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A TALE OF TWO REVOLUTIONS
ON A FEW ENLIGHTENMENT FINDS ON THE
SHELVES OF DET KONGELIGE BIBLIOTEK

BY

THOMAS BREDSORFF

I, 1

L'Esprit des Journaux is a journal founded at Liège in 1759. As the title suggests, the idea was to provide the readers with an essence of other journals. What the editors did was simply pilfering reviews published elsewhere, mostly in English, French, and German, presenting them in French. Since criticism in the 18th century tended to be summaries of the books under review the Liègian journal turned out to be a tremendous source of information of what was in the books of the time, in other words an early version of *Readers' Digest*. Based on theft and compilation the journal was a great pile of news of the world as it was then and opinions about it. Speaking of *L'Esprit de Journaux* Sainte-Beuve – who incidentally lectured at the University of Liège, the very founding city of the journal – said: “Que n’y ai-je pas retrouvè dans le petits nombre d’années que j’en ai parcouru.”¹

I join the master but have to add that I had no idea of the existence of *L'Esprit des Journaux* had I not received an invitation from the University of Liège to participate in the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the journal, accompanied by a request to inspect and comment on what the journal had offered with regard to my home country. I received the list of articles² and then got hold of the books which are all in the holdings of the Royal Library of Copenhagen. I have

¹ *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Bruxelles, VIII, p. 704.

² Articles in *L'Esprit des journaux* concerning Denmark, in the spelling and language of the journal (note that book titles are regularly translated into French even though the books under review are not):

Joseph Marschall, *Voyages en Hollande, en Flandres, en Allemagne, Danemark, Suède, Laponie, Russie, Ukraine et Pologne, pendant les années 1768, 1769 et 1770* Septembre 1772, III, p. 104-08

Nathaniel William Wraxall, *Remarques faites dans un voyage aux pays septentrionaux de l'Europe, particulièrement Copenhague, Stockolm et Pétersbourg* 1775, IX, p. 159-71

to confess that though I have worked with the Enlightenment at that library for decades I had never come upon the books in question nor, it seems to me, has any other Danish scholar, probably because Denmark does not appear prominently, to say the least, in the titles.

The three books to which the four articles refer are all travel accounts from Denmark in the 1760'es and 1770'es. Here I shall concentrate on the two major finds that this series of coincidences led me on to, one a surprisingly modern assessment of the revolutionary events that took place in Denmark 1770-72; the other the discovery of a literary ploy or technique which I think may add to our general understanding of literature of the period: the European Enlightenment.

I, 2

Here is a brief reminder of the historical background.

In September 1770 the German physician Struensee assumed what amounted to absolute power over the kingdom of Denmark. His rule would last for 16 months until, in the early hours of January 17th, 1772, he was deposed by a junta representing roughly the people who had been brushed aside by him. They put him in prison, convicted him of treason and, on April 28th, 1772, had him executed.

Struensee's short and tumultuous rule resounded throughout Europe. Soon after having assumed power he relinquished every kind of censorship. The free-speech act made Voltaire publish a poem in praise of – well, King Christian of Denmark, because the monarch was and remained the nominal head of state throughout Struensee's period. The reason Struensee could assume power being (what Voltaire probably knew, like everybody else) that the king was indisposed, either for suffering from a psychiatric condition or for being childishly uninterested in wielding power. The reason Struensee, a foreign commoner, could become ruler in fact if not in name, was that he

J. Marshall, *Voyage dans la partie septentrionale de l'Europe pendant les années 1768, 1769 et 1770, etc. dans lesquels on trouve les plus grands détails sur la Hollande, la Flandre, l'Allemagne, le Danemark, la Suède, la Laponie, la Russie, l'Ukraine et la Pologne, relativement à l'agriculture, la population, les manufactures, le commerce, l'état des arts et les entreprises utiles* Août 1776, VIII, p. 90-104

J. Williams, *The rise, progress, and present state, &c. Naissance, progrès, et état actuel des gouvernements du Nord, savoir des Provinces-Unies, du Danemark, de la Suède, de la Russie, et de la Pologne* Mai 1778, V, p. 68-81

had been appointed court physician and thus had had the opportunity to befriend both the king and the queen, whose lover he became. Struensee's intimacy with the queen was what the junta would harp on when selling their coup d'état to the public.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup Struensee got a very bad press as a despotic fornicator. He had screwed the poor queen and tricked the poor king; he merely got what he deserved. And this is how, for the next two centuries Struensee was to be portrayed in Danish textbooks: as an immoral foreign intruder, a German usurper. Only during the last decade or so Danish historians have begun to acknowledge the Enlightened ideas that he – albeit clumsily – tried practicing such as

- curbing the power of the nobility by centralizing the government,
- making appointments dependant on merits rather than birth, separating the judicial system from the executive,
- supporting free trade,
- conducting a foreign policy that kept Denmark neutral,
- attempting to separate justice from morals by banning police interference in what consenting adults would do behind closed doors in their homes; and
- eliminating the stigma of bastardy, by giving illegitimate children the right of inheritance.³

This is not quite what I was taught in my history lessons in school. Had I been given *L'Esprit de Journaux* of September 1775 I would have been able to read a totally different assessment of Struensee. Nathaniel William Wraxall, a bright young Englishman concluded his lengthy report on Danish matters by stating that “as a politician I rank him with the Clarendons and the Mores, whom tyranny, or public baseness, and want of virtue, have brought, in almost every age, to an untimely and ignominious exit; but to whose memory impartial posterity have done

³ A concise, balanced, and up-to-date list of Struensee's legislative efforts along this line is provided by the American scholar Roger L. Emerson in *Encyclopedia of The Enlightenment*, ed. A.C. Kors, Oxford 2003, vol. 4, p. 131f. – The best and most recent in-depth assessment of Struensee is Asser Amdisen, *Til nytte og fornøjelse, Johann Friedrich Struensee (1737-1772)*, Copenhagen 2002, accessible, however, only to those who read Danish.

ample justice”.⁴ The statesman Struensee on a par with the illustrious Chancellor Thomas More, no less!

Wraxall’s enthusiasm for Struensee is clearly represented in the long passages quoted verbatim in French translation in *l’Esprit*, combining notices from two English journals, *Critical Review* and *Monthly Review*. Everybody at the court detested Struensee – so Wraxall claims – the army, the navy, the chancellery, the financial world, and the noblemen. Or, to revert to quotes from his book, “he ultimately began to attempt a diminution of the power of the nobles, and to set the farmers and peasants at perfect liberty [...] These were his real crimes”.⁵

The subscribers of *l’Esprit des Journaux* through such summaries were provided with an impressive pro-Struensee interpretation, which it took Danish historians more than two centuries to even consider. When his book was published, in 1775, Nathaniel William Wraxall had been on a secret mission to the deposed Queen Carolina Matilda,⁶ banished to Celle in Hannover, which means that his account may be informed by another loser, the Queen’s, views – one more reason why his testimony is worth a hearing.

I, 3

In *l’Esprit* of May 1778 we encounter another Englishman who ‘*n’a pas vue le Danemarck d’un oeil favorable*’. John Williams’ book on Northern Governments is a more academic treatise, based on lengthy accounts and even verbatim translations of legal documents. Yet in spite of his dry tone, Williams conveys first-hand experience. He had visited Copenhagen during Struensee’s short rule and benefited from his enlightened attitude:

“I am much indebted to the late unfortunate Count Struensee, through whose interest I had free access to the public records,

⁴ N. Wraxall Jun., *A Tour through some of The Northern Parts of Europe*, 2nd ed. London 1775, p. 41.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ According to Wraxall’s biography in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. LXIII, London 1900, p. 71. Wraxall himself did not reveal his conspiratorial involvement with the queen in his voluminous *Historical Memoirs of my Own Time*, but his grandson C.F.L. Wraxall divulged the episode at length, based on his grandfathers private archive., in his *Life and Times of Her Majesty Caroline Matilda*, III, London 1864, pp. 167-241.

particularly to those which regarded the finances of the kingdom and its internal policy.”⁷

Think about that: free access to the government’s books!

As for Struensee’s place in history, Williams sees eye to eye with his contemporary Wraxall. He even advances the theory that the illicit love affair between Struensee and the Queen was a story fabricated by Struensee’s detractors. Other Englishmen may have invented the theory – after all, the aggrieved Queen was their compatriot – but Williams’ reasoning is worthy of that of Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple. It was absolutely essential, so William argues, to the perpetrators of the coup to make sure that the Queen did not get access to the King. Had she had but two minutes with him, she would have explained the matter and the coup would have been blown. The junta had no crime to accuse her of; hence they had to invent a transgression; the only pretext for an arrest they could come up with was the insinuation that she had slept with Struensee and thus sullied the royal bed!

The two English writers, through the reports culled from English journals and presented to the francophone world by *l’Esprit*, surely must have helped maintain the view of Struensee as the enlightened hero that prevailed in Europe outside of Denmark. Voltaire, who may have read at least the first of the two articles under review, may have nodded in agreement.

II, 1

Readers of the September 1772 issue of *L’esprit des journaux* must have opened their mouths and eyes wide, when reading – in a review of a travel book – of a place that sounds like heaven, yet is claimed to have an earthly existence. The author of the book relates what his Danish host – in the book called count Roncellen – has told him; the reviewer respectfully passes on his fantastic tale of utopian bliss word for word:

“Dans tout ce que j’ai fait, me dit M. Roncellin, pour améliorer mes possessions, j’ai suivi une méthode directement opposées à celle des neuf dixième de la Noblesse de ce Royaume: la plupart des Nobles tiennent leurs paysans dans l’abjection & l’indigence, & moi je fais ce

⁷ J. Williams, *The Rise, Progress, and Present Stage of the Northern Governments*, London 1777, p. xviii).

que je puis pour les enrichir; j'aime mieux leur inspirer une hardiesse mâle que de les contenir dans le dur esclavage où sont les paysans Danois. Notre pouvoir sur eux est presque illimité; ils sont obligés de travailler pour leur Seigneur, eux, leurs bestiaux, &c. ensorte qu'ils n'ont presque point de moment à eux. J'ai aboli cette servitude, & l'ai changée en une redevance annuelle en argent; je ne leur demande jamais des services réels. La douceur de cette situation porte mes fermiers à me faire de beaucoup meilleures conditions, parce que leur industrie leur rapporte bien au-delà de cet excédent de rente. Mes paysans sont riches ou du moins dans une honnête aisance."⁸

[I have proceeded, Monsieur Roncellin – *l'Esprit* has gallicized his name – told me, in direct opposition to the methods employed by nine tenths of the nobility of this kingdom (i.e. Denmark). They do their best to keep their peasants in abject poverty whereas I have done my best to make them rich; I would rather inspire them by manly boldness than have them remain in slavery like the rest of the Danish peasants. Our power over them is almost unlimited, their forced labour is such that they hardly have a moment to themselves. I have abolished this slavery in favour of an annual monetary rent and never force them to labour. This makes them happy. The happiness inspired by such circumstances puts both me and my farmers in a much better position because their industrious labour produces wealth in excess of the rent. My peasants are rich or at least of reasonable wealth.]

The reviewer is so taken with the account of this Paradise on Earth that he refrains from reviewing and simply quotes. One wonders how the peasants in this remote part of rural Denmark would get the money to pay the rent (and to be turned into 'farmers': note how *paysans* is replaced by *fermiers*). That too is taken care of by the gentle Monsieur Roncellen.

He has established on parts of his property what amounts to an industrial town with a population of an impressive 2.000 – two thousand! – half of whom are workers employed in various manufacturing jobs, 200 of them in a blacksmith's 'manufactory', or 'fabric', forging

⁸ *L'Esprit des Journaux*, III, September 1972, p. 104f, reviewing Joseph Marshall Esq., *Travels through Holland, Flanders, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Lapland, Russia, the Ukraine, and Poland in the Years 1768, 1769, and 1770, in which is particularly minutely, The Present State of Those Countries, respecting their Agriculture, Population, Manufactures, Commerce, the Arts, and Useful Undertakings*, London 1772.

ploughs, harrows, carts, wagons, shovels, forks, rakes, axes; others in tanneries refining hides into various leather products, yet others in spinning mills weaving wool and in turneries manufacturing dishes, plates, cups, saucers, bowls, and scoops.

How about the raw materials needed for this teeming industrial activity? That too the good Monsieur has taken care of. The little river on whose banks the unnamed town stands has provided ground for wet docks and dry docks for building barges and sloops. Count Roncellen is the proud owner of 'five sloops, each of 50 tons' by which he imports raw materials for his manufacture from the Baltic, England, and Holland and then up the little river in Western Jutland to his estate.

On and on it goes in this vein. How on earth has this perfect but secret industrial revolution in the most rural corner of Denmark come about? And why has it disappeared with no other trace left behind than Joseph Marshall's English account (quickly out in a second edition) and its reverberations in the Francophone parts of Europe, via *l'Esprit des Journaux* and, later, a French translation of the book, duly re-reviewed in *l'Esprit* of August 1776?

Joseph Marshall is no more of an admirer of Denmark than our two previous Englishmen. Contemporary Denmark to the three of them was not a monarchy but rather a despotic government (Wraxall p. 50). The only reason why such a rotten system survives is an oversized army of 40,000 men, mostly under foreign command, designed not to confront an external enemy but to keep the population under control (Marshall p. 237f). Or, in the words of the third Englishman (Williams p. 361):

"In the courts of Asia, when a sultan, a mogul, or a grand visir commits such acts of tyranny, a revolution generally succeeds, and they are punished as their crimes deserve; but in Denmark, every thing is carried on under the cloak of justice; oppression and tyranny are protected, and the innocent are made victims to the malice and baseness of the great."

There is not *something* rotten in the state of Denmark; *everything* is rotten. Except in the ideal industrial town on the heath in Western Jutland, so enticingly depicted by Joseph Marshall!



Something like the above map of Denmark from 1704 may have been in front of Joseph Marshall as he put together the account of his imaginary journey through Western Jutland. Fra Harald Ilsøe: *Udlændinges rejser i Danmark indtil år 1700*, 1963.

II, 2

It took me a while, I am embarrassed to say, to realise that we were being duped, all of us: the reviewers, the editor of *L'Esprit des journaux*, and myself.

Joseph Marshall begins his Danish journey in Altona. The description of the journey northwards along the West Coast of Jutland, in a horse cart accompanied by one footman only, is studded with empirically controllable observations all the way to the town of Ringkøbing (spelt almost correctly) the county town, the biggest town in the county, now and probably always. A few miles to the north of that town the traveller comes upon that golden industrial city with a population four times(!) the size of the county town⁹. Nowhere is there any trace left behind of that industrial miracle – except in Marshall's account.

I know of course the rule for historians, *ex nihilo nihil*, i.e. absence of evidence does not prove absence of existence. Still there are numerous signs indicating that Marshall's golden city is a fiction. Here are some:

- The name of his host, Count 'Roncellen', the founder of the golden city, does not appear in any of the lists of nobility that I have checked.
- The same is true of two other noblemen to whom the traveller is introduced by his first benefactor, 'Baron de Rosenberg' and 'Count de Smikelane'.
- The unnamed city which Count Roncellen had established '23 years ago' he had built of timber cut in his own forest (but there are and were no forests in the entire county, only tiny fir groves).
- The river, navigable by ships up to as much as 50 tons "falls into the gulph that the county town Ringskopping stands on", so the unnamed town must be fairly close to that bay. However Count Roncellen wants to double the tonnage for his imports and hence "he is at present employed in cutting a canal, about two miles long, to gain a better navigation into a bay to the northward, near Wosborg".¹⁰

Here at last is a known name, in fact the only place name that I have been able to identify in this section of the journey. The estate Vosborg

⁹ According to *Trap Danmark* vol. 9,1, 5th ed., Copenhagen 1966, p.66 there were 506 inhabitants in Ringkøbing in 1769.

¹⁰ Joseph Marshall, op. cit. vol. II, 2nd Edition 1773, p. 160.

is indeed located near a bay (Nissum Fjord). The distance between Ringkøbing and that bay, however, is 17 miles. So, if the account were true, the planned 2-mile replacement canal, is meant to cover the better part of 17 miles!

On his onward journey Mr. Marshall soon reverts to controllable fact, place names almost correctly spelt, recognisable geography. Like a good magician he has embedded his fiction in controllable fact. What are we to make of his hoax that has convinced every reader up until now? At least, if anybody has been in doubt he has left no sign behind.

II, 3

To fully appreciate the scope of this ploy we have to remind ourselves of the special function of utopian thinking during the Enlightenment.

A quarter of a millennium earlier, in 1516, Thomas More – who was not only a statesman on a par with Struensee but, unlike Struensee, also a writer – had published the novel *Utopia*, a criticism of contemporary society and mores in the guise of an evidently fictional account of a journey to another and better place. The utopian urge, however, has been with human kind since time immemorial, only the ideal state usually is placed as far away and as long ago or into the future as to be unobtainable. Just think of the Paradise lost by Adam and Eve in the Old Testament; or the future grazing of lamb and lion in peaceful co-existence of the New Testament.

What is new about More's *Utopia*, and at the time still rare, is that it refers to a *contemporary* society and thus contains a political dimension: not a threat, not a promise, but rather a tacit encouragement to *do* something. This, I would suggest, is why the Utopian genre of the contemporary type was to flourish during the Enlightenment. After all, what is Enlightenment if not an appeal to human beings to improve their lot here and now, by their own effort? Action! Paradise now!

The many openly fictitious travel accounts serve exactly that purpose: Look, the authors say, here is what other people do *now* – not long ago, not in the distant future but right now – implying that you, the reader, can do likewise if you make an effort (or avoid what you are doing which I caricature in my account). Such is the appeal of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, Holberg's *The Journey of Niels Klim to a World Underground*, Voltaire's *Candide* and *Micromégas*. When, in Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*, the Tahitian is telling the European

robber that here everything belongs to everybody, while he, the European intruder, has been sermonizing about an inexplicable difference between what belongs to you and what belongs to me, then, formally, it is a travel account from down under, but in actual fact it is a warning against greed right here.

Joseph Marshall – so it gradually dawned on me – is grafting an instance of the then popular fiction genre ‘the contemporary Utopia’, on to his account. Only he is doing so successfully disguised as a reporter, providing documentaries.

Who is this Joseph Marshall? It turns out that while no contemporary reader called his bluff (as far as we know), it was well-established common knowledge that ‘Joseph Marshall’ was a pseudonym for one English John Hill (1716-1775), described¹¹ as an extremely prolific, but decidedly second-rate writer. Trained as a pharmacist, his main claim to fame was a reference work of 26 folio volumes with 1600 copper plate engravings, covering 26.000 plants and flowers described according to the Linnæan system and earning him eventually the Swedish Order of Vasa.

Yet at the same time this John Hill published 75 other works in his own name and at least 8 under pseudonyms, engaging with all the genres of the day, novel, play, poem, travel account, and first and last, polemical essay. He tried in vain to gain acceptance as a scientist and then attacked, in print, the Royal Society; he did not succeed as a novelist and then fought Henry Fielding; when his attempt to become an actor had failed, he had a go in print at the great actor Garrick. For a while he published a daily(!) essay, the Inspector, and is said at times to have made three times as much money in one year from his writing as any other writer.

The probable author behind our book is no genius. Rather he is someone who is capable of swiftly absorbing and varying the trends of the day like an automaton. Which is exactly what makes his hoax interesting, for he who writes automatically tends to embody the *zeitgeist*; in the case of ‘Joseph Marshall’ a deep-seated feature of the Enlightenment: *a utopia contemporaneous with the reader*.

John Hill, in the guise of ‘Joseph Marshall’, is not just pulling the reader’s legs. He is doing something much more interesting: he is

¹¹ In his biography in *Dictionary of National Biography*, of which more in the Supplement.

combining the activist Utopian novel with another popular form, the travelogue, in the certain knowledge that nothing appeals to our imagination as something we imagine to be real. So here we have him divested of his disguise, an English gentleman of the early industrial revolution, whose dreams come true in the shape of a count by the fancy name Roncellen, who at his unnamed estate on the Western moor of Jutland has liberated the poor peasants from villeinage, and established an unnamed manufacturing city with 2000 inhabitants up a river with a wharf from which cargo ships of 50 tons command the high seas – the English squire’s dream of an industrial revolution where everybody is a winner and nobody a loser.

What is this if not one of the oldest *topoi* of literature: The Golden City.

I wish someone with the proper qualifications would care to undertake a critical inspection of Joseph Marshall’s Swedish, Dutch, Polish, Russian, Ukranian chapters. That might support or contradict my thesis that Marshall’s *Travels...* is a utopian dream dressed up in documentary clothing.

Which is not really far-fetched. After all, what could be more in tune with the Enlightenment than a tale based on the utopian urge to improve the world, promoted by the most powerful of vehicles: the fiction of non-fiction. For no illusion is as convincing as the illusion that what you are watching is no illusion at all but plain and simple reality. That is how magicians work. And artists.

And this is how Denmark was introduced to readers of *l’Esprit des Journaux* of the 1770’es: a country run by a nobility whose wickedness competes with its stupidity¹² and at the same time home to a glorious, if short-lived political revolution, and an even more glorious, if minuscule, industrial one.

¹² J. Williams, op.cit. p 419: “I know not whether we ought most to admire the wickedness or the stupidity of the nobility.”

SUPPLEMENT

Is 'Joseph Marshall' a pseudonym? The known facts

No Joseph Marshall can be found in any of the 310 English-language bibliographical reference works compiled in the English Biography Microfiche at Det Kongelige Bibliotek, nor has (with one possible exception) any other book by such an author been located. 'Joseph Marshall' could therefore very well be a pseudonym.

The name was recorded in a number of contemporary sources as a pseudonym for *John Hill* (1716-1775). Here are some:

- Gottlieb Heinrich Stuck's *Verzeichnis von aeltern und neuern Land- und Reisebeschreibungen*. Halle 1784, p. 146: "Hill's () [under the noun] (Ioseph) MARSHALL, travels through ... etc. Lond. 1772. gr. 8. III Vol." with references to Götting. Anzeig. 1773 S. 905, 910, 969.
- Friedrich Ekkard, *Allgemeines Register über die Göttingischen gelehrten Anzeigen von 1753 bis 1782*, Göttingen 1785, p. 999: "Jos. Marshall's (J. Hill's) Travels through ... etc., 73, 905ff. 930-33. 969-73 cf. 1319f; 79, 1118."
- I.I. Volkmann *Neueste Reisen durch die Sieben vereinigten Provinzen der Niederlande*, Leipzig 1783, p. 32: In a listing of five "der vornehmsten (Beschreibungen der vereinigte Niederlande)" here is what he says about number three: "Der Vielschreiber, Hill, hat unter den verkappten (= disguised) Namen, *Joseph Marschall*: Travels ... etc. [...] darin aber manche Unrichtigkeiten, und die Abschnitte von den Manufacturen, Ackerbau und Auflagen (= 'production') aus dem Commerce de la Hollande entlehnt sind. Man hat auch eine Übersetzung zu Danzig davon."

In other words, the contemporaries were in no doubt. There would have been no reason for this supplement – I would simply take John Hill's authorship for a fact – were it not for one single voice to the contrary. Samuel E. Bring, *Itineraria Svecana, bibliografisk förteckning över resor i Sverige fram till 1950*, Stockholm 1954, p. 85, acknowledges the tradition of attributing the work to John Hill, and then mysteriously adds: "Att döma av biografien i DNB, vol. 26, (1891), samt den bibliografiska anordningen i BMs stora katalog synes så icke vara fallet." ['judging by the biography in DNB and the bibliographical placement in the great catalogue of the BM this (= J.Hill's authorship) seems not to be the case']. DNB is short for *Dictionary of National Biography* on whose biography of Hill I base the details rendered in my article.

Neither of Bring's arguments, however, carries weight. As for the latter, the book being recorded in the British Museum catalogue under the name of Marshall, simply implies that the book is catalogued according to the information provided on its title page. As for the former, quite contrary to Bring's suggestion, John Hill, the 'Vielschreiber' (= 'much-writer') portrayed in *Dictionary of National Biography*, summarized above, fits the role of author of *Travels ... etc.* extremely well.

However, whether 'Joseph Marshall' is John Hill or somebody else, perhaps even a Joseph Marshall, is of no consequence to the argument of my article. This is why I have relegated the discussion of the question to a supplement.