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"Hærværk (Havoc) is one of the best novels to ever come out of Scandinavia. As discomfoting as beautiful, it portrays the fall of a man, and it's so hypnotically written that you want to fall with him."

Karl Ove Knausgård,
author of 'My Struggle'

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Review by Mark Elliott

Tom Kristensen, *Havoc*, translated by Carl Malmberg. Published by Nordisk Books, October 2016.
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'*Hærværk* (Havoc) is one of the best novels to ever come out of Scandinavia.' Karl Ove Knausgård's verdict is printed on the cover of this new edition from Nordisk Books of Tom Kristensen's 1930 novel in the 1968 translation by Carl Malmberg. This reviewer, as a mere Englishman reading the book for the first time only in translation and half a century after that translation appeared, cannot legitimately do more than offer a personal and superficial assessment.

It is a remarkable book – vivid, sometimes painful in the clarity of its perceptions of human disillusion and degeneration, always intelligent in its use of language. The central character, Ole Jastrau, is literary editor at the newspaper *Dagbladet*, with a particular taste for poetry. A short poem written by an unwelcome visitor to his apartment, the Communist son of another eminent literary figure and one of Jastrau's main companions in his descent into the abyss of alcoholism, includes lines which epitomise the book and have apparently become among the most often-quoted in the Danish language: 'I have longed for

shipwrecks, for havoc and violent death'. The lines, which appear early in the book, are quoted again towards the end on page 573 (it is a seriously long read) when Jastrau has arrived at a sort of emotional plateau from which he might just clamber back into social acceptability.

Politics, and visionary poetic images, are active themes throughout 'Havoc'. Jastrau and some of his associates are rebelling against what they see as the conservatism and complacency of the Danish establishment at the time. Frequent and extreme recourse to alcohol is one expression of this rebellion, although heavy drinking appears to be universal in the Copenhagen of the period. The hallucinatory images which accompany the later stages of these debauches are brilliantly described. Religion is another sub-theme; part two of the book is entitled 'Behold the Man' or *Ecce Homo*, a reference to Jesus in the Christian scriptures, and Jastrau is inclined in moments of self-realisation to mutter 'behold the man' to himself. Jesuit priests figure in the story and are sometimes seen by Jastrau as black-garbed devils sent to torment him. But his own musings are often deeply philosophical, on the nature of freedom of choice, on the motivation for committing crimes, on his own identification in certain moods with Christ and his occasional ambition to convert to Catholicism. At one point he describes himself as a simple ordinary man trying to find the meaning of absolute freedom; but then he reverts. 'There is something I want, and when I drink I sometimes feel for a moment that I've captured it. Liquor is the only substitute

for religion, shall we put it that way – just for fun?' In contrast Steffensen, the poet/ Communist responsible for the 'longed-for shipwrecks' lines, is more extreme: 'Language is a slut. People should never have taken up with her. No, they should never have learned to talk. That's what's ruined our lives.'

There are some more conventional scenes: tender moments for Jastrau with various women, and with his small son; vivid passages in prison; the fire which destroys Jastrau's apartment. There are some good phrases – 'I'd like to write a book about the Danish national characteristics – deceptive blue eyes and blond unreliability'; an out-of-the-way part of down-town Copenhagen seen 'as if a cloud had passed in front of the sun'; an ambulance which swept by 'with the speed of a shiver running down a spine'. There are echoes of other literary styles, a Kafka-like sense of oppression, inconsequential conversation reminiscent of Chekhov, an almost Homeric repetition of epithets when one character is described as 'the inevitable Kjær' twenty or thirty times in the last section of the book. There are some Americanisms in the translator's style which jar occasionally with the English reader, and other slightly odd usages which may reflect the flavour of the period. But the whole novel has a sweep and an urgency, a compelling quality of dialogue and description, which carry one through. As Knausgård puts it in the quotation on the cover, the book 'portrays the fall of a man, and it's so hypnotically written that you want to fall with him'.