

A Milestone in Brøgger Scholarship

Marina Allemano's "Introduction" to Suzanne Brøgger's Symbolic and Philosophical Universe

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ABSTRACT: This article reviews Marina Allemano's intriguing overview of prolific Danish writer Suzanne Brøgger's oeuvre until 2004. This monograph includes a wealth of information, from biographical details and insightful interpretations by important critics, to musings about Brøgger's symbolic and philosophical universe. This review essay also offers a few interpretations of its own, and suggests some oblique references—in the choice of photographs used in Allemano's book—to Brøgger's precursor Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen).

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article explore la vue d'ensemble captivante de Marina Allemano sur les œuvres littéraires produites jusqu'en 2004 par l'écrivaine danoise, Suzanne Brøgger. Cette étude comprend un grand nombre d'informations biographiques et critiques. On y retrouve des interprétations de critiques importants, ainsi que des réflexions portant sur l'univers symbolique et philosophique de Brøgger. Cet article offre aussi des interprétations originales et évoque quelques références obliques, dirigées par le choix des photographies utilisées par Allemano dans son livre, au précurseur de Brøgger, Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen).

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Although its subtitle identifies it as “an introduction,” Marina Allemano’s book on Danish writer Suzanne Brøgger, published last fall (2004), is much more than that. It is an up-to-date discussion, including interesting biographical details as well as insightful interpretations and artistic contextualization of Brøgger’s work over a period of some 30 years, from 1973 until 2004.

Allemano’s book is divided into thirteen chapters each of which deals with at least one significant work, but with constant cross references to other works and due consideration of where the work fits into Brøgger’s philosophical universe. The first chapter contains valuable biographical information about her childhood and youth, but Allemano’s main aim is to show the progression of Brøgger’s creativity as a writer and artist. In her introduction, “Slør” [Veil] (9ff), Allemano writes that recovery of the “naked truth” is not the objective of her book—hence the “veil”—but rather an account of the “stemmer og skikkelser, der fylder det brøggerske symbolunivers” [voices and figures that make up Brøgger’s symbolic universe] (9).¹ It is Allemano’s aim to follow “selvets evolution...i en kronologisk gennemgang af hovedteksterne, mens den historiske Brøgger vil kunne ses glimtvis i kapitlerne og ellers forblive sløret” [the evolution of the self...in a chronological discussion of the main texts, whereas the reader will only sporadically catch a glimpse of the historical Brøgger, who will otherwise remain veiled throughout the various chapters] (12).

For example, when discussing *Jadekatten*, the novel based on Brøgger’s own family history, Allemano provides us with a few details, such as that the Løvins are actually the Henius family in Denmark. But in this discussion she does not disclose the names of the corresponding members of Brøgger’s family. Allemano discreetly informed the reader in the first chapter what the actual names of Brøgger’s mother, father, sister, stepfather, and stepbrothers are. In the *Jadekatten* chapter, however, she only discusses the fictionalized characters of the Løvin family. This shows sensitivity, on the part of Allemano, to the privacy of a writer who is notorious for her radically autobiographical writing. In terms of the family saga, Allemano does point out that the novel ends quite differently from the history of the historical family. As a fictional novel, the storyline demands a total decline of the Løvin family. It only offers a faint hope for the future through the unexpected appearance of an illegitimate branch of the family with a previously unmentioned Løvin marrying a certain Sheherazade, the epitome of artistic creativity. Brøgger’s own alter ego, Zeste, ends up as a spirited bag lady, not exactly the successful author living in south western Sjælland [Sealand] with husband and daughter in real life. In other words, Allemano is not intrusive; she confines herself to the task of a literary critic.

Indeed, in some situations, Allemano goes out of her way to keep the real sources unrevealed. For example, Brøgger was indeed pursued by a woman pretending to be her and by a school teacher who claimed to be in love with her and who was subsequently convicted of stalking her in 1985 (27 and 145). I personally was inclined to read these incidents in Brøgger's work as fiction, but Allemano, who has visited Brøgger in her home almost every summer for many years, knows that these incidents actually happened, and she is very much aware of the pain these two individuals caused Brøgger in real life. Allemano does not mention the names of these perpetrators. I have elsewhere published an article on Brøgger's novel *Transparence* (Woods 2004) in which both the woman who misrepresents the narrator as her *doppelgänger* and the stalking school teacher appear. I interpreted these figures as expressions of Brøgger's public persona and her readers respectively, representing stages the protagonist had to experience before her "rebirth."

As noted above, the great majority of Brøgger's work is highly autobiographical, but it is nevertheless fictionalized and manipulated to fit into a structure of a more philosophical nature. Brøgger is not really interested in writing a factual documentary about her own life. Rather, she uses her own life as a springboard into her symbolic/literary universe, and Allemano is very much aware of this. Brøgger herself endorses this approach in a comment that Allemano finds particularly revealing: even an ashtray can be made to symbolize something. Brøgger is thus constantly using her surroundings to create narrative settings and filling everyday objects with symbolic meaning, if it suits her current project. In *Et frit og muntert lig* [A Free and Merry Corpse],² Brøgger puts it this way:

Man slider i årevis med at fravriste virkeligheden dens symbolske værdier, denne omskabelsesproces er kunsten. Men bagefter er de fleste mennesker kun interesserede i, hvad der er "virkeligt" i historien...Det er først, når virkeligheden omskabes til fiktion, at mennesker vågner op—til virkeligheden. Heri ligger fiktionens visionære kraft.
(75-76)

[For years you struggle to wrestle the symbolic values from the real world; this transformation is what art is all about. But afterwards, most people are only interested in that which is "real" in the story...It is only when reality has been transformed into fiction that people wake up—to reality. This is the visionary power of fiction.]

In other words, this is a double-edged sword. Brøgger is, on the one hand, critical of the public for wanting the biographical details, but, on the other hand, she feels she can only reach her public by appealing to people's curiosity, and this

she can do best by transforming her own life into symbolizing, fictionalized narratives.

Although Allemano subtitles her study an “introduction,” she provides little in the way of a synopsis to acquaint first readers with the contents of the work discussed. Allemano presupposes that her readers will have read the books in question which, given the author’s popularity in Denmark, is a reasonable assumption. Details of the plot are imbedded in her discussion of literary and philosophical precursors, the reception of the work by Danish critics, and the at times fascinating details from Brøgger’s life. The interpretations are always well informed and insightful.

To illustrate her strategies, I have chosen to look at Allemano’s discussion of the novel from 1979³ *En gris som har været oppe at slås kan man ikke stege*⁴ more closely. Allemano identifies some of the people in Knudstrup and Løve who were actually Brøgger’s neighbours, and served as her models, when she wrote this book. But still, Allemano does not discuss these people, but only their fictionalized characters in the book. There is thus a good balance between biographical detail, intellectual background, literary sources, and interpretation of the work that make her book a thoroughly enjoyable narrative. Finally, *En gris som har været oppe at slås* is contextualized within Brøgger’s larger oeuvre.

I find Allemano’s analysis of this novel illuminating, but since she refers to Rilke’s novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* as a major inspiration for Brøgger’s own novel, Allemano might have explored some of the major differences between Brøgger’s and Rilke’s use of the French tapestries in Cluny as symbolizing the five senses, in addition to a sixth tapestry symbolizing desire (*A mon seul Désir*). Rilke links these tapestries to the perception of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching in a way that is not ordinary, and which foreshadows the progression towards the demise of the protagonist Malte in Paris. Brøgger, conversely, uses the tapestries as an affirmation of ordinary everyday life in the small town of Løve—which may be on its way downhill, towards its death, the the narrator, as Allemano points out—but the tapestries still represent life in Brøgger’s narrative, I would argue.

Another point I should like to make is that Allemano regards the narrator of *En gris som har været oppe at slås kan man ikke stege* as assuming that the lady of the sixth tapestry is the same one as the lady in the five other tapestries. However, the fact that the narrator quotes Rilke’s Malte as saying “Der er en Mængde Mennesker, men endnu langt flere Ansigter. For hver har flere” [There are multitudes of people, but there are many more faces, because each person has several of them] (1988 90; 1997a 100) indicates that each of us may outwardly look like a single, self-identical [the same] person, but we each occupy a multiplicity of subject positions. Allemano, however, concludes that the lady in the *A mon seul Désir* tapestry “ikke er kommet et skridt videre på den lange vej” [has not moved forward one single step on her long journey] (67). In each of the five other tapestry

descriptions, except the first tapestry, the narrator asks whether it is the same lady as in the previous tapestry (1988 31, 44, 62, 84). To me, the point is that Brøgger is questioning the identity of the lady/ladies with her question: “Is she the same lady?” repeated four times. Even though the conventional interpretation is that all six ladies are indeed the same one, just dressed differently in each tapestry, I think that, within the context of the novel as a whole, Brøgger is calling into question the concepts of *identical* and *same*. In other words, the “same” lady is different in each situation—like Malte’s idea of the many faces of each human being (1988 90).

This interpretation is supported by Brøgger’s discussion of pig farming in her novel. She mentions that, in the countryside, it is important that all the pigs in the pig sty be “the same”—to the point that the farmers have a spray that they apply to any pig that appears to be “different.” This is necessary as the pigs—so the farmers say, according to the narrator—will not tolerate a pig that is different. The symbolic implication is clear, to my mind. In order for the protagonist of the novel to fit into the small community of Løve, she must be like everyone else—at least to such an extent that they will not reject her. Brøgger’s narrator has to “cover up” her difference. She becomes a villager who partakes in the life of her village—and loves it, indeed craves it. It is worth noting that Brøgger in real life has been leading a kind of double life, too, to the point of her living mainly in a remodelled old school house in Knudstrup near Løve, and at the same time maintaining an apartment in Copenhagen (until quite recently) where she could metamorphose into her highly intellectual self at least once a week, a self that she did not seem to want to flaunt in front of her fellow Løve inhabitants. This idea of leading a double life is also discussed in *Jadekatten* through the interest of Zeste (Brøgger’s alter ego) in the historic personality of the famous French actress and glamorous stage personality Sarah Bernhardt⁵ whose book about her own double life entitled *Ma double vie* had touched a nerve in the Zeste character. I think this notion of having to live a double life is a major issue also in *En gris som har været oppe at slås kan man ikke stege*. Through various narrators and protagonists, Brøgger expresses a strong desire to be just another ordinary citizen (a “non-different pig”), and at the same time to be the exceptional personality that her ancestors on her mother’s side had been, going back to her great grandfather Louis Henrius’s brother Max Henrius (25; Max Løvin in *Jadekatten*).⁶ I prefer this reading to Allemano’s statement that Brøgger’s text may lead to misunderstandings:

Fordi *En gris*...er konstrueret som optegnelser eller strøtanker uden uddybende ræsonnementer, er der...undertiden ytringer, som kan misforstås, og som læseren har svært ved at passe ind i bogens overordnede mening.

(67)

[Since *A Fighting Pig*...has been constructed as notes or aphorisms without clarifying explanations...statements do occur from time to time that may be misunderstood, and that the reader may have trouble fitting into the overall meaning of the book.]

A statement like this shows how ambiguous Brøgger's texts can be. At one point Allemano also makes a remark about Brøgger's "zitatsløseri" [sloppy referencing] (100), but this kind of remark is rare in her 200+ page book of enthusiastic commentary.

Not all of Brøgger's work has her own life as its focal point. An example is her "epic" poem about a seriously ill milliner, Tone, in Copenhagen, who died of cancer. One of Allemano's most interesting interpretations is the one dealing with this poem. She shows the significance of this life-affirming, yet death-inspired, poem in Brøgger's philosophical universe, and she successfully establishes a connection between Tone—and many of the other female characters in Brøgger's oeuvre—and mythological figures, such as Lilith, Medusa, and various mermaids, furies, vampires, sibyls, and the like (77).

This fondness, on Brøgger's part, for the Lilith/Medusa type of powerful woman recalls her admired precursor Isak Dinesen [Karen Blixen]. Allemano brings up Brøgger's fascination with Dinesen quite often, in different contexts, but she never comments on the indirect visual reference to Isak Dinesen in the photographs of Brøgger in her book. Note especially the photo of Brøgger at the St. Hans bonfire in 1993 (150) that brings to mind, intertextually, Dinesen's midsummer night speech from 1953, "Oration at a Bonfire," in which Dinesen is the "seer" of her day (1950s) with the historical overview. In the photo of Brøgger, in Allemano's book, that was taken at the time that Brøgger was translating / re-creating the Eddaic poem *Völuspá*,⁷ I see the powerful *völva* or *vølv*, the Old Norse soothsaying sibyl figure, turned into Brøgger, the postmodern sage and seer with the historical overview at the end of the twentieth century.⁸

Allemano does not discuss the photos in her book. She does however, as indicated above, discuss Brøgger's fascination with the late Dinesen from a literary point of view. It is not difficult to understand this fascination, both writers being highly intellectual; in order to conjure up their symbolic universes both use every cultural resource at their disposal—Greek myth, the bible, and the cultural history of the past 3000 years, as Dinesen liked to put it. Both writers project a public persona that underlines their distinction from the average citizen, and they both champion strong women. Brøgger even co-authored a play with the well-known Dinesen biographer and Associate Co-Producer of the film *Out of Africa*, Judith Thurman (11), about "Karen Blixen's Lost Tale"⁹ in 1999.

With the abundance of interesting information and references on each page of Allemano's book, it is unfortunate that some scholarly tools are incomplete or totally lacking. Thus I cannot help regretting the absence of an index, for example, a lack that makes the wealth of information that Allemano has assembled much

less accessible. A North American publisher would surely have required one—and rightly so. Similarly, the bibliography of Brøgger’s works is incomplete. True, it does include several unpublished works, among them *Dark*, an interesting play based on the fifteenth-century French virgin Jeanne d’Arc, whom Brøgger re-creates as a contemporary Janne Dark (157f). Another is “Karen Blixen’s Lost Tale” referred to above. Brøgger’s translation of *Völuspá* is also there, presumably because it has been named a “gendigtning” [re-creation], but her translation, “*Især katte*”, from 1977 of Doris Lessing’s *Particularly Cats* is not listed among her works. It is only referred to in the discussion of Brøgger’s own cat book *Linda Evangelista Olsen* published in 2001.¹⁰ Likewise missing is Brøgger’s account of being raped in Uzbekistan that was first published five years after this terrifying experience in the counter-culture publication *Suck*, edited by Germaine Greer. Unfortunately, this particular article is not in the list of Brøgger’s works in the back of the book, nor in the selected bibliography.¹¹ Like *Især katte*, this publication is deemed worthy of mention in the text, but omitted from the bibliography. In fact, many of Brøgger’s other articles and chronicles in newspapers are also missing, unless they were published in one of her collections of essays. It would seem to me that these items would constitute a valuable resource for researchers. This study would be the more valuable for their inclusion.

Similarly, there is no comprehensive bibliography of works on Brøgger, just a list of *selected articles*. Yet these articles are referred to in the notes to the chapters. Important Danish critics Kistrup, Neiendamm, Hertel, and others, have written interesting critiques in influential Danish newspapers, such as *Information*, *Weekendavisen*, and *Berlingske Tidende*, and Allemano quotes them, but they are not listed among the articles on Brøgger at the back of the book. Allemano, or her publisher, seems to have decided that newspaper articles are too insignificant to be listed as articles. Yet, she does list some critiques in popular magazines, such as *Femina*. A comprehensive list would be ideal. Failing that, any work referred to in the text should find its place in the references, including sources that do not address Brøgger’s writing directly but which inform Allemano’s approach: Rilke, Kierkegaard, Baudrillard, Marcuse, and many others.

Despite these omissions, this is an intelligent book. Not too abstract, but accessible and relevant, and above all sufficiently rich in detail for readers interested in Brøgger and her intellectual world. There are very few typos,¹² but many anglicisms and academic terms.¹³ Notwithstanding the shortcomings just mentioned, this so-called introduction is a most fascinating, well-written and well researched book, charged with biographical and scholarly observations, which are drawn into a coherent, successful account of the evolution of Brøgger’s literary and symbolic universe. Every chapter presents fresh insights. Therefore, I would hope that this book will be translated into English (maybe by Allemano herself?). I would suggest, however, that a title be chosen that does more justice

to the book's impressive scholarly scope. If the scholarly tools noted above are included, Allemano's book truly will become a milestone in Brøgger criticism.

NOTES

1. Allemano's book is in Danish. All translations of quotations from it are my own. Similarly all translations from Suzanne Brøgger not otherwise identified are my own.
2. Title translated as "Over My Glad Body" in <http://www.litteratursiden.dk/sw5088.asp>.
3. Allemano's list of Brøgger's works on page 214 gives the publication date as 1979, whereas the list of abbreviations on page 220 says 1978. The copyright page of the book itself says 1979 for the original edition and 1988 for the paperback edition.
4. Allemano's translation of this book appeared in 1997 under the title *A Fighting Pig's too Tough to Eat and Other Prose Texts by Suzanne Brøgger* (Brøgger 1997a). Curiously, Allemano only includes this translation in the list of "Selected Articles on Suzanne Brøgger" (215 ff) by referring to her own introduction to her translation as an article. Nor is Anne Born's recent translation into English of *Jadekatten* mentioned. Maybe Allemano's book was already in press at this point. A separate list of translated works would be desirable. In the notes to her conclusion, she mentions that works by Brøgger have been translated into 17 languages (236 n. 1).
5. Sarah Bernhard lived from 1844-1923. Her initials are SB like those of Suzanne Brøgger—no doubt an interesting coincidence to Brøgger.
6. In the family Løvin, as in Brøgger's own family, it was important "to be a personality." This ideal was established by Maximilianus Løvin, one of the six sons of the first immigrant to Denmark. Max Løvin was a great personality, "a god" even (1997b 28); he was a successful businessman in Chicago and one of the founders of the 4th of July Danish-American festivities at Rebild Bakker [Rebild Hills] in Jutland. This is also the story of real life Max Henius, one of the sons of Isidor Henius, who immigrated to Denmark from his native Thorn (Torun) in Poland in 1838. See J. Christian Bay's tribute to Max Henius (5-47). In *Jadekatten*, the narrator reports that Maximilianus Løvin had been a "personality"; as happens to all gods, he left behind an unwritten commandment stipulating "Du skal være en personlighed" [Thou shalt be a personality] (1997b 28). Since then, this "commandment" had turned into the code word *opmærksomhed* [attention], as in the prayer: "Giv os idag vort daglige brød" that had become "Giv os idag vor daglige dosis opmærksomhed, det daglige brød skal vi nok selv sørge for" [Give us today our daily dose of attention; the daily bread we shall procure ourselves] (1997b 29). Anne Born translates *opmærksomhed* as "attentiveness" and "solicitude" (2004 19).
7. Brøgger herself refers to it as a "gendigtning" [re-creation] (1994).
8. More examples: The photograph showing Brøgger with heavy mascara, Dinesen style, receiving the honour of the Golden Laurels (70) is reminiscent, to me at least, of Dinesen dressed for gala at the publishing house Gyldendal in 1954 (Lasson and Svendsen 170). Another photograph is the one of Brøgger in Paris (44). This photo reminds me of the portrait of Dinesen in her Pierrot costume with a feather in her hat (Lasson and Svendsen 181). Both show a similar angle and facial expression, and both women are posing for the public, it would seem. And the photo of Brøgger on page 84 makes me

think of the well-known portrait of Dinesen by Cecil Beaton (Lasson and Svendsen 197) in which she is wearing a black hat that covers all of her hair. When comparing the two photographs, we find a similar angle of their faces and a similar pensive expression. Brøgger's upturned left brim of her hat makes hers less sombre. Both women had life masks made (and photographed) in their fifties (Allemano 134; Lasson and Svendsen 168). Granted, all these "similarities" might well be coincidental.

9. Listed as an unpublished manuscript entitled "Karen Blixen's Lost Tale: An Entertainment by Martinez Philips S. J." in the list of Brøgger's works in Allemano's book (214).
10. *Linda Evangelista Olsen* seems to me to owe as much to T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* from 1940 as to Lessing's book. Eliot's book is not mentioned by Allemano although it is actually referred to in *Linda Evangelista Olsen* in connection with the question of how properly to name a cat (43).
11. This article is only referred to in Chapter 2, page 34. The same year (1973), Brøgger published another version as the article "Voldtægt" [Rape] in *Fri os fra kærligheden*. 107-38.
12. Page 73: *tolerer* instead of *tolererer*, and page 153-154 and 214 under 1994: *Voluspá* instead of *Völuspá*.
13. Such as "med tungen i kinden" (20); "karnevalets subversive potentiale" (21); "maligne celler" (72); "det futile indhold" (88); "glamourøst image" (152); "den hotte instruktør" (157); "at recherche" (170) etc., etc. It should be said, though, that Allemano does not use any more of these expressions than does Brøgger herself in her writing.

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