**Sørensen, Villy (1929-2001)**



Villy Sørensen was one of the most prominent intellectual figures of twentieth-century Denmark. His work spanned social commentary, philosophy and literature. He was a sophisticated literary critic, author of tales based on Norse and Greek mythology, and an outstanding translator of Latin and German literature, particularly of modernist writers of the German-language tradition such as Franz Kafka and Hermann Broch. His fiction comprises only a small part of his oeuvre. Most notable here are the early tales *Sære historier* (1953) and *Ufarlige historier* (*Harmless Tales*) (1955), as well as the later collections of short prose, *Formynderfortællinger* (*Tutelary Tales*) (1964). The remainder of the oeuvre consists in philosophical and cultural treatises, and literary criticism such as *Digtere og dæmoner* (1959). In this latter work, Sørensen, who was especially oriented towards German letters, provides in-depth perspectives on such modernist writers as Franz Kafka, Hermann Broch and Thomas Mann. To the philosophy of culture belongs *Seneca – humanisten ved Neros hof* (*Seneca: The Humanist at the Court of Nero*) (1976), in which Sørensen’s impressive scholarship and overview are displayed to the full. Moreover, his body of work includes a number of renderings, collections of lectures, speeches and essays, and newspaper commentaries.

Villy Sørensen was born on 13 January 1929 and grew up in the Copenhagen suburb of Valby. In 1947 he suffered psychological breakdown, most likely on account of unrequited love, compounded by his sensitive nature. Following his secondary education he read philosophy at the University of Copenhagen and spent a period as an exchange student in Freiburg. He never found his feet within the philosophical establishment and abandoned formal study in order to devote himself to his own poetry and thinking. He suffered from severe back pain during long periods of his life. In 1974, Sørensen received the Nordic Council Literature Prize for his book of essays *Uden mål – og med: Moralske tanker* (1973). He was a repeated candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Sørensen died on 16 December 2001.

Despite his unassuming nature, Villy Sørensen created a furore with *Oprør fra midten* (*Revolt from the Center*) (1978), a critical treatise in defence of a Third Way reconciling liberalist and communist ideologies. While Sørensen’s subject matter was often demanding, his books achieved widespread public appeal, not least by virtue of the author’s lucid pen and an unsurpassed ability to make accessible even the most complicated of ideas.

**Chronology of Selected Works**

Short Stories

*Sære historier* (1953)

*Ufarlige historier* (1955)

*Formynderfortællinger* (1964)

Essays on Literature and Philosophy

*Digtere og dæmoner* (1959)

*Schopenhauer* (1969)

*Seneca* – *humanisten ved Neros hof* (1976)

Political-philosophical Essays and other Prose

*Uden mål – og med*. *Moralske tanker* (1973)

*Oprør fra midten*  (1978)

English Translations

*Revolt from the Center*, translated by Christine Hauch. Boston and London: M. Boyars(1981)

*Seneca*: *The Humanist at the Court of Nero*, translated by W. Glynn Jones. Edinburgh: Canongate(1984)

*Tutelary Tales*, translated by Paula Hostrup-Jessen. Lincoln: Nebraska University Press (1988)

*Downfall of the Gods*, translated by Paula Hostrup-Jessen. Lincoln: Nebraska University Press(1989)

*Another Metamorphosis and Other Fictions*, translated by Tiina Nunnally and Steve Murray. Seattle: Fjord Press(1990)

*Harmless Tales*, translated by Paula Hostrup-Jessen. Norwich: Norvik Press(1991)

*Four Biblical Tales*, translated by Paula Hostrup-Jessen, edited by Sven H. Rossel. Seattle: Mermaid Press(1991)

**Internet Resources**

Entry for Sørensen on Forfatterweb: http://www.forfatterweb.dk/forfatterweb/oversigt/sorensen-villy

**Further Reading**

Haarder, J. (2000), ‘Skitse til genlæsning af et forfatterskab’, *Kritik*, vol 143: 1-9

Haarder, J. (2001), ‘Villy Sørensen’, Mai, A.-M. (ed.) *Danske digtere i det 20. årh*, vol 2: 139-155

Støvring, K. (2006) *Det etiske kunstværk*. *Villy Sørensens poetik og litterære kritik*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal og Syddansk Universitetsforlag (a clear and highly comprehensive treatment of Sørensen’s poetics and literary criticism)

Støvring, K. (2011) *Villy Sørensen og kulturkonservatismen*, Copenhagen: Informations Forlag (a provocative account challenging the accepted view of Sørensen as a centre-seeking intellectual of the left and aligning the oeuvre with cultural conservatism)

Øhrgaard, P. et. al. (ed.), *Med Villy i midten*. *28 vidnesbyrd om Villy Sørensen*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal