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The two horizons. Sigrid Undset and the Czech reception : English summary

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English Summary

The two horizons. Sigrid Undset and the Czech reception

Literature can be thought of as a relationship based on interactive communication. Indeed, the presented habilitation thesis examines the writings of the Norwegian author Sigrid Undset in terms of relationships. Inspired by Hans-Georg Gadamer, the title “The two horizons” refers firstly to the literary work itself and its morphology with focus laid on historical novels and, secondly, to the reception of this literary work, by which is meant the reception process, as defined by the Constance School. Even though six decades have elapsed since Undset’s death, her work has not lost its relevance with respect to the readership and literary theory alike. The reason is the ambivalent dynamics between the epic scope and historical facts or, between the outer realism and the psychological depiction of characters that Undset employed in her fiction. This thesis does not focus on Undset’s biography as such nor does it deal with the history of her writings or with a historical analysis of these. Rather than that, it examines the influence Undset’s life had on the process of reception, discussing the morphology of selected literary texts with regard to the response they have received during the reception process both in the homeland and abroad.

In Norway, Undset is considered a classic author whose position on the top of the national literary canon has hardly been questioned. The reception of Sigrid Undset by the Czech readership has been appreciative, too. It is symptomatic, in this respect, that there are certain patterns in this reception which have followed the pattern of the politically determined events in the Czech culture of the 20th century. The paper discusses the issue of horizon of expectation in the Czech environment and queries the adequacy and the meaning of the reception.

The Czech reception of Sigrid Undset had its peak in the 1930’s, as is evidenced by the number and focus of various metatexts (translations, reviews, essays, commentaries and monographs). By Undset’s entry into the Czech environment in 1929, the preceding fifty years of manifold reception of Scandinavian literature were continued. Her many essays and polemic and scholarly articles left aside, Undset’s work can be divided into “contemporary” fiction, in which the condition of women in society is the main topic, and epic depictions of Norway in the Middle Ages. As far as the historical novels are concerned, this paper focuses on their structure and cultural context rather than their genre associations. Undset is known for her art of traditionalist realistic writing but there are certain significant aspects in her historical novels, and in the psychology of her characters especially, which go beyond this classification.

Undset’s texts have partaken in various discourses since the very beginning and there are two fields of interest most relevant to this thesis: The first one stands in a polemic, or generally cultural, relationship to the Czech culture of the period between the wars (the genre of historical novel, historicism in literature, and, most importantly, the search for the conception and the purpose of Czech national history in connection with T. G. Masaryk’s “The Czech Question”).

Undset was also a distinctive creator of the Christian type of the Medieval national myth. However, she, too, was an uprooter of this very myth at the same time because, with her continuous critical and rational detachment, she questioned all its “untouchable models”. We could say that Undset was perceived as a provocation *in persona*, not only because of her Catholic conversion. While her acting against Nazism played an unquestionable role in the identification process in the occupied Norway, her approach to the Germans and German

culture itself shows xenophobic features. Still, the author's semantic polyvalence as well as the polyvalence of the reception of her work keep inspiring the readers' interest and scholarly interest alike. Especially in the USA, this interest seems to have been culminating in the last ten years.

The other field of interest is focused on publications of the last two decades (concerned with topics such as gender issues, phenomenological and narrative perspective, and polyphone texts with many narrative voices inspired by Bachtin). For this reason, all Czech metatexts that have been traced are listed in the appendix of this paper, including relevant outputs of international scholarly research since 1997, such as monographs, scholarly articles, critical editions of Undset's works, and diploma and doctoral theses. In this respect, the name of the Norwegian scholar Liv Blikrud, who has been the editor of many critical editions of Undset, frequently occurs. These critical editions are of great importance to this paper.

The habilitation thesis is divided into two parts. The first part is based on essays by the Czech literary scholar Zdeněk Mathauser. It does not deal with Undset's biography, with the exception of the biography "concealed in her works" and related issues relevant to the author's creative conception, as for instance religion, humanism, feminism, anti-fascism, and anti-communism. Special attention is paid to the narrative analysis and comparison of two of the author's most extensive works – *Kristin Lavransdatter* and *Olav Audunsson* – with regard to intertextuality (references to the sagas, ballads, legends, fairy tales and Christian symbolism) and to the psychology of characters. This part questions some philosophical and aesthetic conclusions of Liv Blikrud, who, while considering the Kristin trilogy an open work, sees the Olav tetralogy as beyond the zenith of Undset's creative conception. This paper, on the contrary, tends to look at the dynamics the other way round. According to all accessible sources, *Olav Audunsson* is a masterpiece, suggesting of modernism and psychoanalysis by its narrative nonlinearity and fragmentality.

The latter part looks on the theory and history of the reception, analysing the character and focus of selected Czech metatexts since the publication of the first Czech translation of Undset (*Jaro*, 1929) until present. The reception, seen as a dialogue of the reader with the text, has its background in the cultural situation, while influencing this very situation in its turn. The synthesis of these reflections underlines the proposition that the unusually deep reception of Undset's work corresponded with the last phase of the "Czech Question", by which is meant the discussion of the importance of national history. T. G. Masaryk saw the answer to the Czech Question as connected with ethics and religion. The Czech national identity already established, Undset's work, offering an insight both into the unknown, distant, Norwegian culture and into the universality of the human fate in general, reached Czech readers in the middle of the process of constituting the *Czech cultural* identity, which is the reason why it was accepted.

Last but not least, Sigrid Undset is discussed in the context of world literature; in this respect, the strategies of creating literary canons (national, European), which present a non-contextual, extraliterary and even non-literary phenomenon, are critically questioned. The concept of world literature, on the contrary, deals with the dynamics of literary phenomena in terms of relationships, which is why we can see the reception of Sigrid Undset as an evidence of cultural reciprocity and a subject for comparative literature. It is also why the topic is relevant to both of the two relatively small national cultures, the Czech and the Norwegian.