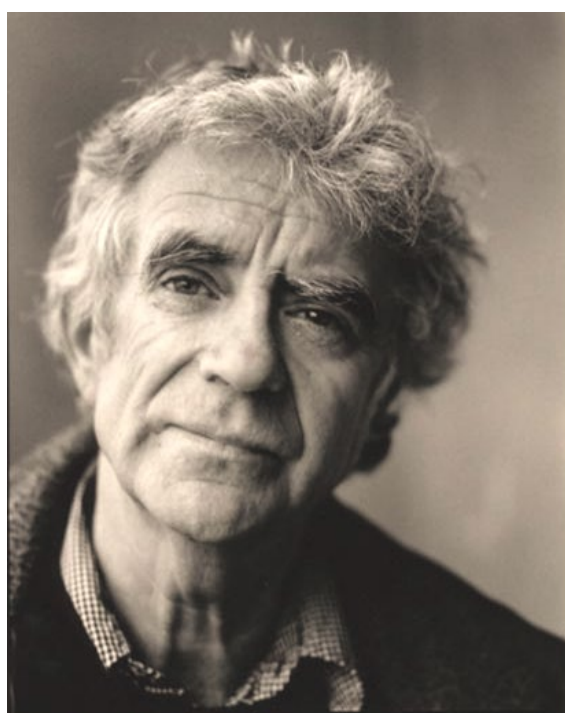


JAN ERIK VOLD – The Renowned Norwegian Word Architect and Performer

Raluca-Daniela DUINEA¹



Jan Erik Vold
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Jan Erik VOLD (b. 1939) is a prominent literary and public figure of the Norwegian literary and cultural space of the 1960s. And he is “still at work. [...] Because if I didn’t, there would be one voice missing”, as the poet himself stated in the introduction of the first Norwegian-Romanian bilingual anthology of

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poetry entitled *Briskeby blues*, published at Casa Cărții de Știință Publishing House, in 2023, with the financial support of Norwegian Literature Abroad (NORLA).

The impressive contribution to the Modern Norwegian literature of the 1960s consists of his innovative and valuable concrete and *new simple* (*nyenkle*²) poems often read over jazz and blues chords, together with his active implication as editor and key member of the Literary Circle *Profil* and of the eponymous literary magazine. The literary direction of *Profil* was drawn by a group of young students whose aim was the renewal of the Norwegian literature through publications based on everyday life experience.

In 1965 Vold made his literary debut with the volume *mellom speil og speil* (*Between Mirror and Mirror*), consisting of typographic poems, followed by the experimental volume *blikket* (*The Gaze*, 1966) where the rhythmic dimension of the poem made by only five words (*blikket, du – you, fanger – catch, meg – me, ikke – no*) is the note of novelty introduced by Vold in the Norwegian poetry of the 60s. *HEKT* (*Grab*) was published in 1966, followed by the volume of prose poems entitled *fra rom til rom SAD & CRAZY* (*From Room to Room SAD & CRAZY*) from 1967. In 1968, the volume *Mor Godhjertas glade versjon. Ja* (*Mother Goodhearted's Happy Version. Yes*) had a great contribution to the renewal of the Norwegian poetry, through its funny and *new simple* (*nyenkle*) poems with impact on Norwegian society, used for the first time in Norwegian literature. These poems underline the fact that there is no clear limit between life and poetry. Their poetic message approached themes like friendship, love, *Briskeby*, everyday life, the Blue Tram, or the city of Oslo. They get directly to the reader because Vold gave them a special and unique dimension, reading them in the tram or on the stage being often accompanied by jazz musicians. There are also other volumes of poetry, namely *kykelipi* from 1969, where the concrete poems are classified into grammatical, ready-mades, ekphrastic and figurative poems, tongue twisters and even nursery-rhymes like poems. *spor, snø* (*Traces, Snow*) are special *new simple* haiku, followed by meditative poems in *Bok 8: LIV* (*Book 8: Life*, 1973) and *S*, 1978. Jan Erik Vold published also political poems *Elg* from 1989, *IKKE: Skillingstrykk fra nittitallet* (*NOT: Broad-sides from the Nineties*, 1993), and the most recent volume of poetry was published 2011, entitled *Store hvite bok å se* (*The Great White Book to See*). The poems in this volume are wintry and resemble a memory book, being also about winter sports practised by the author together with his friends.

² A simple and common poem which illustrates everyday life situations, even personal experiences, thus getting closer to the reader who, in this case, becomes, an important part of the creative process.

Besides being an innovative poet, Vold is also essayist, editing a series of anthologies about the literary work of well-known Norwegian writers, as well as a prominent translator of William Carlos Williams, Samuel Becket, Frank O'Hara, Bob Dylan, Robert Creeley, and a jazz journalist and editor for the literary magazines *Vinduet* (*The Window*) and *BASAR*.

In addition, he became a popular poet also due to the fact that he used to read his poems together with a jazz or blues orchestra. In this sense, he released an impressive number of recordings together with jazz and blues musicians, Jan Garbarek, Egil Kapstad, Kåre Virud, Chet Baker, Red Mitchell and many others. His discography includes *Briskeby blues*, with poems read by Vold, accompanied by Jan Garbarek Quartet, in 1969, *HAV (SEA)*, read by Vold and accompanied by the same quartet, in 1970, Bob Dylan, *Stein. Regn*, with poems translated and read by Vold, accompanied by Kåre Virud, 1981, Frank O'Hara, *Den dagen Lady døde*, translated and read by the Norwegian poet together with Egil Kapstad, Red Mitchell and Nisse Sandström, 1986, *Blåmann! Blåmann!* with poems recited by Vold, accompanied by Egil Kaptad, Chet Baker, Philip Catherine and Terje Venaas, from 1988. In 2009 it was released a single collection of recordings called *Jan Erik Vold – The Complete Recordings 1966-1977* (*Jan Erik Vold: Vocalist – The Complete Recordings 1966-1977*).

He was awarded a series of literary and cultural prizes, *Tarjei Vesaas' Award for Debut* (*Tarjei Vesaas' debutantpris*), in 1966, *Aschehougprisen*, in 1981. In 1992 he was awarded The Arts Council's *Translator's Prize*, *Brageprisen*, in 1993, *Brageprisen Honorary Award* (*Brageprisen hederspris*), in 1997 and *Gyldendalprisen*, in 2000. In 2001 he received the title of *Doctor Honoris Causa* from the University of Oslo.

On the 15th of February 2015, in Tromsø, during my doctoral scholarship at UiT - The Arctic University of Norway, being coordinated by Professor Henning Howlid Wærp, I conducted an interview with Jan Erik Vold, for my PhD thesis, published in 2018 in a book format as *The Poetry of Jan Erik Vold and the Norwegian Lyric Modernism of the 1960s*, at Casa Cărții de Știință Publishing House, in the *Nordica* Collection. With reference to what poetry means to Vold, he states the following: "Poetry is stylistic work: it is not just a multitude of thoughts that comes out of my mouth; the graphic image becomes, in my opinion, prettier when it is organised in two quatrains with a blank line between them. It is a pretty, graphic image, which you see as a whole, while probably reading the letters line by line. Poetry is sound but language is also graphic"³.

³ Det er noe stilisert over dikt. Det er ikke bare at det kommer masse pratebobler ut av munnen min. Det grafiske bildet blir, synes jeg, penere når det er fire linjer og blank linje, fire linjer og

Raluca-Daniela Duinea: Thank you for this interview! In April this year you were invited to Cluj-Napoca as a special guest to the launch of the first Norwegian – Romanian bilingual anthology of poetry – *Briskeby blues*, with 320 poems translated for the first time into Romanian, selected from 11 volumes, from your debut in 1965, to 2011. How could you describe this anthology in a few words?

Jan Erik Vold: The anthology is nicely done and gives a rich picture of my poetry. The foreword and the interview at the end of the book make a solid background for an interested reader.

R.D.D.: What about the first PhD thesis about your literary work published in 2018, in a book format as *The Poetry of Jan Erik Vold and the Norwegian Lyric Modernism in the 1960s*, launched together with the above-mentioned anthology? Do you think this book presents the main stages of your writing? Is it representative for the Norwegian and Romanian readers alike? Are there other PhD theses written about your literary work?

J.E.V.: The PhD is useful, presenting the main stages of my poetry production. There is no PhD on my poetry written in Norway, but the Czech poet Ondrej Buddeus made one in Prague 2017: *Fiktive verdener i Jan Erik Volds verk 1965-1995* (written in Czech).

R.D.D.: Besides the two book launches, the interview for Radio Cluj and the poetry recital, you had an interesting lecture, *Thoughts about Poetry*, for our students who study Norwegian at the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature. What was the lecture about and how can you describe your meeting with our students who analysed and translated your poems during courses and seminars and wrote essays and bachelor theses about your literary work?

J.E.V.: What I did was to discuss poems by some outstanding Norwegian poets -- Henrik Wergeland (1807-1845) being the most important one. His love poems and death poems are among the best we have. He wrote in free verse before Walt Whitman and Charles Baudelaire.

R.D.D.: What does this visit to Cluj mean to you? How can you describe your experience in this beautiful city also called the heart of Transylvania?

blank linje. Det blir et pent grafisk bilde som du tar inn i et syn mens bokstavene der må du lese antakelig linje for linje. Dikt er lyd, altså språk er lyd, men språk er også grafisk (Jan Erik Vold, 15 February 2015, p. 342, my translation).

J.E.V.: It was great to experience the keen information the students in Cluj had about Norwegian literature and my poetry in particular. I do hope I can come back some day.

R.D.D.: Did you ride the purple tram of Cluj? Have you thought of writing a poem about trams in Cluj?

J.E.V.: I was happy to watch the streetcars of Cluj. Unfortunately, I never got to have a ride with them. So, there was no tram poem written, I'm sorry to say.

R.D.D.: You have been the editor of three important Norwegian literary magazines, *Profil*, *Vinduet* and *BASAR*, and a prominent member of the Literary Circle *Profil*. What changes has this Literary Circle brought to Norwegian literature? How did *Profil* influenced your life and your literary career?

J.E.V.: I worked with the literary magazines *Profil*, *Vinduet*, *BASAR* for 16 years: 1966-1981. The discussions I had with my editorial friends were very stimulating.

R.D.D.: Do you and the former members of the Literary Circle *Profil* still meet each other? Do you still have common activities?

J.E.V.: I still see some of these writer friends, when I am in Oslo. Most of the time, though, I live in Stockholm.

R.D.D.: Besides being a famous poet you are also an artist. You often read your poems being accompanied by a jazz or blues orchestra. You have released a series of CDs that combine in such an amazing way your poems with jazz. Among the vinyl albums released, there are *Briskeby blues* 1969, *HAV* 1971, *ingetings bjeller* 1977, *Blåmann! Blåmann!* 1988, *Pytt Pytt Blues* 1992. How can you describe the relation between poetry and music?

J.E.V.: There is music in poetry. I was in the happy position to get in touch with some of the finest jazz musicians in Norway – and also some abroad. I have no difficulties communicating with the players. My “background” was that I started listening to jazz when I was very young.

R.D.D.: You have released these recordings with well-known Norwegian and American musicians such as Jan Garbarek, Bobo Stenson, Chet Baker, Palle Danielsson and many others. In 1988, together with Chet Baker, Egil Kapstad, Philip Catherine and Terje Venaas, you have released the vinyl album *Blåmann! Blåmann*. The English version of this album, *Telemark Blue*, was released as a

CD in 2009. I would like to ask you in what circumstances did you meet the American trumpeter Chet Baker?

J.E.V.: Chet Baker did many concerts in Norway, often playing with Norwegian musicians. Randi Hultin was a jazz journalist that knew Chet Baker very well. She was the one that helped me to get in touch with him. Chet Baker was in Stockholm 1987, when I had a chance to meet him. Jon Larsen, with his Oslo record company Hot Club Records, got hold of a studio in Paris. At Studio Sysmo we did the *Blåmann* CD in February 1988, with my piano player Egil Kapstad in front of the studio sessions.

R.D.D.: What can you tell us about the vinyl album *Briskeby blues* (1969), released as a CD in 1995 accompanied by Jan Garbarek Quartet. How did you meet each other?

J.E.V.: My work with Jan Garbarek was initiated by the radio commentator Svein Erik Børja, who heard the Garbarek band and some poetry readings at the Molde jazz festival 1968. He saw the “similarities” in jazz and my kind of poetry and informed a record company about this.

R.D.D.: Why did you start writing poetry? Could you imagine yourself doing something else?

J.E.V.: Why shouldn't I start writing poetry, when it came to me? Of course, I write prose articles as well, for Oslo newspapers.

R.D.D.: You have a great contribution to the renewal of the Norwegian poetry from the 1960s through your concrete and *new simple* poems. *Kykelipi* is a volume made of humour and irony reflected in grammatical concrete poems, tongue twisters, nursery rhymes and ready-made poems. There are many poems which cannot be translated. This is also the case of “Ønskediktet” (“My Favourite Poem”) and “kulturuke”. What is the message of these poems?

J.E.V.: With language you can be serious, but you can also be playful. In regular poetry, the serious part often dominates. Therefore, I'm happy to make “funny” poems, as they say. People like them.

R.D.D.: How did the Eastern inspiration with its Japanese Zen Buddhist philosophy become a rich source of inspiration for your poems in *spor, snø* (*Track, Snow*, 1970), *Bok 8: LIV* (*Book 8: Life*, 1973), *S* (1978), *sirkel, sirkel*, 1979 and *Sorgen. Sangen. Veien* (*The Pain. The Song. The Road*, 1987)?

J.E.V.: I got to know about Zen Buddhism from some paperback books I picked up around 1960. What I read made great sense to me. R.H. Blyth's books on Haiku poetry were an inspiration.

R.D.D.: The volume of prose poems *fra rom til rom: SAD & CRAZY (From Room to Room: SAD & CRAZY, 1967)* has an interesting structure. "The Colours" alternates with "the fairy tales". What is the role of the colours and how can you define the fairy tales in this volume?

J.E.V.: The colours of SAD & CRAZY, starting with blue and ending with green – well, from the blue sky to the green grass.

R.D.D.: Who is Abel Ek in *En som het Abel Ek (One Named Abel Ek)* from 1988?

J.E.V.: Abel Ek is the main character in the book -- Omega being his sweetheart. What I know about them is what is written in the book, which of course is a love story.

R.D.D.: The volume *Store hvite bok å se (The Great White Book to See, 2011)* presents another aspect of your literary work with winter poems built upon vivid memories with dear friends. Could you tell us the story behind this volume?

J.E.V.: *Store hvite bok å se (2008)* is the third of my "meditation books", after *Tolv meditasjoner (2002)* og *Drømmemakeren sa (2004)*. Different from my earlier works, here are three poetry books with a similar structure.

R.D.D.: What can you tell us about *Voldposten*? Is it a literary magazine? What is *Voldposten* about? How many issues are published per year?

J.E.V.: *Voldposten* is a summary of what I find interesting in the newspaper stories I read, during one year. It started in 2005, the latest covered the year 2021. Right now, I'm working on *Voldposten 2022*.

R.D.D.: Besides writing poetry you also write essays about other writers and their literary works. *Poesi ad lib* from 2013 and *Kánon/Kannon/Kanón* published in 2016 are two of your most recent publications. What can you tell us about these books?

J.E.V.: I do write about poetry and poets I find interesting. Once in a while I gather what I have written since the previous essay book – and make a new one.

R.D.D.: You were always engaged in debates regarding the Norwegian society with a special focus on the social problems of Oslo (e.g., the blue tram, the old wooden houses from Briskeby etc.). What are the challenges the city of Oslo is getting through nowadays?

J.E.V.: Don't ask me about Oslo. There are so many stupid things going on in my home town now – the building of the ugly Edvard Munch Museum being one of the more recent ones. I live in Stockholm. As for my criticism of Oslo, I have not been listened to very often.

R.D.D.: What are your writing plans for the near future? Do you still write poetry?

J.E.V.: I keep on working. There is a lot of editorial work to be done. I just published a collection of the political newspaper writings of my father Ragnar Vold: *Klar tale* (2023). He was the most ardent anti-Nazism-writer in Norway during the thirties. An earlier volume was called *Motstand* (2006).

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