

Raluca-Daniela Răduț, *The Poetry of Jan Erik Vold and the Norwegian Lyric Modernism in the 1960s*, Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2018, 352 pp.

The Norwegian literary figures most acclaimed internationally are either dramatists (Henrik Ibsen, Jon Fosse) or novelists (from the Nobel prize winner Knut Hamsun to the best-selling contemporary authors like Jostein Gaarder, Karl Ove Knausgård, or Maja Lunde). Poetry has not received much attention, and certainly not among Romanian readers. However, Raluca-Daniela Răduț, lecturer at the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature at the Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, has devoted her PhD research to the poetry of Jan Erik Vold, a prominent figure in Norway but very little known outside the country. Her doctoral thesis entitled *The Poetry of Jan Erik Vold and the Norwegian Lyric Modernism in the 1960s* was published in 2018 by Casa Cărții de Știință, a publishing house in Cluj-Napoca.

The title of the book suggests a perspective that seeks to understand Vold's writings in a broader cultural and historical context, and this approach does indeed guide Răduț's work. Modernity has many faces, as Romanian literary critic Matei Calinescu would say, and modernist poetry took many shapes since Baudelaire's ground-breaking and polemical *Fleurs du mal*. Thus, preoccupied with the movement's breakthrough in Norway in the 1960s, later than in other European countries, Răduț explores the emergence of *konkretisme* (concretism) and *nyenkelhet* (new simplicity), two phenomena that modelled Vold's lyrical voice, bringing him forward as an influential figure in the cultural life of his country.

The book is organised into five chapters and includes multiple appendices containing translations of the articles and of the poems discussed, as well as a resourceful interview Răduț conducted with Jan Erik Vold. The first chapter, "The Construction of Scandinavian Modernism in Literature," provides an overview of the phases that marked the beginnings of literary modernism in Norway. Răduț focuses on two major debates that echoed a common interest of the young generation of writers and critics, who pursued their attempt to renew poetry writing and to impose their views on literature. The first one is *tungetaledebatten* or "the gibberish debate," which took place in the 1950s and was a debate between the new generation of writers and the more traditional authors and critics. The second one, from the 1980s, is known as the "blank verse debate," and its central concern was how to define the new literary movement.

In this context, from the outset, Răduț presents Vold's experimental poetry not as an intellectual exercise, but as a type of open, democratic art, emphasising that "anyone is free to interpret and to perceive the poems in his/her own way" (p. 41). That this democratisation of poetry throughout Vold's works goes hand in hand with

the concepts of *konkretisme* and *nyenkelhet*, becomes a red thread in the analysis conducted later on in the study.

Continuing to sketch out the cultural and historical context, the next chapter, “Norwegian Modernism of the 1960s: The Literary Circle and the Literary Magazine *Profil* (1966–1968),” sheds light on the work of the group formed around the literary magazine *Profil*, who established a “new Norwegian poetry,” both through their extensive publishing activity (literary and critical texts, translations, programmatic articles), and through the literary prizes they awarded. The editorial board – with Tor Obrestad, Espen Haavardsholm, Paal-Helge Haugen, Dag Solstad, and Jan Erik Vold, to name just a few members – tried to define their position in relation to “the gibberish debate” from the previous decade, and to open new directions in Norwegian modernism. It seems that one of their goals was “experiment for experiment’s sake” (Mæland 1967, cited by Răduț, p. 76), and that they were convinced that the reader should be “part of the creative process” (p. 84). In line with their literary credo, the group also “wished for the magazine to be part of society” (p. 82). In this respect, Răduț underlines that Vold stands out as a true “cultural mediator” (p. 80) by virtue of his work as literary critic (publishing reviews and texts on foreign writers, such as Beckett, Joyce, or Pound), as a translator, and, what is more, his engagement with other artistic forms, like jazz music, which certainly increased his popularity among Norwegians.

Focusing more narrowly on his works, the following three chapters each provide close readings of Vold’s poems. In “The Norwegian Modernist Phenomenon *Konkretisme* (*Concretism*),” Răduț engages in a presentation of concretism in relationship with different fields, such as linguistics, technology, music, and art. She further presents the manifestoes of concrete poetry around the world: The Noigandres Group manifesto from Brazil, Eugen Gomringer’s manifesto from Switzerland, and Öyvind Fahlström’s Swedish Manifesto. Răduț then shows how Vold contributed to the popularisation of concrete poetry in Norway, both through his essays and his poems. Examining his more theoretical writings on the concept, Răduț presents Vold’s understanding of a poetry that exploits “language as a concrete thing” (Vold 2006, cited by Răduț, p. 122). These poetic experiments are closely analysed further as she goes through a selection of poems from three of his volumes: *mellom speil og speil* [Between Mirror and Mirror] (1965), *blikket* [The Gaze] (1966), and *kykelipi* [Cock-a-Diddle-Dee] (1969), which take different concrete forms: typographical poems, grammatical poems, tongue-twisters, or ready-made poems.

Although Răduț states that Vold “focuses on the ideas that language has to be used with a specific aim of emphasizing its connection with the rest of the world” (p. 121), the experimental poems she analyses seem to contradict this. Especially Vold’s grammatical poems hint at a structuralist view that regards the text as something isolated, separated from the world, and self-referential. Nonetheless, Răduț approaches the texts from the perspective of what I earlier called the democratisation of poetry, and she insists on the more ludic aspects that engage and entertain

the reader. In this respect, she also discusses how Vold plays with the visual form and structure of the poems, but also with a second dimension, namely sound, by experimenting with rhyme and rhythm. This is in fact an innovation that makes Vold a reputed artist. He worked together with jazz artists to record his poems, thus offering his readers multiple and novel possibilities of experiencing poetry, which do not necessarily require the traditional act of reading a book.

The fourth chapter, “The Norwegian Modernist Phenomenon *Nyenkelheten* (*The New Simplicity*),” traces the history of *nyenkelhet*, a concept that, unlike *konkretisme*, is specific to Scandinavia. *Nyenkelhet* describes a poetry that seeks to translate, in a comprehensive and direct way, the simple, even meaningless experiences of the everyday, avoiding, for instance, the metaphorical profusion of symbolism. After emerging in Sweden and then in Denmark, the concept was introduced in Norway through the publishing activity of the *Profil* circle. Răduț argues that, characteristic to Scandinavia, *nyenkelhet* is in a way derived from a specific way of seeing life. She thus refers to the relationship of Scandinavians with the natural world, and to the simplicity or minimalism that characterises their everyday life. The trivial and the mundane are also depicted in Vold’s volume *Mor Godhjertas glade versjon, Ja* [Mother Goodhearted’s Happy Version. Yes] (1968), and Răduț focuses on some poems inspired by the poet’s experiences or by his autobiography, which, deprived of symbolism, disenchant the idea of a metaphysical poetry. Instead, Vold’s lyrical texts, as Răduț shows throughout her close readings, are meant to establish a connection with the reader, by proposing a type of literature that speaks of common life.

Although in his foreword to the book Professor Henning Howlid Wærp states that chapters three and four are “the most valuable parts of this research” (p. 21), I find the last one, “Haiku Poems in Jan Erik Vold’s Literary Work,” to be even more engaging because it describes a process of cultural import that is very interesting to look upon. The author contextualises the emergence of haiku poetry in Scandinavia through translations. Together with Arne Dørumsgaard and Paal-Helge Haugen, Jan Erik Vold was once again an important actor in this process. He both published theoretical essays in which he discussed the cultural differences between the East and the West, and he also wrote haiku poems himself. The Norwegian poets’ interest in haiku is not so surprising after all, given that the modernist Ezra Pound, whom Răduț also brings into discussion, was also highly influenced by Japanese poetry. In the Norwegian context, haiku was subject to certain transformations and was adapted to the specific literary views of that period, inasmuch as, in the case of Jan Erik Vold, Răduț argues that his poetic method “is based on the concept of *nyenkelhet*” (p. 237). She brings these particularities to light in her analyses of a series of haiku poems from *spor, snø* [Traces, Snow] (1970).

I would say that a particular quality of this study consists in providing a historical context of the cultural processes that took place in Norway in the 1960s, and, more broadly, in the second half of the twentieth century. Răduț pinpoints

the literary magazine *Profil*, with its circle, as an institution that shaped the evolution of modernism, and identifies Jan Erik Vold as a “cultural mediator,” whose critical, theoretical, and artistic activity opened new paths for Norwegian poetry. The book provides a great example of how concepts and literary forms circulate, and traces the dynamics of cultural life in a country considered “peripheral,” which adopts models from other literatures and adapts them, as was the case here with concretism and haiku poetry.

Last but not least, Răduț also provides many translations of Vold’s poems, which can contribute to a higher visibility among English-language readers. Therefore, although published in Romania, *The Poetry of Jan Erik Vold and the Norwegian Lyric Modernism in the 1960s* can be a significant resource for Norwegian researchers and international scholars as well. Based on detailed research, this distinguished book can thus become a valuable groundwork for those interested in further investigating the processes of circulation of works and concepts in Scandinavia.

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