

More than decadence – Johannes Jørgensen’s early reception of Arthur Schopenhauer.

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Denmark and Germany; how can one possibly – when exploring Danish literature and ideas – mention one without the other? Until very recently this was in no way possible. For better and for worse, Denmark has been – and still is – inevitably tied to the Continent, to the heart of Europe, to Germany. The following presentation concerns a particular encounter in this stream of ideas flowing from Germany to the north: The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and the Danish poet and novelist Johannes Jørgensen.

Around the year 1900 German philosophy was greatly esteemed in Scandinavia. In 1889, Nietzsche was introduced by the literary chief of Copenhagen, Georg Brandes. By introducing Nietzsche as an absolute must for every educated and thinking being, Brandes intended to bring fresh ideas into a cultural debate that – according to him – was stuck in old ideas from the seventies, that is the ideas of the so called "Moderne Gennembrud" of which he himself had been the chief proponent. In addition to this need for new and interesting ideas that could stimulate artistic creativity, Dr. Brandes also felt the duty to keep the educated youth away from a dangerous homegrown thinker – Søren Kierkegaard. To this end, Nietzsche's *Herrenmoral*, his morality critique and his aversion against Christianity was the perfect match. No alternatives to the Brandesian breakthrough could be tolerated, especially not religious ones. This introduction of Nietzsche as an ally of Brandes is probably well known. What might be less well known is that Nietzsche was not the only German on the Scandinavian market of ideas at that time. Thus the Germanic current did not only bring the prophet of the

affirmation of life with it, but also carried a very different kind of philosophical driftwood to Danish shores, namely Arthur Schopenhauer, the preacher of the denial of the will to live. Thus, Brandes himself was instrumental in paving the way for an influx of the ideas and philosophy of Nietzsche's one time master and later enemy, Arthur Schopenhauer.

This presentation is about the reception of Arthur Schopenhauer and the way his ideas were recruited in a spiritual revolt against the position of Georg Brandes and his modern breakthrough. More specifically it is about one of his most eager readers, the Danish symbolist – and later Catholic convert – Johannes Jørgensen.

In the following I will first briefly introduce Jørgensen's reception of Schopenhauer, focusing on the relation between the attraction to Schopenhauer and Jørgensen's increasing reluctance and hostility towards the Brandesian position and the ruling naturalism of the time. The second part will be aimed at a close reading of emblematic passages in the novel *Livets Træ* (The Tree of Life) from 1893 in which the Schopenhauer reception is a – or perhaps the – decisive trait. I shall limit myself to Jørgensen's reception until the publishing of *The Tree of Life* in 1893 and will not go into the reception after this, though there is a lot to say about this too. However, time is short and cuts must be made.

First a few comments on the beginning of the Danish reception of Schopenhauer in the eighteen eighties.

The first to direct the public's attention to the phenomenon Arthur Schopenhauer was – as already mentioned – no other than Georg Brandes himself. In 1884, Brandes published an introductory article on Schopenhauer in the journal *Ude & Hjemme*. In the beginning of the article Brandes states that the objective of the text is to improve the knowledge about and understanding of this "Forfatter for Verdensmænd og for Europa", this "author for cosmopolitans and Europe" in his small home country. Brandes

regards Schopenhauer as a genius, one of the few superior minds who hold their own against the all-pervasive *Zeitgeist*. However, in spite of this effusive appraisal, Brandes in no way regards himself an adherent of the Schopenhauerian position. On the contrary, he rejects the whole idea of the possibility of an ethical stance that permeates the Schopenhauerian writings. For Brandes – as he himself states – any valorization of existence, any pondering on the question of good and evil is senseless.

Even more important than this is the fact that Brandes never really systematically describes the Schopenhauerian philosophy in its' own right. He merely states that Schopenhauer is an outstanding mind that should be known and honored - though not affirmed – but never goes into any detail concerning the philosophical system itself.

From 1888 the possibility of getting acquainted with Schopenhauer's own thoughts – and not just Brandes' rather shallow rendering of them – significantly improved. Thus, in 1888 a young philosopher named S. Hansen, published a lengthy and well encompassing introductory article and two translations in the periodical *Ny Jord* (New Earth, New Soil or New World) that was the organ of the 'progressive', educated and culturally active youth.

Being a regular contributor to the lyrical section of the periodical Johannes Jørgensen might have read the articles; his encounter with and attraction to Schopenhauer was however only to happen a little later – only after the beginning of and as a decisive part of his gradual drift away from the Brandesian and naturalist position that he had been occupying since graduating from the Gymnasium (High School).

In a letter from the 26th of August 1892, Jørgensen informs his friend, fellow poet (and boozing buddy) Sophus Clausen that he has made a new philosophical – and more important – metaphysically minded acquaintance, Arthur Schopenhauer. In the letter Jørgensen states that he has been comforting himself reading "*En poet og en Religionsstifter med hvem jeg er*

enig i næsten alt”, ”a poet and a religious founder, with whom I agree on almost everything”. In Schopenhauer Jørgensen sees an ally in the struggle for the vindication of metaphysics, a fellow combatant against ”Det naive Hedenskab”, ”the naive heathenism” . The ”naive heathenism” is characterised as a narrow minded naturalist ideology based on the belief and dogma ”at Verden ender ved Stjærnerne”, ”that the world ends by the stars”, which is exactly what Jørgensen will no longer tolerate. With Schopenhauer as his wing man Jørgensen thus states – and thereby aims at attacking his recipient – that holding on to the heathen – that is modern secularist – dogma means:

... at tage Skallen for Kærnen. Og Naturen er intet uden Kærne,
indre Liv, Evighed – hvilken Sandhed er saa gammel som Indien.
Jeg haaber, at alt dette vil sætte dig i et skønt Raseri – *furia francesse*.

To take the shell for the core. And nature is nothing but core, inner life,
eternity – which is a truth as old as India.

I hope that all this will put you in a beautiful rage – *Furia francesse*.

The decisive point about this letter is that Jørgensen, though he does briefly quote Schopenhauer's view on metaphysics, does not reveal much about Schopenhauer's own metaphysical system. Not a single thing is written about the metaphysics of the will, the descriptive Schopenhauerian ethics or any other key element of Schopenhauer's philosophy; only the fact that his system is metaphysical and its theory stands counter to the modern secularist paradigm seems to be of interest for Jørgensen. So far he merely marshalls Schopenhauer as an ally in a very loosely defined struggle against what he sees as a narrow-minded modernity.

This was about to change, however. Schopenhauer was to move from

being a mere resource into an influential source for Jørgensen's spiritual and literary orientation.

Thus, on the 7th of November 1892 in a letter addressed to Harald Høffding, his former philosophy teacher at the University of Copenhagen, Jørgensen reports about his reading of Schopenhauer's main work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, *The World as Will and Representation*, that – according to him – has taken place during the fall of 1892, that is, *after* the letter to Sophus Claussen. So it seems that Jørgensen has only lately read Schopenhauer's main work in full length, which explains the focus on a single detail in the letter to Sophus Claussen.

In this letter however, it becomes apparent that Jørgensen has now not just familiarized himself with Schopenhauer's philosophy, but is also deeply attracted to the Schopenhauerian world view. He informs Høffding that Schopenhauer has been a great support for the new novel he now intends to start working on; a novel that will to a greater extent than his former works concern "*Livets Dybder* [...], *det fundamentale i Tilværelsen*. [...], *de store Grund=Temata*", "The depths of life, the fundamental in existence, the great ground themes". And thus Jørgensen sets out to write the novel that became *Livets Træ*, which he in his autobiography, *Mit Livs Legende* "The Legend of my Life," would later describe as "en filosofisk Roman om 'Viljen og dens Omvendelse' (i schopenhauersk Forstand)", "a philosophical novel about 'the will and its conversion (in a Schopenhauerian sense)'".

I will now highlight five core passages – five scenes – in the novel that can all be understood in accordance with – and thus be illuminated by – the metaphysics of the will and the Schopenhauerian philosophy of redemption. I would like to state that I am not implying that the whole novel can be reduced to a narrative re-writing of Schopenhauerian philosophy, off course there are also numerous elements that have no direct connection to Schopenhauer and off course there can be no one-to-one relation between philosophical and literary discourse. What I am implying, is that the Schopenhauerian

philosophy functions as *a* – or maybe exactly *the* – dominant subtext in the novel, which implies that the novel is understood on a more profound level when the philosophical context is introduced.

I shall to my best to back up all this in the following examples:

So, the protagonist of the novel, Aage, is initially described as a life affirming youngster bursting with the urge to conquer the world – erotically and poetically. However all he ever does is *talk* about this ”frie, vilde forbudne Liv – Elskovens og Poesiens – det, hvorom alle Vers sang, og alle digtere talte”, this free, wild, forbidden life of love and poetry, about which all verses sang, and poets spoke. Aage talks and dreams, but does not yet act. Thus, the first scene is an excerpt from one of his conversations with his friend Niels Graf, with whom he has been on a nightly walk; both of them have been touched by the scenery and ambience of the night – however in two very different ways, as will be clear – and are now trying to convey their experience of the night. First Niels Graf:

dette Mørke! Som en langsomt sivende Taageregn opløser det alle Ting... Vej, Jord, Træer, Marker – Det svinder altsammen hen i et sort Intet... Og jeg fornemmer det, som om også mit eget Legeme skulde opløses i dette Hav af Mørke, opløses i Mørket som smeltende Sne i den vaade Vinterjord... Og jeg føler min Sjæl fyldes af Tilintetgørelsens dybe Fred, af det uendelige Ødes og den evige Søvnns Salighed...

So, Graff senses the all dissolving power of darkness in the scenery and is overcome by the urge to be dissolved by the darkness himself and sink into the ”indefinite vastness and the bliss of eternal sleep”.

Aage however seems to have sensed the exact opposite of his friend, cheerfully he declares that:

–Netop i en saadan Nat fornemmer jeg stærkest Livet og føler mest

Trang til at leve...

[and a little further on as a conclusion]

–Jo du! Livet er skønt!

In this encounter between mutually irreconcilable attitudes, it is extremely tempting – and following the philological reconstruction, also defensible – to see a literary re-writing of the Schopenhauerian opposition between affirmation and denial of the will. Graff is overwhelmed by darkness and senses, the possibility of self-dissolution in nirvanic bliss, Aage on the other hand is filled with the eagerness to live and let live. This basic diagram of affirmation and denial is continuously repeated throughout the entire novel until it culminates in what can either be understood as the decadent finale and hopeless defeat of the protagonist or – if the Schopenhauerian context is appreciated – the sole possible victory in human existence, the final denial of the will. However, we are not that far yet.

Now to scene two:

That which was in the beginning only loose talk about desire for erotic adventures later turns into unambiguous reality – however the adventures end up looking a lot more like bleak nightmares than a joyful and emancipated lifestyle. Thus, in an often quoted passage the experience of the nightly gender circus is described as follows:

Aage gyste i sin Sjæl. Thi disse Mænd og Kvinder, hvis Dumhed og Plumphed i Aften havde æklet ham, de vilde i Nat parre sig – som raa Mænd og dumme Kvinder hver Nat parrede sig mangfoldigen. Og af deres Sæd skulde nye Slægter opstaa, ny Plumphed, ny Ondskab, ny Ynkelighed spire frem og fødes og befolke Jorden... Og alt dette skulde aldrig aflade, men Verden skulde evigt være i Kødets og Syndens Vold... Aages Indre skælvede endnu stærkere end før... Thi der var i ham selv, i Dybet af hans Sanser og i hans Legems Afgrunde, et uroligt og vildt

Begær, som sultent sled i sit Burs Stænger... (s. 281).

In a moment of clarity Aage understands the senselessness of an existence that serves no other purpose than self-reproduction and what follows from this; the reiteration of crudeness, evil and wretchedness. However, this sudden insight into the filthy foundation of human existence does not essentially change Aage's own basic condition; he remains a craving creature like the other participants in this theater of the will. The desire is reflected but in no way broken. In Schopenhauerian terms what Aage realizes is the unquestionable primacy of the will to live and the horrors in its trail. But not just this: what the protagonist realizes is also that he himself is not just an enlightened spectator to this frightening scenery of randy night life; he himself is a subordinate in the court of this all inhabiting force; he himself is a manifestation and an agent of the will to live. The fundamental force of and cause behind all there is, is equal to the essential core to the individual, to him.

Following this 'gnostic' experience – Aage increasingly understands and mourns– but cannot escape the tyranny of the will. In a moment of utmost despair he encounters his old friend Niels Graf who is deeply troubled by the demands of marital life. As a result of the ongoing sufferings of joint existence with a female Graf has now reached a radical conclusion concerning male existence: and it goes like this:

Et Mandfolk er skabt til at leve ene og undlade at mangfoldiggøre sig ... Trods Bibelens Meninger om den Ting ... Man kan leve med Kvinder til sit tredivte Aar maaske ... men jeg er over den Alder ... og da bør man, som de indiske Brahmaner, drage ud i Ørkenen og være i Stilhed for sit eget Aasyn ... (s. 293f).

This is not just a conclusion informed by eastern ascetic traditions; it is also in

perfect accordance with the Schopenhauerian doctrine of redemption, in which the ascetic path is viewed as the sole way out of the infernal suffering of the world.

For Aage, Graf's lamentation means the final blow to the ideas his whole life had been founded on. He realizes the vanity of all human endeavors and shouts out a relentless verdict on himself and his fellow contemporaries:

Aage fornam det, som om et dræbende Slag havde ramt den hele lykkesyge Aand, hvori de alle havde levet. De havde troet, at Lykken var Livets Mål – de havde villet vorde nye Mennesker i et hedensk Paradis – og de havde fornægtet og forladt alt for at kaste sig ud i en Jagt efter det vidunderlige ... Skulde det nu gennem Smerte læres, at Lykken ikke findes af den, som søger, men at den frivilligt går ind i de Sjæle, hvor Selvforglemmelsen boer? (s. 295).

They wanted it all, but got nothing. The obvious consequence of such a statement would be the final resignation of the protagonist; however Jørgensen does not yet free his protagonist of his misery.

Following this acceptance of the vanity of all, Aage *tries* to change the conditions for his life with his girlfriend – originally just a Norwegian girl he found in the streets looking for a new man while her sea captain was away. His attempts to conquer a few hours of alone time for poetic work are all futile. She calls him to bed, and he always answers.

And this is where the *dramatic* part of the novel ends. An example of a standard decadence novel. But Jørgensen has added another end in the form of an epilogue. To understand the epilogue I first have to briefly mention the prologue, since the two together sum up the whole course of events of the novel. So, it all starts with a bleak fairy tale like prologue in which we encounter a young man who is walking on his own in the woods and is drawn to the so called tree of life. The tree looks seducingly beautiful and draws him

to it. However, as he touches it his will is pacified by its tentacle like branches and he can never escape it again. The epilogue follows an equal but not identical trail. A young man follows the dancing elves and ends up trapped and chained in a subterranean prison. For years and years he tries to break the chains but does not succeed. In the end he realizes the futility of his attempt to liberate himself and gives up. And this is when it happens; he sinks into sleep, a dream comes to him, the shackles fall off and he is carried beyond. In Jørgensens own words:

Ud af Regnfaldet skred der en Skikkelse – en Skygge i Skumringen – et Rids i Regntaagen. En Skikkelse, der blidt bar den trætte Sjæl ind i den store Stilhed, den uendelige Taage – ind i Dødens evige November (s. 308).

And this, ladies and gentlemen, is *not* a tragic ending. This is the salute of nothingness, the bliss of eternal silence, the denial of the will.

Thus, in perfect harmony with the Schopenhauerian teachings on the denial of the will, redemption does *not* occur following the intentional decision of an agent; on the contrary, redemption *happens* as an event of grace, by which the individual completely stops acting and instead becomes the object of a salvific altering of the relation between will and intellect. He joyfully receives death, as Schopenhauer boldly states it. Aage no longer walks himself; he is being carried.

Thus my postulate is that *The Tree of Life* is in no way a decadence novel. When the death of the protagonist is not just randomly assessed as a defeat but understood in the context of Jørgensen's preoccupation with Schopenhauer it becomes something totally different: an anti-humanist narrative of salvation that runs counter to the whole Brandesian project of the modern breakthrough with its accentuation of the freedom of emancipated mankind and instead of this stresses the total dependency on non-human –

but in the Schopenhauerian philosophy also non-godly – agency. Soon Jørgensen was going to turn to divine agency in his rebellion against modernity and Schopenhauer was to serve as an ally also in this project. However that belongs to the next chapter and my time is most certainly already out.

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