

Danish literature  
in the 20th  
and the early 21st century



Anne-Marie Mai

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*Translated by John Irons*

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# Introduction

*Danish literature in the 20th and the early 21st century* is a literary–historical account of the most recent periods of Danish–language literature. At a time when information about individual authors and works is only a quick click away and constantly updated, it can be an advantage to gather together this myriad of information and place it in coherent order – particularly for readers unable to understand Danish. That is the basis for this publication, which seeks to help the reader surfing through digital information to gather individual points of reference within some sort of framework.

Internet sources have done an excellent job summarizing individual oeuvres, with hypertexts and the use of links between short passages of prose. There is information in English available about Danish literature and authors in this form, through sources like Wikipedia. It is also often possible to visit websites that are run by the authors themselves, by publishers, by critics or by libraries to disseminate their holdings. Studies of single oeuvres have also become extremely prevalent in literary history, especially when the presentation is of the most recent periods.

But despite the strengths of the single oeuvre portrait, it is not a fully historical genre. As Jon Helt Haarder points out in his book *Portrættets moment* (The moment of the portrait, 2003), it is traditionally used to create an image that synthesises life, work, and historical circumstance. The structure of the portrait, which is rooted in the ideas of the French critic Charles Sainte-Beuve, is not primarily narrative or historically analytic. It seeks to create a single, fixed moment within which the oeuvre can be read. The portrait genre lifts the oeuvre out of history – even out of the processes it comments on. For this reason, career portraits are not the best way to give readers a sense of how a work or oeuvre interacts with complexly unfolding history.

*Danish literature in the 20th and early 21st century* seeks to create a historical framework for the reading of modern Danish literature and thereby to supplement the available introductions to and portraits of authorial careers. I carried out the preliminary work for this volume in editing my anthology *Danske digtere i det 20. århundrede* [Danish writers in the 20th century], Vols. I–III, 2000–2001 and in my literary history *Hvor lit-*

*teraturen finder sted* [Where literature takes place], Vols. I-III, 2010–2011. The present chapters are based on these prior works. The inspiration for *Danish literature in the 20th and early 21st century* comes from American ‘New Historicism’, which does not comprise a cohesive school or have a clear theoretical anchorage, but springs from various historical readings from the 1980s onwards that examine literary texts in their interaction with other kinds of texts. The key insight of these approaches was that texts can be viewed from a historical angle, and that history for its part can also be viewed from a textual angle; literary scholars are not limited to the study of literary texts, sources, and cultural signs, and a critical-historical study must consider the circulations and negotiations between literary and non-literary texts, and between past and present literary culture. Stephen Greenblatt was New Historicism’s first notable proponent. Hardly had he coined the term, however, before he realised that it was not a question of some clearly definable theory or method, or a cohesive school of researchers. New Historicism stood for various types of practice – a point that Louis Montrose also emphasises in his essays on the subject, which do not speak of one New Historicism but of several. New Historicism does not give literary texts preferential treatment over other texts, but is interested in circulations between texts and also stresses that the literary historian must include his or her own cultural context. New-historical reading is essayistic and anecdotal in its style of narration and often includes a whole host of varied and lesser known texts. *Danish literature in the 20th and early 21st century* does not slavishly observe ‘the doctrine’ of New Historicism – such a doctrine does not actually exist anyway. But it is hoped that the present book will evoke that combination of scholarly reliability and an exciting form of communication that is typical New Historicism.

The narrative elements included in New Historical readings are of great importance in the reader’s acquiring a better understanding of the historical dimension of literature. This line of thought regarding the relation between time and narrative can be linked to analyses carried out by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur. Particularly relevant are the ideas and concepts of his major three-volume investigation *Temps et Récit* (1983–85). His thesis here is that the reader needs narrative to be able to gain an understanding of the past. Historical time, at first an abstraction, becomes human time to the extent that it is narrated. It is narratives that make time meaningful, since narratives are configured via a plot, i.e. a comprehensible whole that governs the sequence of events. According to Ricœur, narrative is created by events to the extent that they are

perceived in an order. And here one has to understand that a complex time-relatedness can be developed in the narrative. A progressive, linear chronology is only one option. The writing of history, according to Ricœur, has become too naive in its attitude towards chronology, because in its attempt to explain it has become blind to its own connections with the narrative. For Ricœur, narrative is not something one “adds” to historical events, which could otherwise be seen independently. It is only by acknowledging these events *within* narratives that we get closer to a lived understanding of previous, distant time, something that Ricœur refers to as history’s third time.

If one accepts Ricœur’s emphasis on narrative in human understanding of time and history, it stands to reason that literary history will be weakened if it abandons narrative and becomes a series of oeuvre portraits, lifting works out of historical processes into eternal significance. It is Paul Ricœur’s thesis that humans relate to two separate time dimensions: partly their own existential experience of time that binds together past, present and future in the now, and partly cosmic, irreversible time. So humans need the third time of the narrative in order to be able to gain an understanding of the more distant past. This way of thinking might seem to threaten a return to the Romantic grand narratives of spirit, folk and nation. Ricœur, along with most postmodern philosophers, is critical of the notions of Friedrich Hegel and the Romantics about the sure progress of the spirit via national history and national art. Even so, Ricœur insists, one must use *some* narrative to formulate one’s identity, and this is especially true with regard to culture and literature.

So it is a combination of New Historicism and Ricœur’s narratology that forms the theoretical framework for *Danish literature from the 20th to the 21st century*. The book’s focus is on Danish-language literature, but it also considers phenomena beyond the boundaries of a narrow national-literary context. It will also discuss other studies of Danish literature, and important arguments from this field of study. The work seeks to provide a picture of the literary culture and literary debate in which the various individual works and oeuvres participate. Danish contributions to styles such as realism, modernism, expressionism and minimalism are thoroughly discussed in the various periods, as is the inspiration gained from American, German and French writing, which become extremely important after the Second World War. The history of literature of the 20th and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is divided into two major periods: the modern breakthrough, introduced around 1870, and the postmodern formal breakthrough, which takes its beginning around 1970, and the

presentation has a final summary of the most important works and historical events. Literary periodicals and the debates between them form an important part of this discussion. Notes provide access to other recent research and approaches to the material. The illustrations are photos of important places in Danish literary history. The photos show the locations as they appear today.

In positing canonical works of Danish literature in the 20th and 21st centuries across various genres, this study often finds it necessary to rely on qualified guesswork. *Danish literature in the 20th and early 21st century* deals with periods where the canon has not yet been laid down, and a number of the works dealt with will perhaps be consigned to oblivion in literary history. Now, however, they have at least the advantage of being accessible to readers with knowledge of English, and it is hoped that through these chapters they will show the richness and diversity on offer in Danish literature. Danish writers are invited to give readings all over the world, and Denmark invests in good translations. *Danish literature in the 20th and early 21st century* follows up on this interest with its literary-historical narrative about the art of words in Danish.