NORRI STURLUSON AND THE ROOTS OF NORDIC LITERATURE

In 2007 we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Scandinavian Studies Department's establishment at the "St. Kliment Ohridski" University of Sofia, whose progress and recognised achievements were duly marked by the large-scale conference Snorri Sturluson and the Roots of Nordic Literature. The conference took place in October 2002 in Sofia, gathering most prominent scholars in the field of Scandinavian studies from different countries, as well as known writers and young researchers from the University of Sofia.

Snorri Sturluson is one of the most famous figures in the culture of Medieval Europe. His personality and work, the old-Icelandic poetry and sagas, the development of the Nordic literatures up to the present and their interaction with the other European cultures, including the Bulgarian literature, as well as some key problems of the Nordic linguistics were among the topics presented and discussed at the conference with the deserving commitment. The present volume includes the papers of the three-day conference, whose impressively rich programme was accompanied by a number of cultural events (exhibitions, book presentations, theatre performances, prize awards, etc.), which were met with understandable interest by the academic circles and a broader public.
Ivan Vazov was a child of the Bulgarian National Revival. Born in the small town of Sopot on the southern slope of the Balkan mountains in 1850, he grew up in the last decades of the nearly five-century-long Ottoman rule over Bulgaria. His father, Mincho Vazov, was a respected and reasonably well-to-do merchant. The atmosphere at home during Vazov’s childhood and youth in the 1850s and 1860s has been rendered with liveliness, warmth and humour in the first pages of Vazov’s great novel *Under the Yoke*. Although dominant and hot-tempered by character, Vazov’s father loved his many children and wished them well. Vazov’s mother, Saba Vazova, contributed much to creating a cordial atmosphere, showing great understanding as her first son’s poetic inclinations and interests became more and more evident.

After finishing school in his home town, Vazov went to school in Kalofer, not too far away from home, in 1865–1866. Here he was fortunate to find a fairly rich library with French and Russian fiction and poetry, which enabled him to broaden his literary horizons considerably. In the autumn of 1866, Vazov was sent to grammar school in Plovdiv. In southern Bulgaria, to learn Modern Greek and Turkish, both necessary languages for a merchant in the Ottoman empire in those days. However, much to his father’s discontent, Vazov spent most of his two years in the grammar school studying literature, particularly French literature.

Vazov was called back to Sopot by his father to learn the merchant trade and to work in the family business, with the ultimate goal of one day taking over his father’s role in it. However, to Mincho Vazov’s growing disapproval and even disgust, his oldest son showed no talent for or interest in his father’s profession, instead spending most of his time doing something that could never win bread for himself, let alone for a family: i.e., he practiced writing poetry.

In his late teens in Sopot, Vazov met his first great love: a Jewish woman ten years his senior, Katerina Karaoglu (“Rina”), who originally came from Thessaloniki but had married a Bulgarian. This was a sensitive love story that inevitably would have developed into a scandal if it had become publicly known, particularly since Rina’s husband was away on business in Romania. To all appearances, Rina was a pleasant, understanding, and likeable woman, and she was the inspiration for many love poems by her young admirer. Unfortunately, most of these poems were destroyed when the Turks burned Sopot during the Russo-Turkish war in 1877, but a few were saved and published in the collection *May Bouquet* (1880). Actually, these love poems angered Vazov’s mother, who thought them too intimate, and in the future, until his mother’s death over three decades later, he was careful not to publish anything that could give rise to his mother’s disapproval.

Vazov’s romance with Rina came to an end when her husband called her to come and join him in Romania, and he never saw her again. However, Vazov’s young mind had been deeply moved and he later said that his love for Rina was one of the most important and profound events in his long life. His love story with Rina was essential to him also in a more general respect: it had made clear to him an inclination that stayed with him for life and that he came to be very aware of: he seemed to be unable to be attracted to and fall in love with young girls, however beautiful and charming they might be. In order to attract his interest, women had to be mature, both mentally and physically.

Vazov had his mother’s full support for his poetic activities, but his father, a practical man, showed no literary interests and would never even have thought to read anything his son had written or, for that matter, literature of any kind. Deeply dissatisfied with his son, and in a last desperate attempt to divert his literary interests, his father sent him off to a trading apprenticeship with his uncle Kirko in Oltenitsa, Romania. This decision took a turn, which Vazov’s father could not possibly have foreseen. In Oltenitsa, without the warm family atmosphere his loving mother had created and without his many brothers and sisters around, his uncle’s harsh regime – harsh, no doubt, at the direct request of young Vazov’s father – soon became intolerable to the young poet, who by now had published his first poems. He left in secret one night, with only a few coins in his pocket, for the town of Braila, a centre for destitute Bulgarian revolutionaries, who had been members of detachments within Bulgaria and afterwards had taken refuge in Romania.

Vazov’s stay in Braila turned out to be crucial for changing his views of the world, and for his development as a writer. His young mind was very susceptible to the strong and odd personalities he met there, and to the philosophy they propagated: nothing mattered but Bulgaria’s freedom from the Ottoman yoke! From now on he began to switch his focus from love poetry to poetry about the plight of his country, its people and its heroes. And a little more than a decade later, in 1884, Vazov would depict these Bulgarian outcasts, their ideals and their materially miserable life in a short novel called simply *Outcasts*, which became a classic of Bulgarian literature.

After two years in Romania, Vazov returned to Bulgaria and worked in Sviyengrad (then called Mustafa pasha) as a strongly anti-Hellenist teacher,
and then in Pernik before returning to his home town in 1875. There he became a member of the local revolutionary committee. When the uprising broke out prematurely in April of the next year, and was easily and harshly crushed by the Ottoman regime, Vazov fled to Romania — ironically, via the Ottoman capital! The uprising gave Russia a pretext for attacking Turkey, i.e., the liberation of the Christian people of Bulgaria. In January 1877 Russia declared war, and a little more than a year later Bulgaria became independent for the first time in nearly five hundred years. Although, like all other Bulgarians, Vazov with enthusiasm greeted what was called the “war of liberation”, on a personal level it ended tragically: his father was killed, his home town was burned down, and in the fire most of his early poetry was destroyed.

Vazov was able to return to his native country in the footsteps of the Russian army. While still in Romania, in 1876, he had published his first collection of poems, under a pseudonym in order to avoid reprisals against his relatives in Sopot. Two more collections of poems followed in 1877 and 1878, filled with patriotic pathos and gratitude towards the Russian liberators. After working in small towns in Bulgaria, he settled in Plovdiv, the capital of East Roumelia (present-day southern Bulgaria, but in those days, by decision of the Berlin Congress in 1878, an autonomous part of Turkey).

In Plovdiv, Vazov managed to make a living exclusively from his literary activities. He published poetry, including the collection Italy after a journey to that country in 1884, following another romance that ended in failure, and the short novels Uncles and Outcasts, mentioned above. Uncles is a good-humoured portrait of the characters in his home town of Sopot and a very vivid picture of small-town life in general before the liberation from the Ottomans. A Swede, reading this novel, sometimes comes to think of the characters Backlund and Stoltz in Birger Sjöberg's great novel The Quartet That Split Up (“Kvarterten som sprängdes”).

However, Vazov was not only looking to times gone by. He was concerned and worried about the careerism and corruption he saw developing amongst his fellow countrymen, the chasing after high titles and material advantages. In poems and articles he asked where the ideals from the pre-liberation period had gone. As an antidote, he began to write a cycle of long poems reminiscent of Johan Ludvig Runeberg's Ensign Stål's Legends (“Färrit Ståls sägner”), poems about the heroes of the Bulgarian National Revival - heroes of the spiritual as well as physical resistance after centuries of Ottoman rule.

In 1888 East Roumelia was united peacefully with the Principality of Bulgaria north of the Balkan Mountains. Fearing the prospect of a Greater Bulgaria, Serbia declared war. The Serbs were miraculously defeated by the young Bulgarian nation, and this event gave rise to a collection of poems quite different from Italy, titled Silvinita (after the place where the decisive battle had taken place). These poems too sometimes remind a Scandinavian reader of certain poems by Runeberg, with their (too) lofty nationalistic ideals and (too) heroic deaths, themes that today may seem outdated. But one must bear in mind the circumstances under which these poems were written: the very existence of a newly re-established nation was threatened, only seven years after its liberation.

The 1880s were a politically unstable period, and in 1886 a fiercely anti-Russian government took power in Bulgaria. This political change made the position of the strongly pro-Russian Vazov impossible, and he had to flee again — ironically, again, first to Istanbul, the capital of the perpetual archenemy. Still worse was another feeling: "Is there", asked his friend, the writer Konstantin Velichkov, "a greater irony than that Bulgarians have to flee from Bulgarians?" Vazov this time went on from Turkey to Odessa, Russia, where he stayed for two-and-a-half years.

In Odessa, tormented by homesickness, Vazov wrote his masterpiece, the great novel Under the Yoke, the first full-length novel in the history of Bulgarian literature. Its subject is the April Uprising of 1876. The novel's main plot mirrors the spirit of the times that overshadows everything: the revolutionary enthusiasm and patriotic pathos which, in the end, grip even the most sober: "a people in intoxication!" The focus of the work is primarily on the preparations for the uprising, but also on the uprising itself which is depicted candidly as "an uprising without honour", and on the consequences of the uprising, including the ruin of the leading rebels. The parallel secondary plot is a love story between the main character, Boycho Ogyanov, and Rada, an orphan girl oppressed by the nuns. As a powerful background to these two intricate plots, which carry the narrative forward, and which both end in tragedy, lies a broad, very skillfully rendered account of the manners, habits and thinking of the common people, which is just as entertaining and full of life as August Strindberg's virtually contemporary The People of Hemsö ("Hemsöborna"). And, just like The People of Hemsö, Under the Yoke is imbued with a broad, folkslike humour. Another common feature of Vazov's and Strindberg's novels is the foregrounding of the customs of the people and their personal philosophy rather than their daily drudgery.

Nearing forty and still a bachelor, Vazov felt in Odessa that the time was ripe for marriage and starting a family. He had a love affair with a Russian woman, Irma Timoni, whom he wanted to marry, and asked permission from his mother Saba, head of the family after his father's death. However, his mother was firmly against her children marrying foreigners and insisted that her eldest son marry a Bulgarian woman. Obedient to his mother as always in family matters, Vazov left Odessa in March 1889, leaving Irma in despair.

Back in Bulgaria, and moved in with his mother, in the course of a mere nine months Vazov considered no less than four serious candidates for marriage. In November 1890, after only four weeks' acquaintance, and on the recommendation of two young friends, he married a woman of good background, Atina Bolyarska. Vazov's honeymoon was spent in the Rila Mountains in the company of two women: his wife and his mother. No chil-
dren resulted from the wedding trip, and in fact Vazov remained childless throughout his life, but a number of literary works were born, including the beautiful poem “Near the Rila Monastery.” Hardly surprisingly, Vazov’s marriage with Atina was not a success. Only fifteen months after the wedding Atina, whose life together with Vazov and his mother certainly could not have been easy, was forced to leave home. Despite Vazov’s insistence on dissolving the marriage Atina refused, and, although they had no further contact, the two remained legally married until Vazov’s death three decades later.

The period 1889-1921 saw a steady stream of poems, short stories, tragedies, comedies, travel accounts, and memories from Vazov’s pen, as well as a novel. Nature — or, more exactly, Bulgarian nature (Vazov always remaining a patriot) — began to occupy a more significant place in his works. From the 1890s on, there also appeared in his poetry a stream of social consciousness, manifested in, for example, one of his best known poems, “Come See Our Plight”.

In the mind of the Bulgarian people, Vazov had gradually acquired the position of “national poet”. However, his novel New Land in 1896, a kind of sequel to Under the Yoke, was not a success. Only the second full-length novel in the history of the Bulgarian literature, New Land is an endeavour in the grand manner, a 500-page novel carried through by Vazov with admirable persistency. However, depicting everyday life in liberated Bulgaria could not lift Vazov to the inspiring heights that characterize Under the Yoke. Quite understandably, it was not a theme that moved Vazov as deeply and personally as the dream of freedom had done, and hence some of the freshness and fervour of Under the Yoke is missing. Nonetheless, apparently New Land acquired a certain popularity with the general public, since it was reprinted five times. But the literary critics were harsh. Criticisms were aired on aesthetic, political and personal grounds. Vazov’s personal enemies, particularly the writer Pencho Slaveykov — following family tradition from the 1880s, when his father, Petko Rachev Slaveykov, had tried to crush Vazov — took the opportunity to attack not only New Land, but also Vazov’s whole literary output and Vazov himself, personally. These attacks seem to a reader in our day so venomous, so mean and so prejudiced that they are almost psychologically inexplicable. In its infamy and rawness, what happened on the Bulgarian literary scene in the 1890s, following the publication of New Land, is reminiscent of the Strindberg feud in Sweden nearly fifteen years later.

The attacks had the intended effect. Sensitive, humiliated and, in the end, crushed, Vazov decided to give up writing. Instead, he accepted the post as minister of education, where he stayed for two years. However, he was not a politician by nature, and his period as minister was unsuccessful, so, luckily, he soon returned to his true vocation. One way or another, Bulgaria is almost always present in the aging Vazov’s writings, just as it was in the young man’s: its both glorious and tragic past, its contemporary situation (e.g., the Balkan wars in 1912-13 and World War I, which Bulgaria entered with catastrophic results), its magnificent nature, and impressions from the many journeys Vazov made in Bulgaria. But Vazov’s more intimate side also saw a revival towards the very end of his life. He had a long relationship (1905-21), emotionally very strong but probably completely platonic, with the writer Evgeniya Mars. There is something almost tragic in the fact that it was not until 1919, at age 69, that he published what can be called his only collection of love poems, Toward Sunset, which is filled with soft, distanced, non-erotic love lyrics. Modest and reserved by nature, and also sensitive to his mother’s and other close relatives’ feelings, he had always found it difficult to be very personal in his poetry; only now did he feel open to show a side of himself that for most of his life, with the sole exception of May Bouquet in 1880, he had tried to keep from the public.

In 1920, Vazov’s 70th birthday and 50th anniversary as a writer were celebrated all over Bulgaria in a way that is hardly imaginable now. But the celebrations constituted something more, and something deeper, than just the honouring of a great writer. They were, equally, a way of lifting the national morale after the defeat in the second Balkan war and the still more devastating defeat in World War I, which had resulted in major losses of land and had left both the economy and the national self-confidence in ruins: “A nation that can foster such sons cannot succumb!”

As noted already, Vazov was criticized, strongly and perseveringly, by the young and eager — and by the envious. The “Europeanized” younger generations saw him as hopelessly out of date in his thematics, his views, and his values. But the power of his artistic talent and temperament was such that his works lived on, and keep living on. When he died at age 71, his death and his funeral were a national concern which we in Sweden can find parallels to only in Gustaf Fröding and August Strindberg. Just as he himself had hoped, and, despite his modesty, perhaps what he had believed deep inside (as expressed in his poem “To the Future”) — and in contrast to most of his critics of his own day — Vazov has never been forgotten: he has remained loved by the reading public and has also remained highly appreciated by literary scholars. True enough, in the early communist period Vazov’s conservatism and outspoken anti-socialism were troublesome stumbling-stones to the regime (tempered, to some extent, by his life-long affection for Russia). The criticism directed toward him at that time, however, was based entirely on ideological considerations, and faded away in a relatively short time. His greatness as a writer has never been seriously disputed.

Both quantitatively and in its richness of genres, Ivan Vazov’s literary production is comparable to August Strindberg’s. However, he is to a much higher degree than Strindberg a national writer and a patriot. That is why Vazov is not at all as internationally known, and has not become as internationally acclaimed, as Strindberg. Amongst his Swedish contemporaries, and even amongst Swedish writers in general, Vazov is, ideologically and
thematicallv, more comparable to Verner von Heidenstam, a national poet too who, although a Nobel laureate, never attained anywhere near the degree of international fame that Strindberg has.

Ivan Vazov was a national monument, a source of unrestricted national pride during his own life-time. A national monument he has remained. Even a neutral, foreign on-looker must admit that this status is fully deserved.

Annotated Bibliography

The amount of scholarly literature on Ivan Vazov is so enormous that one can truly speak of the subject as a specific scholarly field, "Vazovology" (vazovovedenie).

A richly documented source on Ivan Vazov's personal life is Georgi Stamatov's recently published V intimnija svijat na Ivan Vazov (Sofia 2001). Much useful first-hand information can be found in Ivan D. Shishmanov, Ivan Vazov Spomeni i dokumenti (Sofia 1976; first edition 1930). An invaluable source of information is the commentary to the 22-volume collected works of Ivan Vazov (Sofia 1974–1979). Milena Tsaneva has written a number of publications analysing Vazov's literary achievements against the general background of his own life, including the presentation of detailed data on his Plovdiv period in Ivan Vazov v Plovdiv (Sofia 1986). Ivan Vazov i balgarskata literaturna kritika (Sofia 1974), by Georgi Dimov, is an in-depth account of the fights and feuds over Vazov's works amongst the Bulgarian critics. Critical writings on Vazov's works covering more than a century can be found in Stranitsi za Ivan Vazov (Sofia 1992).

The Swedish-speaking reader will enjoy Under the Yoke in Bo Lundgren's excellent translation (Under oklet, Tidens förlag 1977). There is also a good English edition of this novel, translated by Marquerite Alexieva and Theodora Atanassova, with a foreword by the literary scholar Peter Dinekov (Under the Yoke, Foreign Languages Press, Sofia 1960). A number of Vazov's poems are published in English in the Anthology of Bulgarian Poetry (Sofia Press 1980), in Peter Tempest's fine translation.