

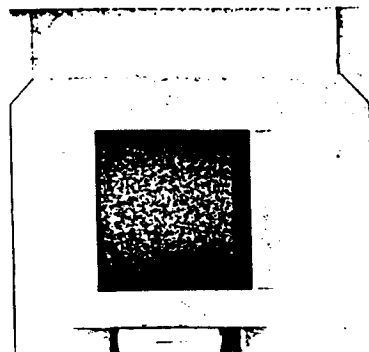
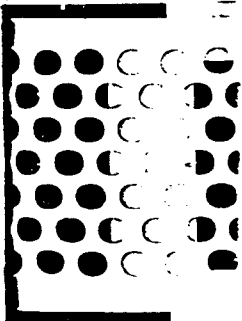
Thorkild Bjornvig. *The World Tree: Poems by Thorkild Bjornvig*. Ed. Sven H. Rossel. Trans. by Paula Hostrup-Jessen. Seattle: Mermaid Press, 1993. Pp. 64.

This current selection of Thorkild Bjornvig's (b. 1918) poems is a welcome addition to the somewhat meager corpus of recent Danish lyric poetry in translation. The title refers to the mythical world tree Yggdrasil—a tree which is the well-spring of life and knowledge yet under attack on all

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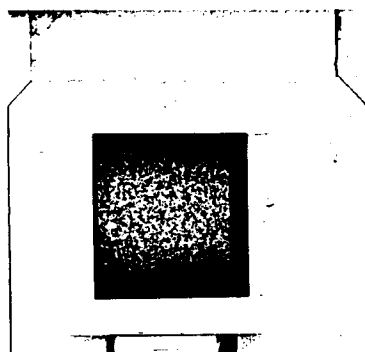
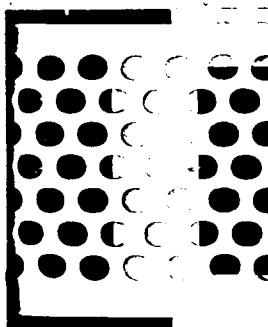
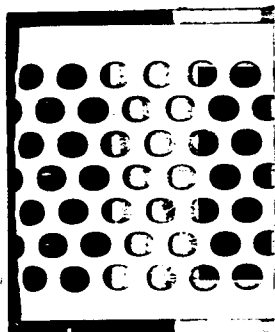


fronts—and signals the focus of the collection on Bjørnvig's nature and environmental poetry. As one reads through the collection, entrancing images of the Danish landscape (e.g.: "Western Skies") contrast with the rumbling sense of environmental destruction lurking just below the surface. Indeed, in the poem "The Trees in the City," a poem in which Bjørnvig mentions the ash Yggdrasil by name, he presents a startling view of the future in which "the wash of waves, the wind in the trees / become long ago sound on tape, / nature a picture on TV or a dream" (15).

The poems selected here, although centered around the theme of nature and the modern world's threat to the environment, also include other themes which are characteristic of Bjørnvig's poetry. Questions of love often intertwine themselves with Bjørnvig's nature imagery, as in "Pink fragrance in the dark," while more foreboding themes of aging and death echo his concern with the death of nature, as in "On Becoming Extinct." Bjørnvig's dry wit as well as his extraordinary descriptive abilities emerge in many of these poems and contribute to the portrait of a master lyricist presented in this collection.

In large part, one can attribute the success of the current collection to Hostrup-Jessen's excellent translations. Capturing the rhythm and mood of Bjørnvig's poetry is no easy task, yet Hostrup-Jessen rises admirably to the challenge. Certainly one could quibble with minor inaccuracies—one finds the occasional change in line order, or the sporadic shift in tense—but these are minor concerns. Indeed, a slavish adherence to the original text would undoubtedly detract from the beauty of the verse. Translating poetry—especially lyrical poetry characterized by an obsessive attention to detail, such as that of Bjørnvig—can be an excruciating exercise and, if not done with skill, can lead to unreadable text. Hostrup-Jessen, however, impressively sidesteps many of the common pitfalls associated with translating poetry and presents eminently readable verse that retains much of the rhythm and style of Bjørnvig's originals.

The only major complaint one can lodge against the collection is the surprising omission of selections from Bjørnvig's work from the 1960s. While Poul Houe, in the afterward, suggests that verse from *Vibrationer* (1966) and *Ravnen* (1968) are "convoluted," "redundant," and "less convincing," it is unclear exactly what he means. Since the collection is intended to introduce Bjørnvig's poetry to an English speaking audience, and since verse in the omitted works echo themes found in poems included in this current selection, there seems to be no justification for the omission. Indeed, Houe's remarks stand as the most problematic element of *The World Tree*. Although informative and well researched, his formulations are at times difficult to follow and often lead to confusion. That said, this collection of Bjørnvig's poetry is still well suited for use in the classroom



and complements nicely recent English language editions of work by Bjørnviig's contemporary, Klaus Rifbjerg (*War* 1995). With the recent surge in the popularity of Danish fiction (to wit, Høeg's *Smilla's Sense of Snow*), Hostrup-Jessen's translation of Bjørnviig comes at an opportune moment.

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