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Literary perspectives: Denmark

The contemporary literary reservation

Committed, critical writing in Denmark has long since left the domain of literature and turned to genres such as documentary film and journalism, writes Andreas Harbsmeier. As it emerges from its sheltered existence in a reservation, recent Danish literature is collapsing the boundaries between the literary field and the broader public sphere.

In 2009 we were in Denmark witness to a rather unusual and spectacular literary incident. The Danish author Claus Beck–Nielsen declared himself dead in 2001. A year later he was resurrected as the nameless director of the art factory Das Beckwerk, the mission of which was to continue the life and work of Claus Beck–Nielsen. In 2003, accompanied by the performance artist Thomas Skade–Rasmussen Strøbech, he journeyed to Iraq under the name "Nielsen" with the stated aim of establishing democracy in the war–ravaged country. Their trip resulted in a series of newspaper articles and TV programmes.

Subsequently, the man formerly known as Claus Beck–Nielsen wrote the book *Selvmondsaktionen* (The suicide mission, 2005) about the journey. In 2006 the pair travelled together again with a similar project, this time to the USA; *Suverænen* (The sovereign) was published in 2008, with Das Beckwerk credited as the author. The book, which is promoted as a novel, is largely about Thomas Skade–Rasmussen, and describes among other things elements of his friend's private life. Skade–Rasmussen, who, to make things even more confusing, also works under a number of pseudonyms, sued Das Beckwerk in 2009; in his opinion, the man formerly known as Claus Beck–Nielsen had invaded his private life and made public sensitive and private information. Confused? With good reason. Essentially, a fictional character is suing the novel's author! This has never before been seen in Denmark — and probably nowhere else either.

The Das Beckwerk case signals a turning point on the Danish literary scene. Not only does it demonstrate the opening of the literary space onto a broader understanding of the literary field, it points to a general trend in Danish literature towards "documentary fiction". A form that is also prominent in film at the moment. It is what the Danish writer and critic Poul Behrendt, in his book *Dobbelkontrakten* (The double contract, 2006), calls an "aesthetic renewal". The idea being that the literary work is no longer restricted to fiction's universe, but that literature involves reality as a conscious strategy, and that the public sphere in which the author acts must therefore be considered part of the literary field. Another prominent example is Knud Romer's novel *Den der blinker er bange for døden* (He who blinks is afraid of

death, 2006), which sparked debate because the author on one hand considered his artistic freedom to be protected by the term "novel", while at the same time he claimed in interviews and elsewhere that the content of the book was wholly true. This provoked strong reactions from the author's former classmates in the region where the book is set.

When a novel is published as a novel, the author has free reign to make use of reality — freedom of speech is unlimited in the name of art. There is no protection for real people. The trend was perhaps most obvious in film, where a couple of titles in the so-called mockumentary genre played with this overlap. The author Janne Teller has even written a novel, *Kom* (Come, 2008), which explicitly takes up the problem.

It would be wrong to say that this case is *the* central theme on the Danish literary scene. Rather, it is a development that is linked to broader events. It is of course no secret that for a while the so-called Muhammad crisis, as it is often called in Denmark, or the cartoon controversy as it is called elsewhere, played a major role in Denmark. The debate about freedom of speech became a major topic. The radical, positive interpretation of freedom of speech means, however, that there are apparently no restrictions on what one can permit oneself in the name of art. Morten Hartz Kapler's film *AFR* (2007), about the then prime minister of Denmark, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, used a collage of manipulated clips from TV and scenes newly recorded with actors to present the prime minister as both a homosexual — which he isn't — and as a weakling who regretted Denmark's engagement in Iraq — which cannot be true either. The prime minister's interpretation of freedom of speech as absolute meant that he could not comment on the film without risking doing precisely what he believed to be unthinkable, namely to censor.

So far there are no examples of an author successfully being sued for damages to a real person. Authors have always been able to protect themselves using the argument of artistic freedom. If the Das Beckwerk case is judged in the plaintiff's favour, the legal consequences will be inconceivable. It would create a precedent prohibiting literature to be part of the reality that surrounds it. Unless, that is, authors wish to have the risk of a court case hanging around their neck. Freedom of speech will in this case be significantly restricted or, depending on the outcome of the case, at least challenged.

But it is difficult to pick out a dominant trend in the Danish literary field. For the most part, mutually conflicting trends exist side by side. This article will therefore be just as much an attempt to describe literature's position in Denmark, which is to say an attempt to describe the themes that thrive internally in literary circles. This is particularly relevant now, since one of the new trends in literature attempts precisely to break down the boundaries between the literary field and the broader public.

In search of the great Danish novel

Literature in Denmark has long led a sheltered existence in a literary reservation. In a public domain where opinions of practically every kind are sought after as long as they are conspicuous and brief enough, literature finds itself in difficulties. What could be seen as a strengthening of literature, the launching of special book supplements in Danish daily papers, is in fact the expression of the opposite: that literature has no place in the broad social debate. It operates in its own closed space, independently of the political and social discussions around it. Within a restricted field, literature can be

discussed with like-minded people and read in isolation, without disturbing and being disturbed by the meddling of intruders.

The Norwegian author Jan Kjørstad was asked not so long ago about what role literature plays in society. And his answer was quite clear: none at all. This has been as true of Danish as of Norwegian literature. At least until now. While the type of literature taken seriously in Denmark has as a rule been interested in formal innovation and has favoured introversion — short fictional depictions of intimate human relations — the tendency now is towards a softening of the reservation mentality.

Political commitment is often sought after in contemporary Danish literature. If a poet sneaks a reference to 9/11 into a poem, he or she is lauded as a committed and particularly relevant author. From time to time this leads to he or she being proclaimed as the exponent of the return of the political in literature. But the pronouncement seldom holds true — and is in any case an entirely misleading demand to make of literature. The extent to which literature is political is entirely dependent upon its reception and the self-perception of the literary milieu. In the Danish literary world, the customary opposition is played out between literature that sells, and is thus automatically distrusted by the literary elite, and "highbrow" literature that thrives in restricted literary circles and is praised by all the critics, but which barely sells. Luckily there are exceptions.

For a while the search was on for the great contemporary novel able to draw a picture of Denmark after the change of government in 2001, which brought the rightwing populist Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party) in from the cold as the parliamentary basis for the government. The search was soon abandoned, however. Not because there was no need for a diagnosis of a society in dissolution, but because there was no longer anybody, apart from a few obstinate authors and critics, who credited literature with any meaningful function beyond itself. The government's confrontation with what were called the "arbiters of taste" discredited authors and intellectuals as legitimate participants in the description and discussion of Danish and surrounding societies. The confrontation with the "arbiters of taste" particularly affected authors who could be categorised as cultural radicals, whether or not they themselves accepted the tag.

Fogh Rasmussen personally endorsed the author Jens Smærup Sørensen, whose novel *Mærkedage* (Red-Letter Days, 2008) bore a distinct similarity to the prime minister's own childhood. Charting two families across several generations, Smærup Sørensen's story fulfilled the longing for a literature that addresses the question of origin and identity. It created a formula for the transition from a traditional peasant society to a new paradigm characterised by a readiness to adapt to globalization. Smærup Sørensen is by no means an unknown figure in literary circles, but is very much so in the public sphere. Even though the attempt to demand that literature play an active and direct part in the political debate has seldom been successful, it is no unreasonable requirement that it should at least have ambitions about portraying its age. Smærup Sørensen does so, and his novel was thought by some to be the best available answer to the decade's longing for a great contemporary Danish novel.

Jakob Ejersbo is another good example of an author who has not only managed express something other than introverted self-promotion, but has also delivered it in a stylish form. Danish literature in the 1990s was characterised

by a kind of "creative writing school" approach, with stylistically assured, often female writers such as Helle Helle, Christina Hesselholdt, and Kirsten Hammann offering a possibly welcome insight into the universe of the everyday. Lacking the central themes of committed literature, the trend was criticised for being thematically unambitious and far too focused on form. At its centre was the ironic portrait of an apparently successful middle class unable to live up to the demands of marital happiness and job satisfaction. The popularity of the trend carried the authors into the new millennium with great success. Through precise, distanced sentences, small, private problems took centre stage in a stylistically convincing new trend.

A further step was taken by the young writer Jan Sonnergaard. His debut *Radiator* (1997) was unusual in several ways: an icy portrait of a generation of disillusioned youth, which with biting irony both exposed and defended the lack of ideology of Sonnergaard's own generation; and a resurrection of the short story as a genre. The disappointing second and third parts of the trilogy, *Sidste søndag i oktober* (The last Sunday in October, 2000) and *Jeg er stadig bange for Caspar Micheal Petersen* (I'm still afraid of Caspar Micheal Petersen, 2003) were followed in 2009 by Sonnergaard's debut novel *Om atomkrigens betydning for Vilhelm Funks ungdom* (On the significance of the atomic war for Vilhelm Funk's youth). The novel takes the form of a description of the existential consequences of the 1980s experience of the atomic threat for yuppies and punks: every day was lived like it was the last.

One complaint has been that recent Danish history has simply not been interesting or important enough to be the object of literary production. With Denmark's neighbour to the south, Germany, as the diametrical opposite. If it is true that all political literature is bad, while all good literature is political, then it is easy to pick out amongst new literature candidates for the literary canon. In the public sphere one has quite simply given up waiting.

Contemporary Danish literature is of course discussed and turned inside out in all kinds of places, but almost exclusively according to the literary reservation's own rules. Committed, critical art has long since left literature's domain and slipped across to other genres such as documentary film and journalism. As journalism becomes professionalised, there is a pressing need for literature also to offer the perspective and nuances that traditional "reality" genres within journalism are no longer good at. It is therefore possible to note a trend for literature that attempts to intervene in the contemporary reality to a much greater degree. Journalists who in the daily papers have little space — or time, for that matter — are forced to turn to the book format to be able tell the stories with a modicum of completeness.

Here one can also find the answer to why crime novels — largely Scandinavian ones — are such a success. Crime fiction is a genre that to a far greater degree than most others can incorporate actual social critique without it seeming tacked on or postulated. Successful Danish crime writers such as Morten Hesseldahl, Sissel Jo Gazan, Leif Davidsen, Jan Stage and Jussi Adler-Olsen, are perhaps not great stylists, but their novels — such as Hesseldahl's *Drager over Kabul* (Kites above Kabul, 2007) and *Natten er lige begyndt* (The night has just begun, 2009) — address highly topical themes such as Islamic terrorism and social destitution. An almost journalistic form is employed, founded on what could broadly be described as current social conflicts, and delivers the goods in the form of saturated and effective suspense. These authors are rarely, however, discussed in the specifically literary world, and with some justification; when they are, it is only as part of

the crime phenomenon.

A potential catastrophe

So where does literature play a role at all? In the autumn of 2008, the Danish critic and commentator Rune Lykkeberg published a forceful diagnosis of the times, *Kampen om sandhederne* (The fight for the truths). One of the most praised and discussed works of journalistic non-fiction for many years, it delivered a blistering and original analysis of the Danish political milieu since the change of government in 2001. In a stagnant Danish debate, the exposure of the self-satisfaction of the so-called cultural radicals as the background for the "change of system" was a surprising and sharp observation. But what was really unusual was that Lykkeberg used literature as one of the primary sources of the diagnosis. The cultural radical bigwigs of literature such as Klaus Rifbjerg came under fire, and literature was successfully re-established as a legitimate and above all relevant expression of its time, without reducing it to an illustration of a specific point. In other words, Lykkeberg extracted literature from its comfortable reservation in literary sections and academic forums, and actually took authors seriously as diagnosticians of broader social developments. It had been many years since this had been done in a Danish context.

Not only is the documentary element in contemporary literature on the way up. It is mirrored in a related trend, namely the conscious use of the private. The young poet Lone Hørslev, who recently published a collection with the significant title *Jeg ved ikke om den slags tanker er normale, Skilsmiddigte* (I don't know whether these kinds of thoughts are normal, divorce poems, 2009) is an example of this. And on the cover of his debut collection of poems of the everyday, *Oliebål* (Oil bonfire, 2009), Nikolaj Zeuthen poses at home in his kitchen with his wife and children. Authors have always made use of their own experiences, just as literary criticism has always been interested in finding connections between the work and its author. But in these works, the private is demonstratively staged as a fully conscious aesthetic strategy, and is therefore entirely worthy of interest.

There are of course other trends to be seen. The clash of the generations is, in the opinion of the critic Erik Skyum Nielsen, one of the obvious changes in contemporary Danish literature in 2009. The posthumously published trilogy of novels by Jakob Ejersbo is a strong testament to this, as is *Apropos Opa* (Apropos of grandpa, 2009) by the relatively young Julia Butschkow. The latter also plays on the author's private experiences, since the novel concerns her own grandfather's past as an SS officer in Germany. Ejersbo's trilogy, which consists of the books *Eksil* (Exile), *Liberty*, and *Revolution* (all 2009) will hopefully come to stand as the beginning of a new way of novel writing, one that opens the restricted Danish perspective onto a global reality. The hard, existential story is here united with a perspective that does not merely place the individual in the world, but also introduces Danish literature to a much wider global field.

Even though a new attentiveness and a new documentary tendency offers renewed hope that Danish literature can once again contribute significant inspiration and perspectives to a public sphere characterised by uniformity and stereotypical representations, the structural prerequisites for the actual creation of this literature look bleak. The deregulation of book prices combined with the fact that it is very much bestsellers that are in demand, means that the middle layer of Danish literature is experiencing difficulties. Whether it is the

deregulation of book prices or the general economic decline that is to blame is difficult to say at the moment. But what is certain is that publishers are firing staff, and that the number of titles has been reduced. The illustrious publishing house Borgen, which has long published poetry, has cut back on almost all literature. Everybody is playing safe, for which they can hardly be blamed. But it is of course a shame, and in the long run a potential catastrophe, if new writers whose first few titles tend not to sell particularly well do not stand a chance of being published. Then, for all the discussion of it, the growth layer will disappear.

But we should not bury literature too quickly. As mentioned, there are also many positive trends in the Danish literary world that are certainly worth highlighting. Jakob Ejersbo is unfortunately no longer alive, but his monumental work will stand as the exception that proved the rule. That it is possible to write a consistent and important work about a world that is larger than Denmark. Claus Beck–Nielsen has fortunately only died in his own fictional universe, and lives on in the best of health — though with a lawsuit around his neck. The new unholy alliance between new literary forms with something important to say, and the author's actions in a public sphere that extends beyond restricted literary forums, offers hope for a literature that aims to do more than merely serve the author's survival and recognition in the literary milieu.

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