

Nobel Prize in Literature 1944



Johannes Vilhelm Jensen

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1944 was awarded to Johannes V. Jensen "for the rare strength and fertility of his poetic imagination with which is combined an intellectual curiosity of wide scope and a bold, freshly creative style".

Among Johannes V. Jensen's prose works *Den lange rejse* (1908-22) [*The Long Journey*] stands foremost in popular estimation. The theme of this immense epic is man's development from the soulless and inarticulate herd-life when more than any other creature he was a prey to the forces of nature - to a state of primitive and gradually progressive civilization. The six long stories are full of adventures actuated, Jensen thinks, by obscure but profound nostalgia for the tropical world that was man's first home.

The first saga takes place somewhere in the primeval forests of Europe near a huge volcano. Fire glows on its summit and sometimes burning lava pours down the slopes, destroying everything in its path. For countless ages, primitive man has worshipped the fire-god in dumb terror. But at last comes the first great moment in the history of mankind: the emergence from the herd of a man with a mind and a will, a Prometheus.

Fearlessly confronting the unknown, he solves the riddle of fire and brings it down on a torch to serve man. With it he lights campfires to keep off wild beasts. But he does much more. Observing the movements of the stars he infers the notion of time, the first abstract idea won from the darkness of chaos. He also takes the first step toward civilized intercourse between individuals, discovering tenderness in sexual relations, the inaugural burgeoning of what we know as love. In the end he dies a prophet's death at the hands of the obtuse masses, but he bequeathes a rich legacy to posterity.

Thus ends the first saga. The next, with a second prehistoric patriarch, begins after another measureless lapse of time. The world has changed now, the volcano is extinct, the climate cooling. There is a general migration to the south. But one man sets off in the opposite direction to grapple with hardship. He is a sort of Cain, a slayer avoided by his fellow men, whom he holds in such contempt that he does not even condescend to take their god, fire, with him to the icy lands of the North. Defying the cold, he grows hardy and strong. With a woman who has somehow found her way up there he becomes the father of the Nordic race which is so dear to Jensen, who follows its destiny.

He rediscovers fire, not simply borrowing it as before but by a stroke of genius striking it out of two minerals. And thus he founds a new civilization.

The theme is repeated in a third saga with another genius who invents means of locomotion: wagons and boats driven by oar or sail. The men of the North, ready now to listen to the old call to the summer lands, begin the long journey proper.

The later sagas describing the journey take us down to historical times: we see the Cimbrians marching on Rome and the Vikings' raids. But the story does not end until Columbus realizes that dream of a tropical paradise which is the leading idea of the book.

Jensen's imaginative resources are rich and inexhaustible, his power of vivid presentation unfailing.

The whole book is like a series of huge decorative paintings in which characterization is less important than the range of composition and the incomparable skill of the brush strokes.

Characters of much greater psychological interest will be found in Jensen's tales from life in his native Himmerland, *Himmerlandshistorier* (1989-1910). Its inhabitants, descendants of the Cimbrians, have kept much of their ancestors' primitive savage energy, forced as they are to struggle hard for meagre reward in a country of heath and sand. They are men of action, rugged, swayed by strong passions. On intimate terms with tragedy, they bear it staunchly. They have their own mordant humour, too, and Jensen renders the tragic and the comic in the most congenial way. The art of these peasant tales is so consummate that they already rank as Danish classics.

The master hand is even more apparent in a later Himmerland story of very different flavour, a short novel called *Jørgine* (1926). This book shows us another facet of Jensen's remarkably versatile talent. It is a simple, quiet story: a deceived peasant girl saves herself from disaster and shame by an unromantic marriage and becomes a dutiful, hard-working wife and self-sacrificing mother. *Jørgine* is an excellent piece of work, deep in feeling, penetrating in its knowledge of life, wonderfully fresh and alert, and written with that virtuosity of style which is always at Jensen's command. Since *Jørgine* he has more than once turned his attention to similar placid lives, creating from them minor works of classic art.

For many years Jensen has collected very heterogeneous pieces of writing in volumes entitled *Myter* (1907-45) [Myths]. The whole series of these is so well known that the word «myth» has acquired in Danish the additional sense of a new literary genre. That sense is not easy to define. Sometimes it means that Jensen has left the everyday world to explore that realm of fantasy which is the domain he masters. This can happen even when he is telling his own experiences in the first person. Just as often he tells in a «myth», events and experiences which must be taken as factual, or he expounds, with utmost sincerity, his ideas and theories. His presentation then is of unique graphic clarity and verisimilitude.

Sometimes natural phenomena are described with such profound intuition and imaginative insight that the word «myth» can be understood in its ordinary sense. The common factor in all these diverse works is indeed only their brilliant and direct style. This

same style in Jensen's innumerable studies and manifestoes in popular science allows us to classify them as belles-lettres.

The exigencies of space prevent me from mentioning more than one of these works here. I choose *Vor oprindelse* (1941) [Our Origin] since it constitutes a sort of parallel and complement to the sagas in *Den lange rejse*. The book opens at the point in time when man himself, ceasing to be merely passive, begins to influence the forces of evolution.

In the introduction Jensen says important things about the blessings of work - a subject on which he is undoubtedly an authority, for he has been an indefatigable worker all his life.

This becomes evident in more ways than one in *Vor oprindelse*. He has re-enacted every one of the advances made by man in that long history he so brilliantly relates - from the mastery of fire and the making of the first weapons to the slowly perfected mastery of the crafts. It is a most impressive book, one of his best.

The Danes think as highly of his verse as of his prose. As a poet his major characteristic is an ever-deepening devotion to his native soil, expressed in quite varying tones. Sometimes he uses a revived old alliterative measure; sometimes modern «free verse» - but with the great improvement that rhythm is retained and syntax respected. Some of his poems are in regular verse, their pure melodies recalling the golden age of Danish poetry. In them Jensen rises to the zenith of his powers and reveals yet another aspect, new and surprising, of his art and his personality.

Primarily he directed all his love to the machine age. He seemed spellbound by the astonishing and ever more rapid march of science. The faster the pace, the greater his enchantment. Such an outlook has no use for old values. It flies high over the nations, has no thought for them. Its Utopia needs no flowering meadows to walk in, no infinite space for dreams.

Fortunately, Johannes V. Jensen's richly creative mind has taken frequent holidays from the marvels of the future to dwell instead on those inherited aesthetic and emotional values which are fundamental to the spirit of man.



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