Bang, Herman (1857–1912)

Olivia Gunn

Herman Joachim Bang was a Danish author, journalist, lecturer, and theater director. He was born on the island of Als, near the site of the Danish defeat by Prussian forces in 1864. In the introduction to his novel, *Tine* (1889), he cites as formative for his writing the experience of the war and the sound of the Danish troops’ retreat. This introduction also indicates that nostalgia and memory are key elements in Bang’s literary aesthetics and contains a definition of his own realism – frequently referred to as impressionism – as the depiction of life’s “Uro og Mangfoldighed” (“unrest and multiplicity”). In addition, Bang was deeply concerned with international politics and cosmopolitanism, both of which are frequent topics in his journalism. He spent a significant amount of time abroad, sometimes to escape homophobic persecution, and died in Ogden City, Utah while on a world lecture tour.

Bang’s first novel, *Haabløse Slægter* (*Hopeless Generations*) (1880), tells the story of the last son of an old and declining Danish family. This novel was banned in Denmark for sexually explicit scenes, setting the tone for Bang’s notoriety: the Danish press constantly caricatured him as a dandy or figure of degeneration. In stark contrast to his lively and contested public persona, Bang’s literary portraits often emphasize *Stille Eksistenser* (*Quiet Existences*). One of his best-known works, “Ved Vejen” (“By the Wayside,” also translated as *Katinka*), tells the story of a quiet housewife, her unconsummated love affair, and her barely-mourned death by tuberculosis. The opening scene of this novel exemplifies one element of Bang’s impressionist representation of life: conversation with many voices but without traditional novelistic framing.

One of Bang’s most important residences abroad took place in 1893-94 in Paris, where he worked as a cultural interpreter and stage director for the French symbolist director, Aurélien Lugné-Poë. Recruited by Count Prozor, Henrik Ibsen’s translator in France, Bang’s task was to tone down the highly stylized productions of Ibsen at the *Théâtre de l’Œuvre*. His stay in Paris was motivated in part by a scandalous murder that resulted in the persecution of suspected homosexuals in Copenhagen. Bang’s only text to address homosexuality explicitly, *Gedanken zum Sexualitätsproblem*, was written in German in 1909 and published posthumously. In this treatise, Bang defines homosexuality as “inversion” (a man’s body with a woman’s soul), as illness, and as a state or experience granting the individual privileged access to life as the ultimate aesthetic source.

## Complete Works:

*Værker i Mindeudgave*, 4 vols. (1912). Copenhagen: Gyldendalske boghandel.

# List of Works:

# Essays and Criticism

*Realisme og Realister* (1879)

*Masker og Mennesker* (1909)

*Gedanken zum Sexualitätsproblem* (1922)

## Novels

*Håbløse Slægter* (1880)

*Stuk* (1887)

*Ludvigsbakke* (1896)

*Mikaël* (1904)

*De uden Fædreland* (1906)

Short Stories

*Stille Eksistenser* (1886)

## Poetry

*Digte* (1889)

## Translation

*Tina* (1984). Translated by Paul Christophersen. London and Dover, N.H.: Athlone Press.

## Further Reading:

Bang, Herman (2007). *Dramaturgiske Pennetegninger: Herman Bang som teateressayist. En antologi*. Ed. Jürgensen K. A. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag.

Bjørby, P. (1986) “The Prison House of Sexuality: Homosexuality in Herman Bang Scholarship.” *Scandinavian Studies* 58.3 (1986): 223-255.

Greene-Gantzberg, V. (1997) *Biography of a Danish Literary Impressionist (1857-1912).* Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.

Shepherd-Barr, K. (1996) “‘Le grand metteur en scène’: Herman Bang in Paris, 1893-94.” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies/Etudes Scandinaves au Canada* 9. 73-90.

Sørensen, Peer E. (2009) *Vor tids temperament: Studier i Herman Bangs forfatterskab*. Denmark: Gyldendal.

Internet Resources:

Entry for Herman Bang on Arkiv for Danks Literatur (includes writings by Bang and biographical information): <http://adl.dk/adl_pub/forfatter/e_forfatter/e_forfatter.xsql?ff_id=1&nnoc=adl_pub>

Entry for Herman Bang on Kaliope (includes writings by Bang and biographical information): <http://www.kalliope.org/en/ffront.cgi?fhandle=bang>

Entry for Herman Bang on the official site of Denmark: <http://denmark.dk/en/meet-the-danes/great-danes/writers/herman-bang/>