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The Veil between Fact and Fiction in the Novels of Kristian Østergaard

by John Mark Nielsen

The bicentennial of the births of Hans Christian Andersen and August de Bournonville and the 150th anniversary of the death of Søren Kierkegaard provide opportunity to reflect and celebrate how artists and philosophers interpret and express the complex network of values and ideas inherent in any culture. Great artists and thinkers are particularly successful in producing work that transcends a specific culture and achieves universality recognizable beyond the boundaries of that culture into which they were born. Certainly the works produced by Andersen, Bournonville, and Kierkegaard are not just Danish; their work engages and invites audiences to consider what it means to be human.

2005 also marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of the Danish-American teacher, pastor, novelist and poet, Kristian Østergaard. Though his creative work falls far short of Andersen’s, Bournonville’s, and Kierkegaard’s, scholars of Scandinavian-American fiction, among them Georg Strandvold and Dorothy Burton Skårdal, recognize him as an important voice for those who emigrated from Denmark in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In poetry and fiction he explored what it meant to be an immigrant and the problems of attempting to preserve an independent Danish identity in the face of powerful forces urging assimilation into American culture.

The immigrant experience and the process of assimilation that inevitably occurs are rich with narrative possibilities. Ole Rolvaag’s Giants in the Earth, a minor American literary classic in the eyes of many plows the fertile ground of the psychological turmoil caused by uprooting and resettling in a new land. Per Hansa and Beret are characters that come alive in their struggles to adapt to the new environment into which they have come. The yoking of two human types, one who is optimistic and a doer, the other reserved, cautious
and an observer, capture human responses to change that transcend the time, the place, and the people of the narrative.

In approaching the problems of immigration, assimilation, and identity, Kristian Østergaard reflects cultural, religious and social debates taking place in Denmark during the last half of the 19th century. At the same time, his experiences among Danish immigrants in the American Midwest tempered his youthful notion that Danes could retain an independent Danish identity or folkelighed, a concept essential to his understanding of what it meant to be human. Particularly in his five novels written between 1891 and 1927, Østergaard explores the evolving awareness that while immigration to the United States often provides opportunities for material success, the experience exacts a high price from the immigrant.

The first, *The Pioneers*, published in Copenhagen in 1891, describes the crude yet hopeful beginnings of a Danish community somewhere in central Nebraska on the hills overlooking the Platte River. *Anton Arden and the Miller's Daughter Johanne* appeared in both Denmark and the United States in 1897 and was his most popular novel, eventually going to a third printing of 25,000 in 1911. It is the melodramatic story of a young immigrant who leaves his native Denmark to wander from New York to the Colorado Rockies, ultimately settling down in western Iowa after being reunited with his childhood sweetheart. Østergaard’s third novel, *A Merchants House*, published in 1909, is the first of a trilogy that loosely traces members of the Krogh family. They have come to Omaha from Korsør because the father, a businessman, had been forced into bankruptcy due to a weakness for gambling. Their hope is that in the burgeoning business climate of Omaha, they will earn enough to pay off the debts in Denmark and redeem the family name. Torn between the various factions of the saloon and fraternal society crowd and the church congregation, the family struggles to retain its dignity and identity. Subsequent novels, *The Valley Dwellers* published in 1913 and *Danby Folk* in 1927, follow the children of this family as they move westward, settling north of Grand Island, Nebraska, in what are today Howard and Hamilton Counties. These two novels describe the founding of Danby or "Danetown," a town
modeled on the many Danish communities in the Midwest with which Østergaard was familiar: Dannebrog, Nysted, and Kronborg in Nebraska, Viborg in South Dakota, Ringsted in Iowa, and Tyler in southwestern Minnesota, the community to which Østergaard retired in 1916 and where he wrote his last novel. In the communal setting of Danby, Danes could maintain their Danish identity. By the end of the last novel, however, it is clear that this hope is but a dream. A few individuals will appreciate and preserve the cultural heritage of their parents and grandparents, but for most, the forces of assimilation are too powerful.

While the characters and events in Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* transcend the novel and even to some extent their Norwegian identity to become prototypes of the immigrant pioneer spirit and consequently accessible to a wider audience, Østergaard’s characters and their central plots do not. There are several reasons for this. First his narratives are thinly veiled references to historical events in the Danish-American community and are constructed around events with which Østergaard was familiar. Second, his characters are for the most part two-dimensional and drawn from Østergaard’s understanding of *folkelighed*, that a person’s identity is defined by his or her language, culture and faith, and hence to assimilate is to lose identity; consequently successful characters rediscover their “Danishness.” Finally, Østergaard believed that literature should provide clear a moral lesson.

Several examples will suffice to suggest the thin veil between fact and fiction in Østergaard’s novels and their two-dimensional and moralistic quality. The first comes from his most popular novel, *Anton Arden and the*...
Miller's Daughter Johanne. The climax of the plot occurs when Anton is involved in a shoot-out in Elk Horn Grove, just south of present day Elk Horn. The reason for the shoot-out is that two men have robbed a bank in Polk City (or Des Moines), committed murder and stolen horses. Arriving east of present Kimballton, they had stolen a horse from a Danish farmer. This together with the fact that the men have committed murder prompts the Danes in the area to form a posse and attempt to capture the culprits. They surround the outlaws in Elk Horn Grove where Anton discovers they are none other than the two men Amos Coffin and Bill Fox who had swindled him in New York and stolen from him in Colorado. In the ensuing shootout one of the outlaws is killed and Anton Arden is gravely wounded. As he lies on what the rest of the Danes fear is his deathbed and because they don't trust Yankee justice, they hatch a plan to break into the Shelby County Jail in Harlan and hang the surviving outlaw from the bridge over the Nishnabotna River. This they do. Anton does not die. Rather his childhood sweetheart whom he had left in Denmark and whom he thought had married the son of the local landowner appears. Her presence works miracles, he survives, they marry, and live happily ever after in Elk Horn, Iowa!
The historical events on which this narrative is based occurred on July 14, 1883, almost a year after Østergaard had left Iowa for Michigan, although he continued to own property in Elk Horn. The story was reported in the July 19th issue of the Shelby County Republican and documents a shootout in Elk Horn Grove, following a robbery and the murder of Postmaster C.L. Clinger of Polk City on the night of July 11th. The two who had allegedly committed the crime were surrounded and one was killed in the ensuing shootout. Mortally wounded was J.W. Maddy a prominent businessman from nearby Marne. Following Maddy’s death several hours later and despite the presence of sheriffs from Polk and Cass Counties who were taking the surviving outlaw into Harlan, the crowd became infuriated, overcame the sheriffs and hanged the surviving man from a bridge over Indian Creek between present day Elk Horn and Harlan.

_A Merchant’s House_, Østergaard’s third novel, is in many ways his most interesting novel for its treatment of ideas. This novel too is grounded in historical fact. Set in the early 1870s in Omaha, a major tension exists between Danish immigrants who gravitate towards the Danish Society, characterized by dancing, drinking and card playing, and those who are committed to founding a Danish Lutheran congregation in the growing city. All, however, read the local Danish newspaper, _The Pioneer_. _Den Danske Pioneer_ the oldest and widest circulated Danish American newspaper was founded in Omaha in 1872 by Mark Hansen, a veteran of both the Dano-Prussian War and the American Civil War. He was later in 1882 to found the Danish Brotherhood in America, which for many years was headquartered in Omaha. The editor of the paper in Østergaard’s novel is Mads Harboe (note the same initials), and the positions he outlines in major speeches in the novel echo positions taken by Sophus Nebbe who purchased the paper in 1887.

The main plot of _A Merchant’s House_ involves the only daughter of the Krogh family, Alma, who is a schoolteacher. She experiences this tension between the religious immigrants, one being her brother, Marius, who has pietistic tendencies, and the Danish Society where the Danish heritage is celebrated in singing and dancing. She is also drawn to a young reporter at _The Pioneer_ by the name of
Grønager. The awakening sexual feelings and the temptations that he inspires makes Alma the most interesting and realistic of Østergaard’s characters. At the end of the novel, she and the rest of the Danish community learn that there has been embezzling at the newspaper, and when Grønager disappears, it is clear that he is guilty of the crime. Devastated by this news and dissatisfied with teaching the many different immigrant children in the public schools she decides to go west and settle in a Danish community where she can hear the Danish language spoken and be surrounded by that culture that is familiar to her.

The character and story of Grønager is based on the story of Hans Møller, a printer from Holstebro who worked at the offices of *Den Danske Pioneer* during its first year of existence and who evidently was a real “ladies man.” Even before coming to the United States, he had run afoul of the law, stealing 1,100 rigsdalers and then disappearing from Denmark. In the winter of 1873, there was a devastating storm flood on the west coast of Denmark. The Omaha newspaper launched a fund drive from its subscribers to assist victims of the storm flood. Møller pocketed these funds as well, and then disappeared. Østergaard drew upon events such as this to suggest that the city could be a place of temptation and that it was safer to surround oneself with others of like identity and heritage in rural communities.²

The final example comes from Østergaard’s fourth novel, *The Valley Dwellers*. Set in central Nebraska, in this novel Alma Krogh comes to the Danish community she has been looking for and there finds a husband worthy of her. His name, August Fjelde; he is the son of a wealthy landowner in Denmark who finds Danish society too restrictive, too safe for his creative instincts. Furthermore, he wants to realize a life that he, himself, makes, rather than being the recipient of privilege due to his birth. His restless and enterprising nature leads him to convince the railroad to locate its line through the Danish community, thereby enhancing the town’s economic foundation. His crowning achievement, however, is that, faced with a problem of finding a crop that will do well during the dry years on the plains, he disappears for a time, only to return with alfalfa. Here is a man worthy of Alma Krogh.
August Fjelde's journey and discovery are based on the life of Niels Ebbesen Hansen. Born in Denmark in 1866, he was brought to Des Moines as a child and later attended Iowa State College in Ames, receiving his degree in horticulture in 1887. After several years of working at commercial nurseries in Iowa, he was appointed to the faculty at Iowa State. Later, he moved to South Dakota State College in Brookings since that position also allowed him to work at the Agricultural Experimental Station there. In 1894, he embarked on the first of what were to be eight extended journeys, to Europe, Russia, China, and Mongolia. Throughout his travels, he was particularly interested in identifying and bringing back to the Northern Great Plains drought-resistant and winter hardy forage plants. While traveling in Turkestan and Siberia in 1897, he discovered a drought-resistant alfalfa that thrived on the Northern Great Plains. Accounts of his journeys and discoveries were popularized by William Paul Kirkwood in *The Romantic Story of a Scientist*, published in 1908. Kirkwood described Hansen "as a thinker, as a man who made quick decisions and took prompt action, a man who is self-reliant and courageous, and as a man who is philanthropic, reverent and patient... (he) seeks to discover the underlying philosophy of things and is not afraid to break with tradition when they do not fit the facts." There is no better description of August Fjelde than this, suggesting that Hansen was the model for Østergaard's character.

Østergaard's technique of drawing upon historical events and characters has its genesis in his earliest major publications. On his return to Denmark in 1885, he was desperately in need of money. The hope of becoming a folk high school teacher proved challenging due to the fact that the conservative government then in power did not favor funding these institutions as they were seen as hotbeds of liberalism. Consequently, it was difficult to find a position, and when he finally did, founding the folk high school at Støvring in northern Jutland, there were so few students that he had to seek additional means of support. This came in the form of contracts to write biographies. Between 1885 and 1887, Østergaard completed biographies of Tecumseh (the great Native American chief), Oliver Cromwell, and George Washington. Since he had acquired English,
Østergaard’s method of research was to locate a good English biography and then loosely paraphrase the work in Danish. The title page of his Washington biography indicates that it was drawn from Edward Everett’s Life of Washington; his 1885 biography of Tecumseh only credits the fact that it was taken from Benjamin Drake’s 1855 biography in a footnote.

In his novels, Østergaard did not feel the same need to credit sources. A critical scene in A Merchant’s House occurs when the Danish community gathers for a Fourth of July picnic on the bluffs overlooking the Missouri River just north of Omaha. Hans Krogh, the oldest son who will gain success by marrying a banker’s daughter, is invited to tell a story. This he does, recounting stories he has heard of Chief Blackbird of the Omahas. Aside from several details that suggest Østergaard’s knowledge of Viking burial practices, a Romantic projection of cultural rituals, the story Hans tells is a direct translation from Washington Irving’s work Astoria. There are no footnotes crediting this source.9

Østergaard does convey elements of the immigrant experience in his novels, but his instinct to chronicle and to draw upon his experience to profess a belief system inhibits readers from participating in and discovering the deeper codes of cultural representation, transformation, and acculturation which is the mark of lasting artistic expression. Though his novels are important in documenting the Danish-American historical experience and can be appreciated as markers in the larger narrative of cultural exchange and assimilation occurring in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they do not achieve the universality that transcends the limited boundaries of the small immigrant group whose experiences they record.

Kristian Østergaard (1855-1931)
(Session handout prepared by John Mark Nielsen)

1855 (February 5) Born in Volstrup, North Jutland to Peder and Maren Østergaard.
1873 Attends Askov Folk High School.
1875-76 Teaches school in Ristinge, Langeland.
1876-77 Studies at Skovgaard High School north of Copenhagen.
1877 Completes his compulsory military service at Viborg in the north of Jutland.
1877-78 Returns to study at Askov Folk High School.
1878 Joins in founding Elk Horn Folk High School (Along with Olav Kirkeberg, the school’s founder, Østergaard is the other teacher. Askov Folk High School and the Danish-American Mission underwrite Østergaard’s position.)
1881 Marries Maren Kristine Svendsen, a young immigrant from Møen who was one of his students. This inspires much gossip in Elk Horn. They had six children.
1882 Participates in the founding of Ashland Folk High School in Ashland, Michigan.
1885 Returns to Denmark and founds Støvring Folk High School south of Ålborg.
1892 (March 13) Maren Kristine, Østergaard’s first wife dies. (April 12) Along with his six children and Kristine Hansen, a young woman and friend of his first wife, Østergaard sets out for the United States and the seminary at West Denmark, Wisconsin. In late August, he is assigned to the parish at Kronberg, near Marquette in Hamilton, County, Nebraska, and he marries Kristine Hansen.
1897 Serves parish in Ringsted, Iowa.
1906 Serves parish in Hetland, South Dakota.
1913 Serves parish in Sheffield, Illinois.
1916 Retires to Tyler, Minnesota.
1931 (October 9) Dies and is buried in Tyler, Minnesota.

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Biographies and Histories
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Danske Arbejdere i Amerika (Danish Workers in America), 1886
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Ariman’s Tjener, 1930 (dramatic poem)

Short Stories
Vesterlise, 1889
Blokhuset, 1892

Novels

Nybyggere (The Pioneers), 1891
Anton Arden og Møllerens Johanne (Anton Arden and the Miller’s Daughter Johanne), 1897
Et Købmandshus (A Merchant’s House), 1909
Dalboerne, (The Valley Dwellers), 1914
Danby Folk, 1927

Life Philosophy

Højere Menneskeliv, 1924

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2 In 1926 Kristian Østergaard wrote a forty-seven page, handwritten, autobiographical sketch entitled Gøde Minder (Pleasant Recollections). The original manuscript is part of the Østergaard collection at the Danish Immigrant Archive-Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa (File #: DIA-GVC O#2 [9B-1]). For a more comprehensive study in Danish including commentary on Østergaard’s fiction and poetry, see Evald Kristensen, Kristian Østergaard (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1955), 7-87. An overview in English of Kristian Østergaard’s life can be found in the critical introduction to John Mark Nielsen, Kristian Østergaard’s A Merchant’s House: A Novel of Danish Immigrant Life in Early Omaha, Nebraska (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Information Service, Order # 9004698), 1-114.


4 Kristian Østergaard’s concept of folkelighed was shaped by his exposure to the thought of Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) while attending Askov Folk High School in Denmark; Grundtvig’s thought informed Østergaard’s teaching at the folk high schools where he taught in Elk Horn, Iowa, Ashland, Michigan, and Støvrning, Denmark. For extensive discussions of Grundtvig’s ideas concerning religion and education, see Enok Mortensen, The Danish Lutheran Church in America (Philadelphia: Board of Publications, Lutheran Church in America, 1967) and Schools for Life: A Danish-American Experiment in Adult Education (Askov, Minnesota: The Danish American Heritage Society, 1977).

5 The events surrounding the shoot-out in Elk Horn Grove and the newspaper reports documenting the story can be found in Edward S. White, Past and Present in


The story that Hans tells about Blackbird and the Omahas is a close translation of various passages from Washington Irving’s *Astoria*. Østergaard chose, however, to leave out passages detailing how Blackbird came to power by using arsenic to poison his opponents since this did not fit the picture of the “noble savage” that Hans was describing in *A Merchant’s House*. For a carefully annotated edition of Irving’s *Astoria*, citing the likely sources Irving used in writing his work, see Washington Irving, *Astoria or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, ed. Edgeley W. Todd (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 161-165. According to Alice C. Fletcher and Frances La Flesche in *The Omaha Tribe*, Volume I (Washington, 1911; rpt. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 82-83, the account of Blackbird’s burial is an apocryphal story, recorded first in the journals of Lewis and Clark. For their account, see Elliott Coues, ed. *History of the Expedition under the Command of Lewis and Clark*, Volume 1 (New York, 1893; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1965), 71-72. While Østergaard makes use of Irving’s description of the burial, he embellishes it with the provisioning of the dead chief for his journey to the “happy hunting grounds” and a ceremony where Blackbird’s warriors place their painted handprints on the dead horse on which the chief is buried. These are details not found in other accounts.