

Hovering Stasis

Arabesque and Allegory in Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales and Stories

[Svævende Stasis: Arabesk og Allegori i
H.C. Andersens Eventyr og Historier]

**By Jacob Bøggild. Hellerup: Forlaget Spring, 2012.
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Jacob Bøggild's monograph on arabesques and allegorical themes in selected fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen contains fifteen chapters, each focusing on a single or a small cluster of tales. With the exception of the first chapter, which focuses on *Walking Tour from Holmen's Canal to the Eastern Point of Amager*, Bøggild analyses the fairy tales only. His comments on and references to the author's other works are few and brief. The several analyses – they are twenty in number – are thematically organised in a fashion suggested by the title. Bøggild argues that the concept of the arabesque is a general key to appreciating a fairy tale corpus. Utilising an approach informed by deconstruction, the allegorical patterns are read as deconstructed allegories, which links them to the concept of the arabesque with its serpentine design consisting of minute parts. According to the author, both the fairy tales and the authorship as a whole are one comprehensive arabesque. Whilst the

tales are given a thorough analytical treatment, the claims concerning the author's other works are declarative and unsupported by analysis. It should be evident that Bøggild's dissertation uses a deconstructive methodology although he steers clear of subscribing wholesale to the litanies of deconstruction. In its generalities the book is a continuation of Schlegel who in his fragments articulated a Romantic poetics directly connected with modernism.

As an academic monograph, this study is unconventional. It contains no clear break-down of the existing scholarship, no outline or even discussions of theories or of the scholarly work done before Johan de Mylius, Niels Kofoed and a few others. It addresses a modest selection of Andersen's fairy tales without explaining why these and not others have been chosen, and it does not place the analyses in the context of the collected works, even though it states that the analytical positions taken pertain to

the entire oeuvre. These issues are both an advantage and a drawback. It is a work without tedious polemicism and theoretical overkill, but at same time it is a book in which the essential concepts are not accompanied by the amount of theoretical instruction and conceptual analysis that would have prevented them (for instance, arabesque and allegory) from tending towards the loose and vague (arabesque can mean anything from irony, digression, and repetition to movement, opening, freedom, artistic competence, plotting, and so much more). The author's attitude to previous research is arrogant. Largely dismissed, and dismissed without substantial reasoning, the author chalks it up either to aesthetically uninteresting biographism or to wild goose chases in historical conditions with no roots in what in Bøggild's book is so crucial: the self-reflexivity and meta-poetic *Gehalt* of the fairy tales. This means that the author directs his focus to the individual fairy tales and eliminates historical and social contexts. Furthermore, it means that the book at times reads as if it had been written in the heyday of 1990s' dogmatic textual analysis. Not once does Bøggild discuss his own premises, and that is a deficit to which I shall return. The central object of the book is a textual analytical insistence on a modernist-poetic essentially text-based mode of thinking in the fairy tales. In several instances Bøggild presents excellent, often subtle, and in a few cases debatable, analytical insights. But the critique of biographism is an easy one, considering the fact that biographical criticism has been on the wane since

the days of the late Topsøe-Jensen. The subsequent biographies are not contributions to the discipline of comparative literature narrowly construed. The author conducts a somewhat mechanical or superficial critique of previous readings of the tales, whether they are disciplinarily informed by history, the history of ideas, the history of aesthetics, or something else. This, however, poses a problem insofar as his distances seem precarious. Some very central contexts within the history of ideas and aesthetics are denied a careful discussion despite their undeniable significance; they remain unspecified subtexts underneath their own arguments. Bøggild's own text is for this reason totally exposed to deconstructive readings.

By way of introduction, Bøggild analyses *Walking Tour* and proceeds by guiding the reader through a selection of fairy tales from 'The Phoenix Bird' to 'The Garden of Paradise', 'The Little Mermaid', 'The Nightingale', 'The Story of a Mother', 'The Shirt-Collar', 'The Pen and the Inkstand', 'The Money-Box', 'The Shadow', 'The Bell', 'The Snow Queen', 'Poetry's California', 'The Psyche', 'Poultry Meg's Family' before concluding with 'The Gardener and the Lord and the Lady' and 'Auntie Toothache.' Clearly, the selection mixes familiar and widely-read fairy tales with lesser known, largely uninteresting texts. The texts have been selected according to a thematic principle. No sense of progression is developed in Bøggild's textual corpus even though he opens his book with *Walking Tour* and concludes with the very last fairy tale written by

Andersen. The author summarizes his intentions in the dissertation's 'Summary and Conclusion': 'The dissertation provides a perspective . . . [from which] Andersen's work is construed as a continuous interaction between two literary modes: arabesque and allegory, and [it] defends the understanding that this interaction creates a certain dynamic, which is linked to openness and the subtle displacement of meaning that characterizes Andersen's work. . . . I have aimed to capture the essence of this dynamic in the title of the dissertation: *Hovering Stasis*. 'Hovering' here connotes Romantic '*Schweben*', a key word in Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic poetics. 'Stasis', on the one hand, connotes the allegory's apparent lack of movement, . . . and, on the other, the tense equilibrium between opposites associated with the literary arabesque' (273). Rarely does the author aspire to reflections of a more theoretical sort than here although the matter has been laid bare by the preceding analyses.

Most of these fairy tales are given a thorough examination. There are numerous quirky, surprising and interesting observations and arguments in the individual analyses: the discussion of 'The Little Mermaid' with Søren Baggesen, de Mylius, and James Massengale is fine and instructive. However, as previously indicated, in rejecting the psychoanalytic and biographical readings Bøggild is flogging a dead horse. In addition, the work features several worthy observations concerning, for example, the narcissism of the prince and princess as well as the fairy tale's narratologi-

cal structure. Bøggild argues that 'The Little Mermaid', by virtue, in part, of a number of instances of textual symmetry, forms a constantly restless allegory, which means that the tale lacks stable contents – it is an 'arabesque mobile' – in which the allegorical elements are subordinated to the arabesque construction. Insofar as this observation applies to other texts besides 'The Little Mermaid', it affords a distinct and fertile approach to the Christian constructions in the fairy tales. This clearly pertains to Bøggild's reading of one of the minor works, 'The Garden of Paradise', in which Bøggild shrewdly identifies an instance of genre-mix. The fairy tale oscillates between a fixed allegorical frame of reference (the mythological fall from grace) and that openness and plurality which characterizes the arabesque. For this reason the tale produces, under a seemingly closed surface, an undogmatic dynamism that acknowledges the openness of the other tales. Similarly, interesting things are uncovered with respect to such classics as 'The Story of a Mother', 'The Snow Queen', 'The Nightingale', and 'The Shadow.' The consecutive readings effectively illuminate hitherto underappreciated aspects of Andersen's texts.

In the concluding chapter, Bøggild asserts that 'Andersen's fairy tales and stories are far from being programmatic texts. Rather, as Georg Brandes is stumblingly close to articulating, they comprise a comprehensive but potentially unending arabesque in which each position is provisional and counterbalanced' (279). As will be seen, as a final result of his analyses,

Bøggild posits Andersen's modernist position. By the same token, Andersen's fairy tales enter into a discourse with other contemporary sentiments and responses, whether originating from the disciplines of aesthetics, the history of aesthetics or the history of ideas. Concerned with intertextual aspects, Bøggild lays the groundwork for a discussion of these. Specifically, he juxtaposes 'The Story of a Mother' and Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard, remarks Bøggild, appears here in inverted form. It is safe to assume that Andersen kept up with Kierkegaard's writings following the famous attack in *From the Papers of One Still Living*. I would have welcomed, however, a more advanced discussion and investigation of the mutual relation between the two writers – Bøggild has a specialised knowledge of both authorships. Hopefully, that is a task that he will bring to fruition in due course.

Other intertextual references include the Bible, which is skilfully integrated into several analyses, and the central figure in idealist philosophy, Hegel, whose theory of recognition greatly advances the analysis of 'The Gardener and the Lord and the Lady.' Additional references are made to Pontoppidan, Søren Ulrik Thomsen, and Edgar Allan Poe, to name a few. Regrettably absent are any intertextual references to Andersen's own novels and travel writings, although some of these, *expressis verbis*, thematise the concept of the arabesque. Equally puzzling is the author's disinclination to elaborate on Schlegel to a greater extent than the randomly scattered comments, especially since Schlegel's

conception of irony is an important idea to Bøggild.

The most serious problem in the book, according to this reviewer, is the decontextualisation of the fairy tales. It is Bøggild's belief that contextual circumstances detract from the aesthetic quality of the tales, which should rather be approached as 'carefully contrived artworks totally without heeding' the external world (14). This stance generates some problems for the author and vitiates the pertinence of some of the central analyses. The book's fundamental assumption is that the fairy tales belong to a tradition between the German *Frühromantik* on the one hand, and modernist textual strategies on the other, in that the tales to all intents and purposes resist 'Biedermeierization' (one could arguably conduct a more thorough discussion than the one featured here). There is then, despite everything, a historical underpinning to the readings provided in the dissertation. Only, it is never directly thematised, and that is unfortunate. Andersen, according to Bøggild, 'is actually operating reflectively on the front line between Romanticism and modernism, confident in his intuitive expectation that the poetry of modernity will be preconditioned by Romanticism and consequently be unable to institute a radical turning point' (40) – notice the word 'reflectively', a word revealing Bøggild's modernistic interest in the self-reflexivity and meta-poetic interests of the fairy tales. Such estimations are, in their generality, fairly precise. But they also reward further elaboration. As it happens, the Romantic in modernity

and modernism has been a debated issue since Brandes. This relationship between Romanticism and modernism is not scrutinized – at least not at great length – in Bøggild’s work, despite his references to Heinrich Detering’s articles on some of the fairy tales under investigation. The collapse of aesthetic idealism is, in Detering’s work, a central and emphasised point; meanwhile something undefined and new, as yet only a fragile vibration, is anticipated. Thus, to Detering the transition is continuous between Romanticism and modernism. Romanticism is subsumed under modernism, which cannot be conceived in the absence of Romanticism. This issue, which involves both poetological matters and commonality of ideas and experiences, is of crucial significance in Andersen’s authorship. In a few places, Bøggild demonstrates that the Romantic text informs and lives on in the new text – as its essence or subtext (‘Poetry’s California’). Overall, it is only implied, however. In this, Bøggild touches on an issue which in my opinion has constitutional implications for Andersen’s fairy tales and the aesthetics they display. The collapse of aesthetic idealism which I am talking about is one of those qualities that makes his fairy tales meaningful and which helps explain why his works, in part helped along by Villy Sørensen’s pioneering 1958 study *Digtere og Dæmoner*, continue to fascinate us. The disenchantment, so to speak, of the world represents a very important host of problems in Andersen’s works (this concept from Weber is assessed on p. 136). Bøggild boils this disenchantment down to

‘the relationship between the material and the spiritual’ (134) – a somewhat tepid assessment, it must be admitted, of the emergent encounter with aesthetic idealism that links Andersen’s fairy tales with modernity. By the same token, the book offers an extremely bland explanation of the aesthetics linking Andersen’s texts with modernity. These shortcomings are most conspicuous in the treatment of ‘The Shadow’ – the tale correctly canonised by Sørensen. In the best deconstructive tradition, Bøggild focuses on three puns and one instance of literalisation while disregarding the story’s narrative (something he dismisses as an illusion [157]). Thus the interpretation is deliberately precluded from going into the downfall of aesthetic idealism as laid out in the story; in turn the story is read as a tale of seduction and ample reserves of linguistic energy. I shall refrain from going into detail here; only let it be said that I would have appreciated a more coherent reading (not necessarily one ignoring linguistic energy and other quirks) of a major text, which to my thinking is quite a bit more than an allegory of the illusions of reading and a *memento mori*. One can be excused for harbouring similar reservations about the readings of ‘The Bell’, ‘The Snow Queen’ and ‘The Gardener and the Lord and the Lady.’ In fact, this problem is evident as early as *Walking Tour*. In my opinion, the Andersen emerging from Bøggild’s reading formula is too severely trimmed. And although the autonomising and aesthetic assumption with which the book opens are delineated sufficiently spaciouly to recognise Andersen’s

linguistic energy and mastery, they are inimical to a multifaceted, and in places troubled, complexity. That is unfortunate.

For better or worse, the author has the capacity to carry out his project. His analyses are often shrewd and almost always instructive. Over the course of his book, illuminating light is shed on aspects of Andersen's tales which the scholarly tradition has slighted. The methodological approach and the analytical idiosyncrasies constantly stimulate the reader.

For the record, it should be noted that I was chairman of the committee, comprising Karin Sanders, Heinrich Detering, and myself, responsible for assessing Jacob Bøggild's dissertation. Additionally, I have a dog in the fight that is H. C. Andersen scholarship in that I have written a book on the author and edited a selection of fairy tales for the Association of Teachers of Danish.

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