the novel. Carsten and Maria, when brought together, collectively represent the hopes and dreams of a new era. Their apartment is representative of the collective symbolism:

Det lå ikke på det fattige Nørrebro og heller ikke på det fine Frederiksberg men et eller andet sted midt imellem, og det var ikke bygget i forrige århundrede og heller ikke i dette her men midt imellem af en familie der ikke var adelig og heller ikke borgerlig og som var velhavende uden at være rigtig rig, og det var bygget på en grund hvis fremtid var usikker og der lå det nu, omgivet af høje lindetræer og hundelorte og en svunden trekvart fornemhed. (Høeg 1988, 304)

It was not situated in poverty-stricken Nørrebro, nor yet in the elegant confines of Frederiksberg, but somewhere between the two, and it had not been built in the last century, nor yet in this one, but somewhere at the turn, by a family that was neither aristocratic nor common, well-to-do without being really wealthy. It had been built on a piece of ground with an uncertain future, and it was still standing there, surrounded by tall linden trees and dog shit and a faded three-quarters grandeur. (Høeg 1995, 369)

Carsten and Maria together stand at the crossroads of Danish society. They have formed a union that is a product of both the wealthy and the poor, the aristocratic (*nouveau riche* and traditionally noble) and the common (including the criminal), not completely modern, yet distinctly not old-fashioned. Although they would change, rejoin the progress of the world, and again dissolve into the separate characters each constructed upon their own pasts and histories, each with their own dreams, hopes and aspirations, they are now in a moment of hesitation, with the “usikker viden om at alle værdier er i opløsning” (Høeg 1988, 304) [“tentative realization that all the old values are disintegrating” (Høeg 1995, 370)].

## MADS

Carsten and Maria have two children, the twins Madelene and Mads, a dark girl and a fair boy. These twins would be imbued with the hopes and dreams of the subsequent generation, our generation, the

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generation whose history has yet to be written, whose future remains uncertain:

Tilstede ved tvillingernes vugge er altså de fattiges og de riges og middelstandens og de allernederstes forventninger der peger fremad, og de blander sig allesammen i et sådant råbende kor af modsigelsesfyldte forhåbninger at jeg dårligt kan få ro til at sige, at på dette tidspunkt har så mange drømme fået ørenlyd i Danmark at det måske ikke mere er muligt at fremstille dem på papirets to dimensioner. (Høeg 1988, 314)

Thus, gathered around the twins' cribs, we find all the hopes of the poor and the rich and the middle class and those on the nethermost rung. There are hopes pointing backward and hopes pointing forward, all mixed up into such a clamorous chorus of contradictory expectations that I hardly have a moment's peace in which to say that, at this point in time, in Denmark, so many dreams are making themselves heard that it may no longer be possible to present them through the two-dimensional medium of paper. (Høeg 1995, 382)

This comment from Mads, the narrator, allows us to analyze the means by which Mads himself has negotiated the history that he has written. He has compared, as he noted throughout the novel, the historical documents of the events, pictures, police records, and newspaper articles, along with comments and input from the various characters, the family from which he was often estranged, and that subsequently left him to his own devices. This construction seems to be the ultimate negotiation of information in the creation not only of the characters themselves, as we see them represented through the text, but also Mads's own identity, through this translation of his past. His identity is both mediated and created through translation, but is also a form of cultural translation of his own past, which he presents in a series of transcultural encounters. Mads has written this history of his family, perhaps as exhaustive and simple as he claimed, but in so doing, has created himself, both a character and an author of his own life. This history, like his own identity, is of his own construction:

Historien er altid en opfindelse, den er et eventyr bygget over nogle spor. Sporene er der ingen problemer med . . . men de er desværre ikke historien, historien består af forbindelsen imellem dem, og det er den der giver problemer. Særlig når det som her er Drømmenes Historie er den forbindelse ugennemsigtig, fordi ingen, og altså heller ikke jeg, har andet at stoppe i hullerne imellem historiens spor end sig selv. (Høeg 1988, 144–5)

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History is always an invention; it is a fairy tale built upon certain clues. The clues are not the problem . . . but these, unfortunately, do not constitute history. History consists of the links between them, and it is this that presents the problem. And the link is especially opaque when, as here, we are dealing with the History of Dreams, because the only thing that anyone—and that includes me—can use to fill in the gaps between history's clues is themselves. (Høeg 1995, 173)

The construction of each person's identity, as we realize at the end of the novel, is not the simple (or perhaps complex) process described above, but is rendered still more interesting with the final understanding of the narrative structure of the novel. Mads, the narrator, is finally revealed as such at the end of the novel and thus, we come to understand, is the true force that has created all of the stories and interpreted the events and the identities of each of the characters. Through his use of various documents and interviews to which he refers, Mads has reconstructed, and perhaps rewritten, not only the history of his own family, which by extension is the history of his nation and century, but also his own history, one that seemingly cannot be separated from his own identity:

Jeg synes at disse mennesker og deres forestillinger ligner mig selv, af og til får jeg den tanke at måske har jeg aldrig rigtigt *set* andres forventinger men bare mine egne, og den ensomste tanke i verden er tanken om at det vi har fået øje på slet ikke er andre men os selv. (Høeg 1988, 335; emphasis in the original)

I get the feeling that these people and their imagery are very like me; now and again the thought strikes me that perhaps I have never really *seen* other people's expectations, that I have only ever seen my own, and the loneliest thought in the world is the thought that what we have glimpsed is nothing other than ourselves. (Høeg 1995, 408; emphasis in the original)

It is thus possible, or at least conceivable, that the other characters are not truly other to Mads, but only a construction of himself, that there is no real way to see the Other as separate or different from oneself, to truly see that possibility. One wonders, perhaps, what the story would have been like if told from his twin sister's point of view, as it is Mads who constructs and narrativizes the various cultural differences, knowing that they are all always already a part of his identity, and thus not fully incompatible. Each of the constructed characters represents, for Mads, an aspect of his history, both personal and national, but also the various aspects of himself. They have been whittled down,

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or synthetically cohered, through the process of transculturation, in which each successive generation (whether actually or solely through Mads's treatment) further negotiated its way. Thus, as Mads interprets the actions and dreams of his ancestors, as they encounter each other and form their identities, we see it solely, and quite significantly, always through the eyes of translation, an interpretation of the events, textual events (both in documents and interviews) generated by the narrator. His modern identity is thus far from homogenous, but represents the process of transculturation within himself, not something to avoid but rather something to be recognized as fundamental to constructing Danish identity.

One could even argue that the novel itself undergoes a similar process, being the process of Høeg's own interaction with otherness (as in the intertextual connection to "foreign" genres and formats) and his literary past (the parallels one can see in the Danish literary tradition—perhaps particularly in the image of the "dream," a common trope in Danish literature from the nineteenth century onward), and constitutes his own literary construction as a writer. As this process is personal, Høeg intimates that it cannot be, as the title might indicate, truly representative of a national process. One should note that the Danish title comes from the last line of the novel, stating that "før vi kan gøre noget er vi nødt til at gøre os en forestilling om det 20. århundrede" (Høeg 1988, 335) ["before we can do anything we will have to form a picture of the twentieth century" (Høeg 1995, 408)], which points to the cyclical and individual project that Mads has presented to us. The American title, however, comes from a translation of the first line, "Dette er De danske Drømmes historie" (Høeg 1988, 7) ["This is the History of Danish Dreams" (Høeg 1995, 1)], which represents a mistranslation. Thomsen elucidates the importance of this alteration: "the force of the definite article seems to shift from 'the dreams' to 'the history,' contradicting the sense of multiple histories (*forestillinger*) that the last line of the novel demands" (Thomsen 2002, 58). By reading through the mistranslation, and recognizing the double meaning of *historie* in Danish (both "history" and "story"), one can recognize that the presentation of Danish dreams is both individual (here, Mads's story) and collective—a representation that, while the specifics of the dreams themselves might change the structure of their construction—the dialectical pattern by which our pasts are integrated into who and what we are is consistent.

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Mads is one voice among many, the fair boy of a set of twins who have had exactly the same background, as well as one of millions who have had a similar development. Transculturation, the ongoing negotiation with otherness both between cultures and between the disparate parts of one's own past, is pointed to as the way forward, and Mads's process, if not his story specifically, is presented as a means to represent one's dreams. What those dreams are, however, is individual, as would be the pictures of a person's pasts. The construction of those, each following a transcultural process, is the way Høeg presents Danish identity, the collective individuality, the commonality of a complex, always renegotiated past pointing its way toward an ideal, dreamlike future. This stands in contrast to an essentialist form of Danish identity, such as that presented by nationalist political discourse, which asserts a static, always already understood Danish identity that is both not universally accepted within the country and also stands in stark contrast to the vision that Høeg provides. Høeg's use of transculturation, the adaptation of magical realism, and the incorporation of numerous historical and literary motifs open up a space to reconsider those national and individual narratives of identity.

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The concept of culture worked effectively in shaping and mapping postcolonial struggles, which have so profoundly reshaped our world. Man's sense of cultural displacement is the core of this project. Man's quest for cultural adaptation forms a kind of equilibrium and compromise to the vision of human liberation. It is very important to minimize disadvantages and to internalize the logic of Western colonization. Transculturalism is defined as "seeing oneself in the other, and as an adjective, it can be defined as the act of involving, encompassing, or extending across the element