

# The Danish Tolstoy

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Henrik Pontoppidan rules over the province of Danish letters with a grey-bearded authority akin to Leo Tolstoy's or Henry James's. The author of three sweeping epics, *Det Fortjættede Land* (*The Promised Land*, 1891–1895), *Lykke-Per* (*A Fortunate Man*, 1898–1904), and *De Dødes Rige* (*The Kingdom of the Dead*, 1912–1916), he was awarded the 1917 Nobel Prize for Literature, an honor he shared with his exact contemporary, the now little-read

Karl Gjellerup. Ernst Bloch admired him, and Georg Lukács likened his novelistic achievement to Flaubert's. On the occasion of his seventieth birthday in 1927, Pontoppidan was lauded by Thomas Mann in an open letter to the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, describing him as “a full-blooded storyteller who scrutinizes our lives and society so intensely that he ranks within the highest class of European writers.” In August, a cinematic adaption of *Lykke-Per* by the Academy-Award winning director Billie August opened in Danish theaters.

And yet, Pontoppidan's writing has remained almost entirely unavailable to English-language readers. He has occasionally been invoked as proof of the Swedish Academy's penchant for giving Nobel Prizes to seemingly obscure minor writers (Adam Gopnik, writing in *The New Yorker*, once asked: “Who wouldn't rather be in the company of Proust, Auden, and Nabokov than of Erik Axel Karlfeldt and Henrik Pontoppidan?”), though it's probably safe to assume that such judgments are not based on any great familiarity with Pontoppidan's writing. *Lykke-Per*, his masterpiece, was not published in English until 2010 (in a translation by Naomi Liebowitz titled *Lucky-Per*), and only then in an academic edition costing a little over \$80. At long last, an affordable new translation by the Irish writer and filmmaker Paul Larkin, published by the Danish Museum Tusculanum Press and bearing the more English-friendly title *A*



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Copenhagen, Denmark, 1900

*Fortunate Man*, is now available. Though I do not always agree with Larkin's choices (in particular, regional dialects and Danish colloquialisms are often rendered in a rustic, sometimes archaic English, like something out of Thomas Hardy), it is on the whole an impressive, fluent achievement. It presents the first real opportunity for English-language readers to encounter what the scholar Flemming Behrendt, in his afterword, calls one of the most re-read and talked about novels in Danish literary history.

Published serially between 1898 and 1904, *A Fortunate Man* offers a vast, fictional panorama of Danish society in an age of social and industrial change and cultural renewal. It is set against the backdrop of a Copenhagen that, in the final decades of the nineteenth century, was transformed into a battleground of struggles between conservatives and progressives, Christians and atheists, the old and the new. The influential critic Georg Brandes gave a series of lectures on modern European literature, championing French naturalism and Darwinian freethinking, that inaugurated the prolific cultural and intellectual flowering known throughout Scandinavia as the Modern Breakthrough, encouraging writers like Ibsen, Strindberg, Hamsun, and Jacobsen. (Brandes appears in *A Fortunate Man* under the guise of the aesthete Dr. Nathan.) And while Denmark's defeat by Bismarck's Prussian troops in the war of 1864 had instilled a pervasive sense of national humiliation, the feeling that a new and better age was dawning was shared by many. The expansion of the railways, the building of new industries, and the city's growing working-class neighborhoods led Copenhagen's population to more than double between 1864 and 1896.

*A Fortunate Man* tells the story of Per Sidenius, the descendant of a long line of austere clergymen, who revolts against the dogmatic piety of his family home and embarks on the young man's familiar march on the metropolis, where he intends to seek fame and fortune as an engineer. His great ambition is to build a massive harbor project on Denmark's west coast that will, he fervently believes, "transform Denmark into an industrial manufacturing power of the first order." Neglecting his studies at the College of Engineering, Per spends his days and nights in his poky abode, reading up on hydraulics and turbines and making elaborate and detailed drawings.

But even stronger than his belief in the soundness of this project is Per's belief in his own purpose. Strong and handsome, ambitious and self-absorbed, Per ruthlessly schemes and plots to overcome his poor, provincial origins and

conquer the city's elites: "He knew that his destiny lay far beyond the realm of everyday concerns and mediocrity. He felt the blood of one who was born to rule coursing through his veins and nothing but a place at life's top table, in the company of the world's highest freeborn men, was good enough for him."

*A Fortunate Man* breathes the excited, tempestuous air of its time, but it often feels strikingly modern. What is Per if not an ancestor of the Silicon Valley positivists of our time? His zealous belief in man's ability to master nature is hardly distinct from the conviction, common enough among tech gurus today, that mortality is a disease with a cure like any other. And just as our contemporary tech-utopianism is a kind of ersatz religion, so Per's ambitions are often couched in a language with a distinct theological hangover. Walking through Copenhagen's streets early one morning, for instance, Per hears the factory horns blowing and stops to listen to them "with the air of a worshipper being called to prayer":

At first there was just a couple of blasts coming from the direction of Nørrebro, then one started in the docks at Christianshavn; eventually the sound was coming from everywhere—a cock crowing with a thousand voices, an Evangelium for a new age, which one day would drive away all the dark forces of spookery and superstition—never to return!

Per Sidenius's engineering ambitions are inextricable from his desire to rid himself of the poison of his religious past, and he can sometimes resemble Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who said that "man is something that must be overcome." (Indeed, Per's youthful battle cry is, "I will! Therefore it is done.") Believing man to be "the master of the earth and absolute ruler," he views Christianity as an unnatural inversion: "a grotesque kingdom of humpbacked underground trolls who shunned the bright light of life, where the poor were counted as blessed, the meek exalted and death was the only glorious salvation—an upside down land where small things were deemed to be big and the crooked declared to be straight." For Per, the Christian concepts of guilt, pity, and compassion are little more than a hoax designed to prevent man from reaching his full potential.

Like Jens Peter Jacobsen's influential novel *Niels Lyhne* (1880), which Pontoppidan would have read, *A Fortunate Man* is often intensely atheistic, and testifies to the oppressive influence of Christian fundamentalism on Danish

society. Pontoppidan read Nietzsche while at work on the novel and was surely inspired by the German philosopher's assault both on Christianity and the cult of rationalism. One of the novel's more memorable characters is the heretical pastor Fjaltring, whose medieval contempt for the liberalizing movement within Christianity is articulated in wonderful, rather belligerent monologues. Like Nietzsche, Fjaltring finds it difficult to reconcile the Old and the New Testaments, and even suggests that one is the travesty of the other. And like that other great religious scold, Søren Kierkegaard, he warns of the difficult passion true faith requires: "But if the man called Jesus was not the son of God, who then can guarantee that Our Lord did not in fact place him amongst us, and allow him to be tortured and suffer an ignominious death, so as to serve as a terrifying example of what true faith requires?"

It is a great credit to Pontoppidan's imaginative sympathy, though, that his depiction of religious conflict includes the Christian worldview but also that of a minority often targeted by Christians. As strange as it may sound, one of the few vibrant and complex portrayals of Jewish life in the nineteenth-century European novel happens to have been written by this son of a provincial Danish pastor.

When Per's ambitions are obstructed by his professors and other high-ranking engineers, all of whom dismiss the harbor project as a naïve and youthful fantasy, he finds an ally and supporter in Ivan Salomon, the son of a wealthy Jewish merchant family. It is Ivan who gives Per his nickname—"Hr. Lucky Per! The Fortunate Man personified indeed"—and who grants him entry into the Salomon household and the wider world of Copenhagen's Jewish bourgeoisie.

More importantly, it is through Ivan that Per meets Jakobe, one of the Salomon daughters, and the novel's sometime co-protagonist. Though less conventionally attractive than her flirtatious sister Nanny, Jakobe possesses a commanding intellect: she is prodigiously well read, widely traveled, and firmly independent. She is also, from a young age, painfully conscious of the degradation and injustice that Jews encounter everywhere from their Christian neighbors across Europe. In a striking passage, she recalls seeing on a trip to Germany a group of Jewish refugees at Berlin's main railway station, outcasts fleeing the pogroms in Russia:

All summer long, she had been reading newspaper reports about these

legions of refugees and the shameful acts which the mob had visited upon them—either to the indifference of the authorities or even with their outright collusion. The newspapers described how Jewish homes had been set alight with the families still inside; Jewish families had been robbed down to the very clothes they stood in; their women had been violated and abused; old Jews and children alike had been stoned to the point where gutters ran with blood.

The experience in Berlin, and the casual bigotry she finds wherever she goes, incites Jakobe's hatred of Christianity, which she regards as little more than "a pitiless executioner of her kinsfolk." In a wonderfully blasphemous letter to Per, Jakobe writes that she would only ever consider a rapprochement with Christian beliefs on the condition that the Church admits its guilt: "The Church must beg forgiveness for its sins. On its knees willing to suffer for the truth—the truth it has suppressed—for injustice, which it has blinded."

Generations of readers have celebrated Pontoppidan's moving portrayal of Jakobe, and it is not hard to see why. (I doubt many male novelists have deigned to write about their female characters's menstrual cycles: "Her natural functions had always been characterized by a marked irregularity.") Jakobe is the ideal foil for Per, to whom she is eventually (but only briefly) engaged. The vicissitudes of their difficult relationship provide the novel with some of its most memorable scenes: Per showing off his physical prowess by outrunning a horse carriage at the Salomon's country home, much to the dismay of his future in-laws; or the touchingly intimate days Jakobe and Per spend together hiking in the Alps, days that are like "a new baptism" for Per, who in his excitable, devil-may-care state fires a revolver at a wooden crucifix: "Here's a shot to herald the dawn of a new century!"

Jakobe's independence and quiet dignity provide a respite from Per's coarse manners and sense of entitlement, and the suspicion sometimes arises that she is the novel's true conscience, its better self. Even as their engagement is broken the narrative seems to expand rather than diverge; it is as if Pontoppidan was so affected by his own creation that, unlike Per, he could not bear to be without Jakobe, whom we never entirely lose sight of.

Still, it is Per Sidenius and his conflicted, beleaguered soul that Pontoppidan plumbs. A proper *Bildungsroman*, the novel parades its hero through a variety of

conflicting influences, from his dogmatic father to the progressive Dr. Nathan, the liberal-minded Pastor Blomberg, and the Nietzschean Fjaltring. Per senses early on a division within himself, an inability, as he puts it, “to be reconciled to a specifically defined life philosophy.” He undergoes a series of moral and religious crises throughout the novel, and even at one point rekindles his interrupted faith and marries the daughter of a provincial pastor, settling down far from the crowded Copenhagen of his youth. But even this quiet life in the country cannot calm Per’s restless soul:

As sure as day followed night, and then night came again; and just as if all life on earth was born out of this dialectic between the dark and the light, so too was religious life conditioned by this inexorable paradox that, with its conflicting forces, ensured that the soul was in constant flux. A Christian faith that was not continually renewed by doubt was a lifeless thing – nothing more than a broom handle, a crutch which might help a soul to forget its lameness for a while, but could never be a life-affirming construct.

A more didactic novelist might have viewed Per’s retreat as an opportunity to condemn modern society, with its teeming masses and blind, mechanical advances. Pontoppidan was indeed ambivalent about the triumph of modernity over tradition; as a young man, he had become known for his social-realist sketches of the plight of Denmark’s rural poor. But Pontoppidan neither reproves nor moralizes; like Chekhov, he knew the novelist’s duty was not to offer solutions but simply to ask the right questions. Per’s disillusionment with modern society is thus permitted to coexist with Jakobe’s cosmopolitanism. Late in the novel, Jakobe has again traveled to Berlin to visit a childhood friend, and there feels “like someone who had come home to her own kingdom.” She entertains no illusions about the perils of the modern metropolis, the dangers and risks associated with living in such dirty, crowded spaces, and yet she finds in it a beauty also:

A huge city containing millions like this possessed something of the magic of the ocean. There was something of the siren call of the rolling waves in this murderous existence, in this wild tumult, this incessant ascending and descending, which right to the moment of extinction continued to hold out the promise of new and limitless opportunities.

Pontoppidan is always of two minds about things, and it is for this reason that *A Fortunate Man*, while being one of the great novels about modernity, never once buckles under the weight of the ideas and currents it depicts. Pontoppidan is repeatedly drawn out into the abundance, the noisy pluralism of life, even as his hero travels deeper and deeper into the small privacy of his own being. The narrative's spaciousness, Pontoppidan's humane breadth and tolerance, remains deeply affecting throughout. As Thomas Mann put it in his birthday letter:

As a genuine conservative, [Pontoppidan] maintains the novel's grand style in a breathless age. As a genuine revolutionary, he sees in prose above all a scrutinizing power. With that charming, indeed captivating, stringency which is the secret of all art, he judges the times and then, as a true poet, points us towards a purer, more honorable way of being human.

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