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ON BOARD IN STORMY WEATHER:

Symbolism of Psycho-Physiological Conditions in K. Munk's Sketch *Lette Bølge naar du blaaner*\*

The starting point of some analytical discussions, I'm intending to present hereafter, is a common place of the literature on K. Munk\*\*, to wit: The central figure of this author's plays is an unbroken, whole and *eo ipso* strong personality, guided solely by its inwardly motivated principle and winning thanks to – either exclusively or chiefly – the force of its sovereign and purposeful spirit.

Such a proposition – however simplistic it may seem at first glance – can hardly be disputed, so convincingly it is supported by the playwright's entire heritage. Moreover, it's quite permissible to add that all-triumphant power, proper to the will of strong individual, is not merely a motive, determining Munk's dramas structure. The magic of mighty human will was an object of the belief, which had defined the writer's life ideal as well. If for instance in his play *Ordet* ("Word") fervent and unsophisticated faith of Johannes, identifying himself with Jesus Christ, permits him to raise someone from the dead despite law of nature, so, – according the same author's convictions which he has expressed repeatedly, – law of history can be overcome by dictatorial will of especially gifted political leaders. This is that conviction with which was bound up his enmity in respect of democratic institutions as well as his initial certitude in beneficial mission of totalitarian dictators of his own time. And although near the end of 30s years Munk had to pay this naïve belief by bitter disappointment, the basic type of his dramatic imagery remained nevertheless immutable: idea of creative force of will continued to be leit-motif of Munk's work till the end.

However, once such a sentence on Munk is pronounced, it immediately brings to mind various literary-historical parallels and first of all Ibsen with his gallery of strong characters which in the course of dramatic events strive for affirming themselves in spite of all dislike and resistance of social environment, where they must live in. But here I put question aside, to what extent the life rôle of Ibsen's heroes is reducible to that type, if their self-assertion goes or not with certain self-negation or even with a kind of craving for dissolution into impersonal continuum – on what way stays exactly the same society as a carrier of limiting principle, – or, in other words, with something that compels us to assume the presence of unconscious suicidal complex (let we recall at least Hilda and Solness in "The Master Builder" or Brand in homonymous play). I would confine myself to only preliminary remark on principal peculiarity, which distinguishes already psycho-physiological constitution itself of Munk's images and

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\*\* Kaj Munk (1898 – 1844). Versatile Danish writer and Lutheran preacher. Since 1938, he came out openly against Nazi racialism and predatory politics; was killed by collaborationists. Munk's dramas take a prominent place in Danish literature of XXth century.

for the entry into problem I shall stay at rather small travel sketch of 1938 year *Lette Bølge, naar du blaaner* (“When, Light Wave, Your Tint Is Bluish”)<sup>1</sup>.

Such a choice of subject matter may seem strange. As it usually happens in similar cases, there were the most important works that chiefly attracted attention of those having written on Munk. It seems, however, that analysis of smaller productions, even if secondary ones, could become a kind of prerequisite step towards correctly posing the problem of Munk’s creative originality, because little text usually gives researcher an advantageous opportunity, while going deep into details, not to lose sight of the whole, to see text at the same time in general and *in minutiis*.

Like all that Munk has ever written, the sketch in question properly speaking deals with the topic of personality and its wholeness. This topic, however, is unfolded exclusively on the symbolic level. Besides, the figure of free-standing human figure appears here as a basic symbol, a sort of symbol-producing model for all this text.

By the time when Munk has used this symbol, it already has had behind itself extraordinary reach and long cultural history. Having initially had taken rudimentary and so far utmost vague shape in some proto-architectural species of Neolithic and Bronze Age megaliths (especially in menhirs), then having begun to separate from architecture forms in ancient Egypt sculpture, which still dominated it, this symbol (at least according to the tenet of traditional aesthetics that seems me to be quite convincing) achieved full expression of its own idea in Classical Greece statuary and since then, in most different art contexts (including literary ones too) gives expression to self-consciousness of human personality, its inner compoundness and at the same time its indivisibility and dignity.

However, in the sketch that is to be considered below, symbol of free-standing human figure is present mainly *implicite*, as an implied norm, by collating with which reader’s perception interprets modification of that symbol, its, so to speak, negative version. In this version, the loss of vertical stability is associated with the loss of personal self-identity. Appearing on background of basic, positive form, this negative symbol variety determines imagery structure of sketch and at the same time gives certain parody sound to the literary allusion in the sketch title<sup>2</sup>.

The plot in proper sense is missing here, but, on the other hand, feelings of passenger, suffering from seasickness during the rocking of steamship, are minutely reproduced. The whole narration is sustained in joking tonality, what seemingly mitigates shocking effect, such an eccentric subject can produce on some reader. Nevertheless, the sketch is not merely a joke in the spirit of Jerome K. Jerome (v. story of seasickness in chap.1 of his famous *Three Men in a Boat*). Describing a somatic ailment, caused by the loss of equipoise, the author combines with it also certain psychic phenomenon, i.e. loss of its own self by the ailing individual.

The very first symptom of seasickness, suffered by the character, which is, actually, unique one in this narrative, proves to be unexpected disappearance of the self-consciousness feeling. It happens in his sleep, when consciousness control is temporarily disconnected. Waking up suddenly, the hero feels a strange confidence in that he were Crown princess Juliane of Holland<sup>3</sup> (consciousness is doubled), but

soon it seems him, that he were a baby abandoned in cradle by the mother, who is departed for riding (consciousness is tripled)<sup>4</sup>.

Important in both cases is not only identification of hero himself with other one, but the fact, with whom he identifies himself. As for many others, so especially for patriarchally minded Munk, the woman image must have contain certain connotations of weakness and dependence, whereas the fact that hero fancied himself to be just the princess, adds here some ironical note. In its turn, the image of abandoned infant, while setting off helplessness, liability to outer force, eloquently expresses the same weakness and dependence, as well as deficit of self-consciousness that became prevalent in hero. At the same time, an exchange of roles begins to show: Masculine hero is reduced to the image of feeble abandoned baby, while mother woman, instead of traditionally expected from her loving solicitude, displays freedom from natural attachment (she leaves her child), symbolizing by her own conduct (as horsewoman) independence and ascendancy.

However, Woman's mythological substitute is the Sea. Accordingly, it undergoes some similar metamorphoses. It's interesting enough that, while the hero loses feeling of personal identity, the primordially impersonal element personifies itself.

'I have plunged into cradle (*so the hero, who had become infant, names his berth* – L.T.) and some hefty lad (*here the rough sea is obviously implied* – L.T.) began to swing me so vigorously...'<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile a new motive appears, which is antagonistic to precedent one:

'...that being uninterruptedly run the danger to be thrown out, I was forced to seize fast.'<sup>6</sup>

And, as a continuation, the next paragraph begins thus:

'I pulled myself together and declared to myself that I'm an adult man, traveling on the sea. I sat erect (*moreover, it's necessary to restore vertical posture, that, however, remains unreliable, what is indicated by word rank, having side by side with its primary meaning 'erect', 'upright', 'slender' also additional one 'unstable' 'shaky', 'prone to fall' – L.T.*), since one has only to wish, so all is surely possible.'<sup>7</sup>

Then a new twiddle comes and a new fit as well:

'Like a sweat-shedding lifeless mass I lay and flowed (*flød*) some time in unknown direction.'<sup>8</sup>

Let us note paradoxical conjunction of pronoun *jeg* ('I'), – the use of which should signify confidence of speaker in his separatedness from all what is non-I, i.e. from ambience, – with the feeling of fluidity ('I... flowed'), that is of his own limits absence and of tendency to merge with the ambience.

So, notwithstanding disappearance of permanent corporal form, space and time sensation, the sketch hero still continues to name himself 'I'. Subsequent stage of losing self-consciousness begins when the same character (i.e. hero of sketch), while speaking about himself, passes on to forms *vi* ('we'), *vor* (or *vort*, 'our'), although is in cabin alone. So the expression *hele vort Legeme* ('all our body')<sup>9</sup> sounds here especially strange. At last, even the pronoun *vi*, which still contains in itself certain meaning of self-consciousness, though dissolved in plurality, disappears, giving up its place to indefinite-personal form *man*:

'Suddenly people hear (*hører man*) themselves beginning to sing with despair in voice last verse of national anthem.'<sup>10</sup>

It is not enough that the hero of sketch, – if it is still possible to tell about any hero, who by that time was already getting impersonal, – doesn't control motions of his body. He also fails to feel them: While hearing sound of his voice, hero sense no more that he himself articulate it.

Indefinite-personal form recurs further continually, for instance by the mention of talk with chambermaid: *man ser* ('people see'), *man siger* ('people say'), although conditions and actions of hero himself are meant. It is not until he begins to think, how it would be well, if only waves would treat him more gently that his self-consciousness partly wakens and with it also pronoun *vi* returns. That is, however, not yet 'I'; personality status remains still divided between hero and North Sea that he addresses with humble supplication as if it were human being, appealing to it with epithets 'nice' and 'dear'<sup>11</sup>.

Self-consciousness and together with it the use of form *jeg* does not return to hero until he firmly declares to himself that he will never set off on sea voyage and imagine, how at home, on the firm ground he will avoid unsteady, treacherous water, and, moreover, all that would remind of it. Thus, only since he has trodden on the earth, – even if it has happened only in his imagination, – hero is getting back his self-consciousness.

But again only for a short while. Mighty jerks, upswings and falls are commencing anew, and again 'I' is giving its lawful place to 'we'. In addition, the hero self that already has lost his outer limits, is now starting to split in itself. His body seemingly stops to be carrier of one and only soul: the stomach of hero appears to be similar to a separate living creature, 'dancing as if it were panther in the cage'<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, this fretful stomach is acquiring independent faculty of desire, wishing neither more nor less than to get detached from body: ...*vilende ud af Halsen* ('...wishing out of throat').

All these sea trials, however, comes happily to the end and the hero is receiving back his nearly lost belief in own self-identity. It was, however, but 'solid stone roadway of Paris' (*Paris' sikre brosten*), – still nowadays reachable for sea passenger not earlier than about an hour and a half after landing in Rouen, – that could return him this belief.

Thus the lingering physical instability as well as unpleasant symptoms of seasickness provoked by it are unambiguously connected by Munk with the loss of personal self-consciousness as the symbolizing entity with the symbolized one, so the original cause of that instability, the sea appears here

as a symbol of hostile to the self-consciousness principle. However, one question else remains open. What accounts for author's irony regarding the hero of sketch? Is it pertinent at all? What had the poor passenger who suffered from the whim of sea weather, done wrong?

These questions can't be answered, if we take the sketch as an everyday life story par excellence. But we have already managed to find out certain symbol system, implied in postures of hero – vertically-balanced as well as disbalanced – and in image of sea element. If we are consequent and so try to interpret symbolically also steamship's image – i.e. image of liner, seductive magnificence of which is expressively conveyed in the very beginning of sketch, – then everything should take its own place and author's derisive tone should disclose its meaning.

Ship, conveying people, is a kind of public transport facilities: Passenger, ascending on its board, entrusts himself to the will and skill of whom he as a rule doesn't know at all. Researches in the field of dream psychology have shown that images of public transport symbolize for sub-consciousness the social life in aspect of its coerciveness, hostility to the free will of individual<sup>13</sup>. For my part, I would add that while the voyage continues, sea passenger, in contrast to terrestrial one, can descend nowhere; on ship, he is blocked up on all sides and the ascertaining of that circumstance by outsider (reader, for example) – be it conscious or unconscious – only strengthens impression of his dependency. It's exactly such a meaning that has the image of ship in F. Kafka's novel *Amerika* (1911 – 1914). Nevertheless, while Kafkian hero is compelled to his voyage by unfavorable circumstances, there is nothing what could force hero of the sketch in question for ascending on board: He embarks of his own accord, being hopeful for easy and agreeable trip, but instead of it gets into heavy gale and pays with highly unpleasant sickness. On the language of symbols, it signifies that man, who gives up his freedom in exchange for tempting promises, deserves not only subsequent troubles but also author's mockery.

As a literary historical parallel, the *Narrenschiff* ('Ship of Fools') of Sebastian Brant may be mentioned here, together with the engraving on title page *verso*, illustrating introductory part in Basel edition, 1494. This picture shows a vessel on waves, jam-packed with those, whose foolishness author promise to represent further in its true light. Mentioned can be here also the legend of this engraving, taken from the psalm 106:

*Hi sunt qui descendunt mare in navibus facie(n)tes op(er)ationem in aquis multis. Ascendu(n)t usq(ue) ad c(a)elos & desce(n)dunt usq(ue) ad abyssos: a(n)i(m)a eoru(m) in malis tabescebat. Turbati sunt & moti sicut ebrius: & omnis sapientia eoru(m) devorata est* ("They that go down to the sea in ships, doing business in the great waters... They mount up to the heavens, and they go down to the depths: their soul pined away with evils. They were troubled, and reeled like a drunken man; and all their wisdom was swallowed up." – 23, 26 seq.)

This biblical text was undoubtedly well-known to Munk as a preacher, so it quite could favour the forming of this sketch's image and symbol system. However, it is also fully admissible to see in it an impact of Greco-Roman poetry and first of all Horace's lyrics, with characteristic for this poetry

association of seafaring with unwisdom<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, Munk's natural ties with the traditional symbol system of Danish national identity, wherein images of physical stability rank very high<sup>15</sup>, must have played decisive rôle.

The fact of Munk's using this system is tightly linked with a foundation of his world outlook, which is Danish native soil ideology. And the point is not only in conception of the earth element as of something unconditionally positive. Here, one aspect of this symbolical image is important especially. In context of the sketch, above considered, the earth is interpreted by no means as it visualized usually, i.e. as a fecund and therefore loose substance, some maternal, begetting principle. Earth image is provided here with another property: It is a firm and solid foothold. In contrast to the earth, taken in aspect of its womb fertility, the earth in this text of Munk is firm like stony ground of island Møn's rock (*Møns Klint*) that was chosen as one of national symbols already by the principal myth and symbol creator of Danish patriotism, N.F.S. Grundtvig<sup>16</sup> (1783 – 1872). Moreover, such an inner experience of earth image that is rigid by its consistence and island-like (with clearly defined limits) by its spatial form, is a specific feature of Danish mythopoetical world outlook. At the same time, the function of Original mother, all-begetting and all-absorbing womb, which otherwise invariably links itself with Earth, is here turned over to Sea<sup>17</sup>.

At last, one more question must be answered: What artistic trend Munk follows in his sketch?

These are considered above symbols, which would be essential for its solution. Does Munk come out here as symbolist? But sole availability of symbols in a narrative text is obviously not enough for reckoning its author among symbolists. It's well-known what a great significance symbols assumed at representatives of everyday life realism and even naturalism in 19th century literature. Meanwhile, neither former nor latter have used symbols as a principal medium: in their works, symbols have imparted more depth and richness to the content, and no more, whereas those at symbolists must have determined it. Exactly this takes place in examined sketch of Munk; it's already noted above that the literal understanding of all what is there recounted, cannot explain even author's irony.

However, in one more point Munk proves to be near to the method of symbolism as art and literary trend. Attaching to symbols importance of paramount artistic medium, he deprives narration sense of social and historical specification and transfers the problem he treats wholly in sphere of eternal topics.

Nevertheless, one important difference in approach to topics of this kind ought to be stressed. Whereas the mystic-philosophical abstractness of idea was at symbolists as a rule completely in keeping with poetical abstractness of images, in sketch of Munk all realities have concrete, everyday life character. To be sure, such a paradoxical combination of everyday background with timeless theme has begun to show already in a late symbolism (cf. novels of Andrei Bely and F. Sologub). But it was certain representatives of expressionist trend in literature – first of all I mean both G. Meyrinck and mentioned here F. Kafka – in whose works this combination comes to light most obviously. For those authors, there exists no more any hierarchy of objects that conforms to their capability for representing the abstract: Even images of inferior reality spheres – and these images mainly – become representants of eternal ideas. The presence of this feature also in the sketch of Munk impels us to define examined above account

of ordinary sea trip and sickness caused with it, as an example of some line in expressionism, which developed in its own way the symbolist tradition.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Initially published in in the newspaper: *Jyllands-Posten*. (27 Jan. 1938). Shortly after, it was included in the collection of sketches: Munk, Kaj. *Himmel og Jord: Kronikker m.m.* København: Nyt Nordisk Forlag, 1938, p. 174 – 178.

<sup>2</sup> *Lette Bølge, naar du blaaner*. This is the name of lyric song, very popular in Denmark, composed by E.F. Weyse to words from J.L. Heiberg (published 1829). Light wave (*lette Bølge*), reflecting the blue of heaven in its own bosom, is here compared with lonely soul in love that would find consolation in such a comparison.

My sincere gratitude is to Dr I. Kuprijanova (S. Petersburg St Univ.), who has pointed me out to this fact in 1986.

<sup>3</sup> *Noget efter – jeg ved ikke hvor længe - vaagnede jeg brat og skarpt med en paagaende Bevisthed at jeg var Kronprinprinsesse Juliane af Holland og at Verdenspresse – meget imod min Vilje – kom til at vente længe endnu.*

<sup>4</sup> *Jeg rullede mig om paa den anden Side med en Gisp og syntes saa pludselig at jeg var blevet til en ganske lille bitte Barn, og at min Mor vist var ude at ride.*

<sup>5</sup> *Jeg sank sammen i Vuggen og en eller anden Slyngel gav sig til at gyngte mig saa voldsomt...*

<sup>6</sup> *...at jeg uafbrudt stod i Fare for at blive slynget ud og maatte hage mig fast.*

<sup>7</sup> *Jeg tog mig sammen og forklarede mig selv fyndigt og haardt at Situationen var den, at jeg var en voksen Mand og at jeg var ude at sejle. Jeg satte mig rank op, for selvfølgelig kan man naar man vil.*

<sup>8</sup> *Som en livløs, pjaskvedt masse laa jeg og flød et Stykke Tid et eller andet ligegyldig Sted...*

<sup>9</sup> *Det dirrede i hele vort Legeme og et Øjeblik vidste vi slet ikke, hvad vi ville.*

<sup>10</sup> *Med eet hører man sig selv med fortvivlet Mæle istemme Nationalsangens sidste vers... "Modtag din Ven"* ('Receive thy friend' as in H. W. Longfellow's translation). Here a line from Danish national or to say precisely royal anthem (*kongesang*): *Kong Christian stod ved høien Mast* is meant. This line forms a part of last stanza: brave hero, when losing his life in naval battle, turns towards rough sea, asking it to carry his corps away to his grave (*sortladne Hav! Modtag din Ven.../ ...før mig til | min Grav*).

<sup>11</sup> *Kære Nordsø, gode lille Vesterhav!..*

<sup>12</sup> *...dansende som en Panter i sit Bur.*

<sup>13</sup> 'Automobile', Chevalier, J., Gheerbrant, A. *Dictionnaire des symboles: Mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres*. T. 1. Paris, 1971, p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> Cf., for instance, Hesiod, *Works and Days* 641 – 660; Horace, *Odes* I. 3; I. 14; III. 29. 57 – 64; Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life* VII. 10; Lucian, *The Ship: Or, The Wishes*, passim.

<sup>15</sup> Taruashvili, Leonid. "ZHertva kak samopozhertvovanie: Datskaja tradicija v simvolike skazki H.K.Andersena «Stojkij olovjannyj soldatik»", *ZHertvoprinoshenie: Ritual v kul'ture i iskusstve ot drevnosti do nashih dnei* ('EPMHNEI'A 2). Edited by L.I.Akimova i A.G.Kifishin, Moscow: JAzyki russkoj kul'tury, 2000. (Ser. «JAzyk. Semiotika. Kul'tura). S. 361 – 370.

<sup>16</sup> According to Grundtvig, Denmark is the cliff (*Klinten*), queenly throne (*Dronninge-Stolen*) of Norse goddess Freya, while the rocky Møn is natural throne of Denmark. V.: Toldberg, Helge. *Grundtvigs Symbolverden*. København: Gyldendal, 1950, p. 164 – 165.

<sup>17</sup> *Livets rige Kilde, | moderlige Hav* ('Source of life abundant, | You, maternal sea'). So an appeal to the sea in the play of J. Ewald 'The Fishermen' (*Fiskerne*, 1779. I. 1) sounds. This play has become one of program works, having determined specific features of Danish patriotism. In its turn, imagery-symbolic system of Grundtvig contains two characters, which personify Danish essence, Heimdall and Freya, and besides, according to the same Grundtvig, the former is *Bølgernes Søn*, ('Son of waves') while the latter, being born in sea, watches over Denmark as a mermaid.