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Southern Literature in Northlight: 20th Century Southern Writers in Norwegian Translation: Reception, Reputation, Affinities.

The search for transnational connections between the South and a small country in the northernmost part of Europe is not only an intellectual challenge, but might well be deemed one of those fruitless endeavours that literary scholars undertake when concepts from other disciplines set the agenda for us. Yet if our discipline is considered to be a part of a wider field, cultural studies for example, we ought to do our best to cope with other aspects of the human and social sciences, and we may even be surprised by seeing how such an approach, no matter how treacherous and dangerous it may be, can offer new insights and almost inadvertently enrich our literary studies. 'Transatlantic exchanges' is a suitable and fitting term if we want to investigate the transnational aspect of what has traditionally been looked upon as a regional literature, even if most of us claim for the great representatives of Southern literature that they transcend their limitations and all borders and boundaries.

There is no doubt in my mind, however, that it is almost futile to search for the influence or impact of Norwegian literature or culture on Southern literature, whereas the opposite is an obvious if not too interesting task. The simple fact is that Southern literature, as a part of American literature, is a rich and varied and very important part of our literature in translation, although the impact of it on critics, literary scholars and on our authors is difficult to assess and can only be speculated upon. And since I do not want to deal only with facts and figures, titles, years of publication, critical reception and the like, I may have to speculate more than serious scholarship normally allows. Yet speculation, analysis, evaluation and judgment based on facts are constants of our trade, and not harmful if and when we subsume them under a general understanding of how cultural exchange takes place.

But we must then stop thinking that influence is the simple and direct impact by one writer on another. We should rather study the relationships between texts, and change the search for influence into a study of textual interdependency and not look for evolution or growth or the kind of kinship literary history favours, but really cannot defend.¹

When we talk about transatlantic exchange and the transnational connections we may establish for works of literary art, it may be worth remembering that the relationship between writing and reading – which is really what we talk about here – may be seen as reversible. Reading is a kind of virtual writing, and writing is always a kind of reading; a re-reading perhaps of those books that subconsciously are used, transformed and displaced to contribute to the creation of a totally new and original text. This takes place through a creative effort that we may never really understand, but which transcends all context, all influence, yet seems totally dependent on other texts, on Literature itself. Note that we do not have to forget the environment, the time, the history or the personal experience that also go into a work of literary art. Great works of art cannot be explained or understood on the basis of even a total contextualization, local or transnational. André Bleikasten has a fine observation of how one of the great Southern books could be written. Bleikasten writes:

The Sound and the Fury marks Faulkner's decisive encounter with Literature, his final entry into what might be called its infinite text, a space in which novels are endlessly born out of novels. . . . He had discovered that his experience as a Southerner could be used for literary purposes; [now] he came to realize that, far from being the mere expression or reflection of prior experience, writing could be in itself an experience in the fullest sense.²

Reading a book can thus be seen as a re-writing of it in the context of our own lives, and thus we appropriate, negotiate, transform and naturalize texts so that they somehow seem to mean something which is simple, coherent, and true.³ Writing a book can likewise be understood as an appropriation, and yet also a dismissal and a displacing of those books that somehow made it possible, and of which the writer may not even be aware when the creative process is closer to forgetfulness than to remembrance. A writer reads books, and, if serious, he reads the best ones by the great writers, and, having more or less forgotten them, they are still somehow present when he creates his own books. But this is only a general truth; we may believe that novels are born out of novels, without being able to find a trace of the

old books behind the new one. In other cases, when we come to particulars, we may find similarities in plot, in the handling of narrative as well as of language, in attitudes and moral outlook. We may even see how the use of very concrete borrowings – real intertexts, if you like – has a clear and decisive effect on the development of a story and hence of a novel as a whole. I have little hope of finding such relationships between Norwegian books and Southern literature, whereas I shall present to you a couple of instances where Norwegian books could hardly have been written without Southern predecessors.

I accept as obvious and commonplace that books and thoughts and knowledge and understanding from outside the Southern region, and of course not least from old and established European cultures, must be part of the frames through which we perceive and evaluate Southern literature, whether it is the extensive role of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in Flannery O'Connor's fictions or the pervasive Chekovian atmosphere, narrative style or mood in some of Eudora Welty's best stories, or elements of the Christian tradition as well as fragments of Greek mythology in some of Faulkner's writing. Yet we should be aware that we can neither take for granted that Southern literature has distinct qualities to set it apart from the rest of American literature, nor that the South and its cultural products remain stable and exempt of change. On the contrary, I do not believe in 'The Lasting South,' nor in 'The Everlasting South,' but I have some sympathy with John Reed's notion of 'The Enduring South.' You all notice that I quote book titles that claim lasting southernness in many if not all walks of life.⁴ But the South has changed; the South is changing. Yet I shall proceed as if 'Southern' was a well-defined term, the distinguishing traits of which we all agree upon.

When I now move on to Norway and things Norwegian, I am left with little food for thought and not much for speculation when it comes to the transnational exchange between my country's rich literature and Southern writers from the 20th century. The best I can offer are some facts about Southern writers who have been made accessible in Norwegian translations, and then discuss whether this has had any visible or measurable impact on Norwegian literature in the same period. I cannot point to any Norwegian books in English translations that have been read by major Southern writers and thus contributed indirectly to their creative efforts, yet one may hope or think or even guess that some of them read at least some of Ibsen's dramatic works, and one might also venture the guess that Knut Hamsun, directly or

through the many European writers inspired by him, may have been of importance to some of the best Southern writers. The catalogue of Faulkner's library⁵ shows that he had Volume X of Ibsen's complete plays there – so one may speculate whether *Hedda Gabler* or *The Masterbuilder* – the two plays in this particular volume – can be said to lie behind scenes or characters in Faulkner's fiction. Now, he did also own a one volume edition of *The Works of Henrik Ibsen*, and Ibsen was such a central figure in European literature that the pervasive effect of his works may be found anywhere, also in Southern literature. Hamsun is not represented in Faulkner's library, and the surprising information that he owned two novels by Norwegian novelist Sigurd Hoel may be seen in relation to the fact that he met this novelist and editor and critic in Oslo in June, 1952, and probably received one of the books there – *Meeting at the Milestone* was published in London in 1951. But the other one, *One Day in October*, was published in New York in 1932 and actually autographed by Faulkner in his habitual way – William Faulkner/Rowan Oak. 1932. I include this information since Hoel edited a prestigious series of translated books, "The Yellow Series," and in 1932 included *Soldiers' Pay* in this series with Hoel's foreword.⁶ This brief textual commentary and critical assessment of Faulkner is one of the first non-English articles on Faulkner, preceded only by Maurice Coindreau in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in June 1931. Two years later Hoel translated *Light in August* himself, and wrote another preface. In 1951 he included this novel in a special edition of the ten best books from the Yellow Series, which had then run for two decades. Yet no evidence of Hoel in Faulkner or Faulkner in Hoel can be traced, as far as I have found.

But even if hard evidence cannot be found we must not forget that American books, published in New York or in British editions in London, were bought, read, exchanged and discussed among intellectuals in Oslo in the 1920s and 1930s, perhaps to a greater extent than what has commonly been thought, since we tend to believe that this began much later. I have a number of books by Faulkner and Hemingway that were bought in Oslo in the early 1930s and signed by their owner, a psychiatrist who at the age of 23 wrote a study of Hamsun's writings called "The Circle of Life." My copy of *As I Lay Dying* is, for instance, the Cape and Smith edition published in New York in 1930, and was a gift to him from Rolf Stenersen in August 1932. This is inscribed in the volume. Stenersen had made a fortune for himself on the stock market, he had the world's largest private collection of

Edvard Munch's works which he later gave to the city of Oslo, and he was an extremely experimental modernist novelist, with very moderate success, indeed. Does this prove anything? No. Just that there are writers and books and readers and that they find each other at certain times and places, and that this subtly and slowly must make a difference.

Let me then give an example of something that is more than a possible exchange between North and South, between Southern literature and Norwegian books of the same period. In addition to Sigurd Hoel, who read, translated and wrote a couple of brief essays on Faulkner without any discernable effect on his own creative writing, I can at least offer minimal evidence of one more renowned Norwegian novelist's interest in a Southern author and prove by more than conjecture that he had read one or more of his books and that the two writers had a similar literary agenda. Olav Duun, author of a historical novel in six volumes, *Juwikfolket – The People of Juvik*, translated into English between 1930 and 1935, and some thirty other books, was a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature for many years and almost received the prize in 1925. Many critics and literary historians hold him above Hamsun and Undset as our greatest novelist of all times. If I were to compare or simply relate Faulkner to any Norwegian writer, Duun is my obvious choice. Yet to my knowledge, we have only one piece of evidence to show that Olav Duun read and knew Faulkner as an author. In a letter to a book reviewer he strongly recommends that she read *As I Lay Dying*. He is clearly impressed by the book, and he had read it as early as 1932 or 1933, and calls it what in a literal translation would be "a real son-of-a-bitch."⁷ Knowing that Faulkner's early books were available (in American or British editions) in Norway very quickly, it is tempting to speculate that Duun read more books by Faulkner, like *The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August*; perhaps even *Sanctuary*. Authors seem to have been more impressed by Faulkner's books than the reading public in general, and a professional novelist like Duun would certainly find things to admire in Faulkner's narrative structures and rhetorical force, which were of a kind that he had never dared to even attempt himself. Duun remained a fairly traditional teller of stories in the best tradition of historical novels, and even in the books from the contemporary scene from the 1930s, he experimented little. Faulkner, obviously, was much more experimental, but also a great storyteller even in his most modernistic books. What Duun and Faulkner share in a general sense is, first and

foremost, their sense of place. Both writers are totally and deeply immersed in the land and the culture they write from and about, yet able to see it at a distance and fictionalise it with wry humour and generous understanding of its shortcomings. Both prove that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature, and they both create imaginary areas within which almost all their characters live and all the events of their stories take place. Both are clearly “rewriting the homeplace,” to use Richard Gray’s phrase,⁸ and thus they create world literature.

Some twenty years ago I published survey articles on the reception and reputation of Mississippi writers in Norway, among whom William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams were the only ones to deserve separate treatment. In an additional piece I presented what I called ‘minor Mississippi writers’ in Norwegian translation, and Richard Wright was by far the most successful among those in terms of printed and sold books.⁹ Mississippi is not the whole South, of course, yet no other Southern writers would demand the attention and space I gave to Faulkner and Williams if we look at the number of books translated and the interest they evoked in Norway. Thomas Wolfe was, of course, translated early, and made a difference with some authors, notably one who borrowed ideas and plots, rhetorical and often very lyrical prose from Wolfe, in short stories as well as in a couple of novels that this author thought made him the greatest writer alive, anywhere. He even spent almost a year in Chapel Hill from the fall of 1951, no doubt because Wolfe had been a student there. His major books were based on personal experience at least to the same degree as Thomas Wolfe’s books, with little distance to life, events and people. There is no doubt that Agnar Mykle and his two novels from the mid-50s owe much to Thomas Wolfe. If you have not read *Lasso round the Moon* and *The Song of the Red Ruby*, I recommend the first, although his greatest success came with the second, which was first banned as pornographic but later freed.¹⁰ The narrator and main character, Ask Burlefot, looks at his life in retrospect, and he knows that he cannot ever go home again, but also that he has to. He has to enter the night train and journey north towards home, as we all shall have to do, with the memory of a dead brother in his arms. He knows that “Love is something others do not know of. Love is loneliness.”¹¹ He knows that our time between dark and dark is painfully brief, and perhaps also that only art can create some sort of permanence. I may even contradict something I said earlier, and admit that a study of direct influence

would be possible in the case of Thomas Wolfe and Agnar Mykle, to a degree that I cannot show for any other Norwegian writer, not even if I went outside the borders of the South and included, for example, Hemingway or Carver, from whom numerous Norwegian authors have learnt a lot and found new approaches to their own material.

Without much more to offer about how Southern books may have changed Norwegian literature, I now turn to a brief survey of 20th century Southern writers in Norwegian translation: Reception, reputation and affinities.

Despite my early research on Southern writers and their Norwegian careers, which I have revised and updated a couple of times over the years, I have had to extend my research and expand my thoughts for this collection. Much has in fact changed over the last twenty years, although Southern literature in Norwegian translation may well be described by the omissions, that is, significant books that have not been translated.

Among important translations in the years immediately after World War II, Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* appeared in translation in 1947, both in the Yellow Series. Another important writer, on the stage more than in books, is Tennessee Williams. His *A Streetcar Named Desire*, translated in 1950; *The Rose Tattoo*, translated in 1951; and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, translated in 1955, are the only *books* in Norwegian by him, but he has had ten more plays translated and performed by various theatres in Norway from 1947 up to the present day. Elizabeth Spencer's *The Voice at the Back Door* was translated in 1957 (Yellow Series), and Walker Percy's *Lancelot* in 1979. The critical reception of Percy's book was negative, which may account for the fact that no other books by this writer were published. William Styron was somewhat belatedly introduced to a Norwegian audience with a translation of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1984, followed by *Sophie's Choice*, 1987 and *Darkness Visible*, 1991.

Two short story collections by Flannery O'Connor were translated and published as one book under the title *Dommens dag (Judgment day)* in 1971. Including the superb stories from *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, this book has been reissued twice, the last time in an inexpensive paperback edition. Eudora Welty has had only one short story translated, for an anthology, in addition to *The Optimist's Daughter*, published with little critical acclaim in 1994. The translation of Kaye Gibbons' first novel *Ellen Foster* received mixed reviews, but a couple of her other novels have

now been translated. Perhaps the black female writers – notably Toni Morrison and Alice Walker – dominated the literary scene too much for a period, also in Norway – all their books have been translated. Accordingly we should not expect such a talented and intricate writer as Josephine Humphreys to be among the Southerners in Norwegian translation, which she is not, in company with Lee Smith, Doris Betts, Pam Durban and many others, male and female. On the other hand, as expected perhaps, Bobbie Ann Mason and Jayne Anne Phillips and Anne Tyler have had many of their books translated. Cormac McCarthy had one of his Southern books, *Child of God*, translated early, but then became a bestselling author and a celebrity even in Norway with the publication of *All the Pretty Horses*. Larry Brown has had his *Father and Son* and *Faye* translated, whereas crime writers such as John Grisham and James Lee Burke are omnipresent in Norwegian. And so are a number of Pat Conroy's books, inevitably.

Since Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* was immediately translated, and her second book also is out in Norwegian, I feel entitled to be critical of the literary judgment among our editors and publishers. It is fine that Richard Ford is present in Norwegian translations; it is a pity that Barry Hannah is not. That Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* was picked up immediately and had great success in translation is likewise fine, and his new novel is bound to be out in Norwegian translation early next year. To me the important lacunas, the missing books, are first and foremost novels and stories by the really great Southerners: O'Connor, Welty and – I am sorry to have to admit this – William Faulkner.

William Faulkner's direct influence on Norwegian literature or on any particular Norwegian writer is seldom noticeable, but indirectly he must have made a difference. For numerous writers young and old there can be little doubt that their reading of *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying* or *Absalom, Absalom!* must have been decisive experiences in their lives and careers. Some of our younger writers admit this almost inadvertently by intertextual play on Faulkner texts or by lightly disguised references to characters from his books. The simple fact that numerous Faulkner books have been translated into Norwegian for the first time after 1990 may be one reason for this, although Norwegian readers always have had easy access to Faulkner's books in English paperbacks.

Faulkner's reputation in Norway may be said to rest upon a legend of the difficult but otherwise great story-teller from the South, a leg-

end that has been very tenacious since the appearance of the first translation in 1932. The Norwegian translation of *Soldiers' Pay* in 1932 was, as mentioned, the first translation of a Faulkner book anywhere. *Light in August* was brought out in a translation two years later, and was re-issued in 1951, 1964 and 1989. No more translations appeared till after Faulkner's Nobel Prize in 1950: *Sanctuary* was published in 1951, as was a collection of fourteen short stories. *Sanctuary* was reprinted in paperback in 1970, and a book club edition appeared in 1988. Translations of *The Unvanquished*, *The Reivers*, *The Wild Palms* and *The Sound and the Fury* appeared in 1957, 1964, 1966 and 1967, respectively. Only *The Sound and the Fury* has been re-issued, in a book club edition as one of the books in "The Library of the Century" in 1992, but has later been re-translated. In 1992 a translation of *As I Lay Dying* was published. In 1992, moreover, a very handsome edition of 28 of Faulkner's short stories was published by a book club. The book includes 13 of the 14 stories in the 1951 short story volume, and, accordingly, fifteen stories translated into Norwegian for the first time. *Absalom, Absalom!* appeared in translation in 1994, and *Go Down, Moses* in 1996. In 1996 the first volume of the Snopes trilogy, *The Hamlet*, appeared in a Norwegian translation, followed by *The Town* in 1998 and *The Mansion* in 2000. In the meantime, in 1997, Faulkner's only book for children, *The Wishing Tree*, was made available in Norwegian. Even more recently, *Intruder in the Dust* has been translated, and a new translation of *The Sound and the Fury*, based on the corrected text and including the "Compson Appendix," was published in 2004, and was included in the so-called World Library in which books from all times and all countries, selected by a hundred contemporary authors, are included.¹²

On the basis of this survey, one might hope that Faulkner stands a better chance of being influential among Norwegian writers in the coming years than ever before, since so many books have been translated recently.

Thinking about transatlantic exchanges, even when limited to my own small country and language, we may reach the conclusion that boundaries are broken up, contacts established, intertextual relationships established, deliberate or accidental, even between the literatures of the north and the south, between books from worlds so different that one might think it impossible to establish any sort of common values or understanding. I once tried to ascertain and become aware myself why at all it was possible for me to undertake my first

Faulkner translation – of *The Hamlet*. Just think of the world of Frenchman's Bend and its farmers, in the old days. They use horses or mules, they plow their fields in the spring and grow cotton or corn. They drive in wagons of many sorts, from buckboards to buggies. They buy coils of plowline from Varner's store. As we all know, the names and designations and the technical vocabulary for harnesses and equipment for horses and mules have disappeared from our daily language. If I have at all managed to get this right in my translation of *The Hamlet* it can only be because I grew up on a dirt farm in northern Norway in the 1950s, which was before the mechanization of farms, even before the general advent of tractors. Literature and literary understanding work in mysterious ways, but I have also learned from my attempts at tracing the South in the North and the North in the South that we cannot generalize and perhaps we should not even try to be systematic. I agree with René Wellek, who once wrote *The Rise of English Literary History* (1941), but who thirty years later, in an essay called "The Fall of Literary History," said this:

There is no progress, no development, no history of art except a history of writers, institutions and techniques. This is, at least for me, the end of an illusion, the fall of literary history.¹³

Therefore I have not tried to trace a development or establish a pattern of connections and exchanges; I have just looked at a few writers and some of their books, with emphasis on certain aspects. It is not much. It is not nothing.

Notes

- ¹ See Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* 3.
- ² André Bleikasten, *The Most Splendid Failure. Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury* 45.
- ³ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* 141. Culler refers to Barthes' S/Z in his explanation of 'naturalization.'
- ⁴ See Fred Hobson's discussion of these books in his *Tell About the South* 298-99.
- ⁵ Joseph Blotner, ed., *William Faulkner's Library. A Catalogue* 110-11.
- ⁶ See my "A Note on the First Faulkner Translation, and a 1932 Essay on Faulkner," *Notes on Mississippi Writers* Vol.XV, No.2, 73-77.
- ⁷ See Duun's letter to Eugenia Kielland, 11 January 1934. Otto Hageberg, *Olav Duun. Biografiske og litteraturhistoriske streiflys* 81.
- ⁸ Richard Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner*. The phrase is used as section heading for part III of the book.
- ⁹ "The Reception and Reputation of William Faulkner in Norway," *Notes on Mississippi Writers* Vol.XVI, Nos.1&2, 25-58; "The Reception and Reputation of

Tennessee Williams in Norway," *Notes on Mississippi Writers* Vol.XVII, No.2, 61-81; "The Reception and Reputation of 'Minor' Mississippi Writers in Norway," *Notes on Mississippi Writers* Vol.XVII, No.1, 19-33.

¹⁰ See for instance Anders Heger, *Mykle. Et diktet liv*, which is a well-informed but not very analytical biography about this writer.

¹¹ These are the final words in Agnar Mykle's *The Song of the Red Ruby* in English translation.

¹² This means that *Mosquitoes, Flags in the Dust, Pylon, Knight's Gamble, A Fable* plus a fairly high number of short stories remain to be translated. Included in the list should perhaps also be the original text of *Sanctuary*.

¹³ René Wellek, "The Fall of Literary History" 440.

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