# (UN)HOMELY LANDSCAPE AT THE CENTER OF THE WORLD

## On the 1936 novel *En Gård midt i Verden* by Jørgen Nielsen

*By Poul Houe*

How prognosticating – intentionally or not – can literature be? Robert Kaplan's new book *Waste Land* (2025) begins by showing Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) and Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) ominously setting the stage for the "new" Germany that came into being in 1933 and lasted until 1945 – if not for the dire aftermath, or repetition, we may be approaching today. Could Jørgen Nielsen's *En Gård midt i Verden* (1936/1967), a novel from the same interwar years but unfolding its plot in a rural provincial setting much different from Berlin, similarly anticipate what may be just around the corner not only for today's Denmark, but for much of the Western world now, a century later? A simple affirmative answer would be foolish. But with some cautionary restrictions imposed on the question itself, I am foolish *enough* to venture some rather long-ranging claims based upon observations in Nielsen's text.[1]

My first caution, as I approach it as a cautionary tale of sorts, concerns its boundaries, which are certainly geographical,[2] but further set by social psychology and cultural history rather than by simple allusions to political idioms or values. My second

[1] The article is a revised version of my oral presentation on 04/26/25 at the 115th annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study (SASS) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.

[2] In the wake of "det folkelige gennembrud" in early 20th century Danish literature, Nielsen channeled urban literary landscapes into more utilitarian, rural realism. Far from colorless and prosaic, the change proved animating, not least in his *Figurer i et landskab* (1944/1973), which links its characters directly to this enlivened environment.

caution is that this novel is a double-edged sword that certainly strikes human identities and interactions more deeply than socio-political features almost one hundred years later – yet tends to do so with a dulling effect. What still warrants my claim about its potential relevance to today's world affairs are the structural paradigms it lays bare in a way I believe touches on *our* geo-political traumas – and thus highlights the potential affinity of a small region or landscape's characteristics to much broader, if not international intricacies.[3] If ever so indirectly, it's a lesson that seems in sync with that of Robert D. Kaplan's earlier book *The Revenge of Geography* (2012), namely that not only the geography of nations but of smaller provincial regions can have wide-ranging impact.

Its title term "in the middle of the world" both hovers over the novel as a whole and resurfaces in several of its significant contexts. Kirstine, its lead character, whose life trajectory will be my focus, grows up, matures, and ages in a rural mid-Jutland Danish community, initially as a small-holder's child and eventually as a farmer's wife and widow, all the time governed by the duty to work hard and be committed to colorless normalcy and disinterest in personal happiness. It is a society of both class and religious division, each of which Kirstine takes for granted and accommodates by not standing out in any way.

Already Hanne, Kirstine's mother, set the stage for this way of life. When she remarried, after her first husband's death, her sister and close confidant pulled back and left her missing "et voksent og forstandigt menneske at udøse sig for!" (Nielsen, 1936/1967, p. 12). For lack of better she relies upon camphorated

[3] As the novel unfolds, it even voids its title's centripetal point – as do location and landscape in most of Nielsen's oeuvre as it conforms with the mental geography of the rural Jutland movement within Danish literature that I have discussed in my 2022 book *Jyske bevægelser* about five authors testing the boundaries of *their* Jutland locales. Likewise, Nielsen turns *his* landscape into a troubled, "unhomely" fiction (as Homi Bhabha might say).

spirits, "en gave fra Gud" (p. 12), and after calming herself down this way, her "splittede sind opnår endnu en gang illusionen af at blive samlet til en slags helhed. Styrket af [camphor] dråberne tog Hanne igen fat på dagens arbejde, medens tankerne, små og forsagte, listede afsted i gamle, slidte spor" (p. 12). Later, her new husband abuses her children, which makes her regret her whole situation, as she does again and again, yet without hitting rock bottom "hvor man føler sig som en overtræder fremfor andre. Trods alt boede hun *midt i verden*" (p. 13, my italics).

Aside from the infusion of camphor, this whole trajectory pretty much presages the one her daughter Kirstine will one day be traveling. It's a life in deficit; and once the memories of lost happiness come true, so does a shadow of lasting miseries: "Med rædde øjne, med altfor megen alvor nærmede hun sig den virkelige verden. For at virkeligheden så sådan ud, og at dette var den eneste virkelighed […] derom skulde hun aldrig komme i tvivl" (p. 18). This early she came to realize that she "kunde ikke nå hen, hvor der var overskud. Det var ørkesløst at tænke på det" (p. 18). She felt unwanted and in debt and was reminded of it every day, "og det satte spor" (p. 23). On top of this numbing experience of life, Kirstine's sister Ane dies, which dwarfs all her other downturns, and makes Kirstine fear "at *hun* ikke længere var til" (my emphasis) and that it was *she* who had "oplevet overgangen til *det andet*" (p. 35). This later cooled off, but the ground on which she was walking was no longer safe and "skulde aldrig mere blive det" (p. 35).

When later she becomes a domestic servant for good people, watching them honestly but foolishly playing with their spoiled child, and realizing why other people found them laughable, she found it just "naturligt, at de var som de var. Det var to forskellige verdener. Hun accepterede begge og lod dem bestå hver for sig. Og hun var sig ikke denne dobbelthed bevidst, for hun havde ikke brug for at gøre dig den bevidst" (p. 40). These people's way of life worked – in a more unpretentiously happy way than Kirstine's mother, Hanne, could imagine. But despite

watching it up close, Kirstine would be lying in the darkness of her room, feeling the wind blowing outside "gik i ét med hendes sinds melankoli og ængstelige tro" (p. 46). Which the novel's narrative ego connects sociologically to the low life of common people, not identical with Kirstine's thoughts, "men hun var gennemtrængt af det. […] Hun var for ydmyg og ikke naiv nok og ikke frodig nok" (p. 47).

Then one day, Kirstine changes jobs, from the idyllic homestead to a larger farm, which hires her thanks to her impersonality, and which also employs two farmhands, each targeting one of the maids. Kirstine's interaction with the one named Thomas leads nowhere but offsets this insight as the two of them approach its dead end:

> Der travede de ved siden af hinanden, *midt i verden*, jordbundne og evige, – betrængte, fattige, uudfoldede mennesker, med almuesind, i almuetøj, men alting var i dem, af dem kunde alt komme. Tiderne ventede på dem. Men de kunde ikke få hinanden. Naturen havde sat et skel imellem dem, ikke meget tydeligt, men dog et skel, som de ikke kunde overskride. For de var tæmmede mennesker. (67-68, emphasis added)

A more alien type of farmhand later replaces Thomas, which contributes to a more orderly but chilly atmosphere, especially because of the farmer's unfriendliness to all his farmhands. Kirstine, however, thrives in this atmosphere "mellem magter, der, omtrent lige stærke, holdt hinanden i skak" (p. 73). In this "paradoksernes land" "vendtes der op og ned på så meget" (p. 77), which in hindsight she found it hard to grasp, for she "blev aldrig den, som gav sig ud for at forstå noget af livet" (p. 77).

Here on the threshold to the novel's middle, its chapter 6, Kirstine's "middle-of-the-ground" attitude to life unfolds in a way that pertains not only to her country's days during and immediately after World War One, but potentially to our times as

well. She becomes engaged – to someone named Morten – and so the girl "som aldrig havde drømt om at gøre sin lykke" had truly made it come true (p. 78). Though feeling surrounded by a past with no future prospects, her relationship to him matures after meeting with his parents – as does her view of his indecisiveness, which someday will end it, but only after he has been able to distract her from it for years by virtue of his flexibility, so that she subdues it at the cost of her youthful years, as no one had taught her:

> […] den optimisme, som er den hvide mands forfærdelige byrde og hans pragt, og som er roden til vores mindreværdskomplekser, – og synes du, der ligesom er noget i vejen for dig, så er det virkelig din egen forbandede skyld, for vi andre er i én henrykkelse tilhobe. (87-88)

Instead, she long accepts her fate with fatalistic calm and blames destiny for the rest, thus enabling her relation to Morten to last for 10 years. Then she turns ill, perhaps by tuberculosis, and ultimately moves *home*, to her mother Hanne and *her* husband Jens Peter. Here she thrives, for it "var huset midt i verden" (p. 91), where even sadness was uplifting, "et vitalt, et levende vemod" (p. 92), or a past that would stay with her in the future.

Kirstine is in a "vægtløs[t]" epoch (p. 93), where nothing is like before, all for better *and* worse. "Ingenting var blevet til noget" (p. 93), though at the same time, one detects what had gone unnoticed earlier. Happiness, as a fact, is gone as well, as is sister Grethe in her TB pains, and unhappiness triumphs, though Kirstine herself is not unhappy – at least not like those who had lost everything. Her in-between status takes on so many nuances, and has been negotiating such a degree of complexity, that what might have proven untenable on simpler terms has now become an almost untouchable ordinariness. An overwhelmingly multifaceted world is coming into view – at a great cost, but seemingly with survivability as its one benefit.

After Morten is gone, Kirstine partners with Anton, a divorcee with little humor or wit, but with one child, for whose sake, as well as for other practical reasons, she consents to marry the man, a slippery type, smoothly respectful of others and sometimes a reasonable doubter, for instance when facing a missionary pastor. If coming from Kirstine, everything not "ubetinget almindeligt" receives "et venligt drillende, tomt smil" from him (p. 106), and while he is also both amenable to and impressed by her brother Andreas's self-taught thinking and opportunistic anarchism, Kirstine remains in general indignant and her other brother, Karl, in America and out of reach. Hardly any abnormality makes a dent in her outlook.

Kirstine and Anton's wedding ceremony is boring, but their life together is okay, her only eternity, spiced by small pain, so that things don't turn unrealistically perfect. He is 'a common denominator' serving both her and the temperance movement, and she notices all she comes in touch with and can locate her conceptions thereof (p. 125) – if only within the couple's own location; everything else is soon forgotten. From her center-point-of-view there are –

> Nærmere og fjernere ringe af mennesker! Tydelige og utydelige skikkelser! Og de, man kendte mindst til, var undertiden de tydeligste og kunde blive forvirrende utydelige, hvis man lærte dem nærmere at kende, og kunde så igen blive tydelige.
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> De var alle hendes mennesker; her skulde hun altid være, blandt dem. De var menneskeheden. Og undertiden gik de i ét med andre store strøg af mennesker, hun havde kendt på andre egne, men ikke opfattet så personligt. Det var de samme folk. Der var kun dem. (p. 126)

A more democratic and forward-looking narrative from and about the early 20th century's demography is hard to imagine. Its mapping of human life – narrowly centered on local and personal

experiences yet expanding smoothly into universal takes on its subject – is precisely what augurs this novel's pertinence to today's cultural scene. On the one hand, it seems a flawless recipe for humanitarian progress, on the other, it comes at devastating costs. From the previous chapters' promising build-up to this point, it's time to enter the remaining four, which are more dire than they may seem at first. Chapter 9, the first of them, being the case in point.

Kirstine gives birth, and Anton is as devoted as a child himself, unmanly, just an appendix. She takes on a mother's duties by slavishly following the norms. It is normalcy capitalized. And it continues with God or nature deciding her number of children, and with her – not so coldly – following suit. Things progress without much ado or afterthought. Only the generational gap between mother and children stirs her, and even that not seriously, so long as the latter are "som andre børn," i.e., when "den fornuftige Kirstine meget tydeligt" saw "de var normale" (p. 139). She is a fatalist doctrinarian, Anton an intelligent doubter, whom the children prefer, which everyone tacitly accepts, including Kirstine, who follows suit as her husband with his subconscious peasant soul plays "sin blind-mands-rolle i det drama, der omfatter alt" (p. 146).

The next chapter equates the couple's children with workforce, primitivity, and averageness. Norms are to be followed, and even the kids belong to the "middle." Time gives and takes, the latter in terms of Kirstine's parents, whose deaths leave her in sorrow and feeling empty – connected with her siblings and half-siblings only in superficial friendship. Blood is thicker than water, but not much! Of her half-brothers, Frederik is an optimist, while Michael is an unfortunate shadow of the future, and her sister Marie strangely fat and afraid of Hell.

Chapter 11 expands the novel's perspective to include both Jørgen Nielsen's Denmark *and* world – especially Jutland, localized between landscape, place, and space, and opposite European Copenhagen. The mood in 1914 is less tainted by war than by

roleplaying and children's excitement; "på en endnu lykkelig-skæbneløs, uforpligtende måde" (p. 163), Jutland feels far from the war and its youngsters disinclined or unable to wrap their heads around it, except when survivor's guilt sneaks in. This contrast between the big calamity and Kirstine's small place gradually expands, even as the latter gets hit by rationing; and when peace in 1918 finally arrives in Denmark, "der havde haft fred hele tiden," it is "svøbt i blid poesi" (p. 167). Even as the Spanish flu and Black death added medical harm to injury, the war years' impact remained mostly intangible; everybody "følte […] et koldt pust af den gamle vished om, at intet varer ved" (p. 169). But that sense of endurance yielding to changeability is an old lesson and different from close proximity to a recent world catastrophe; it rather reminds of the natural aging of humans, which both echoes and mitigates intrusions from a war abroad. The old Anton's way of thinking – even pro-life – is a case in point: murky and foggy (especially in talking to Kirstine), his output boils down to "the times they are a-changin": the boys becoming teenagers, the family gradually dissolving, and the son Peter standing out as its heir – or as another average person, quite like Kirstine's own new version of the old. Altogether, another deceptive way of having it both ways?

Chapter 12 is about the aftermath of it all, or a continued squaring of the circle. Life seems renewed – certainly Kirstine's son Jens thought of it as happily timeless and fun and easy; he was "ens over for alle mennesker" and "tænkte ikke noget om sine medmennesker, de kom ham ikke videre ved, syntes han" (p. 177). Even when Jens is killed, his friend disabled, and an agricultural crisis roars, instead of seeing it all going to pot, Anton is taken in by American optimism. "Han var utilfreds med livet. Men det tilfredsstillede ham, at det blev ved …" (p. 185). Even when he dies and Peter takes over, immersed in normalcy and engaged to the most normal girl as well, Kirstine, too, avoids bitterness by never having believed in happiness. Repetition was her life in a nutshell and what enabled her marriage to function as an "selvstændig

organisme" (p. 189) that would continue pulsating after the couple's deaths. And while their son Frands turns Fascist, Peter modestly takes over his parents' farm, marries, and has children.

Commonality reigns after all. In exchanges with Mette, her new friend, Kirstine maintains her belief in burden and contribution, while Mette hits *her* middle ground by neutralizing extremes *she* believes in: "en hård hedningetro, som hun selv kaldte kristendom. Hun troede på det evige liv. Men hun troede ikke, der var noget ved det" (p. 196). One tough but generous cookie, her only weakness was for love! Kirstine, by contrast, was not looking for any meaning in life, since it was about over, anyway. All its big things were disappearing, with little family things taking up the space. The book ends: "Alt var ikke blevet godt, men alt var blevet overkommeligt. Og der var intet forklarelsens lys. Hun havde det ikke behov." (p. 197).[4]

As *En Gård midt i Verden* approaches its finish line, its narrative adds up to featuring Danish social culture as what might be called a lowest common denominator satisfaction: an exit or escape route from dire conflicts; a mitigator that seems resistant to almost any infringement. Or an immodest modesty that seems more durable than most confrontational inroads. Nielsen's novel doesn't leave readers with the illusion of a priceless procedure, but it doesn't spell out the cost of its modus vivendi either.

The subtitle of Robert Kaplan's *Waste Land* (2025), about today's world, is *A World in Permanent Crisis*. As Weimar Germany

[4] Since the quote pictures Kirstine as not seeking to improve her life or solve its problems but being the fatalist who makes a virtue out of necessity, it deserves mention that much of Jørgen Nielsen's literary production sets up a different scenario, with humans desperately struggling to deal with problems but finding their narrow rural environments too closed to allow for a sufficient level of consciousness to that end. (See Erik A. Nielsen, 1967, pp. 78-79). One even senses the possibility that Kirstine's laid back position is also what lies behind her humanistic universalism, as a have-your-cake-and-eat-it solution that may seem to address the very challenge of being human, while in reality evading it by way of abstraction.

was "a system of belligerent and far-flung competing parts," so is "our world today, with its great cultural and civilizational differences, yet on another level [it is] becoming increasingly united at the same time," in that "a crisis in one [country] becomes a crisis in all," since "a crisis for one can contain a domino effect that becomes almost universal." (p. 9). The person who both affirmed and conjoined differences in Jørgen Nielsen's novel was Kirstine, who always, as I pointed out earlier, thought of:

> Tydelige og utydelige skikkelser! Og de, man kendte mindst til, var undertiden de tydeligste og kunne blive forvirrende utydelige, hvis man lærte dem nærmere at kende, og kunde så igen blive tydelige. – De var alle hendes mennesker; her skulde hun altid være, blandt dem. De var menneskeheden" (p. 126).

As Paul la Cour (among others) has emphasized, Jørgen Nielsen had a particular "sans for det sociale Kompleks i Sindet" (1959, p. 29; see also p. 35) and since *Minds Make Societies*, to cite another book title,[5] it lies near to consider precisely Kirstine's words as precursors of the very cultural predicament Kaplan claims to be worldwide today. Unfortunately, this striking fictional potential is undercut by the fact that the words crediting Kirstine's mindset for embracing human difference and similarity in a multifaceted way are not hers but have been unduly imposed upon her by the author's narrative ego.[6] Hence, they ring hollow, no matter how well they might articulate Nielsen's *personal* faculties. Was he tragically stuck with them because they expressed desires for a moral order that was rejected by a civilization aimed at preventing

[5] Pascal Boyer, *Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create*, 2018.

[6] Tage Skou-Hansen, for one, notes in his 1968 critique of Nielsen's novel how the author "taler hen over kendsgerninger og personer, hvor man hellere ville have dem i rå tilstand. Han kan være en meget tyrannisk og bedrevidende fortæller" (1972, p. 140).

humanization of human nature by crushing "vor inderste Livsfølelse – den indre Integritet"? And if so, was this the enigma that ultimately drove Nielsen to take his own life? That seems to be the implications of Povl Schmidt's reading of his work.[7]

As for *En Gård midt i Verden* an obvious consequence seems to be that Kirstine's true, but inauthentic – or semi-authentic – key statements anticipate much of today's public discourse, where faking to be having it both ways is omnipresent. Being a Jutlander is good and comforting, according to the cited version of Kirstine's state of mind, because it enables an individual in such a provincial locality to be at the center, as a citizen of the world, which she proves again and again to be. As false as this comfortable bridging of "localities" – "rummet som 'uendeligt, kontinuert og ensartet'" versus "stedet, der er 'intimt, komplekst og mættet med betydning'" (Rosiek, 2015, p. 144) – was between the two world wars, when Nielsen attributed it to Kirstine, and when only the latter of these "locations" was truly hers, the lure of similar bridges has only increased since then.

In today's globalized life we may be as mindful of the whole world on our small phones as we are of our local communities, yet still fail to establish a genuine and evenhanded connection between the two and to bestow integrity upon them as a whole. The disingenuous wording of Kirstine's outlook signifies a long-living human shortcoming with no end in sight. Being *some*where while pretending (with tech assistance) to be *any*- or *every*where, we may rather be *no*where. So, as Nielsen's Kirstine was under the illusion of being at the center of the world, much of the world itself, in Robert Kaplan's view, seems under the same illusion today.[8]

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[7] My proposition is based on the concluding remarks in Povl Schmidts "Jørgen Nielsen" chapter in the 3rd ed. of *Danske digtere i det 20. århundrede*, 1981, p. 356.
[8] In the words of Lise Sørensen, many of Jørgen Nielsen's characters share a "kollektiv […] galskab" (1969, p. 93), while Tage Skou-Hansen considers *En Gård midt i Verden*'s protagonist abnormal – or too common to be common (1972, pp. 141f). Both critics' claims resonate with my account of Nielsen's characters being challengers of human boundaries in the same way his literary landscape challenges these characters' own mindset.

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