

Foreword

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Confronting Klaus Rifbjerg

Én, to, tre
uforståelig sammensmelten af to organismer
filihankat
og grunden er lagt til det bedste af alt
at eksistere.
(‘Undfangelse’, *Under Vejr med mig selv*, 1956)

One, two, three
a baffling fusion of two organisms
abracadabra
and the ground is laid for the best thing of all
– to exist.
(‘Conception’, *Setting Sail with Myself*, 1956, my translation)

With this playful depiction of the first moment of his existence, the 25-year-old Klaus Rifbjerg burst onto the Danish literary scene of 1956. His debut collection as a poet was entitled *Under vejr med mig selv*, which translates roughly as ‘Setting Sail with Myself’. It was startling enough that this sequence of poems described conception, gestation, birth, childhood and youth, but the language employed by Rifbjerg to take the reader on this journey was equally iconoclastic. The ‘I’ of the second poem in the collection introduces himself as *fosterfisk*, (foetus-fish) — a compound noun at once irreverent, inconsonant, and absolutely right.

For Rifbjerg, and for his contemporary Leif Panduro, the solemnity of post-war Danish literature was ripe for rejuvenation through linguistic experimentation and an

engagement with the everyday. Their brand of modernism took its name from Riffbjerg's third poetry collection of 1960, *Konfrontation* (Confrontation). In the decade that followed, this 'confrontation-modernism' enacted the encounter of the individual with a world that was, to paraphrase a famous line from the anthology, blessedly empty, except for *things*. This was a material world of flesh and blood, of technology, and of words that collided to generate new and often joyous perspectives on existence.

Riffbjerg would go on to publish some 175 works in the course of a sixty-year career. Around half of his output has been in novel form, the rest encompassing collections of poetry, short stories, essays, radio plays, film scripts, and many other genres. He has worked as an editor, journalist, critic, restaurateur, and as literary director of the publishing house Gyldendal. He has been awarded the Danish Academy's Grand Prize (1966), the Nordic Council Literature Prize (1970), and the Swedish Academy's Nordic Prize (the 'Little Nobel', 1999), amongst many others, and was made a member of the Danish Academy as early as 1967. Riffbjerg is, quite simply, a colossus of twentieth-century Danish literature, unsurpassed in influence and productivity. And yet it is a rare Dane who would, if asked to identify Riffbjerg's masterpiece, choose anything other than his very first novel: *Den kroniske uskyld*, published 1958.

The Danish *Catcher in the Rye*

Terminal Innocence, as translator Paul Larkin has chosen to render the title – a literal translation would be 'Chronic Innocence' – is narrated by Janus Tolne, a Copenhagen schoolboy whose life is enlivened by the arrival of a new friend, Tore Riemer. Through Janus' eyes, we catch glimpses of life under the German occupation of Denmark (1940-45), but his main preoccupation is his beloved Tore and, by extension, Tore's girlfriend Helle. Locked in a chaste *ménage à trois* with this glamorous couple, Janus navigates his way through the waters of teenage firsts: girls, drinking, graduating from high school. As readers, we live this perplexing and, at times,

mortifying process of transformation along with Janus. But we know, too, perhaps before Janus does, that Tore and Helle are caught in some strange stasis, trapped in a web spun by Helle's monstrous mother. As the title of the novel suggests, their innocence seems to be a chronic condition. It is also – as captured by the title of this translation – terminal.

Terminal Innocence can be described as the Danish counterpart to J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). The two novels share an ambition to give voice to the angst and exuberance of the post-war teenager, as well as their canonical status as literary works whose linguistic and thematic innovations retain enough freshness to speak to successive generations of readers. The author Pia Juul writes movingly of the enduring relevance of Rifbjerg's novel in her foreword to a recent Danish edition:

When I read the book (at the age of 21) I understood Janus completely. I understood his passionate love for Tore, I understood his odd status as a third wheel to the couple Tore and Helle, I understood him when he went with girlfriends he didn't really like, and I understood the impression he had of his parents as people who didn't grasp what was going on and didn't know what life was really about, as well as his disgust at Helle's mother, who was too intrusive and loomed too large in her daughter's life. Adults can do nothing right. Youth *is* wonderful, and damned.

(My translation)

Juul's final comment echoes the Danish title of *The Catcher in the Rye*, adopted for Vibeke Cerris' translation of 1953: *Forbandede ungdom* (Damned Youth). Published three years later, *Terminal Innocence* was thus not the first novel to hold up a mirror to the lives and language of its young readers. Rather, Rifbjerg embeds the narrator and his friends in Copenhagen, crafting a profoundly local iteration of that new global species, the teenager. Similarly, Rifbjerg's ebullient prose fuses the eclectic vocabulary of confrontation-modernism with a commitment to capturing the colloquialisms of post-war urban youth, echoing the first-person narration of Salinger's Holden Caulfield. Little wonder that Rifbjerg returned to *The*

Catcher in the Rye almost five decades later, to undertake an acclaimed new Danish translation (*Griberen i rugen*, 2004). Meanwhile, one adaptation of *Terminal Innocence* had almost as much impact in Denmark as the original novel itself: director Edward Fleming's 1985 film adaptation. While popular in cinemas and widely screened in schools, its updating of the action to mid-1980s Denmark was panned by the critics, though this aesthetic strategy was arguably in tune with Riffbjerg's propensity as an author to map the twists and turns of twentieth-century culture.

That it has taken almost six decades to produce a translation into English of Riffbjerg's first novel is, in some senses, surprising: holdings of the Royal Library in Copenhagen include translations into Dutch (1964), Swedish (1965), Italian (1966), French (1969), Polish (1971), Norwegian (1979), Czech (1980), and two German editions (1962, 1971). This delay is less strange, though no less regrettable, when considered in the context of the general dearth of translations into English of modern Danish literature in general and of Riffbjerg's writing in particular. Riffbjerg's novel *Anna (I) Anna* appeared in English in 1982, translated by Alexander Taylor; his sci fi novel *De hellige aber* was translated as *Witness to the Future* by Steven Murray in 1987; and a handful of Riffbjerg's plays and poems have appeared in English-language anthologies. In the case of *Terminal Innocence*, an important consideration for potential translators and publishers has, no doubt, been the challenge the text presents. As explained by Paul Larkin in the Translator's Afterword in this volume, Riffbjerg's language is not only rooted in the colloquialisms of a specific historical period and the idiolect of an adolescent narrator, but also complicated by its poetic, experimental departures from that linguistic realism.

A sense of place and period

For present-day Danish readers, the novel is a cabinet of mid-century curiosities. The idiolect used by the narrator and his friends is no less 'foreign' than the long-forgotten vocabulary describing the clothes they wear. Even their curse-words

seem like relics of a more innocent age; it is not easy to tease out the invented in their language from the outmoded. The translation in this volume attempts to communicate something of this linguistic instability and energy.

Terminal Innocence is of its time in another important sense. It was written barely twelve years after the end of the Second World War, a war which Denmark had spent under the occupation of Nazi Germany. Janus Tolne is roughly the same age as Riffbjerg himself; as in much of this author's work, national history is filtered through his own childhood memories. Denmark was invaded in the early hours of April 9, 1940, as a springboard to the more strategically important target of Norway. Sixteen soldiers died in the two hours before the Danish Government, calculating that resistance was hopeless, capitulated. This pragmatically cooperative approach set the tone for some three years of what the occupying soldiers referred to as *Sahnefront*, the Whipped Cream Front. Government remained in Danish hands, and some concessions were extracted from the occupying forces. From autumn 1942, however, this cooperation began to break down, not least in the face of escalating acts of sabotage by the Danish Resistance, and by summer 1943, a campaign of civil disobedience resulted in an intensification of violent acts of retribution by the occupying forces. These events play out as a subtle backdrop in *Terminal Innocence*, as hints and details that a contemporary Danish audience would immediately grasp. For example, when the suburban schoolboy Janus stays at Tore's apartment in central Copenhagen, he hears gunfire, probably a liquidation of a traitor or Resistance fighter. And then bang! as Janus puts it: the Liberation comes, the Resistance fighters emerge from the shadows, and the city erupts with joy. For Janus and Tore, Copenhagen becomes a playground full of abandoned ammunition and Tommies smoking exotic tobacco, just like in the movies.

Danish writers, artists and filmmakers were caught up in the struggle for liberation, not just as chroniclers of the nation's fate, but also in all-too-concrete ways. Some prominent figures paid with their lives: the poet and priest Kaj Munk

was liquidated by the Germans in retaliation for Resistance sabotage. Others, such as the film auteur Carl Th. Dreyer and the novelist Mogens Klitgaard, fled to Sweden to escape a similar fate. An emerging generation of documentary filmmakers, among them Theodor Christensen and Bjarne and Astrid Henning-Jensen, worked with the Resistance to capture footage of sabotage operations and interrogations as well as everyday life under occupation. Being more immediately exportable than literary narrative, their films did much to secure Denmark's reputation in the post-war period through screenings at international film festivals. At home, the literary journal *Heretica* (1948-53) provided a space for poets to react against the realism and modernism which had characterised pre-war Danish literature. Thorkild Bjørnvig, Ole Sarvig and others saw poetry as a means to re-connect humankind with the subjective, the symbolic and the mystical; this was the only way out of the post-war political and cultural crisis. This, in turn, was the literary culture against which Riffbjerg and his young contemporaries reacted, a decade after the end of the war. By 1959, *Heretica* had been succeeded by a new magazine, *Vindrosen* – with Klaus Riffbjerg as one of its editors.

Terminal Innocence is a product not just of its time, but of its city. In this sense, it inaugurates a red thread in Riffbjerg's oeuvre: his love affair with the Copenhagen of his childhood, and with the city as it grew and changed through the second half of the twentieth century. The city of bricks and mortar and the imaginative city jostle and collide in poetry such as *Amagerdigte* (Amager Poems, 1965), or *Byens tvelys* (The City's Double Light, 1987). In *Terminal Innocence*, Janus and Tore's night-time perambulations map an urban geography still recognisable to present-day readers. While the trams they catch have been superseded by buses, many landmarks remain. One of the novel's most memorable episodes occurs on the square in front of the Town Hall, a space recognisable to anyone who has visited the Tivoli Gardens just beyond. Towards the southern edge of the square is an elaborate sculpture known as the Dragon Fountain, a detail of which is captured in Thomas C. Christensen's photograph on the

cover of this volume. It is into this fountain that Tore falls one afternoon, while trying to impress Helle. Failing to catch a pigeon as a symbol of his love for her, he decides to walk around the outer rim of the basin, much to the consternation of onlookers queuing for buses. Inevitably, he topples into the water and emerges, unfazed, 'like a world champion acknowledging the acclaim of the crowd'. This tableau captures all the joyous impetuosity of teenage love, played out before throngs of city-centre shoppers and commuters. Here, Riffbjerg's genius lies in the ostensibly mundane setting. For his bout of gentle hooliganism, the love-struck teenager chooses a landmark whose symbolism foreshadows his and Helle's impending fate at the claws of another of the narrative's 'dragons'.

It is an older, wiser, less innocent Janus who takes leave of his friend Tore at the end of the novel. And yet, *Terminal Innocence* concludes on an optimistic — or perhaps wistful? — note, as Janus cycles off into the future. Like the just-conceived 'I' of Riffbjerg's first published poem, Janus asserts the unwavering message of this most prolific of Danish authors: that the best thing of all is to *exist*.