

## MODERN NORWEGIAN POETRY – JAN ERIK VOLD’S CONCRETE POEMS

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*Abstract. In this paper we shall start by analysing the idea of modernity in Norwegian literature. We shall also discuss and present the way through which modernism got shaped in Norway. The main focus of our paper is Norwegian contemporary poetry namely the concept of concretism. Hence, the ultimate purpose of our paper is to bring forward the image of the contemporary Norwegian poet, jazz vocal reciter and translator Jan Erik Vold and his two volumes of poetry and short fiction, namely: *Mor Godhjertas glade versjon. Ja* (1968) (*The Happy Version of Mother Kind-Heart. Yes*) and *fra rom til rom SAD & CRAZY* (1967) (*from room to room SAD & CRAZY*).*

*Keywords: modernism, concrete poetry, Jan Erik Vold, the Literary Circle Profil, modern Norwegian Literature.*

### Modern Norwegian Literature

Modern literature has its roots in the symbolist literature which represents the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This literary movement took place in France where the writer Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) was well known for his famous volume of poems entitled *The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleur du Mal)* published in 1857. His poems brought a note of originality both in France and in the whole Europe. The modernist theoretician Hugo Friedrich (1904-1978) in his famous literary work *The Structure of Modern Poetry* called the French writer ‘the poet of modernity’. Thus, Charles Baudelaire was the one who influenced and inspired the French symbolist writers as for example: Jean N. A. Rimbaud (1854-1891), Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) and many others.

In the view of the Romanian critic and essayist Adrian Marino (1921-2005) that “[...] the notion of *modern* rejects fixed chronological marks. Its historical dimension is changeable, being put to a few delimitations that where always changing” (Marino, 1969:143). This literary movement together with other avant-garde literary movements bring in front of the readers the novelty, the innovation and at the same time a distance from tradition. Moreover, this literary movement is the result between the new and the old between modernity and tradition. Among all these literary movements those who join this modernist domain are the following: futurism, Dadaism, surrealism, concrete poetry and expressionism. In our paper we shall focus on the concrete poetry, its definition and some examples from two different volume of poetry written by the Norwegian poet Jan Erik Vold.

But before writing about these concepts we shall make a brief presentation of modern Norwegian literature. The writer who had a very important role in the modernisation of the Norwegian novel was Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) being well-known as the promoter of the modernism in this part of the Europe. Furthermore, when he published the novel entitled *Hunger (Sult)* in 1890 he was considered a prominent member of the psychological realism in Norway. Moving forward the one who promoted the modern Norwegian poetry was the poet Sigbjørn Obstfelder (1866 – 1900), who published his first volume of poetry entitled *Poems*

(*Digte*) in 1893. He was strongly influenced by the French writer Charles Baudelaire and his poems were said to be equivalents of Edvard Munch's (1863-1944) paintings. Thus at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sigbjørn Obstfelder was a prominent literary figure for the Norwegian literature.

Before writing a few things about another Scandinavian poet, this time a contemporary figure, we shall make a short and brief presentation the way through which modernism got shaped in Norway.

Here are a few phases of modern Norwegian literature. It is very important to know that modernism came into Norway through Danish and Swedish literature. The first phase coincides with the 1890s when the Norwegian literature was impregnated with different features of the above mentioned literary movements. Among these there is the decadent movement that is represented by the Norwegian writer Arne Garborg (1851-1924) with the novel *Tired Men (Trøtte Mænd)* published in 1891. We can include here the writers that we have already mentioned: Sigbjørn Obstfelder, Knut Hamsun who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1920.

The second phase is associated with the historical period named the early Norwegian modernism, being significant for the years 1920s-1930s. The literary movements that characterise this period are futurism, expressionism and the late symbolism. In Europe modernism appeared in the first part of the 19th century, meanwhile in Norway the person who introduces this literary movement in this period of time was the writer Claes Gill (1910-1973) together with his volume of poetry from 1939 *A Period of a Magic Life (Fragment av et magisk liv)* and *Words and Iron (Ord i jærn)* that was published in 1942. Another writer that was representative for expressionism was Emil Boyson (1897-1979) who began his literary career in 1920s with his volume of poetry entitled *Opening Towards the Rainbow (Åpning til regnbuen)*.

The third phase is equivalent with the years 1950s when the forms of the modern Norwegian literature were put in a more clear light than they were described in the previous phases. In this case there is presented a literary debate that took place between traditionalist and modernist writers. This third phase was called *tungetaledebatten*<sup>1</sup>. The poets who were representative for this period of time wanted to bring a note of originality for the whole Norwegian society that was strongly affected by the period when it was under the Nazi occupation during the Second World War.

### **Modern Norwegian literature – The Literary Circle *Profil***

The fourth phase is characterised by the revolt of the members of the Literary Circle – *Profil (Profil-opprøret)*. This phase coincides with the 1960s. Moreover there is also a literary magazine which has the same name *Profil*. In this magazine the new generation of young writers published their innovative literary works. It is published for the first time in 1959 with

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<sup>1</sup> *Tungetaledebatten* (Glossolalia debate – the term was used for the first time by the Norwegian writer Arnulf Øverland (1889-1968) termenul a fost pentru prima dată folosit de către scriitorul norvegian Arnulf Øverland (1889-1968) who was against modernisation both in literature and in the society. This word is representative for the literary debate that took place in 1950s having as a starting point for discussions the Norwegian modern poetry. Thus there were formed two groups of writers: the modernist group led by Paal Brekke (1923-1993) and the traditionalist group led by Arnulf Øverland and his followers.

the title *Filologen* at Oslo University. In 1966 Jan Erik Vold (b. 1939), Dag Solstad (b. 1941) and Espen Haardsholm became the editors of the magazine and from this moment the literary magazine changed its name in *Profil*.

In the mid 1960s there were two revolts initiated by the members of *Profil* generation. The first was against the symbolist writers and the second was a political rebellion. The aim of these young writers and critics' revolt was to convince people to take part in a new literary movement that was called *the social realism (sosialrealismen)*. In Norway this was also called *the working class literature (arbeiderlitteraturen)*. Furthermore, these writers were fighting against symbolism using modernist concepts as for example: *nyenkelheten*<sup>2</sup>, *the concrete poetry (konkretismen)*. Among the partisans of the *Profil* movement are the following writers: Jan Erik Vold (n. 1939), Paal-Helge Haugen (n. 1945), Dag Solstad (n. 1941), Einar Økland (n. 1940) and many others. Through their writings they promoted simple poems without meter and rhyme. Most of them were inspired by the Japanese poems, namely haiku poems that have in the centre of their creation the nature and its vitality.

On the basis of the above considerations, the 1960s Norwegian modernism there were a big tide of literary debate among the young writers and social debates among different political groups and ideological movements. „The gradual awaking and radicalization of the 1960s, were linked to such international problems as the atom bomb threat and opposition to the imperialism of the United States in Vietnam” (Mæland, 1974: 34). What was missing from the Norwegian literature until 1960s was the originality of the literary works' form and content: „Innovation, freshness and force were lacking” (Mæland, 1974: 35). Prominent members of this literary circle were: Stein Mehren (b. 1935), Georg Johannesen (1931-2005), Jan Erik Vold (b. 1939). They were three important Norwegian literary critics of the 1960s, and it is interesting to see how they changed the language of literary criticism in the country. According to Erik Bjerck Hagen, their criticism is seen as heteronymous (Hagen, 2001:1), because they conceive of a literary work not as a text, but as an event in which real readers participate in constituting literary meaning.

Taking all these things into consideration one can say that through the courage and the initiative of these young people, the profile of the Norwegian literature got shaped.

### ***Konkretisme and the concept of Ikonotekst***

In 1953 the Swedish writer, Öyvind Fahlström (1928-1976) wrote for the first time a manifest for concrete poetry. He presented briefly the link between the text and the images created by the words. The form of the poem has a central role when one talk about concrete poems. *Concrete poetry* comes from the ordinary and simple poem that presents life as it is with its bad and good sides.

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<sup>2</sup> *nyenkelhet-dikt* – it is a type of simple and ordinary poem being easily understood by the readers. In my research I did not find a translation for this word, being used only in Norwegian - Idar Stegane, „Medierevolusjon og modernisme 1945 – 1990” in Bjarne Fidjestøl / Peter Kirkegaard / Sigurd Aa. Arnes / Leif Longum / Idar Stegane (ed.), *Norsk litteratur i tusen år (A Thousand Years of Norwegian Literature)*, Bergen, J. W. Cappelens Forlag, 1994, p. 596.

Firstly we shall focus our attention on a few definitions of *ikonotekst* concept and at the end of our paper we shall use two of Jan Erik Vold's volumes of poetry in order to give examples relating to this concept.

The editor of the Norwegian magazine for teachers, *Norskelæraren*, Marianne Røskeland, wrote in one of her articles entitled "Ikonotekst – Forsøk på definisjon" (Icon-Text- An attempt of defining it) that "Ikonotekst is a concept that is formed by two terms "icon" and "text". In other words, *ikonotekst* is both image and text"<sup>3</sup> (Røskeland, 1998:27). In her article, Marianne Røskeland put under discussion three important things: 1. what is the *intention* of using this term – ikonotekst is a text together with a picture"<sup>4</sup> (Røskeland, 1998:27). 2. The *phenomenon* of this concept; 3. The *reception* or the impact that this *ikonotekst* had among the readers.

### Jan Erik Vold – prominent features of his literary work

Among these writers there was also the contemporary Norwegian poet Jan Erik Vold, an emblematic figure of the Scandinavian literature. Poet, dramatist, prose writer, translator, essayist, Jazz vocal reciter, he was born on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1939, in Oslo. At present, he is living in Stockholm, Sweden together with his family. The innovation itself is brought by Jan Erik Vold, concerning his poetic language, more exactly, the visual and concrete poem. The reading of this type of poem can easily become a self-reflexive and a critic method, leading to the spreading of the premises and of the methods of interpretation. Jan Erik Vold wrote a great number of volumes of poetry: *Mellom speil og speil* (1965), *kykelipi* (1969), *Sorgen. Sangen. Veien* (1987), *En som het Abel Ek* (1988), *Mor Godhjertas glade versjon. Ja* (1968) and many others. He also wrote two volumes of short prose, namely *fra rom til rom SAD & CRAZY* and *BusteR brenneR* that were published in an anthology in 1982. According to our translation: "Each new volume of poetry has a new concept, and a special aim: from well structured-poems (*blikket*) to haiku poems (*spor, snø*),..., from travelogue poems (*sirkel, sirkel*) to childhood poems (*Mor Godhjertas glade versjon. Ja*), from meditation (*S*) to challenge (*kykelipi*),..., a sound of a solitary bell and the development of the jazz cliché."<sup>5</sup> (Wærp, 2000:1).

In what follows we shall present some features of Jan Erik Vold's literary work including also the concept of concrete poetry (*konkretism*). The poetic language is moving in a large space: beginning with a simple game with the words and ending with complex images and ideas. Thus creating what critics called "the democratic poem" (*en demokratisk poesi*)", (Norsk Litteratur i tusen år, 1994: 583). It is a type of poem that is opened to new forms of art, such as music especially jazz and blues. His preference towards the play with words and the form of poetry is a living part of his literary work. Jan Erik Vold seems "to laugh at the metrical structure" – "å gjøre narr av rimsmidene" (Beyer, 1997: 208) of a poem, considering that all these elements of versification are specific for the traditional poems.

<sup>3</sup> „Ikonotekst! er et begrep som er satt sammen av termene „ikon" og „tekst". Kort sagt er ikonotekst både bilde og tekst”.

<sup>4</sup> „ikonotekst er en tekst som står sammen med en "illustrasjon”.

<sup>5</sup> Hver ny diktsamling har et nytt konsept, og spennvidden i forfatterskapet er imponerende: fra systemdiktning (*blikket*) til haikudikt (*spor, snø*), ..., fra reiseskildring (*sirkel, sirkel*) til heimstaddiktning (*Mor Godhjertas glade versjon. Ja*), fra meditasjon (*S*) til provokasjon (*kykelipi*), ..., en bjelles enslige pling og jazzens utbyggende frase”, in the original.

In what follows we shall present the two volume of poems mentioned in the beginning of our paper. In 1968 Jan Erik Vold was a prominent and well known poet because of the volume of poetry entitled *Mor Godhjertas glade versjon. Ja*. In this volume he is known for his simple and funny poems, being easily recognized for his love for the city of Oslo. Thus, Jan Erik Vold was the one who introduced concepts like imagism and the concept of concrete poetry in Norway through articles published in different literary magazines and through his own practice. Many of his poems from this volume are recited by Jan Erik Vold having a jazz band as a background. He also read his poems being accompanied by great jazz and blues musicians as for example: Jan Garbarek, Chet Backer and Red Mitchell. The form of the poems is very simple and it is inspired from every day events, about friends, trees, Oslo's tram and many other ordinary things.

The volume entitled *fra rom til rom SAG & CRAZY* is, in fact one of the first volume of short prose that was published in Norway. Except from the other volumes of poems that had as a main idea problems related to identity or the relation between I and you, the poems from this volume are created having as a background I – it relation. The book is formed of four parts, each of it being represented by a colour: “Blått” (“Blue”), “Gult” (“Yellow”), “Rødt” (“Red”) and “Grønt” (“Green”). All these four colours seem to create a balance having in its centre the red colour. What makes the book special and unusual are the following things: there are not page numbers, the text are not numbers and they have no punctuation marks thus being very difficult to follow the text, except from the four fairy-tales with which the book ends.

## Conclusions

Taking all these things into consideration, in the case of the concrete and non-figurative poem, there are a few elements that characterize this type of writing: “a typographical space” - „typografiske plan” (Kittang, 1976: 109), the non-linearity of the writing and the variation and the combination of linguistic elements. All these emphasize the materiality of the language.

„Nowadays, to create poetry it does not mean to illustrate the world in which we live as being an image decorated in a pleasant way. To create poetry is an attempt to understand the worlds that surrounds us with the help of the words. It is an attempt to say something about the world that surrounds us and which live inside us”<sup>6</sup>, says Jan Erik Vold in 1965 (Beyer, 1997: 207).

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<sup>6</sup> „Det å dikte i dag er ikke å illustrere vår verden gjennom smukke bilder og blider rytmer. Å dikte er et forsøk på å fatte vår verden, fatte og gripe den med ord, et forsøk på å si noe om alt dette som omgir oss og som lever i oss”, in the original.

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