

REVIEW of an edition of Jens Baggesen's *The Labyrinth* to be published in the Oxford University Press series World's Classics, edited and translated by Jesper Gulddal at the University of Newcastle, Australia

By HENRIK BLICHER, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen, editor of the scholarly edition of *Labyrinten eller Reise giennem Tydskland, Schweitz og Frankerig* (2016), the Danish blueprint for the proposed translation

Making *The Labyrinth* available to English readers is an excellent idea; in fact, I have long wondered why a translation into English has never been attempted before. We have long had a German as well as a French translation, and recently there has been negotiations about the first thorough translation into Swedish, based, notably, on the unabridged edition from 2016.

On another occasion, I have called Baggesen's work an undisputed masterpiece of Danish literature. It is set in 1789 and offers a unique take on the political and cultural turbulence associated with this year. Its outer form is that of a travelogue, tracing the writer's journey through Germany, France and Switzerland. However, more than anything, it is the story of the traveller himself – a highly original individual expressing himself in a wealth of different modes and styles, with humour and irony as well as sensibility. As a detailed record of the transition from a classic to a romantic mode of writing, the book is of unparalleled importance in Danish and Scandinavian literature and still has much to offer contemporary readers.

To make this work come alive in another language requires considerable skill. To jump to conclusions: Having reviewed a 50-page draft, I am convinced that Jens Baggesen has found his proper translator in Jesper Gulddal. I can confirm that the translation is accurate both in terms of semantics and tone, and that it fully captures the unique irony and playfulness of Baggesen's language.

The translator has chosen three individual chapters from Baggesen's work: the first chapter is the initial *contre la montre*, in which the traveller desperately is trying to obtain a passport, and the narrator is showing his skills in suspense; the second chapter stems from Baggesen's visit to the rectangular city of Mannheim, which in reverse inspires a flux of ideas about freedom and roundness in life as well as in writing. Straightforward narration is followed by reflections; and the third chapter is certainly a high point of Danish prose,

in which Baggesen impressively is performing his ascension of the impressive Strasbourg Cathedral. Indeed, a lesson in sublimity.

The three chapters are well chosen, they show the diversity of Baggesen's writing. And they show Jesper Gulddal as an ample translator doing justice to the original. I can think of no one who would be better suited for this task.

I would expect an English edition of Baggesen's *The Labyrinth* to trigger enthusiasm in the English-speaking literary republic; it is certainly Sternian, but with a twist, it is a fresh report from a Europe in turmoil, it is a fascinating portrait of the artist as a young man, and it shows a mastery of Danish prose only to be rivalled by Kierkegaard.

Would it be a good addition to the World Classic's series? Certainly, Jens Baggesen can be compared to Ibsen or Strindberg, so yes, I think so.

Will it sell? Well, the Danish edition from 2016 is around in a second edition. Today it must be considered mandatory reading in a public comprising more than university students, in parts or in toto.

I strongly support this very fine project, and I would be happy to see it become a reality.

Copenhagen, May 7th 2020



Dr Henrik Blicher
Associate Professor, PhD

Institut for Nordiske Studier og Sprogvidenskab

Københavns Universitet

Emil Holms Kanal 2

Lokale 22.4.46

2300 København S

Denmark

TEL + 45 35 32 83 15

henblich@hum.ku.dk

www.nors.ku.dk

A few minor corrections: *Copenhagen*, p. 5: "... enabling a ... Homer to find would find ample material". The superfluous 'would find' should probably be deleted; p. 9, it should be noted that Cramer's *Menschliches Leben* is not a journal, rather a book series; and Wessels's drama should more properly be termed a mock-tragedy.