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SELMA LAGERLÖF'S TRAVELOGUE ON RUSSIA: FAIRY TALE, REVELATION OR PROPAGANDA?

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Speeches constitute unique and poorly studied part of Selma Lagerlöf's legacy. The article analyzes the speech delivered at the ceremonial meeting of the Swedish Academy on December 20, 1926, where Lagerlöf chose to talk about her experiences during the journey to Saint Petersburg and Moscow, which she had made in 1912 accompanied by a close friend of hers Valborg Olander. The publication of the speech in a major Swedish newspaper "Dagens Nyheter" omitted a larger part of the speech's text, namely the very description of the trip to Russia, leaving space for the political message only, which followed in the second half. The only unabridged version of the speech was published in 1945. The latest publication of the speech in Sweden is dated 2016 and received mixed reviews, as Selma Lagerlöf's characterization of Russia in it borders to some extent on propaganda. Selma Lagerlöf renders her impressions of her visit to both Saint Petersburg and Moscow and her encounters with Russian people, culture, art, theatre, and religiosity, as well as with social and political conditions. Among these impressions a key role is given to the visit to Tretyakov Gallery, where she got mesmerized by one of the paintings, namely by Ilya Repins "Ivan the Terrible and his Son Ivan on November 16th, 1581". This stark impression allowed her to shape the speech's rhetoric as a revelation while herself trying on a role that of a secress. The article though studies Lagerlöf's speech about Russia primarily as a literary work: in terms of composition, artistic techniques and images. Like anything else Selma Lagerlöf wrote, her address to the Swedish Academy members follows a thoroughly planned narrative idea. To reach her thesis Lagerlöf makes use of a variety of tropes, such as metaphor, allegory, parable and ekphrasis.

Keywords: Selma Lagerlöf, travelogue, ekphrasis, Nobel family, Knut Hamsun, Russian revolution, Ylia Repin, Ivan the Terrible.

There are only few texts available that outstanding Scandinavian writers of the past composed about their trips to Russia. Among the texts of genuine value and exquisite artistic quality we note Knut Hamsun's renowned travelogue 'In Wonderland' (1903). 'Address to the Swedish Academy at the ceremonial meeting on 20 December 1926' by Selma Lagerlöf is an important piece in this sense. The address is little known in the writer's homeland. Even to a lesser extent was it available to the Russian readers for reasons derived from the address' text itself. This ten page text takes a special place among everything written and told by Selma Lagerlöf as a work which combines features of fiction, political and social writing and historical evidence, thus enriching our understanding of her legacy as a writer, individual and public figure. The address was first published in 1945 followed by a very recent publication in 2016 when it was included into a selection of texts published by the Swedish Philological Society under the title 'Selma Lagerlöf. Speeches' along with 43 more speeches delivered by the writer at different events on different occasions. Naturally, this speech of 1926 should awaken special interest among Russian readers and scholars, because it addresses Russia as a country, in particular its culture, history, and society.

The background of the writing is the following: in February 1912, accompanied by her close friend, a well-known suffragette and supporter of education Valborg Olander, Selma Lagerlöf came to Saint Petersburg from Helsinki by train. She had been invited to Helsinki by the Swedish Literature Society in order to participate in ceremonies on the occasion of commemorating Finno-Swedish lyric and epic poet J. L. Runeberg (1831–1877). It had been as early as during the Nobel Banquet of 1909 when Dr. Emmanuel Nobel had invited the writer to visit Russia. Dr. Nobel was the one to meet and greet the guests at the Russian border one morning in February 1912. 14 years later, on 20 December 1926, during the Christmas meeting of the Swedish Academy, where she had been a member since 1914, Selma Lagerlöf would deliver a one and a half hour speech, starting with the following words:

"Dear ladies and gentlemen! We all have lived through some episodes that do not seem important when they occur but that can gain utmost importance as long as we witness their further development. That's why I dare to take the attention of the Swedish Academy and tell you some stories from my short trip to Russia [...]" [Lagerlöf, 1945, s. 46]¹.

¹ All quotes from 'Address to the Swedish Academy at the ceremonial meeting on 20 December 1926' given in translation by the author of the article.

These are the first lines of the text which was published after her death only, in 1945, as mentioned above, in the selection of texts under the title 'Från skilda tider II' (works of different periods) edited by Nils Afzelius. There are 14 years between the journey to Russia as such and the speech addressing it at the meeting of the Swedish Academy and there are 21 years between the moment of the speech and its publication as a literary work. It is symbolic, that the first period between 1912 and 1926 is the period when Europe and the World were amidst the World War I and several revolutions, including all phases of the Russian revolution. During the second period between 1926 and 1945 the world history witnessed similarly tragic developments, the central one being the World War II. The same period of history saw the death of Selma Lagerlöf herself in 1940. As for the World War I, its start and development was a deep shock for the author which resulted in her creative crisis. She did not create fiction between 1914 and 1918 and it was only in 1918 when her anti-war novel 'The Outcast' (the original title in Swedish is 'Bannlyst') reached the reader. As for the start of the World War II, namely the Winter War between the USSR and Finland as its integral part, the position of the Swedish writer, who was an elderly person at that time, was well known. She handed over her golden Nobel medal to the Parliament of Finland as her gift in order to contribute to the efforts of the brotherly nation in combating the aggressor. As for the World War I, the writer "kept her reputation as a writer and played a role of a balanced and dignified queen of the Swedish literature" as noted by Anna Nordlund [Nordlund, p. 157], but the USSR's attack on the neighboring Finland in November 1939 was followed by her quick and undoubtedly negative response.

Referring back to the speech of 1926, it should be noted, that, according to a fair comment by Anna Nordlund, "Unlike her colleagues Key and Wägner², as well as the preceding generation of female authors, Lagerlöf kept her distance from official political rhetoric" [Nordlund, p. 162]. Instead, as I believe, Lagerlöf uses those methods for expressing her attitude to actual events which she best masters and which possess the strongest suggestive and artistic effects, that is, a fairytale allegory, parable and ekphrasis. As for the composition, Brigitte Mral notes the

² Outstanding Swedish female writers, education activists and women's and children's right advocates Ellen Key (1849–1926) and Elin Wägner (1882–1949).

following in her introduction to the selected speeches by Selma Lagerlöf: "Her way of building up her speeches with a reserved and not flashy start and then accomplishing a powerful thesis thanks to narratives, analogies and examples seems to be her favorite stylistic device" [Mral, s. XVIII].

Like anything else Selma Lagerlöf wrote, her address to the Swedish Academy members follows a thoroughly planned narrative idea. As mentioned before, the speech uses an allegoric and partly parable-like strategy typical for Lagerlöf when there is a pre-determined thesis but the way to the culmination is sometimes counterintuitive like several water trickles different in their speed and color, all rushing to the big river. As the speech is a reflection of 1926 on what had happened in 1912, it is an easy guess what the culmination of Lagerlöf's "fairytale" about Russia, which she had visited in 1912, was. As the matter of fact, Lagerlöf tried on a role of a prophetess in her speech, who, thanks to the heavenly gift of prophecy, could anticipate tragic developments of 1917. As a result, the story has a culmination in a post-apocalypse revelation and at the same time contains a moralizing message typical for a fairytale:

"Even if it³ was not completely bloodless, it induced hopes rather than horror, as they used to say in the beginning. It was not an earthquake but just a little shock. In contrast, Lenin's revolution followed as the darkness of the autumn. And the real earthquake started, the Earth was shaking, the Neva River was full of corpses, all over Russia people had been killed and an entire social class was eradicated. Personally I was not a bit surprised about it having happened. I saw it, I knew it long ago. I was trying not to believe the warning received, but deep in my soul I knew it would inevitably happen" [Lagerlöf, 1945, s. 58–59].

What warning does Selma Lagerlöf remind us of in the culmination part of her travelogue? We will be back for sure, but let us first consider what the start of the trip of the two Swedish women to Russia looks like. That's a good illustration of a "reserved and non-flashy start" Brigitte Mral refers to. Lagerlöf writes that the trip of herself and Olander "started with an insignificant incidence", that is: "As soon as our baggage and ourselves were accommodated in a very comfortable compartment, the conductor said that we had to change our seats. A Russian admiral and his company were travelling with the same train and they wanted the best sleeping compartment. The reason given to us was the fact that he

³ February Bourgeois Democratic Revolution of 1917.

had bought his tickets earlier than we, nevertheless it was a clear abuse of power. Our friends from Finland who were seeing us off would complain and make a fuss, but they were not ready to protest openly. So, we changed our carriage for a more modest one" [Lagerlöf, 1935, s. 46–47]. To make a historical and textual comparison it will not bother to refer to Knut Hamsun's travelogue about Russia, where he describes his train trips. One of the chapters describes a case, which is also related to theory and practice of exchanging train compartments. Hamsun gives, however, opposite judgment made from different angle and based on different values:

"The engineer, who knows this country inside out, suggested that we bribe the conductor with a couple of rubles, so that we, too, can have our own compartment. We bribed him and were moved. Later it occurs to the engineer that we have to bribe him one more time to get him to take our tickets. Otherwise we would be awakened at every change of conductor during the night. So we bribed him once again, according to our means. Everything was taken care of in a trice. The system of taking bribes is an easy and practical system" [Hamsun, p. 34].

Let us note, that Hamsun's text 'In Wonderland' has a subtitle 'Caucasian experiences and dreams' and is a biased, if not strongly tendentious work which sets a goal of fulfilling some creative plan rather than of presenting an unbiased picture of the writer's impressions of another country. The same is true for Lagerlöf's memoir text about her trip to Russia in terms of following the writer's creative plan. In contrast to Hamsun's text, Selma Lagerlöf's travelogue is more accurate in practical details, she writes only about things she knows and saw by her own eyes. Among other things she observes that she failed to visit the Hermitage and the Armory Chamber due to "spring cleaning", so she does not write anything about them. In contrast, her visit to another museum is described in minor detail and this thread becomes pivotal in her travelogue.

So, let us come back to what we called an apocalypse revelation. As it happened, Lagerlöf and Olander accompanied by Doctor Nobel set off to Moscow where they visited a lot of sights, including Moscow Drama Theater and Tretyakov Gallery. It was the visit to the Gallery which became a turning point in her narrative, an axis of fear and presentiments of disaster on which the story of her Hamsun-like mysterious trip to Russia revolves. The story of her visit to the most advanced European art gallery as she calls it begins by Selma Lagerlöf's comparing herself to a

little bee moving chaotically over a flowerbed. There is, however, a moment when these movements stop abruptly, as she sees frightening eyes on one of the canvases: "Dull, ravenous and full of madness. These were not human eyes, but eyes of a tiger, a werewolf" [Lagerlöf, 1945, s. 53]. According to her, it was Ilva Repin's picture 'Ivan the Terrible and his son Ivan on 16 November 1581' better known as 'Ivan the Terrible killing his son' (1883-1885) which made such a strong impression. The image of Ivan the Terrible from Repin's famous painting plays a role of the bestial half of the human nature, which, according to Lagerlöf's neoromantic thinking, can co-exist with the Christ-like half of the human. In connection with this the animal-related comparison made by Lagerlöf seems highly remarkable and logical. Ulla-Britta Lagerroth comments it as follows: "Human fear of an attack of a feline predator has been several times described by Selma Lagerlöf in a highly expressive manner" [Lagerroth, s. 405], and as one of the illustrations she quotes the first chapter of 'The Wonderful Adventures of Nils' where a harmless domestic tomcat transforms into an almost infernal beast, resembling a bobcat or a black panther. When the cat saw that his eternal foe Nils had transformed into a tiny person, its eyes started glowing menacing green and it finally transformed: "The next instant the cat was so changed that the boy could scarcely believe it was the same animal. The boy felt how the sharp claws sank through his vest and shirt and into his skin; and how the sharp eye-teeth tickled his throat. Every separate hair on his body stood on end. The back was bent; the legs had become elongated; the claws scraped, the ground; the tail had grown thick and short; the ears were laid back; the mouth was frothy; and the eyes were wide open and glistened like sparks of red fire" [Lagerlöf, 1929, p. 20–21].

The above mentioned supports that the subject of expanded ekphrasis in the quoted text by Lagerlöf became the famous painting by Repin. An ekphrasis technique, which is based on addressing a visual art piece, has been used by the writer many times in her literature works strictly following the technique's application rules. By way of illustration, Luca Signorelli's fresco 'Sermon and Deeds of Antichrist' (1499–1502) from Orvieto Cathedral occupies a central place in her novel 'The Miracles of Antichrist' (1897) and her important novel of her mature writing period 'The Löwensköld Ring' (1925) begins with a description of a huge portrait of the old general Löwensköld. The portrait will remain acting within the course of the mysterious story of the lost and found precious

ring. The apparition of the general seems to step out of the portrait, sowing discord and mess in the lives of his offspring, frightening and blackmailing them.

Lagerlöf's memories of the visit to Russia are however not limited by the terrifying look of Ivan the Terrible. One more portrait of another Russian tsar was represented in the memoir work. The painting by Nikolai Ge 'Peter the Great Interrogating the Tsarevich Alexei Petrovich at Peterhof' (1871) plays an important role in the story. It is common knowledge that Selma Lagerlöf read Dmitry Merezhkovsky's trilogy 'Christ and Antichrist' (1895–1905) and the Russian writer's binary concept of confluence of the divine and the earthly influenced her creative legacy, namely, prompted creation of the already mentioned novel 'The Miracles of Antichrist'. In her story about Russia she refers back to Merezhkovsky: "And in this very moment I understood the book. Now I knew that this book was second to none with regard to reflecting the truth out of all I had read about Russia" [Lagerlöf, 1945, s. 53]. In Ge's figure of Peter the Great she noted, first of all, the tsar's contempt for his weak-willed son. It is also worth noting that a bit earlier, when describing her impressions of Saint Petersburg's monuments, she compares the Bronze Horseman and the equestrian statue of Alexander III in Znamenskaya Square, but the objects of her comparison are the featured autocrats themselves rather than the monuments as such: one of them wanted to break through and reach the level of the rest of Europe, the second one "would suppress the education and curse the West" [Lagerlöf, 1945, s. 50]. It would be erroneous though to state that Selma Lagerlöf perceives the figure of the tsar Peter as embodying a progressive reformer. First of all, she writes that he also embodies Russian cruelty. Here we would like to come back to Knut Hamsun's travelogue and make a comparison. There he has some observations of the era of Peter the Great and applies them to Russia of the edge of 19–20 centuries seen with his own eyes. Having witnessed a scene of obsequious behavior of a group of peasants in presence of a uniformed officer, Hamsun presents the following conclusions: "One obeys a man who knows how to command. People were delighted to obey Napoleon. It's a pleasure to obey. And Russians still know how to." [Hamsun, p. 374] Later Hamsun retells an episode of Waliszewski's book about Peter I's time, where a triple execution in which the convicts were broken on the wheel was mentioned. The execution took place in 1722. One of the convicts noticed

that he had spilled a few drops of blood on the wheel he lay on and used his mutilated arm to wipe the blood off. Hamsun agrees to the solution drawn by the author of the historical chronicle that "with such people one can go far" [Hamsun, p. 49]. In contrast, Selma Lagerlöf is in no way charmed by the medieval-like executions. "I tried to hurry when passing the stone-clad marble scaffold which remained standing in the Red Square under Kremlin's walls (....) [Lagerlöf, 1945, s. 56].

Hamsun's and Lagerlöf's experiences of Russia approximate in dominating dichotomy of West European and, as Hamsun puts it, "Byzantine" halves, a combination of progress and the dark ages. These impressions are often naive, or, as they would say today, touristic. Hamsun's agenda in the above quoted episode of servileness of the peasants can be referred to as Nietzscheanism, while Lagerlöf's vision is dramatically different. She sees signs of the dark ages' barbarism in obedience and piety of Russian muzhiks. For her it is also a foretoken of an anticipated ruthless riot. Trying on a role of a Pythia in this story, Selma Lagerlöf writes: "I did not tell the host family4, that I know that once they will have to flee violent crowds and that their property will lay in tatters. I tried to stay calm and did all I could in order to free myself from the frightening presentiment" [Lagerlöf, 1945, s. 55].

It would be incorrect and unfair to mention only the author's traumatizing experience related to the Russian culture. She dedicated a whole passage to description of her visit to Moscow Drama Theater. It was the first night of 'Hamlet' directed by Gordon Craig with Kachalov as the protagonist. The performance impressed Lagerlöf deeply, especially stage, costume design and music. Thus, in the episode when Queen Gertrude sits on the throne listening to the musicians playing, the latter were dressed as the Flemish artist Hans Memling's 'Musician Angels', as Selma Lagerlöf noted immediately being deeply impressed by this resemblance. She also noted with admiration that even the instruments the musicians were holding in their hands looked the same as the ones on Memling's canvas. Thus, being a devoted user of the technique of ekphrasis, the Swedish writer highly appreciated the level and quality of this technique in another artist's work. Thus Lagerlöf continues by writing that after the Drama Theater performance the magic haze seemed to fade away and she just wanted to laugh at her own fear provoked by

⁴ The Nobel family.

seeing the tiger-like eyes of Repin's tsar Ivan. Summarizing her travel experiences Selma Lagerlöf writes: "I recall that a couple of days after leaving the country we, the travelers, were sitting and discussing our experience: All that friendly approach we met from our host family and from other Swedes, all beauty we witnessed, all interesting conversations we had and all knowledge we gained" [Lagerlöf, 1945, s. 59]. After that Selma Lagerlöf introduces the idea of future rationalization of memory into the text and continues: "But among all these things I exclaimed, however, that Russia is a scary and dangerous country. And I did not feel like staying there. It kept frightening me. And I came home. And never more did Tsar Ivan's bestial eyes come back to me in my fantasies. And all my fear seemed to be result of stress" [Lagerlöf, 1945, s. 59].

However, as it was mentioned on page 3, the 'Address to the Swedish Academy at the ceremonial meeting on 20 December 1926' is finished by an epilogue about the February revolution followed by the October one". So, the coda in-built into this work's composition is doomed by the original prophecy: Antichrist defeats Christ since the beast defeats the human. All this correlates with Lagerlöf's dychotomic and originally romantic concept of two halves struggling in the human's nature: the humane and the beast's ones, or Christianity and the Old Testament. It is therefore symbolic, that the last work by Lagerlöf published in Bolsheviks' Russia before the long period of silence was the above mentioned novel 'The Outcast' ('From death to life' in the Russian translation by E. Blagoveschenskaia), where the author presents a very telling contrast and struggle between these two natures using the story of a young man resembling Christ who was unfairly accused of cannibalism on one hand and a story of a priest on another hand, the priest not being able to cope with his own wild antediluvian impulses, with his uncontrolled wrath and jealousy in particular.

To summarize, it is worth to present some observations of the destiny of the writer's works in the Soviet Union. Of course, this fate was not as counterintuitive as the one of August Strindberg's works, that had been unspoken taboo for publishing or even research up to the mid-1980s. You cannot say that everything went smoothly, though. Almost all Lagerlöf's works published before October 1917 were translated into Russian. However, the first decades of Soviet power were the decades of a significant and important part of her artistic career and the situation had changed dramatically by that time. In 1924, as we mentioned, the

latest translation of Lagerlöf's work was published in Russian before the long period of silence that followed. The writer died in March 1940, several days before the Winter War was over. It is therefore especially notable that the first work by Lagerlöf to be published in the Soviet Union after 16 year of silence was printed in 1940. It was a shortened and adapted version of 'The Wonderful Adventures of Nils'. We remember that the writer addressed the Swedish Academy on the Christmas Eve in 1926. It is hard to believe that statements and judgments that we find in her speech could go unnoticed by Bolshevik's ideologists; it is even worthless to mention that they could not be published in Russian. As we saw, the author was sceptical and cautious about the changes which had taken place in Russia and the developments of the World War II could only make these judgments stronger. As the result, Russia saw a new, much needed edition of 'Gösta Berling's Saga' only in 1959 and the best work of late Lagerlöf — Löwensköld trilogy — found its way to Russian speaking readers in 1970s only.

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СЕЛЬМА ЛАГЕРЛЁФ О СВОЕМ ПУТЕШЕСТВИИ В РОССИЮ: СКАЗКА, ВИДЕНИЕ АПОКАЛИПСИСА ИЛИ ПРОПАГАНДА?

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Рассматривается малоизвестный текст Сельмы Лагерлёф под названием «Речь на торжественном заседании Шведской академии 20 декабря 1926 года», впервые опубликованный посмертно, в 1945 г., в сборнике «Из разных времен II». В речи, обращенной к членам Шведской академии, Сельма Лагерлёф вспоминает свое путешествие в Россию, совершенное ею по приглашению семьи Нобелей за четырнадцать лет до этого выступления перед академиками, и описывает в ней свои впечатления от Петербурга и Москвы. Среди наиболее значимых фрагментов речи выделяются рассказ о посещении Третьяковской галереи и Московского художественного театра. Кроме того, в речи Лагерлёф о России говорится об истории, религиозности, общественных отношениях в нашей стране, которые она отметила во время своего визита. Следующая публикация этого отчасти спорного текста на родине писательницы, в Швеции, состоялась совсем недавно, в 2016 г., и вызвала неоднозначную реакцию. В том числе звучали мнения, что текст речи является пропагандистским, так как в нем пестуется исторический страх шведов перед Россией. В предлагаемой статье текст речи Лагерлёф рассматривается не только с точки зрения содержания (подробно описанные впечатления писательницы о России 1912 г.), но и с точки зрения того, как она применяет свое мастерство рассказчицы для создания публицистического произведения. Оказывается, что даже в тексте на случай писательница проявляет себя как неоромантик. Важное место в риторическом искусстве Сельмы Лагерлёф занимают такие художественные приемы, как аллегория, притчевый дискурс и экфрасис. Кроме того, автор примерила на себя роль провидицы, выстроив свое повествование вокруг мнимого пророчества о грядущей русской революции, увиденного ею на знаменитом полотне Ильи Репина «Иван Грозный и сын его Иван 16 ноября 1581 года». Таким образом, «Речь на торжественном заседании Шведской академии 20 декабря 1926 года» выстроена согласно модели апокалиптического видения.

Ключевые слова: Сельма Лагерлёф, травелог, экфрасис, семейство Нобелей, Кнут Гамсун, русская революция, Илья Репин, Иван Грозный.

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