

# Aurorae Borealis Studia Classica

Vol. IX

*Biergtrollden* (1803 / 1861)

by Adam Oehlenschläger

digitized, with a biographical introduction  
and summary of contents by Laura Massini Nielsen  
and a prose translation by Per Pippin Aspaas

*Aurorae Borealis Studia Classica* (Classic Studies of the Northern Lights) is [a series](#) of digitized texts, with biographical introductions and content summaries, edited by Per Pippin Aspaas and published by [Septentrio Academic Publishing](#), University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway (UiT). The texts as such are already in the public domain; all further content is open-access except when stated otherwise.

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The ninth volume in the series derives from an MA course in Scandinavian literature entitled 'Dem Polarlicht auf der Spur. Wissenschaftshistorische und kulturwissenschaftliche Erkundigungen', given by Marie-Theres Federhofer at Humboldt University Berlin in 2019. In her introduction, MA student Laura Massini Nielsen analyses the role of the aurora borealis in *Biergtrolden* (The Mountain Troll), the very first poem of the seminal debut collection of *Digte* (Poems) by the Danish Romantic author Adam Oehlenschläger. The article begins with a biographical introduction, followed by a short overview of the Danish Golden Age that provides context for the reader. Massini Nielsen then briefly outlines Oehlenschläger's works and, in conclusion, focuses on the poem *Biergtrolden* and on the role of the aurora borealis in it. As always, this issue of *Aurorae Borealis Studia Classica* includes a facsimile of the original, *Biergtrolden*, as it was published in the very first edition of *Digte* (released in December 1802, official year of publication: 1803) and subsequently reprinted in vol. 24 of the collected works of Oehlenschläger, *Poetiske Skrifter* (Poetic Texts, 1861). As a supplement, a prose translation of the poem is included.

I would like to thank Marie-Theres Federhofer for the idea of including works of fiction in the series and Kira Moss for pointing to *Biergtrolden* as a potential text for inclusion. I would also like to acknowledge the non-profit database with transcriptions and commentary of older Danish poetry, Kalliope, and its organizer, Jesper Christensen.

- The editor

Items digitized for this volume:

A copy of *Digte* (1803) digitized with optical character recognition by The Royal Library of Copenhagen. See [Biergtrolden only](#) or [entire e-book](#)

A copy of *Poetiske Skrifter* (1861) digitized with optical character recognition by The Royal Library of Copenhagen. See [Biergtrolden only](#) or [entire e-book](#)

# ADAM OEHLENSCHLÄGER (1779–1850) AND THE DANISH GOLDEN AGE

## Biographical Introduction by Laura Massini Nielsen

Adam Gottlob Oehenschläger (also spelled Øhenschläger) was born on 14 November 1779 in Vesterbro, Copenhagen. At the age of thirteen, he had an incidental meeting with the Norwegian poet Edvard Storm (1749–1794). As a result of this encounter, he enrolled at a *Realschule* (a high school focusing on modern languages and natural sciences rather than Greek and Latin) run by Selskabet for Efterslegten (The Society for Posterity), an important institution headed by Storm, where he taught a class about Norse mythology. There, Oehenschläger first became acquainted with the poetics of his ancestors' religion. He left school in 1796 and tried to become an actor at the Royal Danish Theatre (Det Kongelige Teater) without great success. During this period, he met the Ørsted brothers for the first time and noted in his diary: 'Today I made the acquaintance of two young students; they are excellent people, and we are likely to become the best of friends!'<sup>1</sup> The two Ørsted brothers not only became his friends, but also his mentors and teachers. Hans Christian (1777–1851) – a brilliant physicist and chemist, famous for his discovery of electromagnetism in 1820 – especially influenced Oehenschläger's professional path by persuading him to abandon the stage in order to become a lawyer. In 1800, Oehenschläger took his graduation exam, financed by H.C. Ørsted, and initiated studies in law at the University of Copenhagen but never finished, as he decided to devote himself exclusively to literature.

In the summer of 1802, the Norwegian natural scientist and philosopher Henrik Steffens (or Heinrich Steffens, 1773–1845) returned to Copenhagen after a long visit to Schelling in Germany, where he had met several early Romantics, such as the brothers Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Ludwig Tieck. In his lectures at the university, Steffens

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Ch. Christensen: *Hans Christian Ørsted: Reading Nature's Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 32–33; 70.

introduced the Danish public to these new Romantic ideas. After his meeting with Steffens, who was eager to spread the doctrine of German Romanticism in Denmark, Oehlenschläger wrote his famous poem *Guldhornene* (The Golden Horns), about the loss of two golden horns, symbolizing a union of the Nordic past with the national present. The result of his new enthusiasm manifested itself soon after in a volume of poems published in December 1802 entitled *Digte* (Poems, official year of publication: 1803). The ideals of Henrik Steffens gave Oehlenschläger the courage to break with eighteenth-century literary traditions, and particularly *Guldhornene* (included in *Digte*) marks a turning point in the history of Danish literature. Oehlenschläger became one of the greatest poets of the Danish Golden Age and authored Denmark's national anthem, *Der er et yndigt Land* (There is a Lovely Country). Written in 1819 for a contest to create a new national anthem, the song had become the national anthem by the 1920s despite not actually winning the contest a century earlier. Rather than praising the king, the national anthem focuses on Norse mythology and old legends, as well as the country's natural beauty. Additionally, Oehlenschläger delivered many great works for the theatre and brought the ideas and the tone of Romanticism to the stage as no one else could.

In 1805, Oehlenschläger received a government grant to study and travel through Germany and other countries, giving him the opportunity to visit Goethe and other leaders of the Romantic movement. He returned to Copenhagen in 1809 and became a professor of aesthetics at the university there in 1810. In 1829, Oehlenschläger was officially crowned Scandinavian Poet Laureate. He died in Copenhagen in 1850, at the age of seventy-one.

### **The Danish Golden Age**

The Golden Age is a term that describes a period in Danish spiritual and cultural life, roughly 1800 to 1850, during which art and culture blossomed. Despite several national losses in the early nineteenth century (the disastrous bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807 and Norwegian independence in 1814, among others), science, philosophy, art, literature, and creativity and culture in general developed rapidly, particularly in response to German Romanticism.

As already mentioned, it was the philosopher Henrik Steffens who introduced German Romanticism to Denmark, while Oehlenschläger was pioneering in his application of Romantic philosophy to poetry. Oehlenschläger was a great source of inspiration for other Danish authors such as N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), B.S. Ingemann (1789–1862), and Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875; see *Aurorae Borealis Studia Classica*,

[Vol. VIII](#)). Science and philosophy prospered, thanks to figures such as the above-mentioned physicist Hans Christian Ørsted and the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855).

The Golden Age coincides with a general European-wide rise in nationalism, an ideology that permeates the intellectual sphere in this period. Art was increasingly employed in the making of a Danish national identity. The use of Danish history, the national landscape, Nordic mythology, and folk poetry all became important sources of inspiration for Danish Golden Age artists and authors. Oehlenschläger's poetry in many ways established a literary tradition that greatly outlived him, and today several Golden Age writers are included in the Danish literary canon, among them Oehlenschläger himself.

Oehlenschläger's *Digte* was the starting signal for the new literature. With it, he assured himself a position as the leading figure of Danish Romanticism. He further strengthened his position with many short dramas that served as points of reference for later writers and would form part of the Danish cultural tradition until far into the twentieth century. Oehlenschläger created a new, sensuous poetic language and brought new life to poetry. He turned Nordic mythology and legend into a living source of inspiration for literature and cultural life and breathed new life into Danish drama through his many successful tragedies and historical plays. His works include lyrics, epics, and dramas, amongst others: *Aladdin, eller Den forunderlige Lampe* (Aladdin, or The Mysterious Lamp, published in *Poetiske Skrifter* I–II, 1805), *Nordiske Digte* (Nordic Poems, 1807), *Axel og Valborg. Et Sörgespil* (Axel and Valborg: A Tragedy, 1810), and *Corregio. Tragedie i 5 Akter* (Corregio: A Tragedy in Five Acts, 1811). He is today known as the national poet of Denmark.

### *Digte*

Apart from *Guldhornene* and *Biergtrolden*, Oehlenschläger's debut includes *Sanct Hansaften-Spil*, a lyrical drama combining literary satire with poetic discourses on love and nature, as well as song lyrics, ballads, and a dramatic piece. *Digte* was received as nothing short of a revelation of the unknown possibilities of Danish song, a unique feat in the history of Danish literature. The poet and literary critic Peder Ludvig Möller (1814–1865) is said to have called *Digte* 'the cornerstone of nineteenth-century Danish poetry. No other Danish book has so wonderful a fragrance of culture-history, breathes forth such a wealth of glowing memories, of fiery ardour, of the joy of life, and

of impossible hopes for the future'.<sup>2</sup> The author desired to interpret Nordic history in the light of his romantic awareness of universal order.

On the cover of *Digte*, there is a quote by Goethe: 'Was ich irrte, was ich strebte / was ich litt und was ich lebte – / sind hier Blumen nur im Straufs!' (What I err'd in, what corrected / what I suffer'd, what effected / To this wreath as flow'rs belong).<sup>3</sup> This could be read as a tribute by Oehlenschläger to one of his literary idols, as well as a subtle invitation addressed to the German poet.



Portrait of Adam Oehlenschläger by Emil Bærentzen.  
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<sup>2</sup> P. L. Möller, quoted in William Morton Payne, 'Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger', *The Sewanee Review* 8.2 (1900): 133.

<sup>3</sup> *The Poems of Goethe* (transl. by Edgar Alfred Bowering), London, 1853, p. 44.

# BIERGTROLDEN

## Interpretation and Summary of Contents by Laura Massini Nielsen

*Biergtrolden* (The Mountain Troll) is a 293-verse poem that appears on the first pages (pp. 3–15) of *Digte*. The poem combines elements from Old Norse mythology and Scandinavian folklore, such as the mountain troll, with the veneration of Scandinavian nature, such as the spruce forests characteristic of southern Norway.

What is immediately striking is the freshness and dynamism that characterise the description. The dramatic mood of the poem arises from, among other things, the opening imperatives ('See' [See!], 'Hör' [Hear!], verses 1 and 4) that immediately involve the reader in the situation described. In addition, its dramatic personifications and evocative language draw the reader into its dark mood right from the incipit.

The construction of the sentences is clear and efficient and the contrasts are well highlighted. Also, the use of adjectives and verbs is more colourful and dynamic than it is in most contemporaneous poetry. Oehlenschläger employs an innovative language and linguistic vitality that speaks more to feelings than to the intellect and appeals to all the senses. In order to evoke feelings and immerse readers in this lugubrious atmosphere, Oehlenschläger mentions several natural phenomena in his poem: creaking woods, wind, storms, and the flames of the northern lights.

It may be assumed that the author wanted to celebrate nature and the intimate relationship to it by hyperbolizing its features – a common motif in Romantic literature. In this context, nature itself is no longer a mere background but, rather, an animated figure that plays an active role in the poem.

The northern lights are depicted as red burning lights on the black celestial arch, perhaps as an echo of Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*: 'A bright light has been seen



proceeding from the heavens in the night time, [...] so that there has been a kind of daylight in the night'.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, there is a possible mythological interpretation. Oehlenschläger may have used Norse mythology as a reference point, according to which the aurora borealis is a special phenomenon: an earthly manifestation of the gods. In particular, the Vikings believed that Odin, the main god and regent of Asgard, lived in Valhalla, where he was preparing for Ragnarok – a series of events that would bring about the end of the gods and the beginning of a new world. In Norse mythology, Ragnarok was predestined to become Odin's greatest battle, so he needed the bravest warriors at his side. During every battle on earth, he chose fighters prepared to die by his side in Valhalla. The Valkyries – female mounted warriors wearing armour and spears and shields – were tasked with leading Odin's chosen warriors to Valhalla. The northern lights were believed to be reflections of the Valkyries' armour as they brought the warriors to Odin. The aurora was also believed to be a shining, pulsating bow that pointed the fallen warriors to their final resting place. In this mythological context, it is interesting to note the contrast between the darkness of the troll and the brightness of the northern lights, e.g. in verses 55–58: 'overalt han skuer, kun ei til Himlen, hvor Nordlyset luer' (his gaze turns in all directions, except for the direction of the sky, where the northern lights sparkle). The dark creature moves fast in his gloomy world, as if he does not want to be seen by the celestial Æsir (Norse gods). His red eyes peer everywhere, yet he is afraid of glancing at the sky, where his enemies live.

In summary, the northern lights appear twice in Oehlenschläger's poem *Biergtrolden*, namely, in the first verse: 'See Nordlys lue' (See northern lights glow) and in the fifty-seventh verse: 'hvor Nordlyset luer' (where northern lights sparkle). The author describes the aurora as a burning light with red flames that illuminate the dark celestial arch. These lights first appear right at the beginning; however, they do not seem to have a predominant role in the rest of the poem. In this case, the northern lights should perhaps be evaluated in the wider context of the Romantic view of nature, as a tile in the larger Romantic mosaic. Indeed in Oehlenschläger's poetry, we find a personification of nature, where the poetic language addresses nature's divine character in a manner similar to the mythology of the legendary Norsemen. Consequently, it can be argued that Oehlenschläger's aurora is neither a merely rational, natural phenomenon – at least not as we consider it today – nor a phenomenon that can be scientifically explained. Rather, it is something divine, spiritual, and mythological that perfectly crowns the Scandinavian Romantic picture of the universe.

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<sup>4</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History of Pliny* (ed. and transl. by John Bostock and H.T. Riley), Vol. I., London, 1855, p. 63 (Book II, p. 33).



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