

Article

Nordic Modernism for Beginners

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Received: 16 July 2018; Accepted: 18 September 2018; Published: 20 September 2018



Abstract: This essay proposes a narrative of the Nordic countries' relationship to modernism and other major literary trends of the late 19th and 20th centuries, that situates them in conjunction with the rest of Europe. "Masterpieces of Scandinavian Literature: the 20th Century" is a course that has been taught to American college students without expertise in literature or Scandinavia for three decades. This article describes the content and methodologies of the course and how Nordic modernisms are explained to this particular audience of beginners. Simple definitions of modernism and other related literary movements are provided. By focusing on this unified literary historical narrative and highlighting the pioneers of Scandinavian literature, the Nordic countries are presented as solid participants in European literary and cultural history. Further, the social realism of the Modern Breakthrough emerges as one of the Nordic countries distinct contributions to world literature.

Keywords: modernisms; Nordic; European; literature; translation; decadence

1. Introduction

Are the Nordic countries latecomers to the international phenomenon of modernism or were they on the cutting edge as it was getting underway? Were the Nordic countries in step with each other and Europe in terms of their relationship to modernism or do they each have a separate history? The answer to each of these questions is, paradoxically, "Yes." This essay seeks to offer a narrative of the literary trends in Scandinavia of the late 19th and 20th centuries that reconciles these seemingly irreconcilable positions. Such a narrative is somewhat at odds with some of the prevailing scholarly narratives and arose in the context of explaining Nordic modernism to beginners. The purpose is to provide a fresh perspective on these narratives and contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation about the concepts of the Modern Breakthrough, modernism, decadence, and postmodernism.

In the spring of 1988, the course, "Masterpieces of Scandinavian Literature: the 20th Century," was taught by the present author for the first time. The course has been offered virtually every spring since then, and I have spent much time and thought devising ways of explaining the major intellectual and artistic movements of the 20th century to students who have no background in literary studies or Scandinavia.¹ At the University of Wisconsin, the course counts as part of the breadth requirement for a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science degree in Letters and Science. That means that many budding natural scientists and social scientists have taken the class to see what the humanities might have to offer them. Most, but not all, will have taken some English literature courses during high school, so it is helpful to place the intellectual trends of Scandinavia into a larger European/ American

¹ The most relevant of my publications along these lines include: "Heidenstam's *Karolinerna* and the *Fin de Siècle*." *Fin(s) de Siècle in Scandinavian Perspective. Festschrift in Honor of Harald S. Naess* (Brantly 1993), "Into the Twentieth Century: 1890–1950" in *A History of Swedish Literature* (Brantly 1996), *Sex and the Modern Breakthrough* (Brantly 2004) and *The Historical Novel, Transnationalism, and the Postmodern Era: Presenting the Past* (Brantly 2017).

context, so that students might have a chance of relating these concepts to works they might already have read or could perhaps read in the future. In this essay, the distilled wisdom of thirty years is presented with the acknowledgment that the bullet lists and definitions may seem reductive to experts and may present points of contention . . . but it is a place to start the arguments.

2. Modern Breakthrough versus Modernism

Given that the focus is on Scandinavia, the course begins with a brief look at the Modern Breakthrough, since it is such a significant moment in Nordic literary history, a time when Nordic letters exerted influence throughout Europe, and it is a literary movement that casts a long and important shadow throughout the 20th century.² When one speaks of literary movements or periods, it is important to note “where,” “when,” and “what” is meant. In the case of the Modern Breakthrough, the “where” is specifically Nordic. In other traditions, similar movements might be referred to as 19th century realism or naturalism. The “when” is given in rounded figures: 1870–1890. These round dates are intended to signify that these sorts of periods, concepts, movements have been identified and named by scholars, based on observations of common trends. Writers did not simply wake up on New Years’ Day in 1870 and decide all at once to call themselves writers of the Modern Breakthrough. Elements of these movements exist before and after these rounded dates, but they indicate a moment of dominance, when the movement reaches its peak. The “what” of these literary concepts consists of both world view and certain literary and artistic techniques that tend to gravitate towards the central world view. The bullet list that describes the Modern Breakthrough is as follows:

- A belief in God is replaced by a belief in science and reason.
- The world is explainable and logical.
- Realism—Literature tries to give a true picture of life.
- An interest in social issues (class struggle, feminism).
- A belief in objectivity—It is possible to depict reality as it is.
- Social problems can be solved in public debate.

In this context, “a belief in God” represents an understanding of how the world is organized: a higher being has thought it all out and everything must make sense somehow. In the Modern Breakthrough, the higher being is replaced by the scientist, inspired by Darwin, who can explain the causes and effects of existence. There is an initial optimism that, if only we know enough, we can explain everything, and even human behavior and world history can become predictable. There is a strong sense that much human behavior is biologically determined, so details of nature, nurture, and environmental issues are important. The natural mode of expression is realism, since writers hope to create true and convincing depictions of life, generating human documents or case studies that will help us to understand human behavior and the world. Two primary focuses of interest are class issues and the woman question, due to historical changes taking place in the latter part of the 19th century. There is an almost naïve belief in objectivity, due to a great stake in having literary texts perceived as true and convincing. In the final point of the bullet list, scholars of Scandinavia will recognize the echo of Georg Brandes’ winged words in his lectures that gave the Modern Breakthrough its name ([Brandes 1883](#)). It is noteworthy that the writers of the Modern Breakthrough did not seem to

² It is perhaps important to note that many discussions of Nordic modernism have an uneasy relationship with the Modern Breakthrough, in part because some of the authors, notably Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg, have proven very useful to demonstrating that the Nordic countries were on the cutting edge of modernism. Although the Modern Breakthrough is a reaction to modernity, it is not a subset of modernism, in my view. They are in some ways opposites. Poignant, socially engaged realistic literature is one of Scandinavia’s greatest contributions to world literature, but this is often eclipsed by the modernist innovations offered by Ibsen and Strindberg. They are simultaneously both men of the Modern Breakthrough and modernist innovators. This view is slightly at odds with, for example, Pål Dahlerup’s statement: “*Modernisme er en blandt flere kunstneriske udformninger af den ‘modernitet’, som ‘det moderne gennembrud’ skabte* ([Dahlerup 1991](#), p. 31; ‘Modernism is one among many artistic forms of the ‘modernity,’ that ‘the modern breakthrough’ created’).”

perceive the paradox between being objective and canvassing social issues, which involves a great deal of partisanship.

Starting the course with a basic understanding of the Nordic Modern Breakthrough becomes relevant later in the course as we deal with working-class literature of the 1930s, and feminist literature of the 1970s. Much still applies, although biological determinism is no longer in fashion: What is the point of changing society if one's lot in life is already biologically predetermined? The working class is not inherently inferior in terms of intelligence and general viability; it is social conditions that need to be changed in order to improve working-class lives. Some feminist writers of the 1970s have much in common with the Modern Breakthrough as well, although they have also given up the cult of objectivity. It is perfectly acceptable to describe female experience from a woman's point of view.

The literary text used to illustrate the principles of the Modern Breakthrough is August Strindberg's "Otur" ("Bad Luck") from his short story collection *Giftas* (Strindberg 1913; Married). This is a text that I have translated to English myself, which brings up the complication of which texts students read in the class. To a great extent, that depends on which texts are available in translation, although personal preferences of the instructor also play a role.³ One significant drawback with working with translations is that poetry is underrepresented, which is especially unfortunate in regard to modernism.

At the outset, the Modern Breakthrough bullet list forms a contrast to the modernism bullet list. The two modes are played off each other, in order to clarify the differences. The "where" of modernism is given as Europe and America and the "when" is 1910–1930 (remember we are talking about a peak.) The general dates of modernism are much more scattered if one considers the individual Nordic countries. Back in the early 1990s, Nordic literary histories argued for a much later heyday of modernism for the individual Nordic countries (Sweden 1940s; Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Finland 1950s and 1960s).⁴ There are signs that this narrative is under revision, but this phenomenon illustrates the benefits of considering Nordic modernism against a backdrop of European modernism. There are strong individual representatives of Nordic modernism (Hamsun, Strindberg, and Lagerkvist, to name a few), even if they cannot be said to represent a dominant trend in their specific Nordic country at that particular moment. These individual writers are way ahead of the curve, in terms of Nordic modernism, but closer in step to Anglo-American modernism. These exceptional individuals allow the Nordic countries to be integrated into the general narrative of European modernism.

The six points of the modernist bullet list are meant to resonate with the six points of the Modern Breakthrough list, and they are as follows:

- A belief in God is replaced by a feeling of isolation and anguish.
- The world is fragmented. The artist must provide coherence.

³ The reading for the course has, of course, changed over the years. Books that have fallen off the schedule because they went out of print include: Martin Andersen Nexø's *Pelle Eroberen* (Nexø 1989; *Pelle the Conqueror*, vol. 1.), Peter Seeberg's *Fugls føde* (Seeberg 1990; *The Imposter*), Knut Faldbakken's *Adams dagbok* (Faldbakken 1988; *Adam's Diary*), and Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's *Den vedervärdige mannen från Säffle* (Sjöwall and Wahlöö 1980; *The Abominable Man*).

⁴ These dates are somewhat standard, though possibly in the process of being re-evaluated. These suggested peaks appear in a number of sources, but you can find references to these varying Nordic modernism heydays in the proceedings of the 1990 IASS meeting: *Modernism i skandinavisk litteratur som historisk fenomen og teoretisk problem* (Lien 1991; *Modernism in Scandinavian Literature as a Historical Phenomenon and Theoretical Problem*), edited by Asmund Lien. The story has not changed much by 2007 and *Modernism: A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, edited by Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska. These sources are also united in that they agree that strong early modernists existed before these peak periods. Toril Moi's *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (Moi 2006) and Dean Krouk's *Fascism and Modernist Literature in Norway* (Krouk 2017) are two examples of books that move modernism's timeline in Norway up quite a bit, and a symptom of the revision that may be underway. An important book that puts Nordic modernism into a European context is *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930* (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976) by Malcom Bradbury and James McFarlane. The "Chronology of Events" at the end is particularly interesting, and James McFarlane's choices of Nordic texts are as affected by personal bias as my own. Two volumes that also address issues of the relationship between Nordic and European modernisms include *English and Nordic Modernisms* (Tysdahl et al. 2002) and *European and Nordic Modernisms* (Jansson et al. 2004).

- Irreality—Literature creates poetic, subjective realities which do not conform to the rules of this world.
- An interest in artistic issues. (The limits of literary genres are tested. Aspects of form in literature are of major interest.)
- A belief in subjectivity. (The only mind you can know is your own. The only reality you can know is your own subjective reality.)
- A suspicion of language—Is it possible to communicate fully with others?

Arguably, the first point could read: A belief in science is replaced by isolation and anguish. Nonetheless, the struggle with the absence of a God remains relevant. “Anguish” seems to be the best the English language can offer to express “Angst” or “ångest”. The world is seen as fragmented, and the hope of overarching explanations, reasons, and patterns is futile. If any coherence is to be found, it will be imposed by the artistic process. Realism no longer reflects the individual’s relationship to reality. The term “irreality” is not (or was not) an English word, but is borrowed from German’s “Irrealismus.” The point is to distinguish this from “unreality” (which seems too judgmental) and “surrealism” which is a rather specific form of irreality. The reality depicted in modernist works is highly subjective and symbolic, and does not always obey the laws of physics. Rather than focusing on society’s ills, modernism prioritizes artistic issues. Especially in the aftermath of World War I, it was felt that new forms were needed to give expression to a new, chaotic perception of reality, therefore, literary innovation and experimentation were highly valued. Subjectivity is the dominant mode of perception, and objectivity is scarcely a possibility. There is no place outside the world itself from which the world can be described dispassionately. Whereas language was thought to be a tool for social change during the Modern Breakthrough, there is a strong suspicion of language’s ability to connect people or even to express what it means to say.

The text used to illustrate modernism in the initial lecture is Pär Lagerkvist’s “Kärleken och döden” (“Love and Death”) from *Onda Sagor* (Lagerkvist 1965; Evil Tales). From a certain perspective, Strindberg’s “Bad Luck” has the same plot as “Love and Death”: Boy likes girl. Girl is mean to boy. Boy is sad. The differing ways in which this simple story is presented help to illustrate the differences between the two literary modes. Strindberg’s tale depicts the plight of a wholesaler from Skeppsbron, Master Ernst, at a particular place and time (1880s Stockholm), and his unlucky marriage to a young woman with whom he was not particularly well acquainted, and who turns out to have vastly different tastes, habits, and values from her husband. There are many realistic details regarding location, dress, and customs. She likes French novels, which Ernst cannot stand, and the wife despises Dickens, who is the husband’s favorite. The list goes on and on. There are references to Darwinian natural selection as the force that causes men and women to become attracted to one another. Ultimately, Master Ernst remains a slave to his sexual attraction to his wife and cannot divorce her despite her compromising behavior, and there is every indication that his life will continue to be fairly miserable. It is simply “bad luck” that he happened to have met and been attracted to this particular woman. If social norms were to change so that bourgeois men and women could get to know each other before marriage, then this sort of thing might not happen. The narrative is third-person, and our authoritative narrator, who knows much more than the characters he describes, enlists his reader as a co-conspirator with the occasional rhetorical question: “What use was it?”

Lagerkvist’s “Love and Death” tends to strike students immediately with its brevity: It is a scant paragraph long. Is it a short story? A prose poem? At a glance, one can see how genre expectations are already being unsettled and challenged. The location is nowhere recognizable, and appears timeless. There are no specific details that reveal when and where this is taking place. Our first-person narrator is walking beside his beloved when he is shot by a hairy cupid wielding a crossbow who has stepped out of a dark, cheerless fortress. He falls down and she continues on her way. The narrator reflects that she must not have noticed that he had been shot, otherwise she would have stopped. His blood runs after her in the gutter until there is no more. This is a shocking fragment of experience. The reader does not even know who these people are or how they came to be here. The rules of biology have

been suspended, because our narrator ought to be dead since he has no blood left. Burly cupids with crossbows are not something you see every day. This is irreality, a symbolic subjective reality. Language, in this case, does not form a bridge between individuals. They do not communicate, and our narrator is confined to his own subjective experience of his beloved's deeds. The overwhelming note struck is one of isolation and anguish.

3. Decadence and the Transition to Modernism

As presented, the Modern Breakthrough and modernism seem to be opposites. How does one get from Point A to Point B? The attentive student will note that there are twenty years missing between them (1890–1910), which is designated as the *Fin de Siècle*, or what one might also call literary decadence, which peaked around the turn-of-the-century throughout Europe.⁵ The bullet list that describes this era is as follows:

- There is a growing pessimism about science.
- The irrational is of interest.
- Realism is used as well as dream-like symbolism.
- An interest in existential issues.
- A belief in subjectivity. (The only mind you can know is your own. The only reality you can know is your own subjective reality.)
- A suspicion of language—Is it possible to communicate fully with others?

Society's great faith in science being able to solve all the problems of the world begins to wane as many problems remain unsolved. The idea of biological determinism seems to negate the existence of human will: What is the point of trying to be different if everything is programmed into your genes and you are shaped by forces outside your control? As a sort of reaction against the logic and reason of the Modern Breakthrough, an interest in the irrational arises (think Sigmund Freud). Realism is still in wide use, but dream sequences allow for experimentation with symbol and irreality. Rather than social or artistic issues, the focus turns to existential issues. How is the individual supposed to navigate the choices of existence, especially since doubt has been cast on the power of the human will? Subjectivity, rather than objectivity, comes to the fore. There is an inward turn in literature that focuses on individuals rather than society at large. Language, which had not seemed to change society for the better, is viewed with suspicion.

The text that illustrates this transition between the Modern Breakthrough and modernism is Hjalmar Söderberg's *Doktor Glas* (Söderberg 1998; *Doctor Glas*). I have written on this in some detail elsewhere, so will simply point out some salient connections (Brantly 2016). The book is in a diary format and, except for a brief dream description, is realistic to the extent that you can follow Dr. Glas around on a map of Stockholm. Dr. Glas is a reluctant man of science who scarcely believes in his own power to cure anyone. He tries to make a moral decision (should he commit murder or not), even though traditional guides have failed him. Religion is not helpful (he murders the Reverend Gregorius, after all), the legal system is called into question (the Dreyfus case), and the writers of the Modern Breakthrough are deemed simply aeolian harps upon which the wind plays. He imagines himself to be the doctor who is removing diseased flesh in his justifications to himself, but the murder of Rev. Gregorius achieves nothing positive. In a final epiphany inspired by the overture from *Lohengrin*,

⁵ There are many who would see decadence as a close relative or even a form of modernism (Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Calinescu 1987), for example), especially since Charles Baudelaire is considered a portal figure for both movements. George C. Schoolfield in *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion, 1884–1927* (Schoolfield 2003) considers decadence “a literary fashion,” which it undoubtedly is. I am making use of decadence in my narrative of 20th century trends as a transitional phase between the Modern Breakthrough and modernism, and as such, it carries features of both.

Dr. Glas is staring into the modernist abyss: “Thou shalt not ask!” (Söderberg 1998, p. 84). If you do, you will find there is no meaning or order to life, only chaos.

The remaining texts of this first third of the course illustrate the emergence of modernism. We read Knut Hamsun’s *Sult* (Hamsun 1998; *Hunger*), a pioneering modernist work that is groundbreaking in terms of its narrative. August Strindberg’s *Ett drömspel* (Strindberg 1975; *A Dreamplay*) demonstrates how modern drama evolves towards modernism, while noting that Strindberg himself had not rejected the existence of a God but, nonetheless, shared the modernist vision of human existence as a painful struggle. At last, we arrive at high modernism itself, in the form of the poems of Edith Södergran and Elmer Diktonius⁶ and Pär Lagerkvist’s short play, *Himlens hemlighet* (Lagerkvist 1966; *The Secret of Heaven*). This is regrettably the only moment in the course in which Finland is represented, and poetry for that matter, in part because of my own lack of a command of Finnish. Similarly, the literature of modern Iceland is for me a closed book, so apologies to both Finland and Iceland for my neglect. It has perhaps already been noticed that I rely heavily on Swedish language texts, because that is my area of expertise; however, Denmark and Norway feature more strongly in the remaining two sections of the course.

The Finland-Swedish modernists are fully in synch with European modernism, because of their unusual historical situation compared to the rest of Scandinavia. World War I seems to confirm for European intellectuals that the world is chaotic and meaningless and science is a destructive rather than constructive force. Finland was impacted by the Russian Revolution and ravaged by civil war at this time. The Swedish-speaking minority of Finland responded literarily in a similar fashion to the rest of Europe. The Finnish-speaking majority experienced these historical events as a moment of national emergence, so modernist elements did not enter Finnish language literature until much later. One might also attribute a later emergence of modernism in Norway (according to some) to Norway’s independence in 1905, compounded by the German occupation during World War II.⁷ The combination of both these historic events would naturally promote a stronger sense of nationalism in Norwegian literature than is found in either Sweden or Denmark. Denmark, which was also occupied during World War II, delays embracing modernism until the war is over, and Sweden’s neutrality and relative postwar affluence is thought to be behind its earlier modernist breakthrough (Eysteinnsson and Liska 2007, pp. 834–35).

Pär Lagerkvist is fully in step with the trends of European modernism, having written more-or-less a modernist manifesto for Swedish literature in *Ordkonst och Bildkonst* (Lagerkvist 1913; *Verbal Art and Pictorial Art*) at the tender age of 22. In the context of Sweden, he is somewhat unique, and modernism is not at all the dominant mode of literary expression. In the 1910s, there is a revisiting of socially engaged realism (the shadow of the Modern Breakthrough) and three of the giants of Swedish literature from the previous century (Heidenstam, Karlfeldt, and Lagerlöf) are still major literary forces. Even so, the work of Lagerkvist, Södergran, and Diktonius, enables the presentation of Nordic modernism in our narrative as a part of the larger trends of European modernism. When the Young Man of Lagerkvist’s *Secret of Heaven* jumps off the planet into a bottomless abyss, it is the darkest moment of the semester and modernism at its most bleak.

4. The Evolution of Modernism and the Modern Breakthrough

The second section of the course covers from 1930 through 1960. The 1930s are seen against the historical backdrop of global economic depression. Working class literature is given as the dominant trend in Scandinavia and represented by Ivar Lo-Johansson’s “Kyss handen, trälinna!” (“Kiss My Hand, Slave”) from *Statarnoveller* (Lo-Johansson 1936; *Tenant Farmer Tales*) and the first chapter of

⁶ The poems we read in our in-house translation are: Södergran’s “The day cools,” “Vierge Moderne,” “On Foot I Had to Cross the Solar System,” “The Stars,” “The Land that is Not” and Diktonius’ “Red-Eemili,” and “The Jaguar.”

⁷ Torben Broström makes this suggestion in “Modernismens gennembrud i nordisk litteratur” (Broström 1991, p. 21; *Modernism’s Breakthrough in Nordic Literature*).

Kvinnor och äppelträd (Martinson 1933; *Women and Apple Trees*), “Mother’s Baths,” by Moa Martinson (Martinson 1989). This type of literature, social realism, is one of the strengths of the Nordic countries, a part of the enduring legacy of the Modern Breakthrough. Some short stories by Cora Sandel, “Larsens” (“Larsen’s”) and “Lort-Katrine” (“Shit-Katrine”) from *En blå sofa: og andre noveller* (Sandel 1985; *A Blue Sofa and other Stories*), show that even non-working-class writers were interested in social issues, such as gender and class.⁸ The thirties are, however, very much a mixed bag. There are modernist experiments, alongside the historical novels of Sigrid Undset, and the fantastic tales of Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen). Since I have written a book on Isak Dinesen, she gets a lecture to herself at this point, which notes that she is not writing like anyone else, and so it is difficult to fit her into greater literary trends (Brantly 2002, pp. 4–6).⁹ World War II is given as a major catalyst for the rise of modernism to literary dominance in Scandinavia. Unlike the case with World War I, all of the Nordic countries were drawn into the conflict (despite Sweden’s official neutrality), and the message of meaninglessness and chaos was driven home. The concept of existentialism is introduced at this time, primarily as a strategy for coping with the modernist view that the world has no meaning. Another bullet list comes in handy to explain existentialism, with apologies to Jean Paul Sartre:

Crisis:

- A problem of identity: Who am I? Existentialism attempts to answer the question.
- The experience of one’s own life or existence lacking a purpose or meaning.
- A feeling of alienation. One feels fear and loneliness in the face of our well-known world. The world is seen as absurd. Values have broken down.

Response:

- One must accept one’s own fear, loneliness, and death as basic conditions of life. This provides a type of freedom.
- The freedom is the freedom of choice, where you are not tied to anything. You can choose to take over your own life. You have also chosen responsibility.

Some short stories by Martin A. Hansen “Gartneren, Dyret og Barnet” (Hansen 1965; “The Gardener, the Beast, and the Child”) and “Soldaten og Pigen” (Hansen 1972; “The Soldier and the Girl”) exemplify this Nordic response to the war. Both the eponymous gardener and the soldier are deep in an existential crisis: The gardener because he no longer wants the responsibility of being a gardener and a father, and the soldier because of what he has done in the war. Both characters move from a space of structure and order to a place of chaos, a trash lot inhabited by strange beasts and a marl pit strewn with refuse, respectively. Despite his wish to leave his ordinary life, the gardener chooses to continue to call out for his son, knowing that he will have to take responsibility for having robbed his own child of innocence when he stepped aside. The soldier’s choice is more ambiguous: Either he comes to terms with his deeds after speaking to a dead girl and will leave the place or he chooses to remain at the pit, a piece of society’s refuse, and commit suicide. Pär Lagerkvist’s *Dvärgen* (Lagerkvist 1973; *The Dwarf*) engages the idea of human evil as a universal element throughout time, yet shows the reader that there is a choice to be made: Do we keep the dwarf in the dungeon, or release him? This is a step away from the despair depicted in the final moments of *The Secret of Heaven*, when the Young Man jumps off the planet and plunges into a bottomless abyss. Such modernist despair leaves the door open for tyrants, like Hitler, to take over. This section is rounded off with Ingmar Bergman’s *Smultronstället* (Bergman 1957; *Wild Strawberries*), which is undeniably a masterpiece,

⁸ Let me acknowledge that Cora Sandel is often seen as an early Norwegian modernist, but that is not evident in these two short stories.

⁹ Although some have tried to make Dinesen into a modernist or even a throwback to romanticism, my personal view is that she has more in common with postmodernism. The stories we read are “The Roads Round Pisa” and “The Dreamers” from *Seven Gothic Tales* (Dinesen 1991).

though it is more literary than it is literature. It is a work easily read through the lens of existentialism and, at this point in the semester, students are grateful for the rather uplifting message that it is never too late to make new choices.

5. Postmodernism

The final section of the course is dedicated to postmodernism, peaking from 1960 through the present throughout the Western world. This is, once again, a moment when the course is not entirely in line with the wisdom of Nordic literary histories, which have had some difficulty with the term “postmodernism,” since it has been seen as connected to cultural conservatism and superficiality.¹⁰ In the wake of her Nordic Council Literature Prize for her novel *Bang* in 1997 (Willumsen 1996), Dorrit Willumsen came and spoke to my Masterpieces class. When I informed her that I presented her as a postmodernist, she said in a mildly baffled voice, “But in Denmark they tell me I am a modernist!” I use this anecdote to this day to illustrate how these labels are generated by scholars, and the writers themselves write the world as they see it, without concerning themselves overmuch with labels. I have made the argument for Nordic postmodernism elsewhere (Brantly 2017, pp. 9–13), and the texts read in this section of the class continue to be the most popular among the American college students, presumably because they finally see a world that seems familiar. I make the point that postmodernism is not a radical break from modernism, but rather a shift in tone, interests, and attitudes. The shortest definition of postmodernism I can provide is that it is modernism that has developed a sense of humor. The bullet list is as follows¹¹:

- Contemporary existence is in a state of confusion.
- The world is absurd—The modernist quest for coherence is abandoned.
- Contradictory orders of reality—A taste for science fiction and the eruption of the fabulous into the secular world.
- An interest in the products of culture. (A distinction between “high” and “low” culture is dissolved. Styles are mixed. Commercialism and the media are key players.)
- Disbelief in traditional literary values. (Originality is challenged through parody, narrative authority is undermined, stories lack closure, the canon is questioned, as is the “normal self”)
- Radical questioning of the integrity of language.

The first point indicates an adjustment in attitude compared to high modernism. The long-lasting struggle with the void caused by God’s death has diminished to the point that it is no longer a primary issue. One has grown accustomed to the lack of a purposeful design to the world, and rather than feeling the isolation and anguish caused by being abandoned by God, we are left with a mild case of confusion. The world appears absurd at times, because of the lack of reason and purpose, and one simply acknowledges that is the way things are. Our sense of reality is challenged by realities that contradict our common everyday experience of reality, whether that be by presenting a dystopian future or allowing patently “unreal” elements to disrupt the illusion of a plausible fiction. This draws attention to the fact that narratives, stories, fictions are made things, and not a representation of reality. While possessing an interest in both social issues and artistic issues, postmodernism’s main focus can be stated as an interest in the products of culture. The dynamics of cultural construction are of chief interest. Cultural attitudes are examined and exposed as constructed, not natural. Modernism took itself very seriously, and literature was a form of high culture. Postmodernism calls into question

¹⁰ For example, the Danish critic Morten Kyndrup, in his 1997 essay on “Postmodernism in Scandinavia” (Kyndrup 1997), suggests that postmodernism did not really make it to Sweden and it has already died out in the rest of Scandinavia (p. 377). A lively press debate raged in Sweden about the existence of Swedish postmodernism in the 1980s, and soundly rejected it, for the most part. My book, *The Historical Novel, Transnationalism, and the Postmodern Era: Presenting the Past* (Brantly 2017) argues strongly and, I hope, persuasively, that postmodernism has been and is alive and well in Swedish literature.

¹¹ This list has been informed by my general reading about postmodernism, but has been most strongly influenced by Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Hutcheon 1988).

the distinction between high and low culture (think Andy Warhol's soup cans or the proliferation of literate crime novels). Styles can be mixed, so that "serious" novels use the formulae of popular fiction. Narrative collage is a device that is sometimes used. Pervasive forces that appear to shape our modern culture are commercialism and the rise of media, so they become a strong interest. There is no objectivity, everybody wants something from you, and postmodern narratives tend to raise questions, rather than providing answers. The disbelief in traditional literary values strongly overlaps with the previous point of looking at the products of culture. Modernism valued originality and artists who created new forms of expression. Postmodernism holds the view that nothing is original under the sun, and parody can come into play, as well as literary interrogations of literary classics (see Dannie Abse's *The Strange Case of Dr. Simmonds and Dr. Glas* (Abse 2002) or Bengt Ohlsson's *Gregorius* (Ohlsson 2004), both of which re-visit the story of *Doctor Glas*). Occasionally this can result in nostalgia, a painful longing for a simpler time with clear-cut values (see the popularity of Jane Austen films, paired with the postmodern parody *Pride & Prejudice & Zombies* (Grahame-Smith 2009)). The protests of the 1960s brought about a suspicion of authority in all of its forms, including narrative authority. As mentioned before, there is a tendency to raise questions rather than provide answers, which often results in texts with a lack of narrative closure. Readers must provide their own answers, if there are any. Connected with questioning the distinction between "high" and "low" literature is the general process of questioning the literary canon: Why are there so many white men? This, in turn, leads to a questioning of the "normal self," which for the purposes of the class, is defined as "white, male, and monied." This construction of the "normal self" has left its stamp all over Western culture. Finally, the modernist suspicion of language has been ratcheted up a few notches, and is now a radical suspicion of language. All language can do is re-present reality; it is not reality itself. At the same time, there is an acknowledgement that language is power. Whoever crafts the most persuasive story or the most attractive advertisement will have an impact on people's choices. Therefore, one must remain aware of the manipulative power of language.

There is too little time left in the semester at this point to provide examples of all of these issues, but students quickly get the point nonetheless, because they are able to find examples of these things everywhere. They are surrounded by them. We start by looking at two different approaches to feminism from the 1970s: Bjørg Vik's "Portrommene" (Vik 1984; "The Entryways") and "Oppbrudet" (Vik 1984; "The Breakup") read in combination with an excerpt from Gerd Brantenberg's *Egalias Døtre* (Brantenberg 1985; *Egalia's Daughters*). After Moa Martinson and Cora Sandel, Bjørg Vik's tales seem somewhat familiar, and not particularly postmodern. Even so, the third-person narrator undermines her authority by taking the perspective of one of the characters. The point is to explore the experience of "non-normal selves," women, and move them towards the realm of "normal." Gerd Brantenberg creates a contradictory reality in which women or "wim" are the dominant normal selves and explores all the ramifications of that power shift. Language presents the most obvious realm of impact and, in the brilliant English translation, all the "sexist" terms in the language are red-flagged and flipped (Men = menwim; Women = wim; fele = female; mafele = male). Dorrit Willumsen's "Voksduken" (Willumsen 1982; "The Wax Doll") explores the shallowness and the existential void created by our commercial/consumer society. Jan, the handsome wax mannequin from a wax museum, is much easier for our unnamed narrator to relate to than the complicated man who becomes her husband. The husband does not remain complicated for long, as he is apparently murdered while the couple is on their honeymoon. When my class asked Willumsen who had committed the murder, she replied "I don't know," and suggested three different possibilities (the doll, the narrator, or a random stranger). That was a splendid example of relinquishing narrative authority. Herbjørg Wassmo's "Hvor nært er nært nok" (Wassmo 1983; "How Close is Close Enough") provides a terrifying look at the extremes to which commercial media might go to make a profit (a magazine has stapled live birds into a magazine). P.C. Jersild's *En levande själ* (Jersild 1998; *A Living Soul*) has long been a favorite of the pre-med students in the class. The narrator is a human brain in an aquarium in a laboratory. The novel explores what it is that makes us human, the ethics of using experimental animals, and the compromising

effect that a profit motive can have upon scientific research. Jersild most obligingly wrote his own postmodern prequel to the novel, *Ypsilon* (Jersild 2012), which the students can only hear about, since it has not yet been translated. The final novel of the semester is Peter Høeg's *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (Høeg 1995; *Smilla's Sense of Snow*). Smilla challenges the normal self in terms of both gender stereotypes and mixed ethnicity. The novel mixes "high" and "low" in that it is a best-selling mystery/thriller with valuable literary and cultural points to make. A dash of science fiction is included in the form of the meteor that might be a silicon-based life form. There is ample confusion as Smilla searches for an elusive truth, which seems absurd when it is revealed, and despite the conventions of the mystery genre there is a lack of closure. The very last line tells us: "There will be no resolution" (Høeg 1995, p. 469).

6. Conclusions

This course tells a simplified narrative of the Nordic countries moving from the Modern Breakthrough via decadence to modernism, which, due to the passage of time and historical and cultural change, transitions to postmodernism. By focusing on this narrative and highlighting the pioneers of Scandinavian literature, the Nordic countries are presented as solid participants in European literary and cultural history. Further, the social realism of the Modern Breakthrough emerges as one of the Nordic countries' distinct contributions to world literature. This interest in social realism never really dies out, and I would argue that it has resurfaced with a vengeance in the Nordic crime literature that has become so popular across the world. The Nordic countries have been on the cutting edge of literary developments, yet they have their own distinct voices.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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