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Latvian literature between Ibsen and Hamsun (till 1940)

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At the end of the 19th century Latvian literature undergoes a very intensive period of changes. The process of becoming aware of one's national independence takes place together with the wish to look upon Latvian literature within the context of the development of European literary processes. The 20th-century Latvian writers get involved in the active process of accumulation foreign literature in two ways:

1) by translating and publishing conceptually new literature. Conceptually new works in Latvian cultural space at that time are the works of Nietzsche, Maeterlinck, Rimbaud, Balmont, Bryusov, Wilde, Hamsun, Ibsen and of other writers who bring into literature the conceptual line characteristic of subjectivism, individualism, aestheticism and other significant modern culture types;

2) by creating their own texts corresponding to the new literary concepts. Quite often we can observe the influence of some West European, Scandinavian, Russian writer (or even several of them) in these texts.

Norwegian literature is well known in Latvia since the last decade of the 19th century. Its popularity begins with the translations of B. Bjørnson's¹ works which corresponded most of all to the Latvian literary paradigm existing at that time. The more Latvian literature approached European literary processes the greater interest about H. Ibsen's works became. Bjørnson's popularity continued only for two decades. In their turn Ibsen and Hamsun, who appear in Latvian cultural space a little bit later after Bjørnson, stay in the Latvian readers' consciousness for a long time.

¹ The first B. Bjørnson's published work in Latvia was the story *Arne* in 1879.

H. Ibsen and K. Hamsun as the most vivid representatives of 'Norwegian literary text' appear in Latvia within a short period one after another. The Latvian reader gets acquainted with H. Ibsen's name in 1889 when his play *The Pillars of Society* is performed in the German theatre and first reviews on it appear in the periodicals, although they do not praise the work too much. Hamsun's first appearance in the periodicals comes with a critical article about Norwegian modern writing. Acquaintance with both writers was furthered by the publications of the fragments of works in Latvian periodicals and the performances of Ibsen's dramas. On the background of all performances there are comparatively many stage versions of Ibsen's works. The first work of both writers is published in 1900: Ibsen's drama *The Doll's House* translated from German under the title *Nora* and Hamsun's novel *Victoria*.

The beginning of the 20th century till the 1940s is the time of the triumph of both writers in Latvia. It is not homogeneous neither in contents nor chronologically. At this period of time we can note certain moments of culmination and decrease in the writers' popularity. One of the reasons for this is that publications of both writers and Ibsen's performances coincide with general mood of Latvian society, with the inner development of Latvian culture and it helps to find the answer to those questions which concern Latvian society and are topical for Latvian writers. The peaks of popularity for both writers are connected with their life jubilees and remembrance dates, also after Ibsen's decease in 1906 with the dates of writer's death when Ibsen's personality and creative work was actualized.

In this context both writers are a significant object of studies when Latvian writers join the framework of modernism literary paradigm. Ibsen and Hamsun are studied from different aspects: both have modelling of the relationship between the individual and the crowd, psychologism; and each of them has the subjective: Ibsen's language of symbols, search for the meaning of human existence (*Peer Gynt*), questions of duty, will-power, faith (*Brand*), confrontation of the creative and the destructive (*Builder Solness, When we, the dead are awakening*). In Hamsun's works the Latvian writers most often focus on the depiction of different oppositions (province — big city, nature — civilization, mind — feelings), and the representation of the stream-of-consciousness in the text.

Ibsen's Nora, Peer Gynt, Brand, Hamsun's lieutenant Glahn, heroes of *Hunger* and *Mysteries*, vagabond August become the stimulus of poetic mythology of many Latvian writers. In the works of a number creators of Latvian modernism, the so-called 'Latvian decadents', we can observe vividly expressed, easily „read” segments of Ibsen's and Hamsun's text, for example, A. Austriņš (short story *Kaspars Glūns*), J. Akuraters (short stories *Peasant Pāns* (*Zemnieks Pāns*), *Illusion Star* (*Maldu zvaigzne*) the main character of which is Victoria) a.o.; although the coincidence of proper names is only one evidence, we can meet more closeness to Norwegian writers also on other levels of the text; themes characters, text structures. Hamsun's text and Ibsen's text in Latvian literature — allusions, hints to Norwegian writers or the use of the attributes of their poetics are often found in the text of Latvian writers. It is not the wish to copy, but rather an attempt to get involved in a cultural dialogue and to create a new version about the Norwegian text so topical for Latvian writers. Such dialogues become especially significant at the moments when some national literature meets a new literary paradigm that already has precedents in another national literature. Also in literary criticism both writers are actualized with discussions about literary trends. In fact, Ibsen's name is mentioned in the context of all literary trends of that time as a 'typical representative of them' (symbolism, naturalism, realism, neoromanticism, impressionism). It testifies that Latvian literary thought (using literary scientific terms) is very uncertain at that time. In their turn Ibsen's dramas with their universalism are an inexhaustible source of impulses and self-evaluation for many Latvian writers.

Hamsun also is examined in different contexts, the most precise evaluation seems to be given by J. Asars in his article *About Knut Hamsun in Connection with Modern Writing in General* (*Par Knutu Hamsunu, sakarā ar moderno rakstniecību vispārīm*) . It appeared in the newspaper *Dienas Lapa* in 1900. Asars considers that Hamsun is the representative of modern art. In this article he tends to compare modern art with naturalistic art.

Modern art, in comparison with naturalistic art, does not explain everything in detail, with statistical profoundness, or express its purpose in dry arguments, does not put its ideas on the plate. On the contrary, it gives only so much in order to draw our attention, shows

direction in order to anticipate and to encourage ourselves to fill in the gaps in the way that the main impact on our soul should come from that what the artist left unexpressed. Modern art wants to awaken the artist in ourselves. (Akuraters 1908)

In this article Asars admits also the fact that Hamsun is a refined psychologist already in his first work *Hunger* (*Sult*, 1890). This is the second Hamsun's literary work which is published in a literary supplement of *Mājas Viesis* in 1903. As a book it is published in Valmiera in 1904. In comparison with early evaluations of Ibsen by literary critics Hamsun wins great acclaim at once because he enters Latvian cultural space later — at the moment when one part of Latvian readers is ready to perceive his works and adapt them to their understanding. But ten years before at the moment of Ibsen's appearance in Latvia the symbolic, directed towards individualism expression of the Norwegian writer practically remained without any response for some time. At the turn of the centuries delving into the works of Ibsen and Hamsun Latvian writers not only get the inspiration for their texts, but at the same time answer the question what are themselves and what way of literary creative work they should follow.

In the first half of the 20th century Latvian literary criticism loves Ibsen and Hamsun. Latvian writer Jānis Akuraters whose works have common features with both Norwegian writers and who translated into Latvian Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, *Brand*, publishes the article *Ibsen, Hamsun and Grieg in Norway* when he returns from Norway in 1908. In this article the author tells about comparatively moderate popularity of Hamsun in his homeland:

Now we even cannot imagine the world of art without these Scandinavian vikings who shared their richness with all culture countries. [...] In our land artists, the best and real intellectuals speak about Hamsun's stories and novels. [...] In Norway they are less popular than in Europe. Norwegians were surprised when I told them how much people are interested about Hamsun in Russia and Latvia. (Akuraters 1908)

Trying to find out the reasons of moderate attitude by Norwegians J. Akuraters speaks about nationalism in Norwegian understanding as a criterion for writers' popularity. He considers that in Europe it is difficult to find as big nationalists as the Scandinavians, especially Norwegians, for whom nationalism has "merged together with the people's soul since time immemorial and has formed their culture, art, even politics and the state." (Ib.)

Akuraters indicates nationalism as one of the most important reasons that explain Bjernson's popularity over Ibsen and Hamsun in the time period when their works simultaneously appear in Latvia. Nevertheless, the wide range of problems offered in Ibsen's and Hamsun's works is one of the reasons why shortly after Bjernson's first reception, the interest in his works rapidly drops and during the second decade of the 20th century he becomes a marginal feature in the perception of Norwegian literature in Latvia.

The time when Akurater's article appears is the period of national and universal paradigm co-existence in Latvia. After the radical experiments of Modernism in the first decade of the 20th century, in Latvian literature the choice between nationalism and universalism takes places. Therefore, Akuraters in his article especially focuses on Norwegian nationalism and writes that Norwegian nationalism is rather intuitive, unconscious and rarely any of them would be able to answer what nationalism is. Akuraters compares the manifestations of Norwegian and Latvian nationalism and makes the conclusion that our nationalism sleeps in the museum, Norwegian nationalism is alive like it was hundreds of years ago, even today in their clothes, household tools, dances and religion. It is significant that some years later after this article was published Akuraters alienates himself from the search for Modernism and turns to the reconstruction of national and ethic values in his creative writing, at the same time maintaining close relationship with the best examples of European literature for new and high-quality poetic expression.

Similar views about Ibsen's creative work are expressed also in K. Skalbe's longest critical essay *Ibsen's Week in Christiania*. The Latvian writer K. Skalbe wrote the Latvian variant of Hamsun's novel *Hunger*. K. Skalbes essay was written in a similar situation, the writer was in exile in Christiania. Similar motives lie at the basis of the article — to understand Ibsen's role in Norwegian cultural consciousness and to compare it with Latvian views about the writer, as well as

to examine the artistic world of Ibsen's plays. The source of the inspiration for the essay is Ibsen's week at Christiania National Theater during which several Ibsen's plays are performed.

In his essay Skalbe does not tell the plot of the plays, but puts forward the aim to analyze what all of them have in common. Skalbe writes that Ibsen's characters are rooted in the writer's soul and behind them we feel the life of the epoch. Ibsen has accumulated in himself all that, he makes judgments, acquits and condemns.

World War I disrupted the great interest in Ibsen and Hamsun which existed in the beginning of the 20th century. After the war the attitude towards Ibsen becomes more moderate. As Kārlis Freibergs writes about this period of time after 10 years in 1928,

the interest about Ibsen has not revived yet. Now Ibsen as if has disappeared here for a time. But he will have his renaissance here again at least we have not fully exhausted his creative work. Of course, many things have passed in setting forth these problems. Ibsen does not surprise with his problems any more as he did some decades ago, but it is not the main thing. We should not consider Ibsen only as the writer who sets forth problems, but we should look upon him as a poet of man and the essence of man's life. He looks into the whirlpools of human life and opens them to us, so, perhaps, we should feel this depth of soul in ourselves and in our environment. (Freibergs 1928: 6)

Similarly Hamsun's literary fate develops in Latvia after World War I. Already in the twenties his works are published in Latvia shortly after their editions in Norway. Latvian reader is very interested in Hamsun. But, in comparison with Ibsen, literary criticism is less interested in him. A probable reason for that might be the difficulties caused by decoding seemingly simple riddles in the novels (evaluation of vagabonds and settlers, absurd little towns, games of proper names), but the layman reader is satisfied with the perception of the upper layer of captivating novels. In 1930 T. Lejas-Krūmiņš publishes the monograph devoted to Hamsun's personality and creative work. Up to now it is the biggest in volume edition in Latvian that is devoted to Hamsun. In 1935 the monograph devoted to Ibsen's personality is published. It is translated from German and it is Zuker's monograph. Both these editions are focused on the biographical evaluation of

creative work, they bring closer “the great Norwegians” to their Latvian readers.

In the thirties both writers are loved and respected in Latvia, although Ibsen's plays are staged in theatres less often than before World War I and there are also less critical articles about both writers. In 1935 significant changes take place in Latvian policy. In fact, these changes began already earlier and influenced the perception of foreign literature. The changes in public life are reflected in literature with the appearance of the so — called Latvian positivism. In culture it is manifested as focusing on oneself — one's own history, folklore, mythology. Several Latvian editions directly mention the formerly overflowing richness of foreign culture. In periodicals Olģerts Kroders (Kroll's 1931) several times asks a concrete question — why so few performances of original plays appear on the stages of the Latvian theatre.

In this situation the portion of foreign literature (even those authors who up to then were so close and loved) drastically diminishes. Nevertheless, in this period (1935 — 1940) Hamsun's Collected Works in fifteen volumes are published, because in Latvia he is now actualized as the author of *Growth of the Soil*, the work that was awarded the Nobel prize is a hymn to the land and its ploughmen, it praises harmonious coexistence of man and nature. In this interpretation (forgetting about initial modernistic search) Hamsun helps to reflect the official priorities in culture of Latvian society at that time. He is not only the writer read by the elite, but also loved by people. In the article *Knut Hamsun in Latvia* L. Stepinš writes, that

those who praised *Pan* could not get accustomed to *Growth of the Soil* because both works are divided by a wide gap: writer's development during twenty five years. Hamsun in *Growth of the Soil* does not admire youth any longer, does not sing a song of praise to a free wandering, now he emphasizes man's belonging to connection with land. Purely religious attachment to nature. (Stepinš 1984: 147)

In their turn Ibsen's nervous, self — tormenting doubting, insecure, ‘led by senses’ characters do not fit into the official culture conception. Perhaps, that is why, for the first time since Ibsen's jubilee decades are celebrated in Latvia, in 1938 Ibsen's jubilee passes silently without the usual pomposity. Also staging of the plays turns

more to social themes, for a time forgetting mysticism and dramas about the relative character of values.

In the year of Ibsen's centenary (1928) Kārlis Freibergs writes that in the 20th century another level of perception should be applied to Ibsen's works. Modern features of Ibsen's dramas disappear, but human fates depicted by him are deeply tragic. It shows their "poetic vitality". And Freibergs calls it the feature of immortality: "We have only to find a corresponding approach to these works." (Freibergs 1928: 6)

K. Freibergs also speaks about the influence of innovative technique of Ibsen's drama on the development of theatre:

His theatrical technique gives much exactly to the stage. With his works he helped to found the ensemble art that did not level, but distinguished personalities. A new way of speaking appeared because his word had a deeper inner force. Analysis came in with it, the moment of mind in acting. Ibsen had a higher purpose than only to depict reality, but in spite of the fact that his heroes were as if personified ideas, their life, nevertheless, was artistically true, only raised above the level of naturalism. (Ib. 7)

Thus Hamsun's and Ibsen's literary fates in Latvia cannot be perceived as oppositions, but as contributing to the development of Latvian literature where both writers at different times had to carry out the functions of the catalyst and the source of ideas, he example and the comparison.

To conclude, I will give the outline of Ibsen's and Hamsun's modern perspective. It is not an exaggeration to say that Ibsen's popularity in modern Latvian society is as strong as it was a hundred years ago. Then a number of reviews and critical articles devoted to Ibsen's dramas and their stage versions were published. Also nowadays in Latvia Ibsen's dramas are performed with great success (this season we can see *Hedda Gabler* and *Nora / Doll's House*). They cause heated discussions and encourage stage directors to search for a new expression of Ibsen's heroes' relationship. In its turn, on this background Hamsun's popularity is wave-like — the demand for his works is connected with concrete mood of society, for example, the culmination of his popularity in Latvia in recent years was in 1993–1994 and in 2002. In year 2002 was the year of Hamsun's jubilee. In

1993–1994 his popularity was determined by cultural political situation and public sentiments (for a long time it was forbidden to publish the writer in full).

In 1993–1994 the second reason for actualizing Hamsun in Latvia was the common element between his works and the public consciousness. The time was characterized by change — an unstable time of changes when it is difficult to draw a borderline between the illusion and the reality, when relativity of these two categories is strongly manifest. Hamsun's works published at the time (the August trilogy) as well as a number of other works actualize a small provincial town Polden (in other works Sirilund, Segelfoss) and oppose its regular, even life to turbulent events outside. The everyday existence of towns — phantoms, but at the same time stability and its opposition — openness of the world, which carries along with it the uprootedness, characterize well the fluctuation and self — search of Latvian society in the transition period.

In this interpretation the study of Ibsen's and Hamsun's works in different stages of development Latvian culture is an attempt to get closer to the contents of works of iconic figures in world literature, follow their examples, as one of the ways to know oneself better and perfect one's artistic expression.

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