

NINA VON ZIMMERMANN:

Geschichten aus der Jazz-Zeit. Die 'verlorene Generation' in der dänischen Literatur

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One of the paradoxes of international comparative literary studies is that the same terms do not always mean the same thing in different national literary traditions. In this book publication of her well-researched doctoral dissertation, Nina von Zimmermann tackles the question of the 'lost generation' as it applies to Danish literature. At first glance, this endeavor might seem like a dead end, since the majority of popular culture associations with the term relate to the now-famous group of disillusioned expatriate American authors living in Paris in the 1920s, including Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and Jon Dos Passos. Gertrude Stein is usually given credit for coining the term, not least because Hemingway attributed it to her in *The Sun Also Rises*. However, as Zimmermann shows, the term 'lost generation' originated in an entirely different context and applies to a wide range of groups, both historical and literary, in several different nations. In England and France, for example, the term was originally used to describe the men who died during the war and only later gained currency as a descriptor for those who survived the war with intact bodies but traumatized psyches and who used literature as a vehicle for exploring this psychological fragmentation.

The focus of Zimmermann's dense but insightful analysis is the 'lost generation' of Danish authors between the world wars, whose sharp critique of contemporary society reflects the death of individualism and the rise of a mentality of anti-materialistic idealism. She begins with a systematic analysis of the terminology, considering the extent to which one can even speak of a cohesive group mentality shaped by the traumatic historical events of the first World War and of a resulting literary aesthetic. She grounds her analysis of several pivotal Danish novels from the 1930s

in a discussion of the term as it applies to American, German, and Danish authors of the post-World War I era. By so doing, she both establishes the historical context of the phenomenon as well as the critical value of reading interwar Danish literature through such a lens. Her treatment of the American 'lost generation' is cursory, relying heavily on Marc Dolan's treatment of the subject in his 1996 book *Modern Lives. A Cultural Re-Reading of 'The Lost Generation'*, in which he challenges the prevailing associations of the 'lost generation' with any specific historical, social, or literary group, arguing that the 'lost generation' is, in fact, not an historical event at all, but rather a discursive object. Zimmermann's discussion of German youth of the interwar period is somewhat broader, encompassing Klaus Mann, Joseph Roth, Peter de Mendelssohn, and Ernst Toller, but less theoretical.

Despite Denmark's official neutrality and non-combatant status during World War I, the interwar period was still characterized by ideological upheaval and competing conceptions of culture. Zimmermann prefaces her literary analyses with a concise historical overview of economic, social, political, and ideological conditions in Denmark during the interwar period, recounting the belated progress of industrialization, the economic opportunities and dangers of Denmark's 'Goulash Age', and the subsequent rehabilitation and institutionalization of the Danish economy during the 1920s that laid the foundation for the rise of the Danish welfare state. The most original and compelling segment of this historical framework is Zimmermann's cogent explanation of the cultural politics of Denmark in the 1920s and 30s, in particular the jockeying for position that went on between the Conservatives, Social Democrats, and Cultural Radicals. Drawing on such theorists as Terry Eagleton and Walter Benjamin, Zimmermann demonstrates the tension between the traditional, bourgeois view of culture as distinct from politics and the modern, radical equation of culture and politics, identifying Poul Henningsen as the new generation's Georg Brandes. She situates her discussion of the literary treatments of Denmark's 'lost generation' within this discursive field, framed by Tom Kristensen's critique of Danish Aestheticism and Poul Henningsen's insistence on the democratic functionality of art.

The term 'lost generation' has been used sporadically in Danish scholarship since the 1920s, both by authors such as Martin Andersen Nexø and Klaus Riffbjerg as well as by critics, though the scholarly treatments of the 'lost generation' in Danish have been relatively few. The five novels that Zimmermann analyzes under this rubric are Jacob Paludan's *Jørgen Stein* (1932), Aase Hansen's *Vruggods* (1933), Knud Sønderby's *Midt i en jazztid* (1931), Tom Kristensen's *Hærværk* (1930), and Martin Andersen Nexø's *Den fortabte generation* (1948). Zimmermann's

literary analyses are conscientious and thorough, looking at each novel individually in terms of its overt and implicit depiction of the revaluation of values that took place in the interwar period. For example, Paludan's *Jørgen Stein* tells the story of a young man who comes of age during the war, trading the patriotism and religiosity of his bourgeois parental home for atheism and pacifism, while still struggling, sincerely but unsuccessfully, to relate to socialism, women's emancipation, jazz, and the multiplicity of new social ideologies and art forms that emerged in the post-war period. By contrast, Nexø's *Den fortabte generation* caricatures the moral decadence of those same artists and writers, who neither think nor work, but attempt to get through life with the least possible effort and the greatest possible consumption of alcohol. Though all five novels are stylistically very different and reflect the individual authors' disparate aesthetic and ideological convictions, their common themes of disillusionment, failure, and despair as consequences of the radically-altered postwar world identify them as memoirs of the 'lost generation'.

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