

GRETHE FATIMA SYED:

Olav Duun. Kunsten, døden og kjærlighetens dikter.

Vidarforlaget, Riga 2015. Pp. 384.

ISBN: 978-82-7990-298-0.

The title of Grethe F. Syed's book translates as 'Olav Duun. Poet of art, death and love', and for those who know a little about the tradition of Duun scholarship, this clearly indicates a study with an emphasis on different if not altogether new aspects of Duun's novels and short stories. The published book is based on the author's doctoral dissertation from a few years back, and although the revised text claims to be aimed at ordinary readers, it is in fact a hybrid between an academic dissertation and a readable book meant for a general audience, which, I fear, must have a fairly high literary competence. This said, the book's obvious strength lies in Syed's enthusiasm, her eagerness to make readers understand the importance in our lives of literature in general and of Olav Duun's fictional world and characters in particular. At the opening as well as near the end of the book she even explains what must be called her lasting love affair with Duun's texts, which is fair enough, whereas it might have been better to leave out metatextual comments about her struggle before the happy ending which has brought her a doctorate as well as seeing this book in print. Reviews in scholarly publications have been few so far, but in general the book has been well received, with some criticism of its precarious balance between an academic or scholarly study and a book for non-academics.

The defining approach and Syed's 'method' may be described as a way of reading in which sensory experience is decisive and is seen as more valuable than theoretical concepts or an intellectual response. Through our senses we have access to the world around us and all it entails. Early on she introduces the Danish theologian K. E. Løgstrup as one of her 'helpers'; the other central theorist is the French philosopher Georges Bataille. Yet even if these two men are quoted time and again, Syed allows her readers to pay as little attention to them as they like, since Duun and her reading of a surprising selection from his total oeuvre are more important.

Syed presents Olav Duun as an author of contradictions and paradoxes, often in such a way that the effect is subversive. In his work many strong forces work to hinder or destroy people in their struggle to do the best they can. She also finds a very intelligent writer in Duun, even when he transgresses norms and challenges our concepts of sin and salvation, or evil and good. And even if love can be seen as a central theme through all his many books, the pervasive images of death and dying may appear to be more forceful, since death is an integral part of life, and without the sense of an ending even Duun's books would be ephemeral entertainment and not serious art. Syed does not say this, but she refers to Frank Kermode's famous book too late in her study and makes too scant use of it. This is part of, or leads up to, the only serious criticism I want to voice against the book as a whole, its structure, and its attempts at theoretical speculation. Far too often theories about reading come after the interpretive work has more or less been carried out, and thus they are of little or no help. This is true for Gadamer's hermeneutics, discussed on pp. 296-97; it is true for Susan Sontag and her contribution to literary interpretation, but also for a more general discussion of how we read, how we make texts signify, which comes even later when most things Syed has to say have already been said.

Syed has read widely and learnt much while having Duun at the centre of her thoughts and writing. Now and then she is too eager to include anything and everything that comes to mind. Too many names, too many references, too many simple parallels or possible connections, threaten to drown her interpretation of a Duun text. This is a pity, but fortunately it is not a general tendency. Syed is a very competent reader when she gets down to close reading. She selects two short stories for close scrutiny early on, and adds a third short story interpretation later. Apart from this, she moves freely to and fro in all of Duun's many texts, although she spends most energy and space on a rather special character in *Juvikfolke* – Ola Håberg. He becomes the central character in her study, and he seems to be the reason why suicide figures so prominently in her book. An image of a pair of shoes, abandoned on the shore before Ola drowned himself, is the basis for her fascination with Duun's work. The extensive discussion of this image and of death

by water could be deemed interpretive overkill, but it is wonderfully executed and quite convincing as it stands. But then, of course, one might question how effective this is if one's goal is to bring about a better and deeper understanding of a writer who is probably the greatest novelist Norway has ever had. Reading Duun by placing so much emphasis on marginal characters and by sweeping comments on his best novels, without treating them at length or even giving them their due when discussing love and death, art and aesthetics, ethics and morals, has its risks. Yet Grethe Syed's book is a timely reminder that we should all try to set Olav Duun free from his first interpreters, and do our best to bring new readers to his books.

HANS H. SKEI

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO