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THE IMAGE OF AHASUERUS IN THE POETRY BY V. RYDBERG

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The legend of the Wandering Jew, which appeared in the Middle Ages, attracted the attention of writers and artists in many countries during several centuries. Ahasuerus has become one of the eternal images of world literature. This image was especially often used in the works of Romantic writers in the early 19th century. A Swedish poet Viktor Rydberg who was influenced by Romanticism used this character in several poetic works such as the ballad *The Flying Dutchman* (*Den Flygande Holländaren*, 1876) and two poems: *Prometheus and Anasuerus* (*Prometeus och Ahasverus*, 1882) and *New Song of Grotti* (*Den nya Grottesången*, 1891). In Rydberg's lyrics, the Wandering Jew interacts with other eternal images of world culture such as the Flying Dutchman and Prometheus. His role as a stranger who witnessed a lot of different epochs and nations is emphasized in Rydberg's poetry. Ahasuerus expresses critical judgments about modern people and actually opposes society which is the feature of Romantic characters. In the poem *New Song of Grotti* the image of Ahasuerus is connected with social problems. It might have been the influence of Sue's novel *The Wandering Jew*. In contradiction to Romantic characters, Ahasuerus in Rydberg's interpretation appears to be a sustainable person, which is specific to heroes of Naturalistic and Neo-Romantic Scandinavian works.

Keywords: Swedish literature, poetry, Rydberg, Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew.

Viktor Rydberg (1828–1895) is a Swedish author who wrote several novels, two collections of poems, essays and scholarly works. Rydberg frequently uses motifs and images from folklore and mythology, which receives in his texts the metaphorical meaning for the literary representation of social and philosophical problems of his time. The image of Ahasuerus appears several times in his lyrics.

The Wandering Jew is one of the eternal images of world literature. Traditionally, the image of Ahasuerus was used by authors to comprehend philosophical and theological problems. E. E. Naumova concludes that the popularity of the character among authors is due to the lack of a strict storyline [Naumova, 2017, p. 111]. Various sources of the legend emphasized either the immortality of Ahasuerus or his role as a wanderer, as R. Edelmann shows [Edelmann, 1986, p. 111], for example. The Wandering Jew was popular in literature of the beginning of the 19th century. S. S. Averintsev writes that the legend of Ahasuerus “provided rich opportunities to move from exotic paintings of changing eras and countries to depict the emotions of fatality” [Averintsev, 1980, p. 28]. The character receives a new perception and appears in the context of social problems in the middle of the 19th century in the novel *The Wandering Jew* by E. Sue. K. A. Chekalov notes two elements of the social-critical component in this novel namely stinging criticism of Jesuits and criticism of the plight of the proletarians [Chekalov, 2022, p. 37]. Among Scandinavian authors before Rydberg, Ahasuerus was popular with the Danish romanticists. The image of Ahasuerus in Danish literature of the 19th century was analyzed by literary historian Mogens Broendsted [Broendsted, 2004, pp. 9–11]. The Wandering Jew appears in the collection of lyrical monologues *Pages from a Jerusalem shoemaker's table-book* by B. S. Ingemann, where this character is showed as a homeless person who tries to bring back the past by recalling the speeches of prophets. Ahasuerus becomes the follower of Christ in the final monologue. In S. Kirkegaard's work *Either/Or*, Ahasuerus is presented as an embodiment of the despair of a person who finds himself behind the ordinary life because of his immortality. Philosopher emphasizes desperation and misery of the character. H. C. Andersen turned to the image of Ahasuerus in the middle of the 19th century. In the dramatic poem *Ahasuerus* (1848), the character appears as an angel of doubt who denies divine nature of Christ. F. Paludan-Müller in the dramatic poem *Ahasuerus* presents another interpretation of this image. The Wandering Jew perceives his punishment as God's mercy and becomes a Christian.

In the poetry of Rydberg, the image of Ahasuerus first appears in a ballad *The Flying Dutchman* (*Den Flygande Holländaren*) in 1876. Remarkable, that a new Swedish translation of Sue's novel was published in the same year. The first two parts of Rydberg's ballad describe

the endless voyage of the ship. In the third part, the Flying Dutchman meets Ahasuerus. Author omits the background story of the ship and focuses on the wanderings of the captain. The endlessness of his sailing is emphasized and connected with lack of any goal. By the poet's own admission the Dutchman is a symbol of restless humanity that doesn't know its goal.

Ahasuerus appears as a counterpart of the captain of the Flying Dutchman: he is another wanderer destined to be immortal. But the characters of Ahasuerus and the captain are different. Ahasuerus has a wholesome personality. He has no desire to escape his endless wandering:

Ur smärtans natt i blicken sken
ett outsläckt hopp.

'Inextinguishable hope lighted
in his eyes from the night of pain'¹.

The only word he whispers is “patience”. He doesn't tear around or seek an escape from his destiny. As opposed to the captain, Ahasuerus is a sustainable person. In a letter dated July 13, 1876, the author himself states that he “saw in Ahasuerus a Dutchman purified by suffering” [Warburg, 1900, s. 340]. As A. V. Korovin shows [Korovin, 2023, p. 34], sustaining of a person is a specific feature of Naturalistic and Neo-Romantic heroes by which they can be distinguished from Romantic characters.

Then the image of the Eternal Jew appears in the dramatic poem *Prometheus and Ahasuerus* (*Prometheus och Ahasverus*, 1882). The poem is a dialogue between the two title characters. The opposition of different axiological systems and points of view on the society is expressed in their controversy. The binary opposition “a prisoner — a wanderer” takes a significant place in the poem. Ahasuerus looks at the suffering of Prometheus and urges him to make a plea to “the God of time” in order to free himself. But Prometheus doesn't desire to release from chains, because he chooses rather to bear the suffering in the fight for spiritual freedom. Prometheus appears as an idealist for whom spiritual freedom is a high priority.

¹ Here and below, quotations from the Rydberg's poems are given in the word-based translation of the Swedish text from the following edition: [Rydberg, 1996].

Ahasuerus criticizes him for individualism, but actually Prometheus is not individualistic. The meaning of his struggle is compassion to humanity. Ahasuerus urges him to stop thinking about the suffering of others. He is convinced that everything Prometheus opposes is connected with the course of nature.

Jag bär min lott, och det är nog att veta,
att hur vi tolke Herrens dunkla råd,
och hur vår tanke livets gåta rede...

'I am bearing my fate, and it is enough to know
How we interpret the Lord's vague advice
And how we solved the mystery of life...'

The author himself called Ahasuerus "a representative of historical necessity" [Warburg, 1900, s. 426] that is due to his role as a stranger: the Eternal Jew witnessed the life of various nations and noticed the regularities of historical processes. He blames Prometheus for abstract perceptions:

Guds vilja visar sig i det som är;
er vilja blott i det som "borde" vara...

'The divine will manifests itself in what is in reality;
Your will manifests itself only in what is supposed to be proper.'

Prometheus actually appears in the poem as an idealist. In fact, this character is connected with the tradition of English Romantic poetry (*Prometheus Unbound* by P.B. Shelley, *Prometheus* by Lord G. Byron). Rydberg's Prometheus imagines the lost world of bliss and he is sure that poets, artists and scientists will play a defining role in the restoration of the ideal world. A modern literary critic M. Nilsson writes about the idealistic pathos of the whole poem: "Since Prometheus appears as the hero of the poem, it can be said that Rydberg's poem is idealistic, that it defends the position of the ideal, not the realistic" [Nilsson, 2008, s. 111]. Meanwhile, Prometheus and Ahasuerus both are the main characters of the poem. His position isn't absolutely extrinsic for Rydberg. Ahasuerus draws conclusions based on his personal observations. This feature of the character can be associated with the development of positive science in the 19th century, which caught Rydberg's interest despite his idealistic views. Moreover, Ahasuerus in the poem is probably an idealist. Literary critic A. Hedberg notes about the character: "...his

way of thinking is not controversial with idealism: he understands that everything has to change — but he does not believe in the possibility of change” [Hedberg, 2012, s. 20].

The significance of the image of Ahasuerus for Rydberg is confirmed by the fact that he returns to this character in another work. This text is *New Song of Grotti* (*Den nya Grottesången*, 1891), the main part of which is based on the story of Old Norse *Song of Grotti* (*Grottasöngur*). It describes the mill of Grotti that grinds working women and children for the sake of the priest-chancellor of Mammon. This image symbolizes both the triumph of technology over nature and the mechanization of human life, as well as the lack of natural freedom of each person. The author wrote the poem at a time when he was thinking about the modern working conditions. In fact, he criticizes labour exploitation, therefore this text is frequently considered by scholars as the author’s social protest. However, it contains more comprehensive philosophical ideas. Besides that, as a literary historian Ingemar Algulin noted [Algulin, 1989, s. 97] working conditions in Sweden at that time were not so difficult in the end of the 19th century.

The philosophical implication of the poem is clear from the preface and the afterword written in prose, where the image of Ahasuerus appears. The preface describes that the main part of the poem is a story told in another variant of the mythological song, which was known to the Ahasuerus. The author emphasizes that it does not create a new representation of the image, but returns to the same character from previous texts: “His face didn’t become older than during our last meeting, when after his visit to the Flying Dutchman he was heading to the Prometheus”.

Ahasuerus and tells about his worldview to the narrator and reflects on the fate of mankind: “The Past is insignificant. As well as the future. Mankind will die out” [Rydberg, 1996, s. 152]. He criticizes modern people for the lack of desire for knowledge. This thought actually develops the idea of “the Flying Dutchman” about the aimlessness of human existence: “Despite all the growth of scientific knowledge, people are becoming less and less inquisitive. <...> ...the connections between the past, the present and the future are becoming lost more and more. People live in instantaneous moments more and more. But are you sure that a chain with broken links will endure for a long time? Mankind is close to dying out. This is my consolation. The terrible Grotti mill will stop gristing” [Rydberg, 1996, s. 153].

In the afterword, his ideas are revealed in more detail. The narrator receives a scroll with Ahasuerus' notes "with such a mixture of letters from different times and nations that I could not extract anything meaningful from" [Rydberg, 1996, s. 176]. Criticizing technological progress takes a significant place in his reasoning. "If I could describe the catastrophe of the nineteenth century in comparison with the catastrophes of the previous centuries in a few words, I would say: due to industrialization, this disaster is organized and systematized" [Rydberg, 1996, s. 177]. Then the thought about the spiritual decline of people appears again. Ahasuerus connects the aimlessness of modern human with doubts about the existence of God caused by modern materialistic ideas and positivism. However, Ahasuerus has no disparage towards positive sciences themselves. He criticizes biased views, formed under its influence. In particular, his thoughts contain a refutation of atheism based on science: "The approach of natural science is such that they cannot oppose levers and crowbars to something ideal. What it destroys is the mythological perception of causality in nature, which is not the same as causality in the world" [Rydberg, 1996, s. 178].

The wanderer considers the main problem to be in the modern socialistic and materialistic theories. He traces the inconsistency of views of utopians and Marxists: "positivists and atheists who believe in Utopia instead of God have since that time [Middle Ages. — V. S.] been forced to defend themselves and sometimes they did it with such devotion, which seems to show that there is the One in their hearts in whose existence they do not believe" [Rydberg, 1996, s. 180]. Ahasuerus' thoughts are concluded with the point about the casual relationship between ideas of modern philosophers and the mechanization of human life.

Rydberg keeps a distance from his character at the story level: the main Ahasuerus' conclusions are revealed from the writings on parchment that are an incomplete fragment of the text. Moreover these notes are translated from the language unknown to the narrator. A modern scholar B. Hasselgren makes the following conclusion about the poem: "So, an ideal for humanity is presented here as well, in which an original, non-material culture and simple conditions in life may lead to happiness, whereas a way of life focused on material possessions and earning for personal gain leads to weariness among the privileged and misery among those who have not come to enjoy the same good

material conditions” [Hasselgren, 2023]. Actually, the author conveys his own reasoning through Ahasuerus’ monologue. Rydberg’s thoughts about the materialistic theories of his century are known from his lectures published in the 1890s.

The image of Ahasuerus in Rydberg’s works express the author’s ideas about the philosophical and social problems of his time. The character keeps his traditional meanings as a symbol of the contradictions of human existence. The poet emphasizes that the breadth of his knowledge was achieved due to his life experience. Besides, this image is connected in the poetry of Swedish author with social problems which might have been the influence of Sue’s novel. In fact, the Wandering Jew in Rydberg’s interpretation opposes society, which is typical of Romantic characters. But he appears as a strong, sustainable personality. This feature is specific to the characters of Naturalistic and Neo-Romantic literature of the end of the 19th century. Especially, Rydberg’s Ahasuerus similar to the second one, since he expresses the position of idealism. Besides, there is coincidence with interpretations of Ingemann and Paludan-Müller, in whom works he becomes a Christian. Thus, Rydberg’s interpretation is connected with Romantic tradition, but his Ahasuerus gets characteristics which are specific to the new literary movements.

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ОБРАЗ АГАСФЕРА В ПОЭЗИИ ВИКТОРА РЮДБЕРГА

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Легенда о Вечном жиде, которая появилась в период Средних веков, привлекла внимание писателей и деятелей искусства разных стран на протяжении нескольких столетий. Агасфер стал одним из «вечных» образов мировой литературы. Особенно часто его образ использовался в произведениях романтических поэтов и писателей в начале XIX в. Шведский поэт Виктор Рюдберг (Viktor Rydberg; 1828–1895), испытавший влияние романтизма, обращался к этому персонажу в поэтических текстах, таких как баллада «Летучий Голландец» (*Den Flygande Holländaren*, 1876) и две поэмы: «Прометей и Агасфер» (*Prometeus och Ahasverus*, 1882) и «Новая песнь о Гротти» (*Den nya Grottesången*, 1891). Статья посвящена образу Агасфера и его функциям в этих произведениях. В лирике Рюдберга Агасфер вступает во взаимодействие с другими вечными образами мировой культуры: Летучим Голландцем и Прометеем. Подчеркивается его роль как странника, который стал свидетелем множества разных эпох и народов. В поэзии Рюдберга Агасфер выражает критические суждения о человечестве и фактически противопоставит обществу, что характерно для романтических героев. В поэме «Новая песнь о Гротти» с образом Агасфера связана социальная проблематика, в чем может проследиваться влияние романа Э. Сю «Вечный жид». Кроме того, у Рюдберга странствующий сапожник приобретает идеалистические черты, как в произведениях датских романтиков Б. С. Ингеманна и Ф. Палудана-Мюллера.

Но, в противоположность романтическим характерам, Агасфер в интерпретации Рюдберга представлен как цельная личность, что присуще героям натуралистических и неоромантических произведений.

Ключевые слова: шведская литература, поэзия, Рюдберг, Агасфер, Вечный жид.

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