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Some Forays into Danish Poetry 2007

By Henk van der Liet. Translated by Russell Dees.

There are a number of distinctive trends in Danish poetry that are worth noting in the year 2007. First of all, it is evident that poets today are more consciously addressing themselves to a broader (reading) audience. Poets apparently want to be heard, read and used, and their poems are linked to specific experiences and interpretive needs in readers. The second trend has to do with an increased interaction between poetry and other genres and
art forms. Everything from visual arts to short-prose social criticism, from the psalm tradition to pop culture and music, can be found in the poem's frame of reference. This opening up of the stuff of poetry is also leading to a re-evaluation of the grotesque; uninhibitedness, humor and self-irony are once again becoming fixed implements in the tool chest of most poets. Other poets, particularly the younger ones, are focusing their efforts on different forms of direct audience appeal and the exploitation of a variety of media, as well as the use of utterly unpretentious forms of humor and irony. Another aspect that can be felt throughout the poetic year's entire harvest is the growing significance of religion.

HENRIK NORDBRANDT's (born 1945) new collection of poems, *Besøgstid* ('Visiting Hours'), gathers together a lot of life's wisdom, but, with the perspective of age, it also unleashes in him an especially subtle form of humor and joy. Nordbrandt is so generous with his humor, irony and a few Vanitas poems ("You can hear the worms at work in the soil") that you forget everything about composition and artistic structure. Moreover, there are a few precise, laconic poems about experiences in nature and a few inspired by art that make 'Visiting Hours' worth all the effort.

As the title indicates, 'Visiting Hours' is a collection that takes place in an interim linguistic space, where the poet has the feeling of being in transit and language isn't able to keep up with what happens when the infirmities of age begin to make themselves felt, where one's health begins to decline and the finitude of life can no longer be brushed aside as something that happens to other people. In his opening poem, *Programerklæring* ('Policy Statement'), he makes it clear that there is no God or higher power controlling his lyrical path. It is he, alone. Thus, Nordbrandt can also make fun of the Almighty in his poem *Alle de store mænd* ('All the Great Men'), where he elegantly but firmly brushes aside the myth of a systematic order of Creation. No, in his lyrical universe there is only one entity that bears the full responsibility for poetic creation and that is the poet himself, or, as he puts it at the end of his poetic manifesto: "It is a poem because I say so." That sounds simpler than it is, and Nordbrandt
also takes a stab at locating where this "I" really is, or could be.

SIMON GROTRIAN (born 1961) is one of the most productive poets of his generation, with an immediately recognizable lyric voice at his disposal. Like a number of earlier collections, Tyve sorte kinder ("Twenty Black Cheeks") is dominated by the theme of devotion that classic, rhymed poetry extols. Moreover, 2007 saw the publication of Grotrian’s second book of psalms, Din frelser bliver din klippe ("Your Savior is Your Rock"), which touches on classic psalm themes: mercy, salvation and the ephemerality of life. Simon Grotrian is helping to focus greater literary attention on the religious, not only as a social phenomenon but also as a source of raw material and theme. In Grotrian, the world of traditional Christian themes is clothed in new and unusual robes. It is quite interesting to observe how Henrik Nordbrandt and Simon Grotrian both zoom in on religion, but from diametrically opposed positions—an agnostic, humanistic standpoint and a Christian standpoint, respectively. However both poets do so without a trace of self-righteousness or “superior” knowledge.

Against the background of NIELS LYNGSØ’s (born 1968) earlier work, his new collection of poems, 39 digte til det brændende bibliotek ("39 Poems for a Burning Library") (2007), comes as a surprise. The destructive imagery of the title— the burning library—signals in a very tangible way that the poet is changing track this time. In ‘39 Poems for a Burning Library’ Lyngsø has opened up a new vein in his oeuvre and instead of developing and refining the text’s graphic appearance or phonetic performative aspects, he attempts to write a form of "neo-simple" poetry, with a few important autobiographical themes. There is a series of glimpses from his childhood, all of which bear the common designation "(still life)", and there are also love themes from his adult life. The latter poems are collected under the subtitle "(hymn)", where themes from the Old Testament also enter into Lyngsø’s lyrical universe. In the first "(still life)" half of the book, the poems about his father - such as Ansigt ("Face") - make an especially deep impression, whereas the almost naively simple, erotic poems that follow - such as Alle...
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vegne ('Everywhere') - are seductive in their wild ferocity.

In her second collection of poems, *En have med duft af mand* ('A Garden with the Scent of Man'), Iraqi-born poet DUNA GHALI (born 1963) describes an especially recognizable female reality with small detours into a somewhat alien world. This, of course, has to do with Ghalì's dual cultural background, and while it does not keep her from occasionally venting her feelings of longing and homesickness - as in the poem *Breve til en veninde i Irak* ('Letters to a Friend in Iraq') - cultural alienation and multiculturalism are only utilized sparingly as themes in 'A Garden with the Scent of Man'. The primary weight of the collection is on rather classical/sensual love poems.

On one occasion, however, the love motif is linked to the stab of nostalgia (or wanderlust) that smolders beneath the last section of the book.

An international perspective is also very prominent in PETER CHRISTENSEN TEILMANN's (born 1962) poetry collection *Friværdi* ('Equity'). The book consists exclusively of a sort of dual poetry, graphically mirrored on the left and right page. The poems all take their starting point in concrete localities (from Skagen in Denmark to Rome) and finish off with a quote (from Søren Kierkegaard to Chuck Berry and U2). The formal framework of the poems is maintained without seeming strained or affected. Most of the poems are powerful, critical-descriptive images of moments, and the best of them deal directly or indirectly with the dark side of aging, with the increasing fragility of the body and its inevitable decay. Christensen Teilmann often zooms in unmercifully on various quiet lives; some are anonymous, while others are relatives. A poem such as *Den krumme kvinde* ('The Stooped Woman') hits the reader in the solar plexus, perhaps because it paints a very recognizable, neutral everyday picture that becomes frighteningly intrusive the moment you juxtapose your own life on it. Such descriptions evoke memories in the poet's 'I' – and in the reader – of things one (presumably) has not experienced, but nevertheless has a premonition of.
THOMAS BOBERG (born 1960) is one of the most well traveled of the contemporary Danish poets and therefore travel is a major theme for him. Boberg has written three major travel books, *Sølvtråden* ('The Silver Thread') (1996), *Americas* ('Americas') (1999) and *Invitation til at rejse* ('An Invitation to Travel') (2003). His poetry collection *Gæstebogen* ('Guest Book') was published in 2007, and also has travel as its theme, as the title indicates. 'Guest Book' consists of two major sections followed by a thank-you note *Tak for opholdet* (Thanks for Having Me). The poems describe encounters that most often have the character of a confrontation. Instead of focusing on journeys and incidents as positive experiences, Boberg often describes the dark side - life behind the glossy tourist brochures - and especially the ugly reality of modern urban living and its human costs. It is not only the poet as observer, critic and chastiser of modernity we meet in 'Guest Book', since toward the end of the book - in one of the most extended prose fragments - a sort of poetics is formulated that reveals the source of the poet's dark vision.

ANNETTE KURE ANDERSEN (born 1962) is also a poet with a fairly extensive literary production behind her. She has built up a discriminating and intense authorship through the use of stringent linguistic economy and a sort of haiku-like frugality of imagery. She concentrates on theme cycles in her poetry that on the one hand are very sensual and often deal with stylized experiences of nature, while on the other hand pursuing artistic meditations that follow in the wake of artistic experiences “out in the world”. The thematic turning points and points of intersection presented in these cycles of contrasting themes and endeavors are also reflected in many of Kure Andersen’s book titles, such as *Tidehverv* ('Epoch') (1996), *Vandskel* ('Watershed') (2005) and most recently, *Andetsteds* ('Elsewhere') (2007).

'Elsewhere' is an impressive, tightly composed collection of poetry - three parts, each containing twenty poems, and all three sections have a subtitle that refers to a musical concept. Still, the mood and linguistic weight of each
part is completely different. The book’s first part bears the banner *Ansats* (‘Embouchure’) and consists of warm-ups or preludes - ultra-short sentences, most often merely free-standing words that almost without syntactical reference present fragments of an “I” speaking to an anonymous “you.” In the second and third parts the poems grow, they are given more content, and words begin to clump together in bigger and bigger units, whole sentences even. Here the short, hesitant glimpses from the first part are replaced by the fear of losing one’s beloved, especially when he/she is not present. In Annemette Kure Andersen’s poems her alter ego is constantly demanding confirmation in order not to be devoured by loss and longing.

ANNE-LOUISE BOSMANS’ (born 1978) second book, *Villa* (‘Villa’), is a collection of prose poems containing short, sometimes ultra-short, poems that are soundings in the universe of the symbolist painter Fernand Khnopff. ‘Villa’ is an exploration of, or a zeroing in on, the painter’s distinctive villa which - via a series of textual glimpses - is re-created in words as an artificial and artistic space. You could call Bosmans’ prose poems a sort of sustained conceptual poetry in which an idea is made concrete linguistically and taken to its furthest consequences. In her imaginative descriptions of the imaginary villa Bosmans addresses herself to an unknown reader who is subsequently introduced to the villa’s possible inhabitants, including the painter’s sister. This entire fragile, introspective and refined collection of poems is characterized by an enormous linguistic precision and intellectual mastery of the material. ‘Villa’ is an elegant architecture of powerful, descriptive poetry that creates a reality - “as it” - and it will be fascinating to see whether in her next collection Bosmans will expand this perspective from her dreamed, feigned linguistic interiors to also include the nervous, pulsating reality outside, of which one gathers only weak signals in ‘Villa’.

LONE HØRSLEV (born 1974) is already a mature poet who pursues both music and literature. She made her debut in 2001 with her poetry collection *TAK* (‘THANKS’), and has developed into a central figure in the new
generation of Danish poets. Her poems call out to be read aloud, and a reading with Lone Hørslev is an event
where the linguistic material is infused with an extra kind of energy and liveliness. Word games are combined with
surprising shifts in rhythm, and breaks in sentences become changes in perspective. In her poetry collection *Lige
t mig* ('Me to a T'), the lyrical 'I' moves from the windy Danish boondocks to the metropolis of New York City. In
both places Lone Hørslev acts as a sort of observer of her own behavior and her own imagination. Jealousy and
longing for love are important themes in 'Me to a T' but, besides the classic references, Lone Hørslev is just as
much at ease and just as profound when using the icons and celebrities of modern pop culture to establish an
emotional orientation in reality. Thus nature is no longer a refuge or a breathing space to soothe the soul and
refresh the spirit, but rather a phenomenon that is to some extent subject to cultural hollowing-out and in need of
new conceptual content. Rhythmic qualities and associative connections play a large role in the collection's
closing prose poem sequences.

In current Danish poetry we can see an inclination to ignore high modernism's conceptual experiments for the
sake of experimentation. Instead there is an acknowledgement of an increasing need to enter into a concrete
dialogue with the reader, without any direct talk of occasional poetry mind you. The soundings discussed here, in
the poetic landscape of 2007, show that poets are making reference to other forms of art and culture, thereby
shifting the one-way traffic of the monologue to a search for poetic conversational space. The last poet in this
overview may be the exception that confirms the rule: the newcomer PALLE SIGSGAARD (born 1976), whose
little collection of poems *Glitrende støv danser* ('Glittering Dust Dances') seems quite traditional at first
glance, but that would be a flagrant error of judgment. Even the collection's motto, derived from the New York
School poet Kenneth Koch (1912-2002), indicates that Sigsgaard is a philosophical-absurdist linguistic juggler.

'Glittering Dust Dances' consists of two parts – of which especially the first’s funny, sonorous rhymes make
fascinating reading. Sigsgaard’s poetry takes its clear premise in what in the 1970s was called "systematic poetry,"
but he is able to add a rare musical suppleness and rhythmic elegance to his texts' systematic character.
Sigsgaard investigates various syntactical and logical structures and forms, and even though he circles around the uncertainty and irresolution of language, it is above all linguistic reality he relates to, and not all that which lies outside it. In the first part of 'Glittering Dust Dances', the "doubt" suite contains some very eye-catching and successful poems; in the second part, the poems are about something that has "disappeared". And with this part comes the end of our overview, which is also a tribute to all poets who have made 2007 a distinctive lyrical year.

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