

THE NORDIC MIRROR — SOME NOTES ON  
HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON AND THE RECEPTION  
OF NIELS LYHNE

The novel, *Niels Lyhne*, by Jens Peter Jacobsen, is accorded a high place as a modelling influence on the work of Henry Handel Richardson. It is reported that Richardson translated the novel from a German version, assisted by the Danish original and a dictionary.<sup>1</sup> Her translation was published, with an introduction by Edmund Gosse, in London, 1896. Dorothy Green, in her long study of Richardson, *Ulysses Bound*, devotes considerable space to Jacobsen and his work as a major influence on Richardson's writing. She declares Richardson to be the "literary disciple" of Jacobsen, who had "set out to fuse physiology, psychology and metaphysics in a romantic novel".<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, we know that Henry Handel Richardson was deeply interested, not only in Jacobsen in particular, but in Scandinavian and German literature more generally. She had gone to Leipzig, had married in 1895 and lived in Germany, in Munich and Strasbourg, for six or seven years, all this time becoming more and more familiar with Germanic literature. Her husband of course was Professor J.G. Robertson, the author of a text on German literary history, which through numerous reprintings and editions is still a standard work at this present day. Dorothy Green observes that "As far as the philosophic content of Richardson's novels is concerned, it is this Germanic strain in her work which is of primary importance, together with the influence of Jacobsen."<sup>3</sup>

Henry Handel Richardson wrote an article on Jacobsen, published in the journal *Cosmopolis*, in 1897 (reprinted in *Southerly* (Sydney) No. 1, 1963). However, it is stated that she did not begin her study of Danish properly until 1911; her knowledge of Jacobsen was gained substantially through German-language publications.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of Jacobsen's work, and of the German setting as the locus of its reception and influence on Henry Handel Richardson's work, is beyond doubt. However, the nature of this setting, of the reception of Jacobsen's work in Germany, and of critical understanding there of Jacobsen's work, all necessary to comprehend Richardson's situation at the time, have by no means been adequately dealt with; the material so far available in the Australian critical literature is very limited in terms of actual continental reference. The notes supplied here are an attempt to partly rectify this deficiency.

Firstly, some biographic particulars.<sup>5</sup> Jens Peter Jacobsen was born on 7th April, 1847, in Thisted (North Jutland). His father, Chresten Jacobsen, was a merchant and shipowner (1813—1897). His mother:

Bente Marie, *nee* Hundahl (1815–1898). His first schooling began at Thisted in 1851; in 1856 he was in the "Realschule" and was described as amongst "the worst students". In 1862, he made his first poetical and dramatic attempts. He studied Latin and Greek, in 1862/3, in preparation for the "Gymnasium"; he was confirmed at this time, and, according to his own statement, was reading Holberg, Wessel, Oehlenschlaeger, Ingemann and Heiburg.

In 1864, Jacobsen (again from his own statement) was reading Goethe, Schiller, Wieland. In 1866, he was occupied with Shakespeare; his schoolmates referred to his "lack of persistence", "overriding pre-occupation with botany"; he wrote essays on "Mannerism"; he failed his leaving examination. In 1867, he repeated the examination, and passed; he went to the University of Copenhagen (never completed the final examination); according to his own statements, he was reading at this time Poe, Kierkegaard, Schack Staffeldt, Ludwig Feuerbach, Heine, H.C. Andersen, Dickens, Byron, Tennyson, Sainte-Beuve, Taine, the Nibelungenlied, the Kalevala, the Bible, the Edda, the Sagas (old Norse), and folk-literature of various countries. In 1868, he decided for natural science, although he was also much interested in "Poesie"; in September, he submitted a collection of poetry, "Hervert Sperring", to the publisher Gyldendal, which was rejected.

In 1869, a short prose piece was submitted to the magazine *Illustreret Tidende* and was rejected; he was present at a science-congress in Copenhagen, where Charles Darwin was part of the program. In the years 1870–73, he was engaged on botanical work, was writing popular scientific articles, published in *Nytdansk Maanedsskrift*, and was at the same time reading Swinburne again. In 1872, he was a co-founder of a literary society, together with Georg Brandes, Holger Drachmann, Vilhelm Moeller, and others; his novella "Mogens" was published in the *Nyt dansk Maanedsskrift*; also there appeared a Danish translation of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, instituted by Jacobsen. In 1872/73, he began work on the novel *Fru Marie Grubbe*. In 1873, he went on his first extensive foreign journey: Copenhagen, Lubeck, Berlin, Dresden (travelling from there with Edvard and Georg Brandes), Prague, Vienna, Salzburg, Berchtesgaden, Munich, Brixlegg, Innsbruck (leaving Georg Brandes here), Trient, Gardasee, Brescia, Verona (violent, passing illness), Bologna, Ravenna, Pavena, Florence (burst blood-vessel, causing return), Munich, Nuremberg, Cassel, Hamburg, Thisted.

Towards the end of 1874, Jacobsen wrote the first eight pages of *Niels Lyhne*. In 1874/5, there appeared a Danish translation of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, again instituted by Jacobsen. He was also writing shorter pieces at the time; the first two chapters of his novel *Fru Marie Grubbe* were published in the monthly magazine *Det nittende Aarhundrede*. The finished *Fru Marie Grubbe* was published in book form on 15th December, 1876; the first edition of 1250 copies was sold out on 24th December.

In January–September, 1877, Jacobsen resumed work on *Niels Lyhne*, but this was broken off by travels for the sake of his health, to

Montreux, via Hamburg, Cassel, Marburg, Heidelberg, Basel, Vevey. At Montreux, between October, 1877 – May, 1878, he completed chapters II and III of *Niels Lyhne*; he also made acquaintance with the Russian baroness Anna Buchholz; returned to Thisted, May, 1878, via Berne, Strasbourg, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Aalborg. At Thisted again, he finished chapters IV and V of *Niels Lyhne*, sending parts of the manuscript to the publisher. His health worsened, violent bleeding occurred; then, supported by a public stipend, he made his third extensive foreign journey, this time to Rome, staying in Cologne, Mainz, Lyon, Avignon, Marseille, Nice, Pisa. In Rome, October, 1878 – June, 1879, he associated with Ibsen, had his portrait painted by Ernst Josephson, made studies for a projected novel on Cola di Rienzi, and planned to bring out a collection of his poems. His health improved, and he travelled to Capri, Pompeii, Naples, but his health then seriously deteriorated; in June he returned to Thisted, via Florence, Munich, Leipzig, Hamburg. In Thisted, he lived in the ground-floor of his parents' house, together with his brother, and his health rapidly improved; work on *Niels Lyhne* was resumed.

In 1880, *Niels Lyhne* was published in book form, on 9th December. From June, 1881, to July, 1884, Jacobsen was in Copenhagen, working on a variety of prose-writings and poems, essentially shorter works and fragments. In 1884, he returned for the last time to Thisted, where he was too weak to leave the house; he died on 30th April, was buried on 6th May, in the family grave at Thisted.

In more detail, Jacobsen himself gives the composition of *Niels Lyhne* at various places, in tabular form, as follows (the pagination follows the original Danish edition):

“Pages 1 – 8	written at Studiestraede 18, 2nd floor, 1874
Pages 9 – 16	(2nd half of Chap. I) Thisted, 1877
Pages 17 – 64	(Chap. II – III) Montreux, Nov. 1877 – May 1878
Pages 65 – 97	(Chap. IV – V, start of Ch. VI) Thisted, June – Sept, 1878
Pages 98 – 107	(Remainder of Ch. VI, start of Ch. VII) Rome, Nov. 1878 – Apr. 1879
Pages 108 – 148	(Remainder of Ch. VII, Ch. VIII) Thisted July – Dec 1879
Pages 149 – 324	(Chap. IX – XIV) Thisted 1880 (p.222, at start of Chap. XI – conclusion, Oct. Nov. 1880).”

According to Georg Brandes, Jens Peter Jacobsen, during his lifetime, remained unknown outside of his own country; his great fame was reaped after his death.<sup>6</sup> The first German translations (made by Adolf Strodtmann) in 1877/78 of the novellas *Mogens* and *Et Skud i Taagen*, as well as *Fru Marie Grubbe*, appeared to have little interest at first for a German

public. But by the 90's, at the latest, there was a Jacobsen-"fashion" in the German-language area. In the flood of publications about Jacobsen that ensued, one finds a basically ambivalent attitude to the Danish writer, which, according to Naegele,<sup>7</sup> is to be explained from a certain journalistic compulsion, stemming from the political situation at the time. Namely, the implications of the founding of the German Reich were such that there was an increased demand for matter pointing to the common racial roots of the "Germanic" peoples, including the Scandinavian peoples. Observers refer to a "blurred mixture of feelings of blood-kinship, and fanciful ignorance of real Scandinavian conditions" as leading, in Germany to an "ideal picture of the North, which appears as a fulfillment of the Germans' own national and racial wishful dreams".

Whereas the three countries, Sweden, Norway and Denmark were in fact sharply divergent from one another, the German popular national daydream and romantic ignorance of real circumstances fused these Scandinavian countries into a unity of pure Germanness. This progressive "Aufordnung", celebration of things Nordic, found its culmination in the 90's, in which an immense number of imitations of presumably Scandinavian art are to be found, including names, literary and non-literary; in Berlin, for example, there was a fashion for children's names such as Nora, Niels, Arne. Artists' names with a Scandinavian ring to them were taken in the German Reich as a guarantee of quality. Kaiser Wilhelm II was an exponent of the cult of Germanness. A political "Anschluss" of Denmark onto "Lower Germany" was even proposed.<sup>8</sup>

In the 90's, Jacobsen moved more and more into the purview of journalists who were avidly scanning the North for the latest literary sensations. In 1890, an article by Ola Hansson, in *Nord und Sued*,<sup>9</sup> titled "Der Dichter der Sehnsucht. Eine Studie über J.P. Jacobsen" started a chain of rather slanted journalistic depictions that carried on into the 30's of this century. These articles alluded to the Hamlet-character of the Dane, of the Northerner, whose characteristics were such as to be found described in the fifth book of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, namely "fluctuating melancholy" and "indecision of action".

*Niels Lyhne* first appeared in German in the volume *Grenzboten*, in 1888; in book form in 1889. The translator was Marie van Borch; a biographical introduction was provided by Theodor Wolff, chief editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt*; the publication being in Reclam's Universalbibliothek, Leipzig, the first popular paperback series in the world. Other translations were by Mathilde Mann (1895), Marie Herzfeld (1898), Margarethe Langfold (1905), and many others appeared later. The 1911 translation by Anka Mann is illustrated by Heinrich Vogeler, of the Worp-swede colony, where Rilke lived for a time; this volume is widely available in German bookshops at the present day (Insel Taschenbuch No. 44). From a comparison of dates, it appears that the copy of *Niels Lyhne* that J.G. Robertson is reported to have sent his future wife during their engagement was the Reclam edition. Henry Handel Richardson wrote "This book stirred me as few books have ever done, either before or since . . .".<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Theodor Wolff's introduction to the Reclam edition was obviously the stimulus to the important essay by Ola Hansson, mentioned

above, as also to Franz Servaes' article<sup>11</sup> on Jacobsen in the journal *Die Nation*; and various other articles soon appeared. Richardson's essay on Jacobsen appeared in 1897, her translation of the book itself in 1896. Theodor Wolff described Jacobsen as a "modern, scientific romantic", then six years later (1895) as a "realistic romantic". Otto Stoessl, 1896, described Jacobsen as "rooted in romanticism".<sup>12</sup> Later, S. Lublinski, 1900, wrote of *Niels Lyhne* as a "highly important model" for a "refined naturalistic novel", which, with its religious questioning, formed the threshold to a new romanticism;<sup>13</sup> he speaks of an "atmospheric art of Milieu", and of a dialectic relationship to naturalism.

The critics write of "convergences" between Jacobsen and the early Hugo von Hofmannsthal, as well as with Hauptmann's novel "*Einhart der Lachler*" (1907). Richard Dehmel's enthusiasm for Jacobsen is shown in a letter (1892) to Detlev von Liliencron. Max Dauthendey asserts that Jacobsen influenced not only himself in his first prose efforts, but also a whole series of authors of the 90's, a large number of them being representatives of literary "Jugendstil" (Art Nouveau). *Niels Lyhne*, says Dauthendey, was "the story of creation of a new art of depiction". Stefan Zweig<sup>15</sup> witnesses to the youthful enthusiasm of his generation for *Niels Lyhne*. Painters, such as Klinger, Liebermann, Herbst, Kubin, Corinth, Hofmann, Vogeler, Schlittgen, Mayer, were variously enthused of Jacobsen's work. Apart from the well-known interest of Jacobsen for Rainer Maria Rilke, Stefan George, the early Thomas Mann and Arthur Schnitzler, there is a wealth of other material testifying to the widespread influence of Jacobsen's work in German-speaking countries. Henry Handel Richardson may have had "a shock of recognition, as though she had suddenly seen her own life in a mirror" provided by *Niels Lyhne*, but she was far from alone in her response, in Germany.<sup>16</sup>

The critic F.J. Billeskov Jansen,<sup>17</sup> has said that in the general history of Jacobsen's influence three phases can be discerned: in the first phase, the "stylistic components" are decisive; in the second, it is the "ideas"; in the third, it is "Jacobsen's psychological wisdom". Dorothy Green says of Henry Handel Richardson that "It is Jacobsen's thinking, the experiences of his character, which leave such strong traces in her work, not his style".<sup>18</sup> This statement would appear to place Richardson in the second phase of Jacobsen's influence, despite the fact that the essay Richardson wrote on Jacobsen is greatly appreciative of the plasticity of Jacobsen's style, of what Jansen has called the "malende" (painterly) adjective of a literary impressionism.

The "ideas" of Jacobsen, here restricting ourselves to *Niels Lyhne*, though not forgetting that his other works were also influential, have received notice in a very extensive critical literature. In terms of reactions of the time, we note that the journal *Faedrelandet*<sup>19</sup> (3.2.81) categorised *Niels Lyhne* as the bungling work of an otherwise gifted person in the service of a literary Left. Two strongly right-wing papers, the *Dagbladet* (19.12.80) and the *Berlingske Tidende*<sup>20</sup> (20.12.80) however showed goodwill. An anonymous letter sent to Jacobsen characterised *Niels Lyhne* as an acute danger to public morals. Georg Brandes (letter of 18.12.80), to Edvard Brandes) praised the style as unsurpassed but missed

an adequate historical background and factual basis, and censured the "abstract" inner world; later, in an important review, Brandes regretted the priority of the "purely human content" over the historical implications (*Morgenbladet*, 9.2.1881).<sup>21</sup> The disappointment of the Brandes brothers over lack of agitatory fervour in *Niels Lyhne* is clear. Elsewhere we find other critics of the time using terms such as "dream-world", "longing", "escapism", "lyrical imagery", "life-commentary", "expression of modernity", "atheism", "individualism", "decadence", "resignation", and "passivity". In *Niels Lyhne* it was said that the "religious problem" was thrown up and discussed. *Niels Lyhne* was also described as the first "problem-novel", untendentious in character, as it was also a "psychological novel"; both of these designations implying an underlying "defeat" at the heart of the work.

Later critics have distinguished three motives in *Niels Lyhne*, "religious truthfulness", "the tension between fiction and reality", and "erotic implications". The novel has been seen as the compensatory manifestation in dreams of the frustration of the small nation of Denmark, as an "apotheosis of the Danish psyche". Its poetic driving force is "erotic tension". The bi-sexuality of Niels Lyhne himself is said to be the key to the novel. It is the book of a "vain struggle for a viable foundation to life, for personality", the "story of an amateur genius".<sup>22</sup> It is a "station-novel", that is it marks the way of "differentiated, sensitive illumination and generalising of a psychic process"; it is a "human document". It is a "struggle for one's own individuality", above all for "one's own death". It is a "textbook of the new romanticism", the work of a "romantic naturalist". *Niels Lyhne* it is said can be regarded as two separate stories, on the one hand that of Niels' relationship to Eric as "the plaything of an impetuous sexuality", and on the other, that of the erotically frustrated Niels; both of these treatments being contrastively related to each other, chiefly via the figure of a woman (Fennimore) loved in common.<sup>23</sup>

Some of these critical views of the novel appeared after Henry Handel Richardson's Jacobsen essay (sent off to *Cosmopolis*, on 20th July, 1897)<sup>24</sup> and after her *Niels Lyhne* translation (pub. 1896). However, the wave of what Theodor Fontane called "Norwegerei", including enthusiasm for Jacobsen's work, was in full flood at this time. Indeed, during the course of working on her novels, this wave continued; and though it petered out in a huge number of second and third class literary products, the standing of Jacobsen remained such that Thomas Mann, for example, could declare in 1930, and again in 1937, that Jacobsen had been his early master. A modern commentator writing in the latest Insel edition<sup>25</sup> of *Niels Lyhne* states that the indecisiveness of Niels in the "existential order" is accompanied by a wealth of differentiation in narrative style, and that it is precisely this mastery by Jacobsen, of the art of transition, that distinguishes him from all other authors; that it is not so much Jacobsen's theme of atheism, influenced by Darwin, Renan, Strauss, but the magic of his differentiation, from ecstasy to extinction, that makes this chief work of "decadence", just as fascinating today as eighty years ago. Henry Handel Richardson was clearly far from alone in the early choice of "her master Jacobsen"<sup>26</sup> nor was she later lacking distinguished literary company in Europe for her high regard of *Niels Lyhne*, the novel that was "a permanent source of inspiration to her".<sup>27</sup>

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#### NOTES:

1. Dorothy Green: *Ulysses Bound*. Henry Handel Richardson and her fiction. Canberra, 1973, p.51.
2. p.4.
3. p.25.
4. p.544.
5. Niels Barfoed (ed.): *Omkring Niels Lyhne*, Copenhagen, 1970 (includes contributions in German, Danish and English).  
*also*, Horst Naegele: *J.P. Jacobsen*. Stuttgart, 1973 (includes bibliographies).
6. Georg Brandes: Nordisches und deutsches Geistesleben, in *Deutsch-Nordisches Jahrbuch*, 1927, p.57.
7. Naegele, pp.51-2.
8. I. Guenther: *Die Einwirkung des skandinavischen Romans auf den deutschen Naturalismus*, 1934, pp.13ff.
9. *Nord und Sued*, vol. 55 (1890), pp.218-237.
10. Green, p.51.
11. Franz Servaes: Jens Peter Jacobsen, in *Die Nation*, 9. Jahrgang (1891-2) pp.293-5.
12. Otto Stoessl, in: *Magazin fuer die Literatur des In- und Auslandes* 65, 1896, pp.812-8.
13. S. Lublinski: *Literatur und Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert*, 2. Auflage (Neudeutschland), 1900.
14. cf. Dorothy Green's reference to Dehmel, pp.189-90.
15. Stefan Zweig, in his postscript to: J.P. Jacobsen, *Niels Lyhne*, 1967 (first published 1925). Zweig also speaks of Niels Lyhne as the 'Werther' of his generation and states that the whole of the creative literature produced at the turn of the century fell under the "magic of the North".
16. Green, p.54.

17. F.J. Billeskov Jansen: *Dansk Daad*, Copenhagen, 1943, Vol 3, pp.168ff.
18. Green, p.478.
19. Reprinted in Barfoed, pp.83ff.
20. Reprinted in Barfoed, pp.47ff.
21. Reprinted in Barfoed, pp.93ff.
22. Walter Rehm: *Gontscharow und Jacobsen oder Langeweile und Schwermut*, Goettingen, 1963.
23. S.H. Rossel: *Skandinavische Literatur 1870–1970*, Stuttgart, 1973.
24. Green, p.544.
25. Fritz Paul, in *Niels Lyhne*, Insel Taschenbuch No. 44, Frankfurt a.M., 1973, p.291.
26. Green, p.478.
27. p.62.