

THOMAS BREDSDORFF AND ANNE-MARIE MAI (eds.):

100 Danish Poems from the Medieval Period to the Present Day.

Translated by John Irons.

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This hefty volume contains a selection of 100 Danish poems in English translation from the late seventeenth century until 2009, with the addition of two medieval ballads. All but the last six poems also appear in the larger collection (in Danish) entitled *1000 danske digte* (1000 Danish Poems), edited by the same two scholars (Rosinante, 2000), though only the last two poems in the present volume (by Naja Marie Aidt) are written after 2000.

The poems are preceded by a long introduction (pp. 11-54) by Anne-Marie Mai (also translated by John Irons), which not only offers brief information about the poets included but also places them in a wider literary context.

This is a very welcome and fairly representative introduction to Danish poetry for an English-speaking readership, which presents 1-3 poems by most of the prominent poets of the last three centuries or so. The choice of writers/poems is of course always a matter of taste and personal preference, and in the present case one suspects that sometimes other considerations than tradition or quality have played a part. For example, the earlier female poets from the twentieth century included here (Bodil Bech, Hulda Lütken, Tove Meyer) are arguably not household names in the same sense as some of the later ones (Tove Ditlevsen, Inger Christensen, Pia Tafdrup, etc.), but no less welcome for that. These and other choices come at a price, though, since it seems to be to the exclusion of a number of important poets from the last two centuries, such as Poul Martin Møller, Christian Winter, Johannes Jørgensen, Hans Hartvig Seedorff, Per Lange, Ole Wivel and Jørgen Sonne, to mention some of the more obvious ones. Some might also find it a little disappointing that, for instance, Hans Christian Andersen and J.P. Jacobsen are only represented by one poem each, when lesser known practitioners of the art form appear with at least two. But selections of this kind will never please everybody, and the two editors have ranged widely and on the whole not sprung many surprises. As far as presentation is concerned, it is very helpful and pleasing to the eye that the Danish version appears on the left page and the English one opposite on the right side, thus allowing easy comparison between original and translation.

Of all the literary genres, poetry – especially of the more traditional kind with rhymes, etc. – is usually considered the most challenging for a translator, who will need to make some conscious choices from the outset. John Irons has elected to go down the now rather unfashionable road of translating the rhymes as rhymes. Although one may feel some intuitive sympathy for this brave decision, it is fraught with danger; at least if one expects the result to match the language of the calibre of, say, a Keats or a Tennyson. And I fear that these misgivings are all too

often justified. There is no room here for extensive examples, but the poem 'Sne' (Snow) by Helge Rode (pp. 202-203) displays some of the problems. Here (in stanza 1) 'take' is made to rhyme with 'makes' and (in stanza 3) 'fine' with 'sublime'. It does not take a phonetician to spot the flaws, and if this is the outcome, why do it? Furthermore, natural English syntax is quite often stretched beyond what is acceptable to a modern reader; a favourite ploy seems to be to place the direct object before the finite verb, which even in poetry is somewhat clumsier in English than in Danish. Again, the Rode poem provides us with an example: '... makes / quiet the voices that the air are rending'. Similar examples are legion throughout the collection.

It would be a shame, though, to dwell too much on such linguistic infelicities when this publication can no doubt serve as a very valuable introduction to, and overview of, Danish poetry, which at its best can compare with that of any nation. It is therefore to be hoped that this volume will find its way to as wide an audience as possible. The poets and the editors deserve nothing less, and so – despite the problems mentioned above – does the translator for the vast majority of the poems and for the sheer scale of the undertaking.