

Inger Christensen

Eminent Danish poet whose work followed mathematical models

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Inger Christensen, who has died aged 73, was one of the most significant European poets of the 20th century. She was Danish, and it is a misfortune for any great writer to be confined to a language with few readers, but her work, like that of her compatriots Hans Christian Andersen and Søren Kierkegaard, may be destined to find admirers in many languages.

Regarded as the foremost poet in her native country since the 1960s, Christensen's translated poetry was enthusiastically adopted by German readers. Even more in Germany than in her native country, her name was mentioned as a Nobel prize candidate. Though this eluded her, she was awarded most of the important literary awards in Scandinavia and Germany.

Her reputation rests on just five volumes of poetry. Three of them were published in the 1960s, including the most famous, *det (it)* (1969), which was followed by *alfabet* in 1981 and then *Sommerfugledalen: et requiem* in 1991.

The first of her works to be translated into English was *alfabet*. The translator was the American poet Susanna Nied, who has campaigned for 30 years to bring Christensen to English readers. Nied's 1982 translation won a Pen award, but despite this, and the support of the eminent translator and critic of European poetry Michael Hamburger, the work had to wait almost 20 years to find a publisher, Bloodaxe, in 2000. *Sommerfugledalen: et requiem* was published by Daedalus Press in 2001 in a bilingual version, as *Butterfly Valley: a requiem*, a small set of 15 sonnets, again translated by Nied. Her translation of *det* eventually appeared, from Carcanet, in 2007.

Behind this slim output lay prodigious labour and an austere dedication. Born in Vejle, Jutland, Christensen was the daughter of a tailor and a cook and was educated at Vejle gymnasium. She moved to Copenhagen to study medicine but took a diploma in teacher training college in 1958 and became a schoolteacher. She also began writing poetry for *Hvedekorn* magazine, edited by the influential critic and poet Poul Borum, whom she married in 1959. They divorced in 1976.

In 1964 she devoted herself to full-time writing. Much of her work is in the form of novels, essays and books for children. One of the novels, *The Painted Room*, appeared in English in 2000. The translation of *Azorno* (1967) is to be published this summer.

As a poet, Christensen's practice was deeply inflected by mathematics and a sense of the world as ordered otherwise than by language. The "systemic poetry" that she cultivated was designed to distort language so as to allow the disclosure and display of other patterns and other principles of order. The poems of *alfabet* are based on the Fibonacci sequence of numbers: the first poem has one line, the second poem two, the third three, the fourth five, each number in the sequence being the sum of the previous two (1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21,34). The work stops with the letter n, itself a mathematical symbol, which, as the 14th letter of the alphabet, generates a poem of 610 lines. In this modelling of words, Christensen's work can be compared with that of *The Periodic Table* by Primo Levi, and to the works by the French writers associated with Oulipo, notably Georges Perec.

That her last book was a sequence of sonnets might seem surprising in such an experimental writer, but of course the sonnet is deeply mathematical in its structure, the division of its 14 lines having been recognised in the Renaissance as akin to "the golden ratio". A degree of mathematical obsession was hardly unknown to Dante, Petrarch or Spenser. Christensen's verse is also insistently typographical, in this respect following the example of Ezra Pound. In *alfabet*, the number of lines is to be reckoned. In one section of it, the number of characters in each line must be counted if one is to unfold a numerical pattern. In *det*, the printed page keeps the look of a typewritten one (though not, alas, in the English translation). This means that, unlike on a printed page, a space is of consistent length, and can carry value. The white spaces on her pages can achieve purposes similar to those of Edwin Morgan's concrete poems.

To describe Christensen's work is almost inevitably to present something dry, theoretical, abstract and unappealing to lovers of poetry. What is remarkable (and what makes her a poet) is the lyric voice that sounds through all the schemes and systems. A reading by Christensen was an extraordinary event. "Her voice was low and intense," the Norwegian poet Paal-Helge Haugen recalled. "When the text passed through her voice it was as if it became shared by all." Christensen will take her place among the great poets of the European tradition.

She is survived by her son, Peter, and a grandchild.

Inger Christensen, poet, born 16 January 1935; died 2 January 2009