Selections From the New Book Room

Moment of Freedom / by Jens Bjørneboe; translated by Esther Greenleaf Mührer
PT8950.B528 F713 1999

Norwegian author Jens Bjørneboe has had his works declared "masterpieces" in Europe, and yet he remains all but unknown in the United States. There are several reasons for this. First of all, Bjørneboe was living in the European "hinterlands" of Scandinavia, writing in a language that is seldom translated into English, and in whose literature we have shown little interest since the death of Ibsen. Secondly, much of Bjørneboe’s work is not easy to read, not only because his writing is experimental but because one of his major themes is "The Evil;" he takes long, detailed looks at the basest sides of humanity, cataloging man’s inhumanity to man for pages at a time. Thirdly, Bjørneboe committed suicide in 1976, just as Moment of Freedom was being made available in English for the first time. As a result, critics and reviewers had no author to interview or to quote or to provide a sense of the personality behind the book. Also, by the mid-1970s American sensibilities had taken a swing further to the right and Bjørneboe’s radical social critique, which might have seemed more in place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, now seemed out of step with the times.

In spite of all this, Moment of Freedom is a masterpiece, and it is a book whose time has come once again. While our leaders seem stuck on a one-way track heading toward WWII with no regard for popular or world opinion, we need writers like Bjørneboe to point out the corruption and depravity that springs from absolute power, and the absurdity of decisions made by those who are morally bankrupt. Bjørneboe’s writing has been compared to Kafka, Dostoevsky, Rabelais, and the Book of Revelation. If comparisons are needed, I would liken his writing style to the hypnotic, poetic quality found in the best of Thomas Pynchon, with a strong dose of the thematics of Günter Grass, another “difficult” European writer whose world view was formed by the experience of WWII. Since this is an experimental novel without a concrete plot, it is difficult to summarize. The narrator is a “Servant of Justice” who witnesses firsthand the hypocrisy of the powerful. His story is told in a series of diary entries, dreams, fantasies, memories, and drunken revels.

Moment of Freedom won the Norwegian State Prize for Culture, as well as a number of other awards. It is the first book in Bjørneboe’s trilogy generally referred to as The History of Bestiality, which also includes Powderhouse and The Silence. It is a work that can seem overwhelmingly depressing and negative, while at the same time it paradoxically retains both a sense of humor and a sense of hope. The 1999 edition was faithfully translated by Philadelphian Esther Greenleaf Mührer and expresses both the meaning and the spirit of the original Norwegian text. Moment of Freedom is not for the faint-hearted, but those who are willing to look cold, hard reality squarely in the face will find it a rewarding adventure. – reviewed by Alison Lewis

(For further information about this writer and his works, see the website Jens Bjørneboe in English — ed.)