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*Literary history and literary canons in a bilingual written culture –  
some experiences from Norway*

Literary Societies and Literary Museums in Europe: The European Literary Canons  
Petőfi Literary Museum, Budapest, March 4–6 2010

The relationship between cultural identity and literary canons may be rather complex as it is. Nevertheless, I will draw the attention to the role of written culture. Speaking in capital letters, I present an outline of the history of written cultures in Norway and a short story of Norwegian literary history and literary canons. This develops into a discussion whether there are one or two literary traditions in Norway. I conclude with some Norwegian experiences with literary history and canons which might be relevant even for other written cultures.<sup>1</sup>

**The meaning of a written culture**

To me, one of the best books about written culture is Peter Stein's *Schriftkultur*.<sup>2</sup> His amazing overview of the history of writing and reading, in that order, proves beyond all doubt how important literature in every meaning of the word has been in the development of mankind. Mr. Stein's point of view is that *Schriftkultur* "ist –wie Kultur überhaupt – weniger ein Zustand, sondern ein Prozess, der keineswegs als ein geradliniger aufzufassen ist".<sup>3</sup>

A written culture may be defined as the infrastructure of all kinds of literature, from writing and reading to the teaching, publication and distribution, including the use and reception of literature. Literary museums and literary societies can be, and should be, important institutions in a written culture. Only in Norway, there are about 15 literary museums and at least 26 literary societies.

The use of writing cannot be isolated from speaking. A written culture should also be understood as a culture of spoken language. This makes a written culture quite complex. At least, this is the case of Norway, which may be regarded a nation with a bilingual written culture. The borders within this culture may be distinct, but often they are not, because the two varieties of Norwegian – Bokmål and Nynorsk – are mutually understandable. In fact, they are also mutually dependent of each other. Therefore, I offer a rough guide to Norwegian history of written culture.

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was presented with some glimpses from the Ivar Aasen Centre for written culture in Norway, just in case there are some connections between the canonized aesthetic of literature and the aesthetic of other forms of art, such as architecture.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Stein: *Schriftkultur. Eine Geschichte des Schreibens und Lesens*, Lüneburg 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Stein, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

### **The development of a bilingual written culture**

The territory of Norway has been an arena for multicultural affairs for more than a thousand years. When the Catholic Church entered Norway a thousand years ago, it introduced the Latin language to the people of the Old Norse language. In the centuries to come, the two languages were used in different domains and partly written with different alphabets.

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century Norway was a part of the Danish monarchy, which means that Danish language was the de facto written language in Norway. The spoken language was quite different. Norwegians kept on speaking their dialects, which in their structures remained mostly unchanged for many hundred years. Already from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most Norwegians could read, but quite few of them managed also the art of writing, and this writing was mainly in Danish. This means that most Norwegians were speaking one language and writing another, because almost everything printed was in Danish.

About 1800 this distance between spoken and written language became a hot issue in Norway. One solution was to keep on with the Danish language. Another solution was to norwegianize the Danish language. The third solution was introduced by the 22 year old teacher Ivar Aasen in 1836. He wanted to reconstruct a written language based on the dialects still spoken and connect this to the Old Norse language. Mr Aasen looked for the opposite of the typical written language in Europe, which was a language quite far away from the spoken one. Mind the gap, he said, let us diminish it and make a written language out of the spoken languages of the common people, not the one of the social elite.

And so he did. Mr Aasen finished his work with a grammar in 1864 and a dictionary in 1873. This changed the future of language in Norway. As early as in 1885, the Norwegian parliament decided that both this new language, now called Nynorsk, which literally means New Norwegian, and the Danish language, should be official languages of Norway. The next decades, a lot of work was done to norwegianize this Danish language, which is now called Bokmål – the book language. Even today Bokmål may be more familiar than Nynorsk to Danish people.

Since 1885 Norway has been a bilingual society with two official varieties of the language called Norwegian – Bokmål and Nynorsk. At this time, the language of the Sami people was forbidden. Until the 1950's, the Sami people were obliged to learn Norwegian. Now the Sami language is an official language in some regions, and every year about 40 books are published in Sami.

Book publishing illustrates the bilingual written culture in Norway. Every year about 8000 books of all kinds – the figure really includes all kinds of books – are published in Norway. 82 % are in Bokmål, 6 % in Nynorsk, 12 % in English.<sup>4</sup> The percentage of books in Nynorsk is the same as for hundred years ago.

Translation of classics from Europe and Asia was basic for the development of Nynorsk as a literary language. As a consequence, Norwegians can read very different and still very good translations of Goethe as well as Shakespeare and the Bible.

Overall, Nynorsk is a lesser used language than Bokmål, but in some regions Bokmål is the lesser used. This makes Norway a country of linguistic plurality with shifting linguistic majority. Worldwide Norwegian may be regarded as a strong written culture, heavily institutionalized and integrated in the society, even if the pressure from English is remarkable, especially for Bokmål.

### **The tradition of literary histories in Norway**

The first major Norwegian literary history was published in 1896, written by Henrik Jæger. The romantic border between fiction as literature and non-fiction as non-literature was yet not

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<sup>4</sup> Ottar Grepstad: *Språkfakta 2010*, [www.aasentunet.no](http://www.aasentunet.no), table 15.1.

closed. Therefore, Mr Jæger included both fiction and non-fiction in his work, and the few books published in Nynorsk.

In this very year, Mr Ivar Aasen died. A few weeks after his death, a volume of his best writings was published. In that way Mr Aasen was canonized before anyone could be able to forget him or diminish his work. His work as a linguist was highly respected, and so were his literary texts. The controversial factor was his political work and the aim of a new language in addition to the Danish language in Norway.

This controversy was very intense in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless the literature of Nynorsk was included in all literary histories. After the two volume work by Mr Jæger it was impossible to write a Norwegian literary history without including both parts of the written culture.

In addition to his dictionary and grammar, Mr Aasen also published some essays and short stories, and he wrote about 130 poems, most of them songs. The majority of these poems was published after he died in 1896. At that time, his most important poem had already become a hit. Today it still is an unofficial national anthem, and one of the few songs most Norwegians are able to sing without reading the text.

### **A short history of literary canons in Norway**

In 1925, the Norwegian department of a major publishing house in Copenhagen, Denmark, Gyldendal, was established as a pure Norwegian publishing house in Oslo, Norway. In 2009 Gyldendal sold books for more than 13 billions euro, which makes Gyldendal the largest publishing house in Norway.

A literary canon is one part of this success. In the 1920's, Gyldendal needed to make a profile of its own. The publishing house started to present itself as the publisher of The Four Great Authors. These included Mr Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Alexander Kielland and Jonas Lie.

The Four Giants was a slogan, but ended as a proverb with unknown author. All through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gyldendal managed to make Norwegians stick to this idea of The Four Giants, defining who were the four most important authors in Norway. At least two of the authors, Kielland and Lie, were hardly read by anyone unless they had to read. Their literature was vivid only in the text books. To the common readers these authors were not the best nor the most important, besides of Ibsen. Nevertheless, the proverb is still in use and has become a common place.

The idea of canons was revitalized in the 1990's. The intellectual reason was *The Western Canon* by Mr Harold Bloom, published 1994. But again, there was also a commercial need for a canon. At this time the largest book club company in Norway counted more than 600 000 members, or 14 % of the population.<sup>5</sup> The company grabbed the idea of canons and invited 100 Norwegian intellectuals to make a score of the 100 most important books – in world literature, “The Library of the century”. Later on, the same book club launched a series called “The books that changed the world”.

The difference is obvious. In the 1920's, the building of the nation Norway was the major issue. 70 years later, the issue was global communication. The national literature was still interesting, but not as important as before. Strangely enough it seemed easier to pick up the best books in the world than to decide which Norwegian books are the best. Some years earlier, the same book club had tried to make an update version of The Four Giants, now called The Great Eight. The members couldn't care less, and the book club dropped the slogan quickly.

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<sup>5</sup> Trond Andreassen: *Bok-Norge. En litteratursosiologisk oversikt*, Oslo 2000, p. 375.

In 2005, a literary festival asked a jury to make a list of the 25 best books of fiction from the contemporary literature. The festival managed to get in the news and do something which seemed a bit controversial. However, the effort hardly changed the opinion about authors or current literature in Norway.

For several years a major Norwegian newspaper, *Dagbladet*, asked juries to make more lists – including the 25 best novels and the 25 best books of non-fiction. The aim was commercial. *Dagbladet* wanted to do something which made people be aware of and talk about this newspaper in the lazy summer days of July.

### **One or two literary traditions?**

Both the literary histories and the literary canons include literature in Bokmål and Nynorsk. Today this goes without saying in Norway. However, in writing literary history gender, genre and region have been more obvious categories than language. A combined Nordic literary history of women was published in the 1980's, written by researchers in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. History of women's literature, non-fiction literature, children's literature – it has all been written in Norway, together with several cultural and literary histories of different regions. None of these books deals with the different languages in different chapters. Books written in the lesser used language Nynorsk are presented and discussed side by side with literature written in Bokmål.

There is one exception. In 2010, a four volume press history of Norway was published.<sup>6</sup> This project treats with the history of the newspapers published in Nynorsk in separate chapters, as has been done with the quite short story of Sami newspapers. The reason is mainly pragmatic. The idea was to edit all together into one unit, but running short of time, this became impossible.

Lack of time was perhaps not the only reason. Writing the Nynorsk history of Norwegian newspapers, I discovered that the histories were different. The press history covers more than 2000 different newspapers from the last 350 years. Less than 10 % of these were published in Nynorsk, and very few before 1900. The major changes in this part of Norwegian press occurred in other periods than the similar changes in the Bokmål press. Both the financial structure and the organizing structure were different in the Nynorsk press. The editors-in-chief in the Nynorsk newspapers moved mostly to other Nynorsk newspapers, not to the Bokmål ones. There was an identity of language and a similarity in culture.

This identity of language and similarity in culture was the main issue in a cultural history of Nynorsk which I had published in 2006.<sup>7</sup> I had tried to draw an outline of Norwegian history based on the use of this language, how it developed, what were the main challenges, and what was the influence in the society. A couple of years later, I found the same traits when I studied the newspapers in Nynorsk. They represented something else in Norwegian history. Nynorsk made the difference.

### **Written culture – imagined community**

Mother tongue represents a strong vehicle of cultural identity. Throughout the centuries the use of Danish as written language in Norway could not express this identity. The concept of imagined communities as developed by Mr Benedict Anderson, can explain the Norwegian situation.<sup>8</sup> In an imagined community people are connected because they think they share a common idea, self-understanding, a cultural tradition. For Mr Anderson this concept regards the development of a nation. I may add, even insist, that also within a nation, even across the borders, such imagined communities can be founded. Many people using Nynorsk in Norway,

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<sup>6</sup> Hans Fredrik Dahl et. al. (ed.): *Norsk presses historie*, 1–4, Oslo 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ottar Grepstad: *Viljen til språk. Ei nynorsk kulturhistorie*, Oslo 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson: *Imagined communities*, London 1991.

but not all of them, share a common idea of the value of this language and the cultural tradition created by using this language. In the same way, Sami people take part in an imagined community across the borders between Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The basic item of these communities is the language. Such communities are real just because they are imagined.

The meaning of such communities may very well disappear if the differences within and between them are ignored in the name of the nation and a common literature or a common language. This is not a question of political separatism, at least it is not so in Norway. It is just a matter of understanding some of the mechanisms of a multicultural society in the past, and today.

### **Some Norwegian experiences**

To understand the history of language and literature in Norway it is necessary to understand the differences within this literature and the bilingual written culture. Whenever speaking about literary canons, one should be aware of such differences. It should not be taken for granted that a literature is common and that everyone share the same linguistic identity. We have to look for the differences and not go straight to what seems common.

Literary canons can be useful as a commercial idea. Both publishing houses and book clubs are in need of literary authority. By creating a literary canon they make themselves more important, and they offer a connection between the commercial and the intellectual contributions to literature.

It is likely that such lists are dominated by literature in the major used language of a country, unless the list maker is connected to the imagined community of a lesser used one. The national encyclopedias might be a waterproof of the state of the written culture. A typical national encyclopedia in Norway has included the most important authors of the Nynorsk tradition, but the readers will find little or no information about the variety of authors, books and publications which all together establish the Nynorsk part of the literary institution in Norway.

The time is out for the idea of “one nation – one language”. In Europe almost every nation has more than one vivid and written language. Over time a written language will develop an institution of its own. For two reasons there can be a need for separate literary histories and literary canons. First, to understand the development of the use of one specific language and its role in the society. Second, to be able to make a reliable literary history of the nation as a whole with more than one cultural perspective.

In the age of Internet such making of lists has become very popular. All such lists tend to freeze a cultural situation. They reflect *Zustand*, not *Prozess*. I think we also should be aware of the cultural industry, not only the educational system. The cultural industry heavily depends upon imagined, transnational canons of literature, which means that most canons are also a question of cultural economics.

The workout of literary canons tends to be blind of the hegemonic cultural power. What is regarded as important looks different due to one's own place in the hegemonic hierarchy. The cultural tradition of a nation is always more than one. Making literary canons with no regards to this cultural, linguistic and cultural diversity makes only some sense. The conclusion hides in the differences within and between the written cultures.