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Lång, Fredrik

My life as Pythagoras. (Mitt liv som Pythagoras.) (Swedish)

Helsinki: Schildts. 316 p. EUR 21.20 (2005). ISBN 978-951-50-1510-5/hbk

Not knowing beforehand the Finnish-Swedish author of this book, the reviewer expected – from its title and from the fact that the publisher had sent it to *Zentralblatt* – a probably misleading introduction to Pythagoras, the Great Mathematician, in fictional form. He was pleasantly surprised. First of all, the novel is a fine piece of literature, worthy the tradition of such writers as Eyvind Johnson, Pär Lagerqvist and Villy Kyrklund (to stay within the Swedish language area), who also have interpreted and reflected upon the past (for instance, ancient Greece) in order to get insight into the present. Secondly, not even the utterly sceptic will find claims about Pythagoras’s mathematics that cannot be readily accepted – Lång does not go beyond the thesis that “everything is (or is in) number” (which Lång connects to the emergence of mint-based monetary economy, agreeing with Alfred Sohn-Rethel and George Thomson) and interest in the harmony of sounding strings (no numerical ratios are mentioned here). What Lång is after is first of all Presocratic philosophy (including Pythagorean wisdom) in its connection with the society and Lebenswelt within which it developed; next (but implicitly) he aims at offering new perspectives on our own world view through understanding of the conquests, conditions and shortcomings of ancient thought.

The discovery of incommensurability is mentioned, and Hippasos’s assumed demonstration that the ratio between the diagonal and the side of a regular pentagon as well as of a square cannot be expressed in numbers plays an essential role in calling forth the final catastrophe – but Lång points out in a note that this discovery postdates Pythagoras’s death, irrespective of what his book tells.

The same note begins, “the most fanciful biography of Pythagoras (before this one) was written by the Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichos” (emphasis added). In general, Lång draws on those ancient legends which suit his plot, changing them as it fits his purpose. For instance, a couple of ancient writers claim that Pythagoras’s father Mnesarchos was a wealthy Phoenician merchant – Lång turns him into a guest worker emigrated from Sidon. Similarly, a (genuine) Thracian god Zalmoxis was claimed – thus Herodotos – by the Greeks at Hellespont to be a former slave of Pythagoras who, when given liberty, returned to Thrace and used dubious tricks to show himself immortal and in possession of superior wisdom; Lång makes him not only a slave who, when liberated, follows Pythagoras to Croton, but also the alter ego of Pythagoras. Philosophically this Zalmoxis is rather a Cynic, but when he gets the opportunity he is more given to worldly pleasures than Diogenes and other real followers of that doctrine are supposed to have been; and it is the genius and strategy of Zalmoxis (certainly modelled after the story told by the Hellespontiac Greeks) and not Pythagoras’s airy ideas that serve when the council and citizens of Croton accept and flock to his school.

But there is even more to this being Pythagoras’s unconfessed dark side. Pythagoras, according to the legends as well as the novel, remembered his earlier incarnations – but Zalmoxis claims to remember the same previous existences, and therefore he, slave

when they meet, must be the same person as Pythagoras, free at that moment though having been even he for five years an accountant-slave wielding numbers in commercial practice; this (but not only this) allows many disquieting reflections about freedom versus slavery in their connection to fate versus hope (etc.).

Disquieting is also the narrative structure. A first introduction is spoken by a voice which claims to be the modern reincarnation of Pythagoras as well as Zalmoxis, a second by Pythagoras waiting by the sea after the catastrophe (but that the divulcation of incommensurability has led to catastrophe is only revealed much later). Part I then seems to start as an account of what Pythagoras tells a boy who has come looking for him there about the years from his father's expatriation to the moment the tyrant of Samos bestowed Pythagoras himself a slave. Yet in the beginning of Part II (reaching from that moment until the establishment of the school) this slave – namely, Zalmoxis – states to have written Part I and to be writing Part II. Part III goes until the catastrophe, and starts with Zalmoxis's dialogue with the torturers that try to make him confess to have killed Hippasos – but soon it goes on with Zalmoxis speaking (in his own defence) to the reader.

At the end Lång offers 14 pages endnotes. Some of them reveal, for instance, that a dialogue, a passage or a scene is borrowed mutatis mutandis from Thucydides, Xenophon or Hesiod, or point out that a particular scene he has described is in conflict with real history; others are shorter or longer philosophical reflections, one indeed a philosophical essay of six pages.

Readers who get interested in the relation between the novel and its ancient sources (where such exist) may take advantage of Leonid Zhmud's recent "Pythagoras and the Early Pythagoreans" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 61–103. "But you need not", as Lång says after giving a reference in one of the notes – the qualities of the book have little to do with its use or misuse of the imaginations or rare facts of Lång's ancient predecessors. At most one will gain a glance into the secrets of the author's workshop.

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