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From St Francis to Kierkegaard. Henrik Stangerup's Novel *Broder Jacob*

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The historical novel *Broder Jacob*¹ was published in Denmark in 1991 and two years later in Italy with the title *Fratello Jacob*.² It recounts the events in the life of Jacob Johansen, a sixteenth-century Franciscan friar and the supposed brother of King Christian II, who is forced into exile following the suppression of the mendicant orders. After leaving established Lutheranism in Denmark, he makes a long journey through a turbulent Europe and ends up in Mexico among the indigenous Tarascan people.

Although it can be read as a stand-alone novel, *Broder Jacob* is also the third book in a trilogy of historical-biographical works. Its author, the Danish writer and journalist Henrik Stangerup (1937-1998), gave the trilogy an over-arching Kierkegaardian theme which characterizes and unites all three novels. More specifically, this theme is conveyed by the fact that the main character in each of novels represents the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious man respectively, that is, the three existential choices – the renowned “stages on life’s way” – laid down in Kierkegaardian philosophy. This key to reading the trilogy must be taken into consideration given that it was Stangerup’s “working hypothesis”³ in structuring the whole work. However, my research into *Broder Jacob* has led me to acknowledge that the fact that the novels belong to the literary genre of the historical novel is an equally important element which not only links the three books, but also clearly sets them apart from the rest of Stangerup’s output (largely novels with contemporary settings which are partially autobiographical and critical of the

¹ Henrik Stangerup, *Broder Jacob*, Lindhardt og Ringhof, Copenhagen 1991.

² Henrik Stangerup, *Fratello Jacob*, Italian translation by Eva Kampmann, Iperborea, Milan 1993.

³ Henrik Stangerup, interview with Iben Holk, *Argument og Æventyr*, in *Henrik Stangerup*, edited by Iben Holk, Odense Universitetsforlag, Odense 1986, p. 158; “en arbejdshypotese”. Translations are mine unless otherwise specified [the subsequent English version, unless otherwise stated, is by the present translator].



Danish society of the time). As these two lines of enquiry are not mutually exclusive, my intention, after following them individually, is to examine each of them in relation to the other. This will encourage an integrated appraisal and recognize the various perspectives which are perhaps more present in *Broder Jacob* – in historical, cultural, literary and ethical terms – than in the two novels that preceded it.

A historical novel

Producing a text within a specific literary genre is often a complex and challenging undertaking. Even so, genre remains a necessary starting point for literary analysis and above all for those cases in which the close relationship between a text and a particular narrative vein is explicit and unequivocal, as is the case of the relationship between *Broder Jacob* and the dynamism and vigour of the historical novel.

The origins of the historical novel as a distinct genre date from the first half of the nineteenth century and the publication of the works of Walter Scott. These were innovative in their skilful combination of historical fact (up to then only the subject of plays and poems), the narrative structure of the novel, and elements of literary invention. From these earliest years there were many different types of historical novel with a set of variables dependent on whether the action was set in the recent or distant past, the choice of real or imaginary characters, the level of historical accuracy, and the extent of the writer's reliance on sources. Critical approaches to the study of the genre are equally varied. For example, one can go from the Marxist analysis of Georg Lukács, strongly influenced by his theory of art as the reflection of socio-economic conflict,⁴ to more recent considerations, such as those of the Danish writer and literary critic Mette Winge, who maintains that the common denominator of every historical novel is its incontestable links with the time in which it is written:

⁴ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, English translation by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, Merlin, London 1962, p. 19ff.



For det andet kan en forfatter heller ikke forlade sin egen tid og dens tilværelsesopfattelse, dens 'vision-du-monde' og gå tilbage i en anden. Han kan lade, som om han gør det, men han er bundet til sin egen tid, også selv om han tilsyneladende lader sin romanhelt handle ud fra en ældre tids æresbegreber. Hans egen tid vil være den, han skriver ud fra. Han kan ikke skære den fra eller ud, så uanset det formål han kan have med sine romaner, vil hans samtid spille ind⁵

On the other hand an author cannot give up on his own time and his relative idea of existence, his *vision du monde*, and go back to another. He can pretend to do so, but he is tied to his own time, even when he appears to allow the hero of his novel to act according to former codes of honour. His own time is the precondition of his writing. He can neither erase nor ignore it; therefore, whatever goals he fixes in his novels, his own, present, time will be involved.

As will be seen with *Broder Jacob*, it is the intrusion of the writer himself that plays an important part in many historical novels, not only (as Winge states) with regards to the influence that the present has on the historical period in question, but also in terms of the writer's personal beliefs and philosophy of life. While such liberties of interpretation are allowed the novelist, who by definition has a creative role, they have long been forbidden to the professional historian who, on the basis of positivistic ideas that history is a precise science, has the sole duty of reconstructing facts objectively. However, the last few decades have seen the publication of books by various theorists, and by Hayden White in particular, which have cast doubt upon the possibility – and the validity – of any such claims to objectivity. According to White, whose considerations regard not only professional historians but also continually refer to the historical novel, historical works cannot claim to be objective in that they are always the result of the author's individual interpretation of history. They are essentially narratives which are constructed, starting

⁵ Mette Winge, *Fortiden som spejl. Om danske historiske romaner*, Samleren, Copenhagen 1997, p. 32.



from a central line of thought which determines the development and the structure of the whole. If examined one by one, if listed as an unembellished infinite quantity of dates and events, historical facts become a mere chronicle. On the contrary, in order to become a historical *narrative*, they have to undergo a process where meaning is attributed; in giving more weight to some events and giving less weight to (or ignoring) others, the historian arranges them according to a particular interwoven design (*emplotment*), imposing a specific interpretation. In doing so, the writer of history carries out a creative procedure, employing the tools typical of the writer of fiction, such as intuition, imagination and the ability to make connections.⁶ There are limits, however, to this freedom. To again quote White, “unlike the poet, the historian may not use ‘pure fantasy’”.⁷ The writer of historical novels, on the contrary, is not bound by any deontological restrictions and can thus take, as was mentioned above, any kind of artistic liberty. Indeed, on reading the reviews of *Broder Jacob*, it would appear that the writer is *obliged* to take such liberties. While it can be safely said that the historical novel is characterized by the mixing of historical and novelistic elements, and that the varying proportion of these two components determines the wide range of the genre, there is no strict limit regarding the extent to which the boundary between history and fiction might be crossed in either direction. If, on the one hand, many of those working with *faglitteratur* (‘specialist literature’) do not look kindly upon any invasions on the part of *skønlitteratur* (‘the narrative’), on the other hand, the narrative also demands its own specificity and independence from academic writing. It commands its own freedom and its own right to creativity. Some reviews which appeared in Danish newspapers following the publication of *Broder Jacob* criticized the fact that the novel follows its documentary and source materials too closely, thus reducing the aesthetic pleasure of the text. In one such review, Jens Kistrup compares *Broder Jacob* with the other two novels in Stangerup’s historical trilogy and comes to the conclusion that while

⁶ Cf. Hayden White, *Forme di storia. Dalla realtà alla narrazione*, edited by Edoardo Tortarolo, Carocci, Rome 2006, pp. 15-35.

⁷ White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1975, p. 179.



the first two books are fictional works in which the role of the historian is secondary to that of the writer, in *Broder Jacob* the role of the historian eclipses that of the writer of fiction.⁸ In his biography of Henrik Stangerup, Niels Martinov gives an even more negative view regarding the predominance of the historical element in the novel:

Broder Jacob er en bedrift som historieskrivning, men ikke som *roman*. Den manglende forfatteridentifikation med Jacob er nok forklaringen på, at vi som læsere stort set ikke når ind under huden på ham; det er, som om han forsvinder i den kolossale mængde af informationer, som Stangerup dynger på side op og side ned i et forsøg på at få det hele med [...]. Så med afstanden til hovedpersonen, med den overdrevne tæthed af detaljer og med et sprog, der ofte fremtræder knudret, omstændeligt og akademisk, er *Broder Jacob* et værk, der er svært at udvise andet end en intellektuel begejstring for.⁹

Brother Jacob is an accomplishment as a historical work, but not as a *novel*. The author's lack of identification with Jacob explains why we readers do not generally manage to have any direct contact with him; it is as if he disappears in the enormous amount of information that Stangerup amasses page after page in the attempt to leave out nothing [...]. Therefore, because of the distance of the central character, the over-density of the details, and a language that is often lumpen, long-winded and scholarly, *Brother Jacob* becomes a work for which it is hard to feel anything but intellectual interest.

Martinov's views on Stangerup appear to be informed by a psychological approach, although here, as in other parts of the biography, he shows that his skills as a literary critic are tainted by a lack of awareness of the importance of the multiple perspectives the novel has to offer. In fact, although it is true that Stangerup draws upon an enormous number of documentary sources in *Broder Jacob*, they are remodelled, reformulated and placed in relation to each other accord-

⁸ Cf. Jens Kistrup, *Stangerup og beltene*, in *Berlingske Tidende*, 14.3.1991.

⁹ Niels Martinov, *Henrik Stangerup – en biografi*, Cicero, Copenhagen 2003, p. 323.



ing to a finely tuned narrative structure which in itself is a testament to the author's literary talents.¹⁰ Like the two earlier novels in the trilogy (which will be discussed below), *Broder Jacob* is a historical-biographical work based on a thorough study of the sources and on 'omfattende research'.¹¹ Its worth, however, is not simply due to its representation of the facts and on information taken from various other texts. Apart from being, as Hans O. Granlid says, a "skeleton" upon which the author adds "flesh, skin and hair",¹² history also takes on a whole series of different implications for Stangerup. In the early phase of his writing career, Stangerup was more inward looking and had examined his own sense of guilt as a writer, his troubled relationship with Denmark and the predominant culture of the time. In contrast, when he embarked on the Kierkegaardian trilogy, Stangerup recognized that first and foremost history has the function of providing a healthy distance from oneself, from one's own inner demons and from modern-day Denmark,¹³ in search of broader horizons and that "something else".¹⁴ Mogens Davidsen expresses this well:

¹⁰ For further considerations on the use of sources in *Broder Jacob*, the reader is referred to my Masters thesis: Chiara Viola, *L'elogio della fantasia. Un'analisi del romanzo storico Broder Jacob di Henrik Stangerup*, Università degli Studi di Firenze, October 2013, pp. 120-132 and 143-149.

¹¹ Roger Poole, *En Kierkegaard-trilogi – men hvilke 3 bøger?*, in *Angsten, lykken og ekstasen – beretninger om Henrik Stangerup*, edited by Henrik Nebelong and Jacob Stangerup, Lindhardt og Ringhof, Copenhagen 2000, p. 155; "research on a vast scale".

¹² Granlid, after having expressed his conviction that the roles of the professional historian and the poet-novelist can influence each other, illustrates their relationship with the following image: "Vetenskapsmannen samlar och fogar ihop det förgångnas döds skallar och benknotor til «rationella» skelett; diktaren sätter kött, hud och hår på konstruktionen. Historikern av facket återuppför det ruinerade huset: författaren inreder det" (Hans O. Granlid, *Då som nu. Historiska romaner i översikt och analys*, Natur och Kultur, Stockholm 1964, pp. 14-5, "The scientist collects and puts together a 'rational' skeleton of skulls and bones of the past; the poet provides the apparatus with flesh, skin and hair. The professional historian restores the ruined house; the writer furnishes it").

¹³ "Distance var netop hvad jeg savnede", Stangerup, *Tag din seng og gå, en personlig beretning*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1986, p. 12 ("La distanza era proprio ciò di cui avevo bisogno" (Distance was the very thing that I needed), Italian translation by Bruno Berni in Stangerup. *Prendi il tuo letto e vattene*, Biblioteca del Vascello, Rome 1994, p. 18).

¹⁴ In an interview with Iben Holk, Stangerup admitted that he had gone through a difficult period in the 1970s; in fact he wanted to "[l]eave Denmark in the 70s – get



Stangerup benytter historien, fordi han ser sig selv som en del af den, men også i høj grad fordi den er *uden for* ham selv. På den måde kan han bevæge sig uden for det klaustrofobiske rum, han havde etableret med sine tidlige romaner, og komme på afstand af den modernistiske kriseerfaring.¹⁵

Stangerup uses history because he sees himself as part of it, but also, and to a great extent, because history is *outside* him. In this way he manages to operate outside that claustrophobic space that he had crafted in his earlier novels and create a distance from the modernist view of the crisis.

Stangerup, however, does not only see history as an escape from oneself. It is also a chance to reflect on present events and explore some of the great themes of the past that have left their indelible mark on the human species. In this respect, the sixteenth century of *Broder Jacob*, with its wars of religion, *la conquista*, the Inquisition and the gradual dissolution of progressive humanist ideas, provides Stangerup with various stimuli for reflection.

What is more, history is a great depository of stories and perhaps it is this aspect which most attracted Stangerup as a writer of fiction. Embarking on the first volume of his trilogy, he found himself face to face with an approach to writing which was totally new to him; indeed, the narrative potential present in history is even greater in *Broder Jacob* than in the earlier novels. The main plot follows the life of Jacob and is a reworking of Stangerup's main source, the essay *Broder Jakob den Danske, kong Christian II's yngre broder*, written by the historian and archivist Jørgen Nybo Rasmussen and published in 1986. There are

to something else – something else, something else, something else, at any price, give me something else, something else, something else” [the original Danish: “Komme væk fra 70ernes Danmark – ind i noget andet – noget andet, noget andet, noget andet, for enhver pris giv mig noget andet, noget andet, noget andet...”], Stangerup, interview with Holk, *cit.*, in Holk (ed.) 1986, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

¹⁵ Mogens Davidsen, *Vejen til frelse eller fri os fra modernismen – om Henrik Stangerups Broder Jacob, 1991*, in *Prosa fra 80'erne til 90'erne*, edited by Anne-Marie Mai, Borgen, Valby 1994, p. 130.



many other stories interwoven into the novel and the following list of them is by no means exhaustive: the expulsion of Franciscans from Danish monasteries, the meeting of the sculptor Claus Berg with Queen Christine, the friar who leaves the monastery to listen to a bird singing and on his return discovers that three hundred years have passed, the games Jacob plays with his brother when they are young, and the tales of Odin, Thor and the serpent of Midgard. There is also the story of Charles V's disastrous Algiers expedition, of Raphael Hythlodæus and the Utopians, the story of the illness of St Francis, of Iztaccíhuatl and her tragic love for the Tarascan prince Popocatepetl, the story of the evangelization of Mexico, and the story of Panurge and Pantagruel. The list is infinite. Some of these stories are taken from historical sources, others from translations, from literature, from hagiographies and from Norse and *indios* myths; others are the fruits of Stangerup's own imagination. What they all have in common, and what places them on the same level, is their narrative strength and the very fact that they are *stories*. The documentary sources also do not seem to have been chosen by Stangerup simply on the basis of how reliable they might be, but for their intensity and the narrative potential. Thanks to a finely-pitched imagination, historically verifiable facts and myths become mutually enriching and create a unified narrative with a strong visual appeal which communicates the full aesthetic pleasure of the art of fiction without, however, forfeiting the chance to communicate a message.

Kierkegaard

Unfortunately, the secondary literature on Stangerup's trilogy, as with the entire critical apparatus regarding his work in general, is extremely limited, and much of it regards commentaries of scarce academic interest. These appear to ignore the depth and the sheer scale of the ideas presented in the three novels. One such example is an article by Peter G. Christensen.¹⁶ We are duty bound to take it into

¹⁶ Peter G. Christensen, "The Unstable Kierkegaardian Framework of Henrik Stangerup's Novel Trilogy", in *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies / Études Scandinaves au Canada*, vol. 15 (2005), pp. 22-44.



consideration as it is the only criticism available that discusses the Kierkegaardian element in the trilogy, although it actually provides us with relatively little as Christensen limits himself to pointing out the differences between Kierkegaard and what he finds in the novel; there is little evidence that he appreciates the importance of Stangerup's literary transposition. To understand Christensen's objections, it is necessary to bear in mind some essential facts regarding the trilogy. The first in the series, *Vejen til Lagoa Santa*,¹⁷ was published in 1981 and tells of the life of Peter Wilhelm Lund (1801-80), the Danish naturalist who went to Brazil in search of both rational and providential proof of the Creation by studying the bones of mammals that had existed before the Flood. In Stangerup's overall plan, Lund, and his total dedication to his 'duty', represents the stage of the ethical man. The aesthetic stage, which in Kierkegaard is the point of departure, was actually explored in the second novel in the series, *Det er svært at dø i Dieppe*, published in 1985.¹⁸ Here the main character is Peder Ludvig Møller, the journalist and literary critic, and the man who, in all probability, inspired Kierkegaard himself in his characterization of the 'aesthete' in his celebrated *Forførerens dagbog*.¹⁹ For the first two stages, therefore, Stangerup chooses characters who not only serve him well in representing the existential aspects of the ethical man and the aesthetic man respectively, but also Danes who were contemporaries of Kierkegaard and had personal contacts with him. Møller spent his youth in the Copenhagen of Kierkegaard, and embarked on a lively debate with about the role of the press in the very years that bourgeois public opinion was beginning to hold sway in the capital. Lund, on the contrary, was a scientist who Kierkegaard admired greatly and with whom he also shared family connections through marriage. The choice of a character suitable for the third stage was, however, much more complicated as Stangerup admits in his preface. Only Kierkegaard himself

¹⁷ Stangerup, *Vejen til Lagoa Santa*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1981 (Italian edition *Lagoa Santa*, Italian translation by Bruno Berni, Iperborea, Milan 1989).

¹⁸ Stangerup, *Det er svært at dø i Dieppe*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1985.

¹⁹ *The Seducer's Diary*, published as part of the work *Enten-Eller* in 1843 and found in various editions in English.



might have been a fitting “incarnation of the truly ‘religious’ human being”,²⁰ but Stangerup knew that he could not write a book about Kierkegaard, because that book had already been written – in inimitable style and on more than one occasion – by Kierkegaard himself.²¹ To complete his Kierkegaardian project, Stangerup once again had to go and look for “something else” and he therefore made a leap further back in time. In the turbulence of the sixteenth century, the time of the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation and the conquest (by sword and cross) of the New World, Stangerup finally found his ‘religious man’: the Franciscan Jacob den Danske (c. 1484-1566). The Kierkegaardian trilogy was thus completed in 1991 with the publication of *Broder Jacob*. In the aforementioned article, Christensen questions the right of the three books to be labelled as an actual trilogy and his criticism is directed at each of the three main characters. Christensen does not feel that the Danish naturalist Lund can fully represent the ethical man as his admiration for the beauty of the Brazilian landscape is a clear sign that he is still trapped in the aesthetic stage. Lund demonstrates a “romantic” attachment to his ideas regarding the Creation and Providence, and is unable to take the path of despair, the only way forward towards the truly ethical life.²² Even Stangerup’s choice of Peder Ludvig Møller (the aesthetic man) is not particularly apt as far as Christensen is concerned. For the purposes of his literary scheme, Stangerup stresses the contrasts between Møller and Lund, and makes them more dissimilar to each other than what they actually were. Despite this, Christensen feels that Stangerup does not make Møller a true aesthete as his loves, friendships and political commitments seem to indicate that he is at the ethical stage; Møller is emotionally involved with the women he loves, he puts his pen to the service of his country as a war correspondent, and he aspires to a chair at the university of Copenhagen: all elements that reveal the ethical

²⁰ Henrik Stangerup, *Brother Jacob*, English translation by Anne Born, Marion Boyars, London 1993, p. 8.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.* For the Danish edition: “Bibliografisk efterskrift”, in Henrik Stangerup, *Broder Jacob*, cit., p. 259.

²² Cf. Christensen 2005, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-44.



side of his character.²³ Passing on to the central character in the novel under discussion here, Christiansen soon makes it clear that he feels Brother Jacob does not possess the necessary requirements for the Kierkegaardian religious man. While he acknowledges that this missionary friar is clearly motivated by religion, it is of a form which has little to do with the exclusive relationship of the individual with God, which Kierkegaard privileged and which represented the basic tenets of Protestant thought.

To some extent, it is possible to sympathize with Christensen's criticism. Indeed, it is rather difficult to appreciate the distinctive characteristics of the Kierkegaardian models of reference, particularly in the cases of Lund and Brother Jacob. For example, Lund – who is not married and has no children, who flees his homeland and his own family and who thus disentangles himself from all ties and responsibilities – has little in common with Judge Wilhelm in Kierkegaard's *Enten-Eller*, the ethical man par excellence. Moreover, Brother Jacob, while often portrayed as a solitary figure who does not completely manage to become part of the 'us' of the monastic community, is far from being the Kierkegaardian "knight of faith" (*Troens Ridder*), who "in the loneliness of the universe never hears any human voice but walks alone with his frightful responsibility".²⁴ His all-encompassing religious spirit has little in common with the paradoxical faith of Abraham, who, on God's orders, is ready to plunge his knife into his young son Isaac, going against all common morality and good sense, and isolating himself from society. At times Brother Jacob is indeed seen as a detached solitary figure, but he never disconnects from his common humanity; on the contrary, humanity – represented, in Franciscan terms, by the most lowly, by those society disowns, by the *indios* treated almost like soulless beasts – is the beneficiary of his energies.

²³ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, edited by C. Stephen Evans, English translation by Sylvia Walsh, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 70; *SKS* (Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter) 4, 171, su <http://sks.dk/forside/indhold.asp> > "trykte skrifter" > "Frygt og Bæven": "Troens Ridder, der i Universets Eensomhed aldrig hører nogen menneskelig Røst, men gaaer ene med sit forfærdelige Ansvar".



It should be asked, however, just how constructive such criticisms are. As Stangerup himself stated, the three-stage structure was a “working hypothesis”,²⁵ a basic idea from which to develop different narrative strands rather than provide an inflexible interpretative scheme. With this in mind, I intend to leave aside any attempt at drawing close parallels between the main characters in the three novels and the corresponding models of the ethical, aesthetic and religious man. Focusing on *Broder Jacob*, my aim is to explore alternative ways in tracing the Kierkegaardian theme present in the novel.

As has been noted, Brother Jacob does not have very much in common with the Abraham of *Frygt og Baven*. Nevertheless, Jacob is a complex character comprises different, and even conflicting, impulses and traits. It is no coincidence that in several scenes Stangerup also chooses multiple voices and different characters in order to represent Jacob’s multifaceted personality. We therefore find at one end of the spectrum ‘Brother Bojac’, the good-humoured Jacob who loves wine, the tales of Rabelais, laughter and the joys of life, and at the other end the stern Jacob who on the *camino* to Santiago aims straight for his destination, doggedly avoiding the tiniest detour and distraction whether for cultural or more frivolous reasons. It could be said that the first Jacob is the aesthete while the second is his absolute negation. If one reads carefully, the episodes where such divisions in Jacob’s character occur are those where there is some abuse of power, or following terrible strife caused by the stupidity of the world around him. For example, this is what happens when Jacob discovers that Paris, the city of humanism and cultural exchange has, over the course of 25 years, closed in on itself; it is still Catholic, but in an intolerant and sectarian way that is truly shameful. It also happens when he is journeying through Spain, now awash with suspicion and in the thrall of the Inquisition, or when he is in Mexico, subject to the absurd unjust trial brought against him by the hierarchy of the order because he has been giving the sacraments to the *indios*. On the contrary, when external conditions are positive, for example immediately after his arrival in the Michoacán region, where “som

²⁵ Cf. *supra*, note 3.



aldrig før en følelse af at være kommet hjem”,²⁶ Jacob is at peace with himself and discovers a balance between the different impulses within him.

The search for balance, understood as the harmonious integration of different elements, is one of the central themes upon which the novel is based. This balance is neither unstable nor partial; it is not the result of oversimplification that omits certain features, but a meaningful syncretism. Indeed, there is never just one immovable truth for Stangerup. He abhors those self-proclaimed truths that are themselves founded on the negation of other supposed truths. For Stangerup, the most appropriate truths are those which do not take themselves too seriously and which are the result of the ‘fusion’ of various points of view. There are many examples in the novel of such integrated combinations and balances. There is an openness in *Brother Jacob* towards religious syncretism, that is, accepting the wealth to be found in other religions along with the qualities of his own Catholicism. This allows the legends of St Francis to be ‘tainted’ by those of the *indios*, or for Norse myths to be taught and studied alongside Christ’s parables. There is also the fusion of the Christian humanism of Erasmus and Thomas More, incorporating the intellectual input of the classical period into a Christianity in search of its own evangelical origins. Erasmus and More are, along with Rabelais, ‘heroes’ in Stangerup’s novel, because they believe in humour, laughter and tolerance,²⁷ and are critical of the absurdities of scholastic philosophy, theological hypocrisy and intellectual quibbling. However, it is Erasmus who is the example of the perfect balance between composure and wit, while the wild abandon of Rabelais can make him succumb – like the character of Brother Bojac in the novel – to bohemian excess. This “wild fever of anarchy”,²⁸ that is to say, situations in which imagination, laughter and liberty are taken to ex-

²⁶ Stangerup, *Broder Jacob*, cit., p. 177; “Now as never before he feels he has come home” (Stangerup, *Broder Jacob*, cit., p. 213).

²⁷ This is the gist of the observations made by Roger Poole in his article on Stangerup’s trilogy. Cf. Poole, cit., in Nebelong and Stangerup (eds.) 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

²⁸ Stangerup, *Broder Jacob*, cit., p. 80; Stangerup, *Broder Jacob*, cit., p. 62: “Anarkiets vilde feber”.



tremes, can cut people off from real life. The novel also presents St Francis as a figure whose tolerance, clarity and poetry matches the Christian ideal, and whose message of light has nothing to do with those Franciscans of later centuries who took sadistic pleasure in forcing their fellow brethren to feed on ash and mortify the flesh. The extreme austerity displayed by some Franciscans in such circumstances is, for Stangerup, also a characteristic, albeit in a less conspicuous form, of Protestant states. Indeed, there is a certain underlying theme in Stangerup's work which distinguishes Latin culture, marked by vitality, optimism, laughter and a spirit of independence, from Lutheran countries, marked by an excessive severity towards the self, by a refusal of life's pleasures, and by predestination and pessimism. These two philosophies of life, to which I have referred elsewhere as the "Catholic paradigm" and the "Lutheran paradigm",²⁹ have, however, little to do with the two respective theologies, and even less with the two religions seen from a historical perspective. In this regard, we see that the novel actually presents Protestantism and Catholicism in a similarly negative way: the former is marked by arrogance, pillaging, the forced expulsion of nuns and monks, the destruction of works of art and the murder of peasants, while the latter is tainted with the Spanish Inquisition, internal hatred and connivance with the *encomenderos* in the New World. Strict institutionalized religions lack the healthy spirituality that Brother Jacob imagines as being part of the original Franciscan movement, and which he finds once again among the Tarascan *indios* in America. The figure of St Francis of Assisi is accepted with open arms by the *indios* because he embodies values which they have always acknowledged: simplicity, love of nature and vivid imagination. According to Bartolomé de Las Casas, the indigenous peoples of Mexico were characterized by a large measure of "natural goodness, mildness, humility and love of peace".³⁰ Jacob agrees, and he sees that the innate generosity and sobriety of the Tarascan Indians in particular (who

²⁹ Cf. Viola, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

³⁰ Bartolomé de Las Casas, quoted by Antonio Desideri – Mario Themelly, *Storia e storiografia, dalla formazione delle monarchie nazionali alla rivoluzione inglese, II*, D'Anna, Florence 2008, p. 483.



are really called Purépecha, “the servants of God”³¹, are true expressions of the Franciscan spirit. He also appreciates their various myths as evidence of their fertile imagination and great mental flexibility.

This prompts some considerations regarding such myths. Indeed Davidsen observes that “historien og myten er de vektorer, trilogien orienterer sig efter”,³² and in this exploration of history and mythology he perceives a common theme that unites the novels about Lund, Møller and Brother Jacob. We have already mentioned history, but, as we have seen, myth is also an extremely important element in *Broder Jacob*. In fact myth combines the aesthetic component of a tale of the imagination, the ethical values that bind a community, and an all-important element of spirituality. The reader also recognizes that these three factors are consonant with the three Kierkegaardian stages which co-occur in the novel and in the character of Brother Jacob in particular. According to Stangerup’s overall design, Jacob is, in fact, a religious man “et tegn, et menneske der går i Kristi fodspor, et menneske der tager det alvorligt, hvad der blev sagt dengang, og som bruger sit liv på det”,³³ but he is also an ethical man who defends the rights of the *indios* and who tries to create a society in which people can live honourably; he is also an aesthetic man, who appreciates the beauty of nature, art and literature. This combination of characteristics might well appear to be a negation of the Kierkegaardian *enten-eller*, and thus distance the novel from its own model of reference. However, apart from being the basic premise in the creation of a complex, well-rounded character who is well-suited to conveying the author’s open-ended message, it also results from

³¹ The name ‘Tarascans’, that is, ‘in-laws’, was the derisory name the Spanish *conquistadores* gave the *indios* whose daughters they had raped. Cf. J. M. G. Le Clézio, *Les paradis perdus du Nouveau Monde*, in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 18.6.1992.

³² Davidsen, cit., in Mai (ed.) 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 130; “History and myth are the vehicles which orient the trilogy”.

³³ Stangerup, interview with Holk, cit., in Holk (ed.) 1986, *op. cit.*, p. 158; “un segno, una persona che segue le orme di Cristo, una persona che prende sul serio ciò che fu detto allora, e che spende la propria vita per quello” [a sign, a person who follows in the footsteps of Christ, a person who takes seriously what was said then and dedicates his whole life to it].



the choice not to keep to a prearranged plan too rigidly. The model is modified according to various notions that can then be worked upon creatively. These are the things that Christensen does not seem to have perceived when considering Jacob's character:

Brother Jacob is religious in the conventional sense rather than in the Kierkegaardian one. His life is not characterized by the leap of faith and teleological suspension of the ethical, and he does not set himself up against social norms but against hypocrisy and inhumanity. His compassionate attitude toward the Tarascan Indians, fostered by his meeting with Bartolomé de Las Casas in Valladolid even before his trip to Mexico, comes not from an inner message from God but rather from his interpretation of the Franciscan ideal of humanity.³⁴

According to Christensen, Brother Jacob thus has more characteristics in common with St Francis of Assisi than with Kierkegaard's religious man. Nevertheless, although Francis is a fundamental point of reference in Jacob's thoughts throughout the novel, there is no reason to say that the two characters actually overlap. For example, although the spirit of brotherhood is characterized above all by being a member of the Order of Friars Minor (and thus of a 'we'), it is also undeniable that there is always an irrepressible impulse in Brother Jacob towards individuality (the 'I'). Any process of levelling that threatens the identity of the individual – whether caused by the distorting behaviour of the mass media, by utopian-socialist ideals taken to extremes, or by religious fundamentalism – are seen by Stangerup as an attack on what is most sacred to the human being. This celebration of the individual has a markedly Kierkegaardian flavour and is found throughout Stangerup's work. What is different in *Broder Jacob* is the dialectic between the individual and the Franciscan brotherly ideal. If, on the one hand, universality risks falling into uniformity, ringing out in "one particular voice"³⁵ and covering everything

³⁴ Christensen 2005, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-44.

³⁵ Stangerup, *Broder Jacob*, cit., p. 64; Stangerup, *Broder Jacob*, cit., p. 49: "én bestemt stemme".



in a blanket of uniformity, on the other hand, individuality can be synonymous with a closing off, with arrogance and self-referentiality. Thus, in his search for an all-comprehending, but not unvarying 'we', Jacob preserves the richness of the 'I', finding a balance between Kierkegaard and St Francis.

Conclusions

The problematic relationship with the 'I' is a recurring theme in Stangerup's work. For his Kierkegaardian trilogy he chooses the form of the historical novel in order to avoid subjectivity by choosing characters, settings and stories which are outside the Danish cultural context. And yet history comes across as something that is near to us and is relevant, that helps us think about our modern world and ourselves. This is accomplished with the same distance that was adopted by Claus Berg, the sculptor of the altarpiece, that great presence in the first part of the novel, when he observes the events that are taking place in Denmark at that time: the civil war, the Reformation, the climate of suspicion and the sterile mentality of those who no longer appreciate art. It is thanks to such a distancing that Stangerup manages to focus on the image of the Europe in which he lives with greater clarity. What is more, it is thanks to the 'we' (of the religious order, but also a universal, *intra-historical* 'we') that individuality is celebrated.

Broder Jacob is thus a complete novel, and far from being a mere intellectual reshuffling of sources, it presents the reader with a precisely organized structure and a learned use of historical materials, intertextual references, and literary and pictorial sources. At the same time it provides extremely topical food for thought. The novel is a eulogy to fiction and the imagination, but also to mental openness, to tolerance and to a full life that encompasses aesthetic, ethical and spiritual elements.

Translation from the Italian: Peter Douglas