

# A Rest in the West. Translation of Modernity and Modernism in William Heinesen's „Grylen“

## *Týðing av moderniteti og modernismu í „Grylen“ eftir William Heinesen*

„After the gift, positing“ (Ricoeur 1967: 349)  
– Paul Ricoeur

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### Úrtak

Greinin viðger ‘týðingar’spurdómar í stutt-søguni „Grylen“ (1957) eftir William Heinesen. Søgan tekur støði í einum elligomlum føstulávintssíði í Føroyum – at ganga grýla – sum doyði út beint fyri seinna heimsbardaga. Í søguni hjá Williami verður grýlan til ein dionýsiskan figur kallaður Grylen, sum er ólýsandi og ímyndar orðloysi. Greinin vísir, hvussu meta-tilvitaða frásøgufólkið letur seg hugkveikja av hesum fyrbrigdi við áhaldandi at umringja tað við nýggjum myndum. Týdda grýlan verður greinað sum 1) eitt ontologiskt tulkingtonartilvitað frásøgufólk og sum 2) eitt eyðkenni við bókmentamentan í útjaðaranum. Stuttsøgan fær skap sum ein navngevingargongd av einari undantaksveru, og tað er við støði í hesum botnloysi, at frásøgufólkið tulkar og týðir grýluna til eitt listaligt útrykk. Grylen umboðar eina rest, sum dregur seg undan modernaðum manna-

gongdum. Við støði í hugsanum hjá Franco Moretti og Andreas Huyssen verður týðingin samstundis knýtt at landafrøðiliga útjaðaranum, sum skapar ein serligan tørv á týðing í royndini at minka um munin millum ‘miðdepil’ og ‘útjaðara’. Í hesum samteksti umboðar Grylen og oyggin Stapa eitt mentanarligt eftirliep, sum verður gjørt til eina styrki. Hetta ‘writing back’ brúkar føroyskan miðaldarsíð og fornaldarligt evni sum Dionysos til at seta spurning við hegemoniska(n) modernitet og modernismu og við hvat er miðdepil og hvat er útjaðari.

### Abstract

This analysis addresses the issue of translation in William Heinesen’s short story „Grylen“ (1957). It is a story of an old Dionysiac Faroese ritual, which died out around The Second World War. The narrator sets himself the task of transplanting this Dionysos into modern fiction. Due to the muteness of the Gryla the literary connection to the myth can only be established by virtue of interpretation as

demonstrated as an explicit mediation of the mythical silence. The muteness appear as a matter of interpretation while being encircled in conflicting images. Focus is partly given on the interpreted Gryla as a complex question of ontological interpretation and partly as an expression of cultural translation linked to aesthetic development in the geographical periphery. Due to the muteness of the Gryla, the whole story appears as a course of naming the nameless forces that work within Dunald, who is the one having the Gryla. Based on Franco Moretti's og Andreas Huyssen's notion of 'centre and periphery', the question of translation is connected to the Faroe Island as a non-metropolitan culture. Due to the cultural backlog in the periphery there is a special need for translations caused by the discrepancy between the trans-atlantic modernity and a minor culture as the Faroese still close to nature and the oral tradition. In response to the cultural backlog the dynamics of translation become a privileged perspective creating connections between modern and premodern aspects. The Faroese reaction represents an alternative modernity and an alternative (geo)modernism writing back to a rule-based hegemonic modernity an modernism in order to give an account of the encounter with another world, which evades direct contact and brings into question what is periphery and what is centre.

### Introduction

The Dano-Faroese writer William Heinesen (1900-91) has an explicit alternative approach to modernism and modernity. The whole of his writing can be seen as a way to position The Faroe Islands in the modern world as he grapples with old

realities in terms of magic and myth by grappling with modern realities in terms of the Western literary and philosophical tradition. The nerve in his writing is an heterogeneous strand of experience which communicates Faroese culture through hybridity and translation understood as a cross-cultural exchange. His ambition was to translate European cultural capital into Faroese cultural capital and thus to describe the Faroese road to modernity. His approach to modernism and modernity is a celebration of the encounter between centre and periphery and between different roads to modernity. The codeswitching in his works is a kind of oscillation and transformation creating a translocal state of mind. It is a rooted cosmopolitanism, i.e. a fertile span between the narrator's rootedness and cosmopolitan experiences. In his book on migration, Søren Frank says: „People are passing borders, but borders are also passing people“ (Frank, 2008: 2).

Due to the cultural backlog in the periphery there is a special need for translations caused by the discrepancy between the trans-atlantic modernity and a non-metropolitan society as The Faroe Islands is still close to nature and the oral tradition. Heinesen possesses not only modern experiences, but also an experience from an environment containing popular values which had not been interpreted from a literary view before and almost unaffected by technological development. Heinesen refers to previous centuries and pre-modern narratives, and thus gives priority to a reflection on the modern as a long-term historical structure. Modernity thus

is depicted not only as a break, but also as slowly evolving structures. The late entrance of modernity into the Faroe Islands makes it into a kind of ‘rest in the West’.

In a society without a strong and stable literary high culture, it has been decisive having a hybrid writer as Heinesen, who masters the dialogue of complex and comprehensive translation. David Damrosch underlines that „an excellent translation can be seen as an expansive transformation“ (Damrosch, 2009: 66). Because of his expansive translation between local culture and cosmopolitan perspectives, Heinesen among other writers has the role of a superstructure of literary Faroese culture bridging the gap between Europe and the Atlantic periphery.

The focus on the encounter between The Faroe Islands and the world outside is a purposive attempt to place the country and its culture in the modern world. It is a comprehensive project whose idea it is to map the contact zone between local Faroese material and Dano-European influence. As seen as a project of modernity these encounters have a double purpose: 1) to open The Faroe Islands towards the world outside and 2) to enlighten Europe and the rest of world about the mere existence of this island group in the middle of the North Atlantic somewhere (!) between Scotland and Iceland. The zones of overlapping between two completely different worlds develops to an intense translational activity between an atlantic peasant culture and European high culture.

### The Gryla

I have chosen to exemplify the Faroese

reaction to modernity with one of the probably best short stories by Heinesen entitled *Grylen* (1957) („The Night of the Gryla“). The short story is about an old Faroese ritual which died out around The Second World War. The main character, Young Dunald, „has“ the Gryla. The Gryla has been in Dunald’s family „through endless years“ (16). Dressed in the outfit of the Gryla, he looks like a Faroese Dionysos. Dionysos in the Greek mythology wears his three attributes: firstly a thyrsus-staff, which is a staff of giant fennel covered with ivy wines and leaves, secondly a kidskin and third an ivy garland. The Gryla is provided with a Faroese variant of Dionysos’ attributes, which is 1) the Great Peg corresponding to the thyrsus-staff 2) „tatters and rags“ (15) corresponding to the kidskin and a 3) head of an animal corresponding to the ivy garland. That’s also how this Faroese Dionysos really looked like (See p. 172 in Hansen, 2000).

The narrator sets himself the task of transplanting this Dionysus into modern fiction. But it is a most problematic transplantation or translation. The narrator’s problem of describing the Gryla characterizes the whole story, however this aspect is most obvious in the programmatic intro:

This is the story of the Gryla on the isle of Stapa, a strange creature that will not be easy to describe. Not by any means. For no one knows the Gryla except young Dunald, and his lips are sealed with seven seals. Even if he wanted to tell about it he would not be able to, for he is no man of words. His spirit has other ways of unfolding. His joy is that of the dancing calf, his sadness that of the moulting bird. His belief

in himself is matched only by that of the Great Mogul, but in the mute remorse and fear that follow upon his strange excesses, he is seized by an anguish known only to thieves and robbers on their way to the gallows. To put all this into words is nearly as rash as to read the thoughts of wild beasts. We can only hope to give a faint image of awesome and unspoken things (15).

The introduction describes the heartbeat in all dionysiac being swinging from the culmination of ecstasy to the deadness of reaction (cf. Andersen 1904: 115). However, the introduction is also a meta-reflection of the Gryla – an encounter between the world of the narrator and the Gryla as an imagination of otherness. The introduction thus calls attention to the fiction as a special operation in an area that is hard to access. Dunald is represented as the enigmatic confidential of the Gryla, while the narrator finds himself at such a great distance of the Gryla that he can only interpret her. However, the narrator and Dunald are linked together by means of their problematic relationship to the Gryla. For Dunald, the important thing is to manage to live with the pressure from the primitive force of the Gryla, and for the narrator the important thing is to try to solve the problem of transforming the monumental muteness of the Gryla and Dunald into words. The muteness itself is a foundational feature of the mystery of myth: „her spirit is described as „shrouded in mystery and rooted in the darkness of primeval night“ (16). About her inner being nothing is whatever known, and therefore she can only be described from without. The narrator's poetic access to

the Grýla comprises a parallel to Dunald's access to the Gryla, while he can only enter the Gryla's enclosure through the little door from the outside. The hard accessible Gryla can only experimentally be encircled in conflicting images. The Gryla appears as a matter of interpretation, to say as an old world continuing into the modern world as an echo with a still working appeal.

Due to the diversity and magnitude of the Gryla, the narrator has to translate her mysterious effect through a diversity of metaphors. When the narrator makes his attempts to encircle the special effect of Shrovetide compared with any other holiday in the year – Easter, Whitsun and Christmas – he has to paraphrase in order to mark the impossibility of explaining the Gryla. Shrovetide causes

a tiny but ominous loosening within the soul, a sweet seepage somewhere in the depths, frolic in the darkness during which a single finger is teasingly reached out to the Devil. Older men take a drop more than they need, so that even the meekest do a little boasting and even the most silent become talkative. Young people are bolder than usual, and temptation lurks in every nook and loft. Afterwards there is not only remorse but also relief, as always when compulsive deeds have been done. There is no understanding this – that something which in itself is unclean can bring about a cleansing – indeed, an uplifting. It is as when the cow consumes all the unclean matter from her newborn calf, making it clean and fresh by licking it with her enormous, rough tongue (18).

And the thoughts of Dunald:

are not clothed in fine word. They are age-old springs gushing up in his spirit. They are formless as dreams – as fire and water – as clouds or swirling streams in the sea [...] Strange, nameless and everlasting forces are at work within Dunald [...] Old and wordless songs of praise, deep and unfathomable, lurk in Dunald's soul. He cannot understand them, but their forces sing within him languidly like great, swirling waters under the new moon, now that he is at the height of his powers and is fulfilling his life's calling (21-22).

The short story alternates between these examples of an explaining narrator and lyrical exclamations like the following description of the Great Peg:

It can keep April frosts from harming the newborn lambs and from taking their toll of the sheep the way they did last year. It can soften the spring drought that often comes with the east winds and slows the sprouting, and it can hold back the autumn rains that turn the hay to slime and cut down the size of the herds. It will bless the seed in the soil and in the womb. It was made for luck and happiness, for the wonders and joys of creation in bed, in the stable, in nests and all the breeding-places of the sea and the cliffs. It exists to uphold life in all things (21-22)

The diversity of the Gryla is a reference to a ritual deeply rooted in the old agrarian world order, which is constantly being connected to a notion of a modern Gryla consisting of words and reflections. Describing the Gryla includes a link between notions on the modern and the pre-modern. „The Night of the Gryla“ re-

presents this contrast through references to time as being whether archaic or modern. During the culmination of the Gryla's last dance, the Great Peg is connected to a temporal otherness: „Rearing mightily the monster turns, like a bell of darkness with the clapper free and swinging, the rarest of sights, a revelation so amazing that the onlooker can do nothing but gape“ (23). Far more controlled Dunald, when visiting Isan after the ritual, listens to a fire „crackling in the stove, and the pendulum of the wall clock is moving back and forth with polite little clicks in the stillness“ (25). The world has become normal again. The clock unifies time, but also dis-embeds it by removing it from the local contexts. The time is a threat to the ritual because of its abstractions and because in itself it is at once empty and homogeneous. As Sven-Eric Liedman notes, the clock is a metaphor of modernity and industrialism: „The clock is the symbol of the modern time. The mechanical clock is the Western machine“ (Liedman, 1997: 59) and represents an equalizing wave of change: „the uneven pace of modernity suggests that standardization is not everywhere the rule. In many parts of the non-Western world, a very different ontology of time prevails“ (Dimock, 2006: 2). The different temporal aspects reveal a division running deep between not only the West and the rest, but also the West and the rest in the West.

However, the explicit mediation of muteness of the Gryla tells us that a great curve from the old world to the new world is in fact impossible. The „faint image“ of the great world of the Gryla points

towards the sharp self-consciousness in modern art. I quote Walter J. Ong:

All peculiarities of modern art can be summed up in this one feature of renouncing its own importance (Ong, 1977: 49).

The Gryla incarnates the impossibility to reach beyond binaries as form vs. meaning, subjective reality vs. external reality, proximity vs. distance, nature vs. culture. These contrasts represent at the same time an adaptation and an accept of hierarchal contrasts that structured the Western thought (Lütken 2007: 52). Due to the muteness of the Gryla, the whole story appears as a course of naming the nameless forces that work within Dunald accentuating the narrator's distance to the age-old world of the Gryla, but also his effort of approximation.

The binaries and the discourse of distance represent an inevitable condition of modernity in general and of modern literature in particular. The distance is impossible to lift or remove, but the fight against it creates a feeling of proximity by means of the surplus of images working as a substitution for the lack of access to the Gryla.

This doubleness of distance and will to transcend distance is contained in the expression „faint image“, which is the key-word in the introduction. „Faint image“ or in Danish 'Genbillede' comes from the German word 'Gegenbild'. *Wahrig Deutsches Wörterbuch* explains the word in the following way: „Zu einem Bild den Gegensatz darstellendes Bild, Gegenstück; zu einem Bild passendes Bild, ähnl. Bild“ (Wahrig, 1966: 1461). The word

'Genbillede' thus has two different meanings: 1) Firstly something which is not similar and 2) secondly something that matches. Both meanings are semantic active in the text, and set the scene for an aesthetic conflict. The narrator's renouncing of his own importance appears as a fabulating understatement. He acknowledges loss of similarity and thereby greatness too; however, he regains his composure focusing on the literary images of the world of the Gryla. The surplus of images derived from the faint image expresses that nothing can compensate for what has been lost, e.g. art and the reality of the Gryla will never match each other completely.

The faint image contains a doubleness corresponding to a simultaneity of the pre-modern and the modern. The pre-modernity of the Gryla reveals itself as a belief in magic forces, which can be formalized as a notion of likeness being the same as identity. The modernity of the Gryla is thought as distance and absence as seen as a foundational artistically condition. What is the purpose of the attempt bridging the gap between these incompatible worlds, we can ask? The faint image and the flood of images that follows in the wake of it has a modern mythical function. The fundamental meaning of myth is that of a resistance against time, which in the case of Heinesen's mythical influence becomes a negotiation with time and man's inevitable historical existence. T.S. Eliot describes myth as a way of „controlling, ordering, shaping and giving meaning to the immense panorama of aimlessness and anarchy, which is the modern history“ (Moretti, 1990: 172).



The resistance of the modern mythical traits in „The Night of the Gryla“ reveals itself as a kind of code-switching. It is a code of inbetweenness, the role of which is to connect references to completely different areas of experience as the cultic and the cultural. It is a connection which can be characterized as a communication at the breaking point itself. This connection can only be realized metaphorically as there can be no direct connection between the pre-modern and the modern. The literary connection to the myth can only be established by virtue of interpretation.

The story comprises an encounter between two times, which in the first place is that of the Gryla repeating itself endlessly, and secondly the modern time undermining the continued existence of ritual of the Gryla. The story is filled with indications of the existence of the Gryla being against heavy odds. The mere presence of a religious community as the Adventists together with the start of a shyness among people towards the Gryla hints to the end of the ritual. The Gryla represents impurity and indelicacy involving reservations of different kinds. The reservations are weakest on Stapa, which as an isle represents an isolated locality more protected than other localities against the radical change and dynamics of modernity. The isle appears as an image of the rest in the West.

In the end the rest in the West is concentrated in Dunald's staring gaze out across the open sea:

In the early light of dawn Dunald goes down to the shore. Here he stands staring out across the

open sea for yet a while before he goes home to penitence in the Gryla's lair high up in the dark loft (26).

This staring gaze in terms of a thin connection between the new and the old world. At the same time this imagined rest is the starting point of the literary interpretation. The narrator meets Dunald's gaze connecting two worlds, which otherwise cannot meet. The surplus of images express a will to transform the Gryla and thereby to ensure the continued existence of the Gryla in an artistically context.

The rest of the myths legitimates itself as a necessary counterpoint, a writing back to the main currents of modernity and modernism. The code-switching of the modern myth between incompatible worlds can be considered as a re-coding of modernity and modernism without renouncing the heritage of the Western world.

In the periphery there is a clash between two different worlds, which Franco Moretti calls interference meaning a meeting between European influence and local materials. This signifies according to Moretti the periphery, which is not only the geographical periphery but also the periphery of a world system of literature. Moretti quotes the following statement by Moutserrat Iglesias Santos:

It is important to emphasize that interferences occur most frequently in the periphery of a system (own translation, Moretti, 2008: 69).

In Moretti's version of the concept of world literature, this consists of an originally

Euro-American canon which spreads out from the centre to the periphery as local ramifications of world literature. The spread of the modern and modernism to geographical locations throughout the world creates alternative codifications of modernity and modernism called geographies of modernism or geo-modernisms (Huyssen, 2005: 6ff). Geographies of modernism overlap each other and open up for a global discourse in a literary world system of modalities of circulation where Europe is the epicentre. Moretti hints the basic difference between centre and periphery in the world literary system when he emphasises the cultural affinity between the specific literary form and the specific market (Moretti, 1999: 180) and thus the interdependency between size and structure: „size is seldom *just size* (ibid.: 147). This means that literature and literary culture in non-European cultures and in non-metropolitan cultures such as the Faroese, are more clearly marked by culture, history and geography than the Euro-American canon or at least the construction of it. Peripheral literature is characterized by irregular and complex cultural processes and is especially forced to comprise and translate since it is a product of several worlds. Andreas Huyssen describes these processes by linking translation and geo-modernisms:

Indeed, translation in its broadest linguistic and historical sense poses the major challenge to any reassessment to the geographies of modernism in a global sense (Huyssen, 2005: 15).

The late arrival of modernity at the peri-

phery creates an entirely different approach to tradition, contemporary art and philosophy. It is an exuberantly complex, multifarious and energetic representation, overflowing with an eagerness to translate. Literature from the periphery is codifying modernity and modernism into an alternative modernity and an alternative (geo) modernism. Andreas Huyssen puts it in this way:

The politics of the alternative modernisms are deeply embedded in colonial and postcolonial contexts, in which notions such as elite, tradition and popularity assume codings quite different from those in the Northern Transatlantic then or now (Huyssen, 2005: 15).

To conclude, the broad context which influences the literary culture of the periphery so strongly causes categories to collapse. Regarding Pascale Casanova, categories and dichotomies such as nationalism and cosmopolitanism, modernism and realism, realism and fantasy, and political commitment and aesthetics are cancelled in the periphery (Casanova, 2000: 199). Artists occupying the margins of modernity and modernism are maybe best positioned to open to modernity understood as complex transnational and translational processes. The excessive focus of many Western literary scholars on the break with tradition is poorly suited for reading the aesthetic trends and the function of modernism and modernity in the periphery, where the multifarious context also holds other elements than the focus on breaking with tradition. Opposite to this, the concept of geographies of



modernism is useful to understand the aesthetic developments in the periphery. Heinesen's approach to modernism and modernity is a celebration of the encounter between centre and periphery and between different roads to modernity. To put it short: The strong cultural and placial consciousness in Heinesen's writing is a significant situated response to globality.

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