

NIELS FRANK:

**Alt andet er løgn. Essays om moderne litteratur**

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Best known for his own collections of minimalist and deconstructionist poetry in the 1980s and 90s, Niels Frank's collection of essays, *Alt andet er løgn*, illuminates his post-modern views of the character of Danish Modernist literature. Many of the essays were written during Frank's tenure as director of the Copenhagen School of Creative Writing (Forfatterskolen) from 1996-2001 and all have previously appeared in print elsewhere, though in modified form. Frank's purpose in bringing the essays together in book form is to connect their individual treatments of Modernist authors into a more cohesive argument about Modernism in general, while also situating Danish Modernism in an international context, with Per Højholt and Peter Seeberg in dialogue with Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé. Frank's focus on icons of the Modernist movement has the effect of excluding younger Danish writers, such as Jeppe Brixvold and Lone Hørslev, for which Lars Bukhdahl took Frank to task in his review of the book in *Weekendavisen* in 2007.

Frank takes the title for the collection and his ideological point of departure from the Symbolist poet Mallarmé's declaration in a letter to Henri Cazalis in 1867: 'I have been sufficiently immersed in nothingness to be able to say with certainty that only beauty exists and it has only one perfect expression: poetry. All the rest is a lie.' Although Frank asserts that the point of the book is not to prove that Mallarmé was wrong, his overarching agenda for the essays, as explained in the Foreword, is to demonstrate that Modernist literature presents readers with a multiplicity of truths, determined by the subjectivity inherent in each literary and critical text. Once readers learn to recognize each author's subjective position, they will be able to make their own decision about what is 'good literature'. From Frank's own perspective, literature must fulfil more than a purely aesthetic function; it must also engage with the world around it. In

the process, it both shapes and is shaped by its particular historical context. For example, Frank argues that the unique character of Danish Modernism was particularly impacted by the traumas of World War II and the establishment of the welfare state. These experiences prompted mid-twentieth-century Danish Modernist authors to emulate the edifying facets of Modernism, in keeping with their conception of literature as serving a constructive purpose.

According to Frank, the chapters in the book can be read either as stand-alone essays on particular clusters of authors or as related parts of a non-chronological narrative of Danish Modernism's development from its origins as an attempt to emulate an exotic European aesthetic experiment in the late nineteenth century through its homegrown reincarnation in late twentieth-century Danish literature. In keeping with his stated desire to stimulate discussion, Frank begins his first chapter with the provocative statement, 'Danish literature became modern in earnest in 1959.' He dives right in to the central debate of what 'modern in earnest' means, contrasting the image of Baudelaire that emerged in 1959 from Villy Sørensen's *Poets and Demons* and Thorkild Bjørnvig's essay 'Aesthetic Idiosyncrasy' with Sophus Claussen and Johannes Jørgensen's reception of Baudelaire in 1888. In the second chapter, he compares Johannes V. Jensen's 1907 story 'Fusijama' with Peter Seeberg's 'Anatomical Drawing' from 1990, while the third chapter deals with Poul Borum's literary critical legacy. The fourth chapter, a masterful investigation of Modernism and post-Modernism in American poetry, is only peripherally related to the Danish context of the other essays, a fact to which Frank alludes with the title 'The other tradition'. Similarly, Chapters 5 and 6 concern themselves exclusively with Mallarmé and Francis Ponge, respectively. In the final chapter, Frank returns to his Danish context, using an analogy derived from Pablo Picasso and his associate Paul Éluard's diametrically opposed views of the artist's relationship to his historical context to elucidate the varying interpretations of Modernism that have contributed to the development of a Danish Modernist literary tradition.

Throughout the book, Frank's treatment of Modernist literature, both Danish and French, and its house-idols is erudite and confident, but he too often refrains from making specific arguments about the phenomena he describes, limiting himself instead to well-informed but inconclusive commentary. Frank warns his readers in the Foreword that his essays are written in a deliberately non-academic style, but it can still be difficult to find the red thread in some of his intellectual meanderings. The lofty, rather abstract questions he articulates in the Foreword as to the role of literature and its relation to the world around it get very little play in the individual chapters, with the exception of the final chapter, where he at long last takes up the question of his own work and its relationship to the

varieties of Danish Modernism he has outlined. Frank's decision to discuss his own writing, which he describes as 'slightly incestuous', has a transformative effect on the entire collection, suggesting that one of the book's primary functions might in fact be to offer readers a glimpse of the connection between the author himself and the sources of inspiration upon which he has drawn in crafting his own literary style.

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