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The novel *Ikaros* by Axel Jensen as an example of road literature in Norwegian prose of the 1950s

The aim of this article is to present the novel *Ikaros* by Axel Jensen as an example of road literature in Norwegian prose of the 1950s. Analysis of the book, which is set in Algeria in 1953/54 and has biographical overtones, is conducted in relation to themes of history, adventure, ethnography, mysticism and mythology. It is also shown against the background of the development of Norwegian literature in the 1950s, in connection with its most important writers and phenomena, and highlights some of the mythical symbols and archetypes that are embedded in European literature and culture. Additionally, it shows – in a prophetic way – how the identification of the novel's main protagonist with the symbol of Icarus was fulfilled in the author's later life.

Keywords: Norwegian literature, road (travel) literature, mysticism, Scandinavian literature, travel to desert, Greek mythology, Icarus, spiritual pilgrimage, Algeria

1. Introduction

Road (travel) literature is one of the oldest literary genres in the history of world literature and has occurred in every historical epoch. For instance, it is present in Sumerian myths, e.g. the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the main protagonist goes on a long journey to find the gift of immortality just after the world floods.[1] The motif of the journey is also present in the *Bible* – described in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the other patriarchs, and in the wandering of the people of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land, or in the journeys of Jesus and the apostles through Roman Palestine and other Mediterranean countries. The theme of travel appears in Greek and Roman literature from Homer's *Odyssey*, through Herodotus and Pausanias, to Virgil (*Aeneid*) and Ovid. Similarly, in later times – the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the modern age – the journey has

[1] *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*. Translated by Andrew R. George (reprinted ed.). London, England: Penguin Books. 2003 [1999].

always been an important part of literature, both historical, religious (pilgrimage), mythological, geographical, non-fiction, fiction and fantasy. From literature connected with utopian writing there are, among others, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Ludvig Holberg's *Niels Klim's Underground Travels* (1741)[2] or Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872). However, it is impossible to list here all the authors in whose literature the motif of travel has played a leading role. For travel is an integral part of our lives reflected in the history of mankind as, according to Hans Christian Andersen, "To travel is to live."[3]

Moving on to the literature of the 20th century, especially in the second half, it is important to note the increased importance of travel in literature, which is also linked to the fact that in modern times people travelled a lot more than they used to.[4] Whereas travel used to be the privilege of a few, it was now a fairly common way of spending time, whether related to work or to leisure. The revival of road literature in the second half of the 20th century has, of course, continued into the first decades of the 21st century.

After the Second World War, in the post-war period, the first novel in the road literature genre to be set in North Africa was the book by Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), which was his debut novel. Its plot is set in the desert in Morocco.[5] According to Arne Melberg it "[…] is the novel that serves as a model for literary desert journeys with metaphysical dimensions" (Melberg 2005: 217). In the 1950s and 1960s, road literature in American fiction experienced a particular 'boom'. Among its most prominent representatives was John Steinback (1902–1968) with his non-fiction *Diary of a Journey to Russia* (1948) and, above all, the novel *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962). Another leading writer in this genre was Jack Kourack (1922–1969) with his novel *On the Road* (1957), often referred to as a beatnik manifesto.

Considering the theoretical literature on this topic the most significant positions include *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (Percy G. Adams 1983) and the already quoted "Å reise og skrive – et essay om moderne reiselitteratur" (Melberg 2005). Melberg's book in particular contains many references to the novel *Ikaros* which shed new light in connection with literary criticism on Jensens' work.

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2 Published in Latin as *Klimii iter subterraneum.* The book was published in 1742 and translated, among other languages, into Danish and English.

3 This motto is taken from the sentence: "To move, to breathe, to fly, to float, to gain all while you give, to roam the roads of lands remote, to travel is to live." H.C. Andersen *The Fairy Tale of My Life: An Autobiography* (Paddington Press, 1975).

4 Regarding travel literature in the 1930s it is worth mentioning the essays of the Swedish author Harry Martinson – *Resor utan mål* ("Travelling without a destination", 1932) and *Kap farväl* ("Cape Farewell", 1933).

5 After the Second World War North, Africa became a popular destination for journeys for European and American writes. See Andersen 2022: 687; Melberg 2005: 38 ff.

2. An outline of Norwegian prose of the 1950s

After a period of reckoning with Norwegian attitudes in relation to the Second World War, which was present in Norwegian prose for several years after the end of the war, there was a gradual return to pre-war trends.[6] The most important literary forms were historical, folklore and psychological-realist novels, and in the early 1950s there was a revival of the novel of manners. Frequent literary motifs at this time were childhood and adolescence, which was evident in the work of many writers.

One of the most important prose writers of this period was Johan Borgen (1902–1979), author of among others the autobiographical *Lillelord* (1956), which was his most important and best-known novel.[7] Borgen's work was characterized by an experimental prose style, which can be found in several collections of short stories, as well as in the experimental novel *Jeg* ("I", 1959). Another prominent literary figure was Jens Bjørneboe (1920–1976), whose prose dealt with, among other areas, social themes, and exposing and criticizing the establishment of the 1950s.[8] In the novels *Jonas* (1955) and *Den onde hyrde* ("The Bad Shepherd", 1960), he attacked the school and prison systems, and argued that it was in these institutions in particular that the government showed its authoritarian character. Other literary highlights of the 1950s were two controversial novels by Agnar Mykle (1915–1994) *Lasso rundt fru Luna* ("Lasso Around The Moon", 1954) and *Sangen om den røde rubin* ("Song of the Red Ruby", 1956).[9] However, the erotic subject matter of these novels and the breaking of the taboos associated with it, led to legal intervention and a lawsuit, which negatively affected the author's further writing career. During this period, Tarjei Vesaas (1897–1970) established himself as one of the most prominent Norwegian writers of the 20th century with novels such as *Vårnatt* ("Spring night", 1954) and *Fuglane* ("Birds", 1957), where poetic descriptions were intertwined with the symbolism of the literary motifs that were present.[10] Torborg Nedraas (1906–1987), author of several collections of short stories and novellas, stands out in particular among the female prose writers of the period.[11] The subjects of her works were the fate of the Norwegian people during the Second World War and the social conflicts of the pre- and post-war years. In the 1950s, Kjell Askildsen

[6] Much of the post-war literature dealt with the question of why some people remained good Norwegian patriots, while others, seemingly ordinary people, served the enemy. Examples of this are Sigurd Hoel's *Møte ved milepelen* ("Meeting at the Milestone", 1947), Kåre Holt's *Det store veiskillet* ("The Big Fork", 1949) and Aksel Sandemose's *Varulven* ("The Werewolf", 1958), all of which provide psychological explanations of collaboration.

[7] *Lillelord* was the first part of a trilogy, the following novels were *De mørke kilder* and *Vi har ham nå* published in 1956 and 1957. For more about Borgen's writings, see Andersen 2022: 405–407.

[8] See Andersen 2022: 465–469.

[9] See Andersen 2022: 463–465.

[10] See Andersen 2022: 395–399.

[11] See Andersen 2022: 460–463.

(1929–2021) made his debut with the short story collection *Heretter følger jeg deg helt hjem* ("From now on I'll walk you all the way home", 1953).[12] From that time he concentrated on the short prose genre and is today considered one of Norway's best short story writers. Other prose writers include Finn Carling (1925–2004) and Bergljot Hobæk Haff (1925–2016), who also belonged to the experimentalist generation.[13] The new generation of young rebellious writers, on the other hand, found its spokesmen in the persons of Georg Johannesen *Høst i mars* ("Autumn in March", 1957)[14] and Axel Jensen (*Ikaros*, 1957; *Line*, 1959).[15] Both of these writers were new fresh voices in Norwegian literature of the 1950s.

All of the authors described above explored themes of alienation, freedom and the human condition, using innovative narrative techniques and lyrical language to convey the complexity of post-war society. The literature of the 1950s reflects Norway's efforts to rebuild and redefine itself after the war, capturing the collective psyche of the nation and its aspirations for a better future. Authors offered poignant reflections on social change, economic challenges and the changing cultural landscape, offering readers a window into the soul of the nation. Norwegian literature was then, as in other periods, influenced by international literary movements, incorporating elements of existentialism, modernism and social realism into its narrative.

3. Axel B. Jensen (1932–2003), his life and work

Axel Buchardt Jensen is one of Norway's most significant contemporary authors and is considered a classic writer. He was born in Trondheim into the family of Norwegian meat processing tycoon Finn R. Jensen, owner of "Axel Jensen Pølsefabrikk".[16] After graduating from high school he studied for a short while, then stopped and took various jobs while he wrote his first literary texts.[17] At the beginning of the 1950s, he travelled in North Africa, and this led to his literary debut, the novel *Ikaros. Ung mann i Sahara* ("Icarus. A Young Man in the Sahara", 1957), the plot of which is set in Algeria.[18] After the publication of his next novel *Line* (1959), which was very well received by the critics and subsequently translated into English

[12] See Andersen 2022: 474–479.
[13] See Andersen 2022: 472–475.
[14] See Andersen 2022: 482–487.
[15] See Andersen 2022: 475.
[16] Axel Jensen (1873–1955) established the meat company and he was the grandfather of Axel B. Jensen – the writer.
[17] Jensen published his first texts in newspapers, e.g. in *Morgenbladet*.
[18] Issued by the publishing house Cappelen Damm in Oslo. Subsequent editions of this novel from this publishing house were issued in 1989 and 2012. A new edition of the novel, illustrated by Frans Widerberg, was also issued in 1999 by JM Stenersens Publishing.

and filmed[19], he was hailed as a rising star of Norwegian prose and the successor to Knut Hamsun.[20] Later he published the novel *Joachim* (1961), whose action is set in Greece, as well as other locations. His importance for Norwegian and European literature is also linked to science fiction literature, which he launched in Norway with *Epp* (1965), a novel that describes a dystopian future. From the early 1970s until the late 1990s, Jensen authored various texts of fiction. He wrote the script for the comic strip *Doctor Fantastic* (published in the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet* in 1972), followed by the comic strip *Tago* (1979) and the animated film *Superfreak* (1988), as well as the comic strip *En mann for sin hatt: Alfred Jarry (1873–1907)* ("A man for his hat: Alfred Jarry", 1998). During the same period, the writer also published a collection of Indian-themed poems entitled *Onalila – en liten østvest-poesi* ("Onalila – A Little East West Poetry", 1974), an essayistic novel *Mor India* ("Mother India", 1974) and three autobiographical novels *Junior* (1978), *Senior (*1979) and *Jumbo* (1998). The follow-up to his first science-fiction novel was *Lul* (1992) and *Og resten står skrivd i stjernene* ("And the Rest is Written in the Stars", 1995), illustrated by the Norwegian artist Pushwagner.[21]

In addition to fiction, Jensen also published a series of articles and essays that focused on three major political and social issues. His collection of essays *Gud leser ikke romaner. En vandring i Salman Rushdies verden* ("God Does Not Read Novels. A Voyage in the World of Salman Rushdie", 1994), was a critique of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie and a defence of the freedom of expression. Another political text he published in the anthology *Det kollektive eventyr, «en bok om Norge, Europa og EU»* ("The Collective Fairytale. A Book on Norway, Europe and the EU", 1994).[22] This article discussed Norway's role as a future member of the European Union. The third main issue of great interest to Jensen was the treatment of sick and disabled people in modern bureaucratic society. This led to the publication of two books containing articles on the topic – *Den øredøvende stillheten* ("The Deafening Silence", 1997) and *Pasienten i sentrum* ("The Patient in the Centre", 1998).[23] Among his political writings, Jensen also found time to write a biography of G.I. Gurdjieff, entitled *Guru – glimt fra Gurdjieffs verden* ("Guru – Glimpses from the World of Gurdjieff, 2002). Moreover, Jensen co-authored his autobiography, *Livet sett fra Nimbus* ("Life Seen From Nimbus", 2002), with Petter Mejlænder.

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19 The novel *Line* – in English *A Girl I Knew* (1962). The movie *Line* ("The Passionate Demons", 1961), dir. Nils R. Christensen.

20 See Hesthamar 2014: 68.

21 With these science-fiction novels, Jensen created a dystopian vision of the future, following in the tradition of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and Ray Bradbury. Nevertheless, Jensen's novels are also different from these authors, as the tragic vision in his novels is complemented by comedy, giving them an ambiguous and absurd tone. In this way, Jensen's novels are similar to the satirical and parodic novels of Jonathan Swift and Kurt Vonnegut.

22 In this anthology Jensen contributed with the text "A Children's Disease".

23 All these articles describe what it means to suffer from ALS and, at the same time, not receive adequate assistance from the Norwegian welfare state.

For many years, Jensen had a controversial lifestyle, parallel to that conducted by the American beatniks and hippies of the 1950s and 1960s.[24] He lived for several years on the Greek island of Hydra, where he purchased a house and befriended, among others, Leonard Cohen.[25] After returning to Norway from Greece in the 1960s, the author settled in Fredrikstad and then moved to London, where he resided for several years. In the 1970s he lived in Sweden, where he met his second wife, Hindu Pratibha. In 1984, she and the writer sailed to Oslo aboard an old early 20th century schooner, which they moored in the city's harbor and lived aboard.[26] While living in the Norwegian capital, the writer was active in its cultural life and organized a number of events, including the *Oslo International Poetry Festival* (OIPF) in 1985 and 1986. In 1990 Jensen and his wife left Oslo and moved to Kristiansand. In 1993 he was diagnosed with an incurable disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), which left his body completely paralysed. He spent the last ten years of his life confined to bed, from where he dictated his articles and the texts of his novels to his wife.

Jensen received a literary award from the Abraham Woursell Foundation of Austria in 1965 for his novel *Epp*. In 1992, he was honored with the annual literary award from the publishing house Cappelen Damm for his novel *Lul*. For his essays on Salman Rushdie, he received the Carl von Ossietzky Prize from the International PEN Club in 1994. In addition to this, in 1996 he received an honorary award from the Norwegian Foundation "Fritt Ord".

The author influenced many writers and artists with his work, such as Dag Solstad, Ari Behn, Pushwagner and Frans Widerberg – the latter two also illustrated some of his novels. A number of documentary films have also been made about his life.[27] In 1993 Jan Ch. Mollestad published a book about Jensen titled *Trollmannen i Ålefjær* ("The Magician in Ålefjær"), while a biography about the writer by Torgrim Eggen was published in 2019.[28]

4. The novel *Ikaros* – a description and its characteristics

The novel *Ikaros* (1957) belongs to the genre of literary fiction based on the author's biography and personal experiences (Andersen 2022: 474–475). At the age of 21, Jensen travelled to Algeria with his Norwegian friend (who later separated from

[24] Impact of eastern mysticism, hinduism, free sexuality; abuse of narcotics and psychedelic drugs (e.g. LSD) etc.

[25] See Genoni, Dalziell 2018.

[26] The author of this article had the privilege and pleasure to become acquainted with the writer and his wife in 1989. He spent several months helping them in the renovation of their boat.

[27] See *Trollmannen Axel Jensen, del I: Ikaros; Trollmannen Axel Jensen, del II: Resten står skrivd i stjernene* (dir. J.Ch. Mollestad, 2012), https://vimeo.com/218301038; https://vimeo.com/218280604.

[28] See Eggen 2019. Tamanrasset is located approximately 1,900 km south of the country's capital Algiers.

him and returned to Norway), where he stayed for several months in 1953/54. There he travelled from the capital Algiers inland to Tamanrasset and on to a mountain valley, where he lived in a stone hut close to the cave of the French mystic, Maurice Nerval, who became his spiritual guru. In his book, the author includes many of his experiences and youthful adventures from the trip. It combines the characteristics of a travel novel with those of biography with psychological insights. The journey to the desert in Algeria which the main protagonist embarks upon is intertwined with the inner journey that he makes to the depths of his psyche.

The book's action begins on the streets of the capital Algiers, where the Norwegian traveler strolls and meets, among others, a sailor and, in a house of pleasure – the beautiful Angelina. In this part of the novel there are passages dealing with reflections on the importance of literature and moving closer to the source of reality in life. The main protagonist takes a distinctly skeptical view of the social reality that surrounds him, and in metaphysical considerations – e.g. concerning God – he reveals his arrogant and agnostic attitude, which is later put to the test during his expedition across the Sahara. In relation to this, he questions his own identity – "who am I as a person, who is my 'I'?" This eternal question runs through the entire journey perpetrated in the book. Its protagonist, setting out into the Sahara, undergoes a journey that is real, in the three-dimensional world, as well as one into himself, his psyche and his soul. In the first pages of the book, the author writes about it in the following way:

> In this way, you flow involuntarily with the current. You have placed your life in unseen hands and wait anxiously to see what happens to it. Your imagination reacts like a tuning fork to the dark, enticing the sound of a name. You are travelling towards the unknown, and at the same time it is like travelling into yourself. (Jensen 1957: 34)

After a staying in the country's capital, he travels by train to the town of Touggourt, and from there by bus to the Ghardaia oasis in Wadi Mzab – the land of the Berber tribes – Mzabites. He spends some time there, but the Sahara and an inner voice call him further to the south of the country, deep into the desert. The main protagonist surrenders himself to this journey further into the unknown, treating it as a spiritual wandering to the primordial beginning of existence, surrounded by the silence of the mystery of being.

From the land of the Mzabite people, he then sets off in a truck with alcohol smugglers all the way to the town of Tamanrasset, located approximately 1370 km south of the Ghardaia oasis.[29] On the way, they stop at El Golea, known as the queen of the desert, where at the local souk he buys, among other things, a blanket for five hundred francs (knocking the price down from three thousand). Driving on for more than three hundred kilometers to the next village, In Salah, the Norwegian

[29] Charles de Foucauld lived among the Tuaregs from 1901 to 1916, when he was killed by the Sanusijja brotherhood. In 2022, Pope Francis proclaimed him a saint of the Roman Catholic church.

traveler engages in conversations with smugglers that are at times quite hilarious and satirical.

The second part of the novel begins in Tamanrasset, the largest city in southern Algeria and the main Tuareg town, where the main protagonist stays until January 1954. There, he spends the first night in thorny scrub (with only a blanket at his disposal). The next day, he meets the local police chief Vigot and corporal Jacques Hirondelle, who promise him help to arrange accommodation. The latter also introduces him to the local French doctor Bobo, who in turn offers him the possibility to spend Christmas Eve together in his friends' company – in the bar and restaurant of the Hotel de l'Amenokal. This is how the Norwegian traveler meets the French captain Georges Masson and his Tuareg friend Khokkinor. They spend Christmas Eve together and share conversations about Franco-Arab politics, the Tuaregs, their customs and the various stories associated with them, while also enjoying alcohol and listening to the music of Debussy and Strauss, as well as admiring the dance of the Tuareg woman Tifukat. Later they go to the convent of the Congregation of the Little Brothers of Jesus built around the house where the Trappist Father Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916) lived and led a Christian mission among the Tuaregs for many years. Their conversation revolves around the Christian confession, faith and ultimate matters, and when asked about his confessions, the main protagonist admits that he is neither Catholic, Protestant nor atheist, but that he is a man who seeks the truth and does not restrict himself to any official religion.

While in Tamanrasset, the Norwegian traveler learns from a clergyman about the French mystic Maurice Nerval[30], who has been living for five years in his hermitage in the Thaza (Taessa) valley located in the Hoggar mountains – north of the town. He decides to make a trip to these mountains to meet the mystic and spend some time with him, in order to benefit from his teachings and the spiritual level he has achieved. The local Tuaregs call him *marabout*, the 'holy man'.[31]

The third part of the novel begins with a description of the main protagonist's journey on a donkey from Tamanrasset to the aforementioned valley lying east of Mount Assekrem. The journey lasts two days and is marked by both the resistance of the donkey and the difficulty of ascending the mountain. During the night before falling asleep, the young traveler meditates on the destination of his journey – the mysterious French mystic – and gazing up at the starry sky, contemplates instances of human destiny in terms of the symbolism of Greek mythology. This is where the myth of Daedalus and Icarus first appears in the novel – as a symbol of human attitudes, their choices and their fates. The author also cites other mythical figures:

[30] Maurice Nerval's character prototype was John Starr Cooke, the American mystic, whom Jensen met in Algeria, and who had a great influence on him.

[31] He was even treated by the Tuaregs as the incarnation of Charles de Foucauld.

> When Icarus was a prisoner in the labyrinth, his father, the wise Daedalus, gave him wings so that he could fly. And when Theseus entered the labyrinth, the wise Daedalus gave him Ariadne's thread so that he could find his way back to the light. For the adventurer, adventure is alive. He desires only the insane, the impossible and the miraculous. Orpheus in the underworld with his lyre. Prometheus with his stolen fire. Theseus with his sword. Sisyphus with his stone. Icarus with the sun on the bird's wings. All these dreamers in the desert of life. (Jensen 1957: 111)

On reaching the Thaza Valley, the main protagonist meets a Tuareg woman, Tehi, who lives there with her husband Mukazzem and their daughter Haddah. They look after a herd of goats, providing goat's milk to the French mystic.

From then on, a new phase in the Sahara journey, one with a spiritual dimension, begins for the main protagonist. This occurs thanks to his growing acquaintance with the French mystic Maurice Nerval, who leads an extremely ascetic lifestyle. During the first weeks of his stay in the Thaza Valley, the Norwegian traveler builds a hut not far from the Frenchman's hermitage (on the other side of the waterfall). At first the mystic, who is shy and closed within himself, is surprised that a Norwegian has come to visit him. As time passes, however, Nerval opens up to the writer, who often meets the Tuareg family and the mystic for conversations in which they get to know each other better. The Frenchman also visits the Norwegian and gives him advice on building the stone hut. Living in this shelter, in symbiosis with the desert mice, the main protagonist organizes his daily life in the desert, drawing on the experience of the French mystic.

At the end of February, the Norwegian traveler goes to see Nerval once again. The latter already treats him differently from previous meetings, considering him as one of his own, as part of a community living in the desert – almost as a part of the Sahara. At this point, the Norwegian decides to find out more about the reasons why the mystic decided to turn his back on civilization and go and live in the desert. He also intends to ask him about his past, his professional life, and his family, as well as his experiences during the war. However, he abandons this plan when, in an incredible moment, the French mystic, as if in a trance and with difficulty, begins to share his memories from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. There are terrible memories in which appears a Pole (Bronowski), who was punished with a slow agonizing death for spitting in an SS man's face, but who, according to witnesses, saw the Light just before death. The same Light was experienced by Maurice Nerval, who was already separated from civilization in the desert. This confession of the French mystic makes a great impression on the main protagonist, which he reflects upon in the following days and weeks during his stay in the Sahara.

Another important thread which appears later in the novel's narrative is the Norwegian traveller's relationship with the Tuareg woman Tehi. He gradually befriends her, seeing her quite often, especially when her husband Mukazzem goes on long-distance trading expeditions. His relationship with her becomes closer,

more intimate and intertwines with his fascination with Tuareg folklore, customs, music, and the charm of women – independent of men and also free in the erotic sphere.[32] The Norwegian spends many evenings around the campfire with the Tuareg family, enjoying lamb and scones, being served with tea, listening to them singing and playing the *imzad* – a Tuareg fiddle with one string. Occasionally Nerval joins the bonfire, but does not participate in the feast.

During Easter, Father Claude Mairé, Jacques Hirondelle (now a former corporal) and four nuns arrive at Thaza. They visit the locals, bring dates and condensed milk, and hold an Easter service. After their departure, the author describes how the desert snakes – horned vipers – wake up to life after their winter slumber. Then he mentions that Nerval lives in symbiosis with a certain horned viper that visits him from time to time. At the time of these visits, it entwines itself around his body when he is meditating, and he, devoid of fear, allows it – feeling that the snake's movements harmonize with his inhalations and exhalations.[33]

One day, unexpectedly, Joseph Schlumberlaum, a German prospector of precious minerals arrives in the valley. After getting to know him, the Norwegian traveler learns that he was a sergeant of German troops in Norway during the war. The protagonist treats him with a great deal of distance, and seeing that the purpose of his Sahara expedition is primarily the search for minerals he maintains contact with reluctance, while the French mystic refuses to meet him at all. As the German does not have a tent, the Norwegian lets him spend the night in his hut. However, when he wakes up early the next morning, he notices that the German has gone, and with him a packet of sun-dried tomatoes, nuts and shoes with uppers. The protagonist, therefore, goes out into the desert to find Schlumberlaum and retrieve his stolen belongings. He goes out barefoot, taking with him a water bottle, a bandage and a pistol. Stepping carefully, he pays attention not to trample on a viper or scorpion. Then he walks further into the Sahara. It is very hot, he thinks about returning, but realizes that he has lost his way. He feels that his determination to find Schlumberlaum could end very badly and that death is creeping up on him as it is getting hotter and his burning feet are already refusing to obey him. However, just as he begins to faint, he has various hallucinations and hears strange sounds. Suddenly, devoid of strength, he falls to his knees, prays to God and begs to be rescued. After some time, he hears the voice of the French mystic and feels the strong arms of Mukazzem, who lays him down on a straw mat. The main protagonist, having experienced God's providential help, is fortunately saved.

Over the many days that follow, Nerval cares for the writer and he slowly recovers. Talking about death, the mystic shares a thought with him: "– Death is like

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[32] Tuareg women have a very high social standing. A man always has to ask her permission when making various decisions, and she has a lot of freedom in choosing her husband (or lover).

[33] The influence of Kundalini mysticism can be seen in this practice, where the symbol of the snake plays an important role.

a deep well," he said, "but the Light can become so great that it fills all the darkness, and then you will see that the well is also an illusion" (Jensen 1957: 152).

In the penultimate chapter, the Norwegian is still convalescing in his hut, where he is visited by the French doctor Bobo and the Tuareg woman Tehi. As he lies on his mat and recovers, he has time to reflect on life and death as well the meaning of literature and art. This is followed by further reflections that the main protagonist has had throughout his journey and his stay in the Sahara, such as the basic question of his own identity, of who he is. He then realizes how much the journey has changed him and purged him of his illusions about the world. He also feels that the journey is slowly approaching its end.

The final chapter of the novel opens with a description of a desert storm that hits the Hoggar mountain range. The storm causes much destruction in the Thaza valley. The roof of the writer's stone hut is blown off and he loses almost all his possessions, including his manuscript. In these extreme conditions, the doctor, Bobo, arrives in the valley, and three days later the German explorer of precious minerals, who is emaciated and almost dead. Suddenly, on the other side of the ravine, where the French mystic lives, the shouts of a brawl between him and Mukazzem can be heard. No one knows what they were quarreling about but perhaps the local Tuaregs have lost faith in him as a *marabout*, a 'holy man'. At one point, the Tuareg grabs the tail of Nerval's favorite snake and smashes its head against a rock. This leads the mystic into despair. Then, in agreement with his wife, Tehi, the Tuareg slits the throats of all seven goats that had fed Maurice all those years of his stay in the Sahara. After this, the Tuareg family roll up their camp and leave the Thaza Valley without a word of farewell, heading west towards Mount Assekrem. Everyone who has been guided by the French mystic, understands that their adventure in the Sahara – both literal and spiritual – is now over.

On the way back, the German explorer dies and the others, slowly but happily, approach the largest city in southern Algeria. The proximity to Tamanrasset leads the main protagonist to reflect on his incredible journey, which was both a great adventure and a spiritual search to find his place in the world and what is most important – the truth about the world and life. The Norwegian traveller reviews his journey in the context of the Greek mythology of Daedalus and Icarus.

> I flew towards the horizon to soak it up. But things turned out differently than I intended. I also borrowed my life from the earth. I can thank the earth for everything and curse it. At one point in my life, when I was in my twenties, I reached a valley in the desert. Its name was Thaza. There lived the sage Daedalus. The creator of wings. He gave me hope, hope for a different and higher life that we have to earn because we are human. He became my hero. He held the key to the mystery of the labyrinth. He gave meaning to life – clarity where in reality it was hopelessly tangled. He made my little ant soul swell. He tempted me to believe what was easiest to believe. (Jensen 1957: 172)

Then, at the end of his journey and on the last page of the novel, the main protagonist wonders where on earth the light can be found and where there is hope for his generation and the generations to come.

> In a flashback that released something in me, I saw that hope for us young people, hope for the Earth, does not lie on an external plane, not in a more secure economy, not in deeper armchairs, shorter working weeks, bluer skies and bigger cinema screens. Nor is hope to be found in a desolate valley in the Sahara. Hope can be found in the wonderful soil that gives growth to the flower of consciousness. (Jensen 1957: 173)

And a few sentences later the novel ends with the following words:

> In all the images and thoughts that drag my consciousness this way and that, there is a distinction: doubt and hope, confusion and triumph.
> I have reached the end of my way. (Jensen 1957: 173)

5. Greek mythology, its symbolism and esoteric mysticism

As was mentioned above, there are references to Greek mythology and its symbolism. As well as the symbolic significance of the novel's title, the figures of Orpheus, Theseus, Narcissus and, above all, Daedalus and Icarus are mentioned. The author even compares himself to the latter, who, like him, wishes to fly as close as possible to the light, which, however, ends in disaster and a fall to earth (into the sea). Indeed, at one point in the novel, the author gives an extended lecture on the meaning of travel, adventure and dreams of their fulfilment, in the context of Greek mythology.

Moreover, in the book, the protagonist repeatedly compares himself to Icarus[34], an archetypal symbol who became a form of prophecy for the further life and fate of its author. Indeed, the fate of Icarus became the main protagonist's (and the writer's) destiny. Jensen writes:

> Icarus was an adventurer, and for an adventurer there is only one sin: Lack of courage. He must enter the labyrinth himself, inhale the anaesthetic gases, and then find his way out into the light again. We all have a labyrinth and a mythical creature at the bottom of ourselves, we all have to challenge ourselves to find ourselves.
> With Greek mythology on your side, you inevitably become optimistic. So many beautiful ideas emerge. Here's me, Icarus, looking for his wise father Daedalus in the center of the labyrinth. (Jensen 1957: 111)

By weaving ancient archetypes and symbols into his novel, Jensen fits into the tradition of European literature, from the Renaissance and Baroque periods onwards,

[34] About the meaning of the Icarus' symbolism in Greek mythology, see March 2014: 260.

which used them in its content and narrative. In Norwegian literature – in both prose and poetry – the presence of ancient symbols and archetypes are common, from the work of Petter Dass, through Ludwig Holberg, Henrik Ibsen, Jonas Lie, Olaf Bull and many other 20th century writers and poets.[35]

As stated above, the influences of Eastern mysticism (the motif of 'light') expressed, for example, in the writings of Peter Ouspensky and Georg I. Gurdjieff (which the author was reading at the time), as well as Carl G. Jung's psychology, all had an influence on Jensen.[36] Moreover, both the Judeo-Christian tradition – 'light' as a symbol of God – and Eastern mysticism (close to Hinduism and Buddhism) resonate with the metaphor of 'light'.

In addition to these references to ancient mythology and Eastern mysticism, the novel also features quotations from the poetry of Thomas S. Eliot and Virgil.[37] Rich descriptions of Tuareg folklore and customs are present, e.g. women's dances, singing and music, character descriptions; the atmosphere of wandering through the Sahara with all its vastness and beauty but also the dangers that are present is conveyed. Reading this novel, one can also know and feel the atmosphere of life in colonial Algeria a few months before the outbreak of the war for liberation in 1954.[38] Finally, it contains reflections on the role of literature and art in human endeavor and social life.

6. Conclusion

The novel *Ikaros* was very well received by critics and readers after its publication in 1957. It was acclaimed critically in more than 30 newspapers and magazines. For example, the magazine *Vinduet,* Kjølv Egelund, which reviewed the novels published in 1957, expressed its praise as follows: "Here is one of the most sensational works of fiction this year. Brilliant and rich, brilliantly talented, fascinating."[39]

The book was published in an edition of six thousand copies, with further editions of the novel in 1989, 1999 and 2012. After the publication of his next novel *Line* in 1959, Axel Jensen was recognized as one of the most promising writers of the new generation. *Ikaros* was a fresh voice in the Norwegian literature of the 1950s. Describing a form of spiritual pilgrimage it fit well with trends in search

35 See Andersen, Aarseth 1993.

36 Writing about his impressions of meeting the French mystic Maurice Nerval in the context of his difficult past and learning from him – the author again compares himself to Icarus flying to the light.

37 The poetic verses come from T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and Virgil's *The Aeneid*, Book 6, I.

38 The war for independence in Algeria lasted from 1954 till 1962.

39 See Hesthamar 2014: 68.

of what constitutes the essence and meaning of life as well the pursuit of their dreams by the post-war generation.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Melberg compares Jensen's *Ikaros* to the books of Jack Kourack and Paul Bowles. He writes:

> Axel Jensen's *Ikaros* was published in 1957, at the same time as Kerouac's *On the Road*. Both are quasi-autobiographical, but at the same time have elements of Bildungsroman: they tell the story of (and are narrated by) an aspiring writer who gains life experience on the road or in the desert. Both express youthful promiscuity combined with wanderlust and a certain 'nihilistic' attraction to 'nothingness'. And for Jensen, there is both an eroticism and a 'nothingness' to be found in the North African desert, which immediately places him among Paul Bowles' followers. Jensen also seems to allude to the final words of *The Sheltering Sky* when he allows his narrator to conclude: 'I have reached the end of my way.' (Melberg 2005: 141)

Icarus, the ancient archetype, became a symbol of the writer's life and fate. In the 1960s and later, the writer indulged in numerous experiments with narcotics and psychedelic drugs (e.g. LSD), which over time weakened his creative powers and negatively influenced his health.[40] Therefore, although he published some important books, such as. *Epp* in 1965, later in the 1960s and the 1970s he had a long break from writing and publishing. Like Icarus, the writer aspired to be as close to the light as possible by taking, among other things, the above mentioned 'shortcuts' of narcotics and drugs. However, the spiritual quest shown in the book was not abandoned, rather he expressed it in his adoption of Hinduism in the 1970s and his visits to India (the homeland of his wife Pratibha), to which he dedicated a collection of poems and an essayistic novel.[41]

Summing up, the story of Axel Jensen's life and writing can both enrich and teach us. On the one hand, he has given us the fruits of his great imagination, talent and search for the truth. On the other hand, his life became a form of warning about the consequences of one's choices and lifestyle. However, taking into consideration the importance of his literary work and its impact on Norwegian literature and culture, critics and literary scholars view him among the classic writers of modern Norwegian prose, while his youthful novel *Ikaros* is considered to be one of the most important Norwegian novels of the 1950s as well as a significant book of European road literature in the 20th century.

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[40] The consequence of the disease he contracted in 1993 – amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), which confined him to bed for ten years. In contracting this incurable disease, he – an acclaimed and famous Norwegian writer – became like Icarus, who fell abruptly to the ground after the sun's rays melted the wax on his wings.

[41] A. Jensen, *Onalila – en liten østvestpoesi* (Cappelen Damm, 1974); *Mor India* (Cappelen Damm, 1974).

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