

Til Ungdommen – To Youth

by Robert Powell

On the 22nd of July 2011 Anders Behring Breivik, a thirty-two year old Norwegian, set off a car bomb outside government buildings in Oslo killing eight of his fellow countrymen. An hour and a half later, dressed as a policeman and after a twenty-five mile drive and a short ferry crossing, he landed on the small island of Utøya where the Norwegian Workers' Youth League was holding a summer camp. There he shot and killed sixty-nine more people, some of them at point blank range. His victims included fifty-five teenagers, one of whom was fourteen.

A few days later, one of the journalists outside the courtroom in Oslo is reported to have told Breivik's lawyer to 'tell (his) client to burn in hell'. However the reaction of thousands of other Norwegians, especially young ones, was altogether more interesting and very typically Scandinavian. They came out onto the streets and they sang.

In the days that followed the mass killings the world's press descended on Oslo. The backdrop to their reports almost always seemed to be the same: streets filled with crowds of people, sometimes carrying candles, sometimes holding red roses in the air, sometimes holding each other closely in their grief, but almost always singing, and singing one song in particular. There was, in all the sorrow, through all the tears, a thread of defiance. You could see it in their faces and you could hear it in the way they sang. 'Døden skal tape!' – 'Death shall not prevail!'

Til Ungdommen – To Youth – was written in 1936 by the poet Nordahl Grieg (a distant relative of the composer Edvard Grieg). It was then set to music by Otto Mortensen in 1951. It has now become one of the modern classics throughout Scandinavia. For me it was part of the soundtrack behind a wonderful, happy and creative part of my life. When I heard it being sung after July's tragedy I felt compelled to learn more about it, and also to translate it. There have been many translations already, including, so I am told, one that has been approved by Grieg's publishers. None that I have so far seen has really satisfied me. Some will tell you that translating poetry is impossible.

Grieg was a controversial figure who lived in troubled times. Born in 1902, he was brought up in Bergen. He went on to study at the University of Oslo and, for a short time, at Wadham College, Oxford. He interrupted his studies to work as a seaman on a cargo boat that took him first to Australia and then home via the Suez Canal. This experience, and the conditions in which his shipmates were obliged to serve, left a lasting impression on him. Further adventures followed. He travelled in Europe, to China during the civil war, to Moscow for two years, and then to Spain during the civil war there – all the time working as a war correspondent or gathering material for novels and plays. For a time he was Chairman of the Norwegian Friends of the Soviet Union.

When the Germans invaded Norway in 1940, Grieg volunteered for service in the army. But it wasn't long before he made his way to England. He became a war correspondent again, but this time as part of the military and with the rank of captain. In 1943, while reporting on a raid on Berlin, his Lancaster bomber was shot down. He and all his crewmates were killed.

Til Ungdommen has become an anthem for social and popular democracy in Scandinavia, and for pacifism. Yet its author was, amongst other things, an apologist for Stalin's show trials in the nineteen-thirties. How do you explain the contradictions in the life and work of such a talented and complex man? The best I can come up with is that poetry, like ministry, can be very surprising.

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A poem by Nordahl Grieg, translated from the Norwegian by Robert Powell

Kringsatt av fiender,
gå inn i din tid!
Under en blodig storm -
vi deg til strid!
Kanskje du spør i angst,
udekket, åpen:
hva skal jeg kjempe med,
hva er mitt våpen?

Her er ditt vern mot vold,
her er ditt sverd:
troen på livet vårt,
menneskets verd.
For all vår fremtids skyld,
søk det og dyrk det,
dø om du må - men
øk det og styrk det!

Stilt går granatenes
glidende bånd.
Stans deres drift mot død,
stans dem med ånd!
Krig er forakt for liv.
Fred er å skape.
Kast dine krefter inn:
døden skal tape!

Elsk og berik med drøm
alt stort som var!
Gå mot det ukjente,
fravrist det svar.
Ubygde kraftverker,
ukjente stjerner -
skap dem, med skånet livs
dristige hjerner!

Surrounded by enemies,
your time has come!
Now, in this deadly storm,
take up the fight!
Perhaps you are fearful,
out in the open and with no cover.
What will you fight with,
where are your weapons?

This is your sword,
and this is your shield:
a belief in life
and in humankind's worth.
For the sake of our future,
seek it and nurture it.
Die if you must, but
make it grow and make it strong.

Steadily down the line
the canon shells surge on.
Stop their deadly drive.
Stand up to them!
War is contempt for life.
Peace is creative:
throw yourself into it.
Death shall not prevail!

With your dreams, love and enrich
everything that was great.
Embrace the unknown future
and wrest from it the answer.
With spared lives and daring minds,
go out and build
the unbuilt power stations
and the unknown stars!

Edelt er mennesket,
jorden er rik!
Finnes her nød og sult,
skyldes det svik.
Knus det! I livets navn
skal urett falle.
Solskinn og brød og ånd
eies av alle.

Da synker våpnene
maktesløs ned!
Skaper vi menneskeverd,
skaper vi fred.
Den som med høyre arm
bærer en byrde,
dyr og umistelig,
kan ikke myrde.

Dette er løftet vårt
fra bror til bror:
vi vil bli gode mot
menneskenes jord.
Vi vil ta vare på
skjønnheten, varmen -
som om vi bar et barn
varsomt på armen!

The human race is noble,
and the Earth is rich!
If want and hunger are to be found,
then it's down to fraud.
Stamp it out! For life's sake,
injustice shall fall.
Sunshine and bread and spirit
belong to all of us.

The weapons of war will lose their power
and be brought down!
We shall build respect for humanity
and we shall build peace.
If in your right hand
you hold something precious,
you cannot raise your arm
to kill.

This is our shared promise,
each to each:
we will bring blessings
to the people's land.
We will take care of beauty
and we will take care of warmth,
as when we gently carry
a child in our arms.

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