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KONSTANTIN BAL'MONT'S NORWEGIAN ACQUAINTANCE, DAGNY KRISTENSEN

In a newspaper article published some time ago, Dagny Kristensen was described as a "Norwegian writer who had not found the place she deserved in Norwegian literary and cultural history."¹ The validity of this statement can be seen in the relative dearth of information published about her. In Russia she is primarily known as the Norwegian correspondent for *Veey*, and as an acquaintance of Konstantin Bal'mont, but very little has been printed about her in Soviet publications. The aim of this study, therefore, is to illuminate her relationship to the Russian Symbolist movement and poet Konstantin Bol'mont in particular.

Dagny Kristensen (1876-1962) belonged to an intellectually active family, which seems to have provided her with the necessary stimulation for broadening her cultural outlook. Her father was a priest in a middle-sized town in southern Norway, Kristiansand, where Dagny was born. Her three brothers later distinguished themselves as a professor, an editor, and a civil servant.² And she also had the example set by her quite famous uncle, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, poet, novelist, and author of the words to the Norwegian national anthem.

She received a high school education, finishing the *middelskole* (the stage in education immediately preceding work at a *gymnasium*) in 1892. Four years later she moved to Oslo, where she lived for the rest of her life. While in Oslo, she gave lectures at the folk academy in 1900-1902, and by that time had learned the Russian language, well enough to translate various pieces into Norwegian. For example, she was one of the first Norwegians to translate works by Maksim Gorkij, and her version of his story "Makar Čudra" appeared in a newspaper in 1901.³ In 1902, she obtained a position as secretary in a governmental department, where she remained until her retirement in 1940.

These routine details do not give much of a hint, however, about her later interests and priorities, which were varied and apparently based on strongly held convictions. She was, for example, a member of the Norwegian Society for Psychic Research and of the *Sprogets venner* organization, which is devoted to the preservation of a "pure" somewhat more conservative form of the Norwegian language called *riksmål*. She was a deeply religious person, quite conservative in her personal outlook, and in her dealings with others apparently a rather stern, critical woman.

But she is known and remembered as well for her active role in founding a secret society in Oslo, the Maria Order, an organization similar to the Masonic Lodges, but only for women. Miss Kristensen was the order's first leader; during her forty-year tenure, the organization grew from the original lodge to seventeen, located in va-

rious parts of Norway. Not long before her death she revealed some of the order's goals, including self-development and the necessity of maintaining a strong Christian faith. These aims and preferences (especially the emphasis on secrets and the privilege of being initiated into them) are in fact not far removed from some of the interests displayed by the Russian Symbolists, and thus it is not surprising that she would have been attracted to their movement. One thinks here of the various Symbolists who were at some time involved in Theosophy and Anthroposophy, and their interest in all levels and historical stages of the Russian language.

Dagny Kristensen also had a busy career as a journalist, writing on many subjects, and she devoted herself to poetry, mostly dealing with religious topics. Her journalism is now almost entirely forgotten in Norway, largely because it was, quite naturally, topical; times and tastes have certainly changed. And although poetry was not her primary vocation in life, the themes presented in her verse not only give some insight into her interests, but also strike a chord in Norwegian spirituality.

Her two collections, for example, *Psalms and Songs*, and *Selected Verse*, are devoted almost entirely to her faith.⁴ She composed prayers for morning and evening, for burial, and for communicating with God. One finds a whole cycle on the Lord's Prayer, taking each line as the focus for meditation and verses, as well as numerous poems on life, faith, hope and love. The first volume closes with a cycle of songs for matins and vespers for each day of the week, set to various Norwegian hymns. And it is here that her ties to the Norwegian pietistic movements of the last century are most apparent.

These interests comingle with her attraction to the poetry of another nation, and the works of Konstantin Bal'mont in particular. She in fact traveled to St. Petersburg to meet him in the autumn of 1900 (Bal'mont was in Petersburg then from September 1900 to May 1901).⁵ One of the results of this encounter was providing the inspiration for three of Bal'mont's poems, which he dedicated to her (and which will be addressed below). Another was a new role attempting to facilitate contacts between Bal'mont and Knut Hamsun; both men were in fact quite interested in each other's countries. Because of her relationship with Bal'mont, she became the Norwegian correspondent for *Vesy*. She was furthermore one of Scandinavia's most active supporters of this leading symbolist journal and its sole subscriber in Norway at the end of 1906.⁶

There has been some question about the precise nature of her relationship with Bal'mont, whether it was platonic or more than just friendly.⁷ But it is clear from a letter Bal'mont wrote to an editor in 1902 that he did not view the time they spent together as just a meeting of the minds. In this letter, written from Paris, Bal'mont relates:

Do you remember one night, when we were wandering in the streets, and I told you about that Norwegian girl who had come to see me in Petersburg? Two years have passed since then, and now she's here with me. The past several weeks have been like a fairy tale for us, but now the dream is ending, tenderly and easily, like a cloud melting, to appear again -- where? -- it doesn't know.⁸

Once again, it seems evident that Miss Kristensen had come to be with Bal'mont in Paris (he was in fact in exile there because of a political poem that reflected negatively on the tsar). And there is

no mention of his current wife, Ekaterina, whom he had married in 1896 and who had given birth to his daughter in 1901.

The poems composed in 1900, shortly after their initial acquaintance, and later published in Bal'mont's most important collection of verse, also show a depth of feeling that went beyond the purely literary. Indeed, in his printed dedication to *Let's Be Like the Sun*, he mentions several friends, including "Dagny Kristensen, the dream at dawn, the valkyrie, in whose veins the blood of King Harald Fairhair flows." And in the "Trefoil" dedicated to the young Norwegian, we see evidence that he was rather taken with her:

1. FROM A ROYAL LINE

Yes, I know you, I know. You are descended from kings.
You are from the race of those proud skalds of your native land.
You don't feel, don't know many sounds, many words,
Because one cannot hear the ages wafting through them.
You don't see or know many colors and pictures,
Because the power of your native seas' depths doesn't shine in them.
But if you utter a fleeting, prophetic sound,
Then we'll immediately be together, in one closed circle.
And when you can reflect the sea's strength in your gaze,
There will immediately be a tender bond between us.
A bond of recognition, expectation, the boundlessness of dreaming,
Of long songs without names, the beauty of revelations.
Between us a conversation will waft in exclamations: "Forever."
"Will you forget?" "Impossible." "Will you return to me?" "Yes."
Yes, I know you, happiness. You were born of the waves.
And I am bound by a royal order. Remember. Remember! Be with me!¹⁰

Here Bal'mont, in addition to expressing the wish to be together again, stresses Dagny Kristensen's heritage, especially her blood relationship with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, one of Norway's "proud skalds," and her links to Norwegian kings. She is also seen as a representative of her native land's geographical features, and though Bal'mont had not been there as yet, he was already enamored of the country and its literature, which quite likely served to attract him even more to her.

The second poem of this Trefoil is more passionate, with extremely obvious symbols that show no reticence in expression:

2. IN MY GARDEN

White roses shimmer in my garden,
They shimmer white and red,
Timid dreams quiver in my soul,
Shameful, passionate dreams.
I've seen you but once, dearest,
But one meeting of our dreams was enough
To ignite an invincible love in my soul,
Which burns without end.
I see your face growing pale,
A wave of hair, like the harmonious locks of dreams,
The darkening recognition in your eyes,
And your red, red lips.

Just once, dearest, did I know
The bright feeling called happiness,
Oh, my shadow, incorporeal but visible,
Love will not be forgotten.

My love is intoxicated, like ripe grape clusters,
Passionate calls resound in my soul,
White roses flash in my garden,
And bright, bright red ones.¹¹

Again we see the importance of dreams here, especially the type referred to in Russian as *mečty*, daydreams or imaginings. In all three of these poems, the printed dedication, and the 1902 letter about their time together in Paris, the word *mečta* serves as symbol of their meetings and communication.

The final poem of the Trefoil is rather different in tone and content from the other two; there is less talk of dreams, and the mood is close to despair, because of her departure:

3. THE SUN HAS GONE AWAY

The sun has gone away. I am alone again.
The sun has moved away from the earth's valleys.
Only the snowy peaks retain its light.
The sun is sending its last glance.

The air begins to freeze, powerfully fettered by the mist.
Someone bending down breathes over the earth.
The seas' twinkling waves freeze secretly.
"Go away from the night, go quickly."

"Where is your calm refuge?" "There is none."
It exists only where your gaze is fixed on a star.
It exists only where the rays of your dream shine.
Only where the sun is. Only where you are.¹²

We notice as well the emphasis on geography, especially the mountains and valleys of Norway, and the obvious metaphor where she is compared to the sun.

By tracing the publication history of this trefoil, we can see that Bal'mont must have written these poems very close to the time of their meeting in Petersburg, for he had just come in September, and the poems first appeared in print in the October 1900 issue of *Экспрессионные сочинения*.¹³ And when he formulated the dedication mentioned above, spring of 1902, he had not yet been with her again in Paris. Thus his feelings for her seem to have remained fairly constant, at least until October of 1902, when the *mečta* started to fade. But as predicted in the letter of that month, they did meet again, in 1906, when Bal'mont came to Norway for the first time.

Between their first meetings and the Norwegian visit in 1906, she printed a translation of her Russian friend's poem in 1905, and Bal'mont was actively pursuing his interests in Norway, the works of Knut Hamsun in particular.¹⁴ He indeed learned Norwegian and eventually translated five works by Hamsun.¹⁵ His favorite was *Pan*, which he did not translate, but for the Russian version, he did write a glowing introduction in which he stressed Hamsun's popularity in Russia.¹⁶ Bal'mont moreover used a rather well known line from that novel, "I go from one flower to another, they are intoxicated," as the epigraph to his poem "The Lovers".¹⁷ Here again Dagny Kristensen can be seen

as a link between the two cultures: she translated major portions of the Russian poet's introduction to *Pan* for her 1905 article "Hamsun in Russia," and we see in a letter from Hamsun to her that she evidently tried (unsuccessfully) to arrange a meeting between the two men when Bal'mont came to Norway in 1906.¹⁸

She had known Hamsun for a number of years, in part because her brother Brede was a close friend of his. And she maintained a correspondence with Hamsun, often related to Russian topics. Despite Bal'mont's rather intense desire to speak with him, however, Hamsun persuaded Dagny Kristensen to pretend that he had gone far north, "to Finnmark, whether I've gone there or not," in order to avoid meeting his Russian admirer.¹⁹

Thus we can see that Dagny Kristensen remained interested in Bal'mont, both as a person and as writer, at least through 1906 and his visit to Norway. After that time, there is no evidence of them meeting again until 1915, when Bal'mont again visited Norway, this time on his way back to Russia, by a circuitous route later utilized as well by Andrej Belyj, during the First World War. The nature of their relationship seems to have changed after 1906, but this does not mean that they entirely lost interest in each other, for they maintained a correspondence in the years 1915-17.²⁰

And it was precisely because of her acquaintance with Bal'mont, and of course her interest in Russian literature and culture, that she became the official correspondent for *Vesny* in Norway. If one compares her and the contributions she made to that journal with other, more illustrious and significant foreign contributors, such as René Ghil, William Morfill, and Arthur Luther, to name a few, then one can see that her role at *Vesny* was a fairly minor one. Still it must be kept in mind that other Symbolists were also quite attracted to Norway and the works of its writers; Sergej A. Poljakov, *Vesny's* nominal editor, and Jurgis Baltrušaitis, for example, learned Norwegian and translated various works for the Skorpion publishing house, and Andrej Belyj, who very much admired Ibsen and Grieg, traveled to Norway and in fact had one of the most significant experiences of his life there in 1913.²¹ Thus it should be no surprise that her designation as a correspondent was acceptable to the journal's staff.

Her only contribution to *Vesny* appeared rather early in its first year of publication, March of 1904, in fact.²² Her "Letter from Kristiania" carries the explanatory subtitle "An Introductory Remark about Norwegian Theater." In it, she gives some background on the relative importance of the theaters in Oslo [then called Kristiania] and Bergen, on the various leading actors and actresses in Norway, and on certain aspects of Ibsen and Bjørnson. The style is also of note, because it appears that the article was written in Russian, though clearly by a non-native speaker, a description that fits Dagny Kristensen very well.

Because she was Bjørnson's niece, she naturally favors him in her article, and indeed devotes nearly all of her first page to him. She states that the theater in Bergen, for instance, "gained its importance when Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson devoted several years of his youth to guiding it."²³ And she goes on to say that "He was the merriest person in jolly Bergen; he passed by like a ray of sun along the streets; all the men smiled at him, all the women loved him."²⁴ Later, because of his political views, he evoked a more mixed reaction, but his niece again defends him, and it should be pointed out that Bjørnson was truly a major force in the Norwegian theater in the nineteenth century.

She also devotes some space in her piece to the social and political aspects of literature in Norway, especially as seen in certain of Ibsen's plays, such as *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *A Doll's House*. And it is interesting to read her comments about the Norwegian literary scene, which are appropriate as well for Russian culture during the time of Symbolism's heyday: "and poetic works were bloody torches, which the poets hurled into the uproar of the daily struggle."²⁵

But the major portion of her article is given over to rather sensationalistic recounting of actors and their deaths. And she closes with a final reminiscence about the tragic death, in 1898, of a most promising actor, Severin Roald. Thus she offers a somewhat negative impression about the then current state of affairs in Norwegian drama, especially as compared with a more glorious recent past. Ibsen and Bjørnson were still alive, though neither was as actively involved with the stage, and indeed she was correct in her assessment of the Norwegian theater in 1904. It had been a more vital and significant force several years earlier, and this was precisely the period which interested Russian readers, not only Symbolists, the most.

Drawing on all of the information presently available, we can see that Ves'y's correspondent was a genuinely literate and engaged Norwegian writer, not of the first rank, though she did have a number of important acquaintances in that sphere. She clearly had excellent organizing skills and a wide range of interests, including of course Russian literature and the Symbolists in particular. And in the early part of this century, Dagny Kristensen, through her timely acquaintance with Bal'mont, aided in making Russian literary works better known in Norway and vice versa.

N o t e s

1. Martin NAG, "Dagny Kristensen - en presentasjon", in: *Morgenbladet*, 10 September 1980.
2. NAG, *ibid.*; much of the information about Dagny Kristensen's life and activities is drawn from materials gathered for the volumes of biography about famous Norwegians at the Universitetsbiblioteket i Oslo.
3. The translation appeared in *Morgenbladet*, 25 and 27 June 1901.
4. D.KRISTENSEN, *Samler og sagner* (Moss, 1944; 2nd edn., Moss, 1960); *Dikte i utvalg*, (Moss, 1958; 2nd edn., Oslo 1972).
5. Vladimir ORLOV, "Bal'mont: Žizn' i poëzija", in: Konstantin Bal'mont, *Stixotvorenija*, (Leningrad 1969), p. 28.
6. See "Spisok lic i učreždenij polučavšix žurnal 'Ves'y' v 1906 g.", in: *Ves'y* 12 (1906), p. 97.
7. NAG, *op.cit.*
8. Konstantin BAL'MONT, "Pis'ma k V.S.Miroljubovu", in: *Literaturnyj arxiv: materialy po istorii literatury i obščestvennogo dviženija*, No. 5, ed. K.D.Muratova, Moskva-Leningrad 1960, p. 154.
9. See Orlov's "Primečaniya" to Bal'mont's *Stixotvorenija*, pp.625-626.

10. K.BAL'MONT, "Iz roda korolej", in: *Stixotvoreniĵa*, p. 243.
11. K.BAL'MONT, "V moem sadu", in: *Stixotvoreniĵa*, p. 244.
12. K.BAL'MONT, "Solnce udalilos'", in: *Stixotvoreniĵa*, p. 244.
13. See Orlov's "Primečaniĵa", p. 629.
14. K.BAL'MONT, "Glimt", trans. D.KRISTENSEN, *Morgenbladet*, 29 May 1905.
15. The works Bal'mont translated were: *Kratskog*, *Dronning Tamara*, *Under halvmanen*, *Svaermere* and *Stridende liv*. They appeared as the 9th, 10th and 11th volumes of Hamsun's *Sobranie sočinenij*, published by the Šipovnik house in Petersburg, 1908-10.
16. D.KRISTENSEN, "Hamsun i Rusland", in: *Morgenbladet*, 25 March 1905.
17. "Jeg gar fra den ene til den andre blomst, de er berusede", Knut Hamsun, "Pan", *Samlede verker*, Vol. 2, (Oslo, 1954), p.355; Bal'mont's poem is called "Vljublennye". See also Martin NAG, "Konstantin Bal'mont og Dagny Kristensen", in: *Morgenbladet*, 2 April 1968.
18. Martin NAG, "Dagny Kristensen"; Orlov's "Primečaniĵa", p. 629.
19. Martin NAG, *ibid.*
20. Orlov's "Primečaniĵa", p. 629.
21. See Ronald E. PETERSON, "Andrej Belyj and Norway", article forthcoming, for more information on this topic.
22. D.KRISTENSEN, "Pis'mo iz Khristianii: Vstupitel'naja zametka o norvežskom teatre", in: *Vesy* 3 (1904), pp. 41-43.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p. 42.