

mandarins de la vérité désincarnée et des certitudes révolutionnaires. Nouveau procès de Galilée, c'était aussi celui de l'aveuglement scientifique et du refuge derrière un savoir inaccessible. Réaction de l'époque contre l'hégémonie culturelle française et allemande sur le Danemark, Erasmus Montanus se voit curieusement réactualisé par un réalisateur délirant qui sert pour les costumes Ulla-Britt Söderlund (*Barry Lindon*) et pour le reste un étonnant cocktail détonnant de Commedia dell'arte, de Monty Python au pays de Glauber Rocha, d'esprit loufoque baigné dans le baroque...

Mais derrière ce délire d'images et de mise en scène (tout le contraire de l'ethno-colonialiste

*Orfeu Negro*) se glisse une fable cruelle sur toute tyrannie du Logos. Peu importe que la terre soit runde ou plate, c'est de la cultiver qu'il importe seulement. La leçon politique s'accompagne ici d'un véritable plaisir des oreilles et des yeux en faisant sienne la phrase de Cocteau: «On ne peut gifler un intellectuel, il fait toujours semblant qu'il n'y a pas de gifles».

La terre est plate est de ces giffes cinématographiques qu'il est toujours bon de prendre, surtout lorsqu'elles provoquent ce grand éclat de rire, qui à la réflexion, rend cette gifle plus dure encore.

V.L.T.

*Libération*, 28.11.1979

## VEJEN TIL LAGOA SANTA

### Recent Fiction

by George Kearns

The reward of book-reviewing, really its only justification, is the pleasure of discovering a neglected work of extraordinary quality and of having the opportunity to bring it to the attention of a few readers and friends. A dark inversion of that pleasure is the occasional chance one has to warn against some blurbbed and publicized danger to public safety. (Example: the much-advertised "novel," *Infante's Inferno*, a complacently obsessed memoir of its creator's active, unremarkable sex life in pre-Castro Cuba, about which I say nothing but avoid it unless you're interested in bruising your sensibility. Which of course many are.) Let's talk about a work that offers intelligence and surprise on every page, Henrik Stangerup's *The Road to Lagoa Santa*, a book that should have readers as long as people read, but which, although published half a year before I'm writ-

ing, appears to have gone unnoticed in this country. (It will be available next year in an edition published by the Quality Paperback Book Club.) Stangerup's work is an imaginative reconstruction of the life of a once-celebrated man whose reputation has fallen victim, ironically, to survival of the fittest among scientists - the fittest in this case being his almost exact contemporary and rival theorist, Charles Darwin, who affords him brief, respectful nods ("that excellent observer") in *The Voyage of the Beagle* and *The Descent of Man*. His name is in no reference work in my local library, except for an aging *New Century Cyclopedia of Names*, where one may read: "Lund, Peter William, b. at Copenhagen, June 14, 1801. d. at Lagoa Santa, Minas Gerais, Brazil, May 8, 1880. Danish naturalist." Behind that skeletal entry lies an extraordinary life,

one that took Stangerup's genius to match with sympathetic curiosity, and his art to shape and re-imagine as boldly and beautifully as he has done.

As a young scientist, Lund spent three years in Brazil in the late 1820s, a time and place when it seemed that a collector had only to take a walk to return with discoveries:

"Every stone he picks up at the beach, when the incoming tide permits a seaside excursion, is covered with a foam-like substance always differing in consistency, color, shape, and structure. His study of these colonies of small organisms is like an enchantment.

He can hardly imagine a painting lovelier than these rocky basins whose crystal clear waters appear in the vertical searing sun more transparent than air itself. Their walls are carpeted several inches thick with small creatures of the purest hues from azure and scarlet to orange and vermilion, and whose floor is ornamented with thicket of algae and corals."

Lund returned to Europe in 1829, with a reputation based on his early papers and collections, completed his doctorate, and associated with the continent's eminent scientists and intellectuals, including the great von Humboldt, who directed him back to Brazil. "Once again," it seemed clear to Lund, "Providence, spoken through the mouth of von Humboldt!" In 1832 he returned to Brazil, settling eventually in the remote interior village of Lagoa Santa, where his work inexplicably came to a halt in 1845. He died there thirty-five years later, Europe having become for him a matter of letters, books, an ideal, and an occasional distinguished visitor who had made the long journey on muleback to pay homage to the famous, but now silenced, scientist. (The visitors had to put up at Lagoa Santa's primitive tavern, waiting for days before Dr. Lund might agree to see them, and sometimes were sent away without an audience.)

Near Lagoa Santa Lund had come upon extraordinary caves filled with a treasure - the preserved bones of unknown races of extinct, gigantic creatures. Ten industrious years were spent digging, studying, cataloguing, trying

out theories to account for these unaccountable beasts and the unaccountable ages in which they lived, and shipping both bones and theories back to Europe. The last bones prepared for shipment, the first great phase of his work completed, Lund was packed and ready to return to civilization: Then something happened. "Something was wrong," a Danish nephew remembered years later, "something which he glimpsed over there but did not mention in his letters." Stangerup's novel begins as Lund makes a solitary, ceremonial farewell visit to his caves. He has lived under Providence, certain that all is controlled by Divine Will, that in all events of his life in Brazil "there has been a profound truth, a coherence woven of the finest threads," that "the detail leads to the whole as the whole leads to insight into the Creator's Plan... in which the goal is attained in the realm of Freedom and Reason; the realm of Man." Now suddenly the beloved cave presents a physically and mentally painful and paralyzing anti-version of "strange nameless larvae struggling not to be sucked down into the black depths. Nothing is revealed. Everything is chance and darkness is the master of the universe." Stangerup's presentation of the mysterious event, in which the cave speaks in signs beyond the interpretation of Reason, rivals another piece of bravura writing about a similar experience, that of Mrs. Moore in the Marabar caves of *Passage to India*. Dr. Lund never returned to Europe. Thirty-five years in Lagoa Santa lay ahead, years in which he struggles to recover or reconstruct a language that had forced or enabled him all his life to suppress or flee in panic from manifestations of wildness, disorder and evil, and that led him to reject Darwin's solution to the very problems he had been working on. The *Origin of Species*, which arrived at Lagoa Santa about fifteen years after Lund's glimpse into the heart of darkness, was glanced at and shelved forever, as a work which may give rise to all sorts of mischief, which perceives struggle and destruction, where the Creator's order and harmony ought to prevail, which can unleash a new morality excusing all evil, postulating that the weak exist in order to

be crushed by the strong. Doesn't Darwin believe in anything at all... Does he derive aesthetic pleasure from the vision of one vast everlasting bloodbath?

(The young Darwin, too, although Lund did not know it, had been disturbed by the *tristes tropiques*, and resolved never to return. "I shall never again visit a slave country." Vivid memories of extremes of cruelty and repression provoke an extraordinary passage at the end of *The Voyage of the Beagle*, although, thinking of misery at home, he seems to beg an essential question with a subjunctive: "If the misery of our poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin." He remains safely in his study in Engand, compiling his disturbing vision from thousands of facts, including a few compiled years before by Dr. Lund, who was struggling to attain another vision, privately, in a remote Brazilian town.)

Stangerup has placed Lund's eccentric life within a context of European thought, a web of competing languages from romantic literature, Enlightenment philosophy, theology, the politics of revolution, and a science that posited harmony and progress. He recreates brilliantly a time in the history of science when a lone investigator like Lund could have to himself a territory that today would be parceled out to hundreds, and in which so much unaccountable data might appear so paratactically that all one could do to make sense of it was make up stories about it. The life of frontier Brazil, in all its otherness from the civilization that meant so much to Dr. Lund, is vividly imagined: the wildness of the slaves at Carnival; a grotesquely provincial "society" party in Rio, where all the guests, to Lund's horrified eyes, are whitened sepulchres; the difficulties of travel and

communication, of conducting meticulous European science in the isolation of the forest; the daily life of Lagoa Santa, where priest and witch doctor thrive, while just down the road a world-famous intellectual struggles against chaos and insanity in an eccentrically over-structured household. Stangerup's prose moves effortlessly from a neutral ground of reportage into all the modes required by his complex vision of the interaction between the world and the individual, retaining a respectful refusal to coarsen by psychologizing the ultimate mystery of an individual life. On the final page he shifts into an inspired imagining of Dr. Lund's triumphant funeral. The witch doctor drops seven parrot feathers into the grave, and the town of Lagoa Santa bursts – as Dr. Lund wanted it to do, and left money to encourage – into a three-day fiesta, which gets a bit out of hand, or opens at least into the wildness Lund spent a lifetime avoiding, when it is lit by fireworks wrapped in pages of the European mind, torn from books in the Doctor's library.

Unable to read Danish, need I say, I have to sense Stangerup's prose through Barbara Bluestone's excellently-written translation, which seems to be in an English that exists only for this book, one which we will never hear again. Not that it is odd or unidiomatic, rather that it seems so fused with the paces, perspectives, reticences and revelations of this telling that it becomes its own dialect of feeling. Bluestone's English has undoubtedly profited from what T.S. Eliot called a "cross" with another tongue. At any rate, *The Road to Lagoa Santa* gives the reader language that is not boring.

*The Hudson Review*, USA, 1984

*The Road to Lagoa Santa* (Marion Boyars, £8.95) is the road to death, the journey of a Danish naturalist P.W. Lund to the interior of Brazil in 1833. He existed there for 45 years, sending back to Europe large collections of pre-

historic bones gathered from caves. He corresponded with Kierkegaard and Cuvier, Darwin and Humboldt. Working with the ancient world, he became to represent Death himself. In local lore, Death was the man with the sceler-

tons, searching and searching as if he were looking for someone. He was looking for his own death.

Henrik Stangerup has made two journeys to Lagoa Santa and has read much Victorian research in order to write this brooding, intense, evocative novel. It is an extraordinary entry into the mind of an obsessive man, whose dedi-

cation to palaeontology became the dissolution of his own old bones. Stangerup's recreation of time past has an immediate grasp, as though the hand of a corpse were warm within our touch.

Andrew Sinclair,  
*The Times* 8.3.1984

## Henrik Stangerup à l'ombre de Kierkegaard

Il n'est pas facile d'être un écrivain danois. Depuis ses origines, cette petite province de l'Europe du Nord hésite. Entre la puissante Allemagne, ses fièvres romantiques, son goût pour les systèmes totalisateurs, et le sombre besoin d'aventure des navigateurs scandinaves; entre la terre, les cultures pieusement engrangées sous un ciel bas, les petits villages tranquilles et propres, et les horizons infinis de la mer, les voyages dont on ne revient que par hasard; entre l'acceptation sereine des desseins divins, une intériorisation forcée du péché, et la pure révolte, le blasphème, l'écllosion et la prolifération de toutes les formes et de toutes les forces de la vie.

Nombreux dans le passé furent les artistes danois qui résolurent la contradiction par la fuite. Les lettres danoises sont par nature cosmopolites. Marquées ici par l'Angleterre, là par la France, ailleurs par l'Allemagne ou par la Norvège.

*Lagoa Santa*, roman d'Henrik Stangerup, peut être lu comme une expression de ce mal d'être. Il raconte l'histoire d'un savant naturaliste, le docteur Lund, que tout promet à une brillante carrière dans les académies et les muséums, et qui préfère au confort et aux honneurs bourgeois la folle exploration – nous sommes en 1835 – d'une des contrées les plus reculées du Minas Gerais, de la nature la plus sauvage, la plus cruelle, la plus hostile: elle parviendra à bousculer les certitudes de cet homme

vigilant, méthodique et raisonnable jusqu'à ce qu'il perde l'esprit.

Lagoa Santa est aussi le récit de la lutte continue que se livrent l'intelligence et la nature, le besoin de comprendre et la force d'exister. Lund, par sa profession, par sa culture, par ses origines, fait partie de ces hommes qui ont tout sacrifié à l'explication, au classement systématique de tout ce qui existe afin de faire entrer chaque chose dans le vaste plan d'une raison universelle. De la reproduction du ver de terre aux cataclysmes des origines terrestres, tout doit pouvoir s'organiser selon de longues chaînes de causalités dont chaque découverte, aussi minime, aussi infime soit-elle, doit permettre de distinguer les maillons.

Et voilà que la découverte, dans des grottes de Lagoa Santa, de squelettes pétrifiés d'animaux de la préhistoire vient brusquement bouleverser la conception même de ce laborieux assemblage. Comme si les temps se chevauchaient, que cette logique se tordait, que la nature se moquait de l'ordre et de l'harmonie.

Ce n'est pas pour rien que ce roman d'aventures éraboite les pas, hésitants et chancelants, du plus célèbre mais aussi du plus fantasque des philosophes danois, Søren Kierkegaard, dont la silhouette apparaît d'ailleurs dans le récit – on le surnomme « la Fourchette » à cause des piques redoutables dont il se sert pour désarçonner ses interlocuteurs. Car *Lagoa Santa* est évidemment aussi le récit d'une crise métaphysique

dont l'exploration brésilienne n'est que le signe et l'occasion. S'il accepte les fatigues, les privations, les maladies, la morsure des araignées, les nuits traversées de fièvre et de cauchemars, Lund croit le faire au nom de la science, au nom d'une foi inaltérable dans la providence divine et dans le Plan que Dieu a donné à sa création: mais il le fait aussi pour fuir la malédiction qui paraît devoir frapper tous ses proches - la référence au *Dies irae* du Danois Dreyer vient obligatoirement à l'esprit, - fuir la révolte contre le créateur qui ne manquerait pas de l'assaillir s'il devait rester à attendre tranquillement la mort dans l'horizon confiné d'une famille.

Il devient une sorte d'ermitte, hâve, décharné, hagard, qui, au lieu d'aller rechercher la vérité spirituelle dans le désert et dans la méditation surait choisi de le faire au contraire dans le travail acharné et aveugle, au milieu de la faune et de la flore les plus extravagantes, les plus dangereuses, en cet endroit qui est peut-être celui de l'apparition de la vie et qui conserve jalousement ses mystères les plus monstrueux.

Récit, méditation, description historique de la vieille Europe laborieuse et optimiste de l'âge romantique. *Lagoa Santa* est enfin une fable, très actuelle celle-là, et chargée d'ironie in-

quise. Henrik Stangerup a toujours occupé dans les lettres de son pays une place marginale. L'établissement local n'a guère apprécié les questionnements incessants de cet écrivain et de ce cinéaste qui, au nom du passé, de l'histoire, des sources spirituelles de la civilisation danoise, remettait en cause le paisible optimisme et la croyance dans le progrès à petits pas de la social-démocratie dominante. Il appréciait d'autant moins que grandissait à l'étranger la réputation de ce mouton noir.

Aujourd'hui, bon gré mal gré, le Danemark accepte de reconnaître Stangerup le révolté, Stangerup le sulfureux, comme l'un de ses grands artistes. Mais la fable de *Lagoa Santa* est une oeuvre qui ne sera pas facile à avaler. Elle dit à peu près que le vieux monde est en train de s'assoupir d'un sommeil mortel et que le salut, s'il y en a un, n'empruntera pas les routes goudronnées de la bonne et saine logique, mais celle de l'ascèse, de la destruction de tous les systèmes et de la reconquête spirituelle de soi. Une voix étrange dans le concert de la littérature européenne.

Pierre Lepape,  
*Le Monde*, 8.11.1985

## Tidstavle

1937-55 Født i København 1. september. Søn af professor, dr.phil Hakon Stangerup (søn af lærer Axel Stangerup og lærer Ingrid Nielsen) og skuespillerinde Betty Söderberg (datter af Emilie Voss og den svenske forfatter Hjalmar Söderberg, død i København 1941). Bror til forfatterinde, cand.jur. Helle Stangerup (født 31. oktober 1939). - Skolegang: Krebs skole, Gammel Hellerup og kostskole i Eastborne, England. Bopæl: Øster Søgade, Østerbro, København. Fra 1950 I.H. Mundts Vej, Sorgenfri.

1956-60 Nysproglig student fra Stenhus Kostskole. Teologiske studier ved Københavns Universitet. Medredaktør af Stud. teol. og medforfatter til og skuespiller i teologrevyerne (sm.m. Johannes Møllehave). Studieophold i Paris ved dominikanerklosteret le Saulchoir og specialeafhandling om Søren Kierkegaards indflydelse på Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre og Albert Camus. Noveller og artikler i søndagstillæg og tidsskrifter, bl.a. BLM, Hvedekorn og Perspektiv. Medarbejder ved Studenterbladet og journalistikar ved Kristeligt Dagblad. Litteraturanmelder ved Den konservative Generalkorrespondance, Christiansborg.

1960-63 Litteraturanmelder ved Ekstra Bladet. Medforfatter til Det radikale Venstres kulturprogram (63) og til Studenterscenens collager I-V. Medstifter af Collagetruppen og medforfatter til dennes forestilling *Kom herind, jeg vil fortælle Dem noget* (Alléscenen 63). Holder talen for Albert Dam da denne modtager kritikerprisen. Bor en sommer hos PH i Hørsholm og redigerer PH-cavalcaden *Vi er selv historie* (63). Ansøger via det cubanske konsulat i København om at komme et år til Cuba som sukkerrørsarbejder om dagen og lærer filosofi fra Kierkegaard til Camus om aftenen, ud fra den overbevisning at der på Cuba er tale om en eksistentialistisk revolution som beskrevet af Sartre i *Sartre on Cuba*. Intet svar. - Rejser i England, Frankrig, Spanien og Marokko.