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In may this year, the French president Jaques Chirac gathered important artists and intellectuals from all over Europe for a meeting. The purpose was to have a political discussion about European Union from the perspective of the Arts. Dario Fo and Umberto Eco appeared as representatives of Italian culture, Günter Grass represented Germany, José Saramago Portugal etc. From Sweden, Lars Norén was the one who was invited. Incidentally, the conference was held at the famous Comédie Française in Paris, where a play by no other than Lars Norén was running at that very time . (*Och ge oss skuggorna*, And give us the shadows, 1990)

This current fact may illustrate the present significance of Lars Norén, not only in swedish literature, but also in the wider framework of international cultural life. As a playwright and in recent years also as a director, his impact and importance during the last three decades has been a unique phenomenon of contemporary Swedish Drama. Being today one of the most performed dramatists in the world, his position in the world of theater is comparable to his main predecessor or forerunner in swedish literature, August Strindberg.

Like Strindberg, he is not an easy writer to grasp and define in a manner that gives credit to all his manifold literary contributions. Born in 1944, Norén made his debut as a poet at the age of twenty years. And for two decades, that is in the 1960-ties and 70-ties, he was to remain a cultist poet with a pronounced avantgarde profile - a respected and highly influential figure in swedish literature, but with a restricted and mostly highly sophisticated audience.

Even as a poet the radical artistic changes and redirections is what perhaps most significantly characterizes Lars Norén. One of his poetry collections from the early seventies thus begins with a proclamation or a personal manifesto, in many ways typical of Norén: He wants now to be considered as a completely new author, and instructs the reader if he should meet the "old" Norén in the street, to send Greetings from the new one. Norén has continued to undergo spectacular artistic renewals or transformations, radical creative turning-points all through his career. The most notable is undoubtedly when Norén suddenly finishes publishing poetry, and turns into an intensely productive playwright instead, at the end of the 1970-ties.

His almost instant success as a writer for the theatre was as unpredictable as it was overwhelming. With the strongly autobiographical play *Natten är dagens mor* (*Night is mother to the day*), written and performed in 1982, Norén almost overnight was a name familiar to a large audience. An audience that ran across all imaginable social, cultural and psychological borders in Sweden. When I was working with my doctoral thesis, which deals with Noréns dramatic works of the 80-ties, this was still the play people of the most different kind always referred to when they heard what I was doing.

It is clear that Norén gave a strong injection into Swedish theatre, something new that forcefully vitalized not only the people working in theatre, but also the interest among common people for theatrical productions. The already strong tradition of psychological realism was with Norén in the 1980-ties given a fresh and forceful impetus. With *Natten är dagens mor* he lay the base for a career in theatre that has continued to fascinate and provoke audiences in ever new shapes, settings and contexts.

Provoke, because along with his popularity, Norén has also raised a lot of controversy with his work. This status as a controversial writer seems to me related to the absolute claim on reality that Norén seems to have in what he writes. In the midst of the artistic complexity and refinement, we find a solid

sense of reality combined with a genuinely rebellious will to penetrate and illuminate hidden areas in contemporary society, to make a change in a very concrete sense.

The skill for capturing seemingly trivial details of everyday life conversation is a specific aspect of this ability to create a strong and convincing suggestion of reality. That quality combined with a compelling tendency to confront psychologically and ethically challenging matters contribute to the often explosive effect of his dramatic work.

This is clear already in his breakthrough number *Natten är dagens mor*. Here we find numerous intertexts, mythical layers, and phantasy scenes thrown into the plot, none of these however obscuring the powerful effect of Norén's realistic genius, none of these ever reducing the essential element of everyday realism always at the heart of Norén's plays. In *Demoner (Demons)*, written in the same year, 1982, and the play we celebrate today as the first by Norén to be published in Romanian, we find this capacity to make the dramatized events seem real brilliantly elaborated in the complex, intriguing nuances and undertones running through the dialogues between Frank and Katharina, the couple whose relation is at the very core of the play. The lines between them constantly point to a recognizable, authentic reality that can never be ignored when the theatre of Lars Norén is confronted.

Also, in the midst of his high acknowledgement, Norén has to a significant degree maintained his original position as an outsider of the cultural establishment. Through his career Norén has constantly and successfully claimed his distance and integrity, his unwillingness to take up the role of a national dramatist, and has remained highly critical of the conventional social life in general.

As a dedicated seeker after truth he tends to explore the hidden or constricted areas of contemporary society with unprejudiced scrutiny, in general taking a strong stand for the weak and oppressed of the society. For example, in Norén

the drop-outs and lost souls of contemporary profitrunning capitalism find a devoted and authentic protector.

With his up until present day more than sixty works for the theatre, approximately half of which are published in the original swedish language, his dramatical opus just like his oeuvre in general may seem to evade pregnant all-embracing definitions. The swedish academy would have a hard time giving him the Nobel Prize...

It is however clearly possible to distinguish a first, mainly naturalist period considering his dramatical work. A period intensely focused on psychological conflicts in the delimited sphere of family life and intimate relations. Plays driven by an uncompromising artistic ambition to “creep under the skin of the reality” of these relations. Or as one commentator on Norén has put it: “When it works it is not theatre but organic life, the actors don’t read their lines, they breathe the text”. Of this *Demoni* seems to me to be potentially an excellent example, either when read or enjoyed at a theatre.

The inspirations and literary forerunners are obvious for Norén during his first period as a dramatist: it is the strong burgeois familydrama tradition from Ibsen, Strindberg, Tjechov, Eugene O’Neill, Edward Albee among others, that Norén enters into. O’Neill is perhaps the most obvious precursor, and it is of course interesting to notice the fact that *Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern* in Stockholm, the theatre that Eugene O’Neill chose for the premiere of his “*Long Day’s journey into Night*”, which undoubtedly is the one single play that that most importantly stands as a prototype for Norén during his naturalist familydrama period, this is also the stage where many of Noréns greatest works of the eighties and up until present day have been performed.

Especially interesting from the point of view of present day is perhaps the influence from Harold Pinter, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature this year. In an interview from the early 1980-ties Norén himself stresses how deeply he has been inspired by the quality in Pinter’s dramatic works to always

have the audience and the actors experiencing the same thing at the same time. The people at the stage and the audience are to be hit by the dramatized processes simultaneously in the theatre of Norén, his ambition is never to create a distance between the audience and those performing the play, they should always be on the same level so to say, and this is a general tendency in Norén's plays distinctly influenced by Pinter.

But it is also clear that Norén chooses to "empty out" this dramatical form in a manner first and foremostly his own – the extreme authenticity, the radical quest for truth and psychological insight, the absoluteness of his psychological realism seems to be the one element that perhaps most clearly distinguishes Norén from all his forerunners.

Well into the 1990-ties, that is for a decade and more, a steady flow of dramatical explorations in contemporary family- and couple relations comes out of Norén. Usually the plays are linked together in trilogys. All-in-all they form a complex and challenging, highly critical picture of present day intimate relations. Usually set in a poignantly described swedish atmosphere and social middle-class milieu, but with an impact that soon becomes international, and forcefully reaches countrys as far from each other as, France, Cuba, South Africa and USA. Like Strindberg before him, Norén soon establishes a special relation to Germany, where he has maintained a strong position for two decades.

The sphere of intimacy in crisis, Norén's major motif in his dramatic work of the 1980-ties, with *Demoni* as one of many creative high-points, thus clearly emerges as more than a strictly swedish matter. The relations between family members and between man and woman point to underlying, inner, universal problems and conflicts that can be traced along diverse lines of interpretation. One clear and recurring aspect is the problematic relation to the mother portrayed in the plays.

This motif appears indirectly in the trilogy that begins with *Demoner* (*Demons*, 1982), and is followed up by the both thematically and formally

similar *Vilstolen* (*The Reclining Chair*, 1982) and *Nattvarden* (*The Sacrament*, 1983). In all of these plays conflicts caused by hostile, all-powerful mothers return. In *Demoni*, the central character Frank's breakthrough monologue at the end of the play becomes a key scene. It drastically highlights the ambivalence and psychological strain created by a haunting, nightmarish memory-image of a hostile and oppressing mother demon – perhaps the most obvious *demon* of the play. And in fact, an unresolved mother conflict causes a psychological conflict in most of Norén's plays from the 1980-ties. His overall image of the family tends to be one defined by maternal domination and fatherly absence, of strong mothers and weak fathers.

In the mid-nineties Norén once again moves in a new direction, and proclaims a drastic, almost repugnant adieu to the naturalist bourgeois family drama. Norén's break-up from the drama tradition he so comprehensively and originally has explored during the eighties is clearly announced through alter-ego characters in plays from the early 1990-ties. We find him now forcefully moving away from the naturalist familydrama, and turning instead towards a sociological theatre, with increasingly experimental formal characteristics. He now also appears to a considerably higher degree as involved himself in the actual stagings of his plays, as opposed to formerly functioning merely as the author.

With his newest work Norén draws heavily on the absurdist drama tradition. In plays like *Kliniken* (*The Clinic*), *Under* (*Wonder*) or *Ett sorts Hades* (*One Kind of Hades*), he no longer creates characters who talk with each other, but rather *to* each other in broken-up monologues or fragments of utterings that no-one seems to hear or understand. Samuel Beckett now becomes an important influence, but also continuously Harold Pinter, with his social thematics brought to form in an absurdist style. And the main forerunner of the absurdist drama tradition Norén in his latest work starts contributing to, is of course Eugène Ionesco.

Norén now takes hold of the great powerlessness and frustration at the bottom of the globalized, deeply unjust society, with an international rather than Swedish perspective. Or like he says in an interview from 1993, in the aftermath of the Yugoslavian civil war, “the truth is now in Sarajevo, not in Stockholm”. Following his new, social rather than psychological, absurdist rather than realist artistic orientation, dealing with people without homes and identities, he also writes a short piece about exile Romanians living in New York.

A major work of the current Norén is the trilogy *Morire di classe (the death of the classes)*. Here he gives voice to the lost souls of present day capitalist liberalism, to drop-outs, alcoholics, prostitutes, drug-addicts and homeless people without family or nation, in the streets or put away in institutions. Here also there is a strong auto-biographical background – Norén was himself hospitalized for psychic illness with schizophrenia as the diagnosis, in the late sixties, following the premature death of his mother of cancer. The world he depicts in broken down language is no stranger to himself, a fact that once more guarantees the almost overreal authenticity.

*Personkrets 3:1* performed through Sweden in 1998 is hailed as a highlight of Swedish cultural life in the nineties, whereas *Sju tre*, performed by real life prisoners, becomes a scandal with a tragic aftermath that causes an immense negative publicity for Norén.

Hated or admired, rejected or praised, Norén is an unavoidable element in Swedish literature and culture of today, important to the point of becoming a concept in the very language that Swedes use in everyday communication. To say that something is *rena Norén* (“just like Norén”), or to have a *Norénjul* (“Norén-Christmas”) is something everyone understands – it stands for something problematic, full of conflicts, dark and troublesome, but also, as anyone will notice who reads Norén or sees one of his plays performed, full of liberating and lightening, black humor.

As an explorer of the elements that make life and living together difficult, of the dark aspects of society, as an excorsist of negativity or a seeker for the hidden psychological or social breaking points, Norén is too often criticized for being pessimistic. Norén to me, is on the contrary a writer with a strong and profound commitment, constantly engaged in trying to make possible a better world, a better life. Being accused of ruthlessness, Norén once compared his work to that of the surgeon: “A surgeon has to cut. When the purpose is change and renewal, to break old skin and open up, it cannot be done without the pain”, he said.

With this attitude he reminds me of the Romanian philosopher and writer Emil Cioran, who is also often accused of being too pessimistic or for painting reality in purely black colours. Already in an article called *Writing as Liberation* from the early 1930-ties, Cioran speaks of creativity as a form of therapy, of his writing as a means to make objective the scary, tormenting tribulations that every authentic existence gives birth to. And in *Excercises d’admiration* he also stresses how writing makes one lesser, makes one poorer, but at the same time liberates oneself from a surplus that threatens to make life insupportable.

The title for my afterword to Demoni, *Pe culmile suferintei*, is of course an allusion to Ciorans debut work, and this is no coincidence. In spite of their obvious differences and origin in separate fields, Cioran is for me the one figure of Romanian Culture that perhaps most evidently presents a closeness and similarity to Lars Norén.