

JUDITH MEURER-BONGARDT:

Wo Atlantis am Horizont leuchtet oder eine Reise zum Mittelpunkt des Menschen – Utopisches Denken in den Schriften Hagar Olssons.

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Hagar Olsson (1893-1978) was a multifaceted woman; a woman of letters, writer, translator and an important cultural transmitter. She was a central figure in the literary debate in Finland, a leading critic à la Georg Brandes in Finland's literary history. Olsson had a large network and she corresponded with many other writers and scholars in the Nordic countries as well as other West European countries. In the 1920s many Swedish modernist writers such as Artur Lundkvist (1906-1991) and Stina Aronson (1892-1956) were inspired by the Finland-Swedish modernists. Aronson was eager to meet Hagar Olsson, and she regarded Olsson together with Edith Södergran (1892-1923) as her kindred spirits, 'syskonsjälar'. In fact, it was as a close friend of Edith Södergran that Olsson first became famous outside Scandinavia. Students usually read *Ediths brev. Brev från Edith Södergran till Hagar Olsson med kommentar av Hagar Olsson* (1945) and then possibly go on to Olsson's own writings. Scholars such as Roger Holmström have shown that Olsson's literary work deserves to be studied in its own right. In her dissertation about utopian thoughts in the works of Hagar Olsson, Judith Meurer-Bongardt demonstrates how important

Olsson was as a cultural transmitter of ideas. This study is a thoroughly researched piece of work, and it is impressive to see a PhD student who has managed to complete the task within the four years which are so often exceeded. The book is also well written (in German) and gives us a good overview of Olsson's work as a critic and as an artist. Meurer-Bongardt is an author of wide reading, and her book illustrates one of the advantages of globalisation in the academic world; she is able to combine her expertise in German history and philosophy with her knowledge of Finland's (literary) history. The study not only contains observations of Olsson's work as a critic, but also provides us with good analyses of her literary works.

The aim of the study is to focus on the literary works of Hagar Olsson in the period 1920-1950. Meurer-Bongardt focuses especially on Olsson's 'new realism' and her strategy of reclaiming utopia from a faraway island to being the inner self of the people. After the introduction, with a full overview of previous research on Hagar Olsson, Meurer-Bongardt explores in Chapter Two the concept of 'Utopisches Denken' (Utopian thought) and outlines the most relevant theories. The point of departure, however, is Ernst Bloch's notion of utopia, called by Klaus L. Berghahn 'the utopian function'. Meurer-Bongardt links this to Olsson's 'new realism'. Another scholar frequently referred to is Erich Fromm. The word utopia, probably a combination of 'ou' (= not) and 'topos' (= place), comes from Thomas More's novel *Utopia* (1516). It is unclear whether the place concerned is a happy one or a terrible one. More could also have been referring to the best possible place that does not exist in reality (Meurer-Bongardt: 37). According to Meurer-Bongardt, Bloch's utopia is associated not with perfect state organisation but with the human condition. The concept of 'the utopian function' is crucial to Meurer-Bongardt's study and her interpretation of Olsson's utopian thoughts.

Soll die Utopie konkret werden, so muss sie von einem Bewusstsein geleitet werden, das sich auf das "Real-Mögliche" bezieht. Dies bedeutet, dass konkrete Möglichkeiten und Tendenzen der Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart, von Bloch auch als Noch-Nicht-Gewordene bezeichnet, aufgespürt werden

müssen, um ihr utopisches Potenzial zu nutzen und so eine tatsächliche Veränderung der gesellschaftlichen Umstände möglich zu machen. (Meurer-Bongardt: 57).

By adapting the concept of the utopian function to Olsson's new realism, Meurer-Bongardt places Olsson and her work in the context of a quest for a better world, and shows how literature functions in this quest. In the next chapter Meurer-Bongardt elaborates the concept of utopia as a basic category in the arts and literature, and as a utopian place. She analyses Hagar Olsson's novel *Chitambo* (1933) as an example of a utopian novel in order to demonstrate Olsson's utopian way of thinking and writing. The feeling of doom and of being in a period of transition goes hand in hand in Olsson's texts with the possibility of renewal and a new future. In this chapter it becomes clear how Olsson's new realism should be defined: literature that shows us a changed view of reality and at the same time questions it.

In the following chapters Meurer-Bongardt discusses utopia and politics, utopia and youth, as well utopia and gender in Olsson's work. The fourth chapter starts with an overview of the literary field in Finland in the interwar period. Works of Olsson are placed in the context of utopian literature and political engagement, amongst others *Det blåser upp till storm* (1930, *There's a Storm Brewing*). This novel is a fine example of how Olsson sees literature as a Trojan horse that is intended to change society from within and give it a new future. In the next chapter about youth, politics and utopia the same novel is analyzed.

The last chapter is about gender aspects and the 'new woman' in Olsson's work. An intriguing question from the perspective of cultural transfer and transmission studies is Olsson's fascination with the Dutch writer and socialist Henriette Roland Holst-Van der Schalk (1869-1952). There are indeed some similarities between the two women. Though Meurer-Bongardt does not mention how and when Olsson became acquainted with Roland Holst's poems and political ideas, it was probably through an article by Martha A. Muusses in the Swedish journal *Ord & Bild* in 1937, which presents Roland Holst's literary and political work. The article is followed by some poems

translated by Muusses from Dutch into Swedish. Some striking details are for example that Roland Holst in 1912 published a lyrical drama entitled *Thomas More*, in which the protagonist More proclaims that communism will be the future. In the same year her collection of poems *De vrouw in het woud* (The woman in the wood) was published. The poems deal with themes such as the lost land, and the strength to continue and start a new life. These kind of similarities could be studied in more depth, but that must wait for another article or book.

Instead of the traditional summary, this study of Hagar Olsson ends with an epilogue in which the essay *Jag lever* (I exist) (1948) is analysed. Meurer-Bongardt regards this essay as a text in which all utopian elements in Olsson's work come together. *Jag lever* is a manifesto for the utopian potential of human beings.

The overall conclusion after reading this doctoral thesis is that it is an important work in the reading and further study of Hagar Olsson and her importance for Finland-Swedish literary, historical and ideological development in the twentieth century.