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NORLA 1978 - 2008

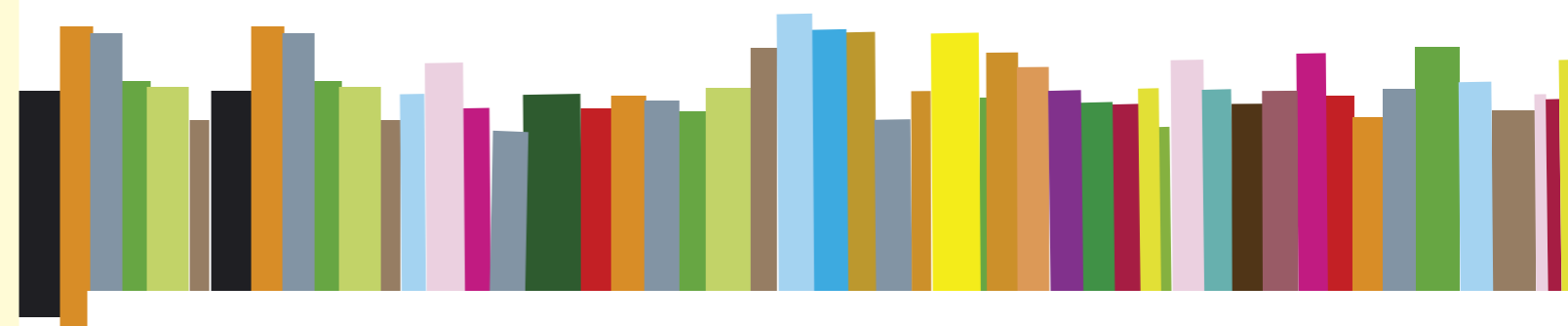
NORLA, Norwegian Literature Abroad, celebrates 30 years anniversary in 2008. This is an occasion for presenting two essays on Norwegian fiction and non-fiction. Each of them says something about modern writing in our country, pointing to conditions within literature – and beyond it, which might be called specifically Norwegian. Hopefully they also reveal new perspectives – from these two writers' qualified and personal readings.

In recent years Norwegian literature has had a good following wind. Foreign sale has increased significantly, and several Norwegian authors have gained international success with their books. In 2007 NORLA granted translation subsidy to nearly 300 titles in as many as 45 countries all over the world. It is particularly encouraging to see so much genuine interest for a small country's literature in a globalised world, where English language dominance is such an enormous factor.

Finally, we would like to thank our tireless, dedicated and distinguished translators, who are essential for this situation. Without them, Norwegian writing can't cross the threshold into new countries and cultures.

Oslo, September 2008
On behalf of NORLA

Gina Winje
Director



NORWEGIAN
FICTION
FROM 1978
TO 2008

Ingunn Økland

Le monde de Sophie, Swiat Zofii, Sophie's World. When you come from a country of barely five million people, it gives you rather a funny feeling to see strangers in far-flung places - the metro in Moscow or Sydney's Bondi Beach - reading a book that was originally written in your own language. But from the middle of the 1990s it began to happen quite often. Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* was the planet's best-selling book in 1995, translated into more than fifty languages all told.

Sophie's World was a veritable breakthrough for Norwegian literature on a wider stage, and today books from our remote outpost arouse amazing interest in many European countries. This applies just as much to an experimental playwright like Jon Fosse as to enterprising crime writers such as Karin Fossum or Unni Lindell. None has reached the same sales figures as *Sophie's World*, but at the time of writing Per Petterson's *Out Stealing Horses* (*Ut og stjele hester*) has been sold to 42 countries. I recently spotted that vigorous and delightful novel on a bench in New York's Central Park.

Although the breakthrough only came ten or twelve years ago, the ground had been well prepared. Ever since 1965 Norway has had a generous and self-confident literary policy covering novels, short stories and

poetry. Each year the state purchases a thousand copies each of the majority of titles from serious publishers. The books are distributed to public libraries throughout the country. The targeting of foreign markets began in 1978 when NORLA was founded. With Kristin Brudevoll at the helm NORLA became a smoothly-functioning promotional centre within fifteen years, rapidly enabling the generation which made its debut in the mid-1990s to enjoy a degree of international attention. Erlend Loe, Tore Renberg, Hanne Ørstavik, Linn Ullmann, Karl Ove Knausgård, Nikolaj Frobenius and Trude Marstein were amongst

the first young authors in Norwegian history to discover that foreign editors and readers were actually interested in what they were doing.

This beneficial environment for Norwegian fiction can be seen as progressive government arts policy - or as a reasonable outcome of the Scandinavian welfare state. The first may be tempting, but the second is more realistic. Norway can afford to support a wide selection of texts for which no one except the small pool of Norwegians can take responsibility. Fiction is popular with the public, and writers enjoy a better standard of living than their colleagues in most other naturally comparable countries. In Scandinavia, only Finland was quicker off the mark

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with an official, targeted programme of support for foreign translators.

However, the welfare state isn't a neutral framework for our body of authors, but a recurrent theme in literature. It's a well-known fact that oppressive and repressive regimes can provoke resolute opposition from writers. But the same is true of a welfare state. The raw material of literary production isn't neutralised just because the state wishes to support artistic expression. When Norway's foremost novelist of the past thirty years - Dag Solstad - analyses the condition

of the country, he finds "a total absence of bright spots in our age". It's true this was uttered as a pointed remark, but the attitude is representative of Solstad's extensive corpus of work, and this work in turn provides a fascinating perspective on Norwegian literature from 1978 to 2008.

Dag Solstad made his debut in 1965. From *Verdigris! Green! (Irr! Grønt!)*, (1969) to *Armand V. Footnotes To an Unexcavated Novel (Armand V. Fotnoter til en uutgravd roman)*, (2006) this author has written about characters who feel themselves out of place in a society of social democratic consensus, and who employ various tactics for dissociating themselves from it. These are misanthropic men who

regard Norway as an oppressive, narrow and ignorant society. Solstad employs what one might call a garrulously formal style with long, intricate sentences. It's a style every Norwegian with a sense of literature would recognise immediately. But in the midst of the despondency there is room for comedy and satire, too. In 1982 he published one of the funniest books in the Norwegian post-war literary canon, *Schoolmaster Pedersen's Account of the Great Political Revival that*

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Has Ravaged Our Land Gymnaslærer Pedersens beretning om den store politiske vekkelisen som har hjemsoekt vårt land). The novel marks the

transition between the 1970s and 1980s; and by analysing - and fondly poking fun at - the situation of Norwegian intellectuals in the 1970s it also points out the need for a literary paradigm shift.

It may seem extraordinary today, but up here in the peaceful backwater of Norway the 1970s was an era of political radicalism dominated by a group of students and intellectuals who espoused quite a militant form of communism. Young authors wrote glowing books about Albania and planned armed insurrections against Norwegian social democracy. Instead of being a brief echo of the international movement of 1968,

communism in Norway was, as Solstad puts it in *Schoolmaster Pedersen*, "clearer" and "colder" than in any other Western European land. China, the Soviet Union and Cambodia were idealised almost unreservedly, and the movement left a lasting impression on academic and cultural life. The aesthetic ideal for literature was utilitarian: it should expose the machinations of power, the battle of the sexes and political injustice - and point the way to a better society.

This is the concrete backdrop for the marked upheaval in Norwegian

literature in the 1980s. Looking back, it seems as if formulating "the new literature" at that precise moment was an extraordinarily gratifying task; indeed, seldom has it been easier for a fresh generation to find sympathetic ears. The 1980s became a decade when authors rallied to the cause of literature as an independent means of artistic expression. There were the glimmerings of Norwegian punk poetry from Cindy Haug and Gene Dalby. Cecilie Løveid began to develop distinctive, expressionistic drama. Tor Ulven established one of the finest lyrical voices in post-war Norwegian poetry. But to the wider public it was, as usual, prose that was the object of most attention. Herbjørg Wassmo aroused huge interest with her trilogy about Tora - fathered by a German soldier during the occupation

of Norway - who falls victim to incest. *Beatles* by Lars Saabye Christensen was an immediate success, and remains one of the most effective and captivating teenage novels in Norwegian literature.

In literary circles the 1980s proved a good time for creative reflection and lengthy experimental prose, overwhelmingly from the hands of intellectual male writers like Jan Kjørstad, Kjartan Fløgstad, Ole

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Robert Sunde, Svein Jarvoll and Jon Fosse. The postmodern novel found a skilful exponent in Kjørstad, a newly

qualified theologian at the time he made his debut with the short story anthology *Silently Spins the Earth (Kloden dreier stille rundt)* in 1980. As editor of the periodical *Vinduet* from 1985-1989, Kjørstad helped to interpret the ideals of classical European modernism within the confines of the modern information society. His own novels are on the grand scale - and fragmented - stories in which the shifts of perspective undermine the notion of a true and final version. His characters expose one another by turns to false and reliable information, dissimulation and sincerity. These are erudite books containing overt and covert references to architecture, music and the natural sciences. The modern information society also forms the background to the complications in *The 7th. Climate (Det 7. klima)* by

Kjartan Fløgstad, but this author moves into burlesque. Here the media society has become parody and satire, the fiction a self-conscious illusion. Where Kjarstad's work is characterised by tours de force and a willingness to experiment, Fløgstad's writing has at its heart a wildly burgeoning creativity.

The 1980s witnessed valuable artistic pioneering work. But just where the real bull's-eyes will occur is totally unpredictable. My own favourite from this decade is a pure, classic, minimalist collection of stories by Kjell

Askildsen, *Thomas F's Last Notes to the Public* (*Thomas F's siste nedtegnelser til almenheten*). Askildsen (b. 1929) was already a veteran of the short story form in Norway when the book came out in 1983, and in the title story, *Thomas F*, he created one of the most telling portraits in Norwegian post-war literature. This is of an old fogey - Thomas F - who, with much indignation and disdain, describes his surroundings and the few people with whom he still has contact. Askildsen endows Thomas with wit and venom, but the story is unencumbered by big gestures or charged symbolism. Almost without wishing to acknowledge it himself, Thomas cherishes a hope of human warmth. This is literature that can transform reality: faced with Thomas, readers can arrive at an understanding

of the contradictory impulses within themselves. The style is unassuming and masterly, underplayed and effective. The short story field isn't a large one in Norway, but Askildsen has set a standard that younger authors clearly fix their sights on. This is particularly true of Merethe Lindstrøm, who made her debut in 1983 and has published a series of short stories that are both understated and disquieting.

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Which books travel best? What kind of literature can have so-called universal appeal? In Norway we have

learnt that it can be almost anything, and not necessarily our national icons. Dag Solstad wasn't translated into English until the 21st century, and our foremost post-war contemporary poet, Stein Mehren, only occasionally appears abroad. Conversely, it would have been hard to predict that a fairly dry novel about the history of philosophy would become the world's best-selling book in 1995. Nor would anyone have guessed that an uncompromising, experimental author from rural western Norway would enjoy an international breakthrough unprecedented in modern times. Even now, Jon Fosse's success can seem a bit exotic to his fellow countrymen. But Fosse concentrated on drama at a time when the Norwegian and European theatres were crying out for new, modern

plays. Now his texts are in demand outside Europe as well. In fact, Fosse wrote a whole series of novels and books of poetry before he made his debut as a playwright in 1993. In tandem with his plays he has continued to publish in many genres: drama, poetry, narrative, children's books.

Experimental literature is often seen as demanding or difficult. The fact that Jon Fosse travels so easily may be because his experiments are, in essence, simple to understand. His work builds on a feeling

that language is an inadequate vehicle for physical sensation. Language is rigid, constricting and hard compared with the revolving, cyclical stream of consciousness that characterises our inner lives. In Fosse's work this monologue is often repetitive, rhythmic and churning, and it includes a kind of physical disquiet, a body-based way of thinking. In Fosse the contrast between the dialogue and the inner monologue is enormous. This is the discrepancy for which he, time and again, provides a lyrical interpretation. Perhaps it is all these attempts to convert the bodily sensation itself into literature that gives Fosse's writing "universal" appeal. And when the human being can't manage, nature takes over, as language and meaning. Everything he writes has an earthbound musicality.

Perhaps it's still too early to judge the 1990s from the vantage point of posterity. But certainly it is timely to enquire if literary Norway has inserted an "equals" sign between success and quality. During the 1990s we in Norway came to the conclusion that our fiction was first-class, attractive and significant. But is it true?

It certainly doesn't hold good for Norwegian poetry, which has been in the doldrums for the past fifteen years. In spite of talents like Tone Hødnebo, Steinar Opstad

and Gunnar Wærness, poets have had great difficulty breathing new life into the genre. Or more accurately: the renewal has taken place within a very limited and exclusive aesthetic that emphasises the intricate processing of language. Norway's pool of writers is very homogeneous, too. White ethnic Norwegians writing about white ethnic Norwegians. Immigrants still have only a brief and brittle history in our country, and although society is beginning to take on a certain cultural diversity, the same can hardly be said of literature.

Within this homogeneous cadre of novelists there is however a relatively large variety. The Norwegian novel broadened out in the course of the 1990s, and spread into widely differing sub-genres. There

were popular historical narratives, like *Psalm at Journey's End* (*Salme ved reisens slutt*) by Erik Fosnes Hansen or a family saga like *The Victors* (*Seierherrene*) by Roy Jacobsen. There was comic naivism inspired by Erlend Loe in *Naive. Super* (*Naiv. Super*), the claustrophobic search for identity from Hanne Ørstavik, symbol-laden psychology as in *Shame* (*Skammen*) by Bergljot Hobæk Haff or Thorvald Steen's documentary novels. There were Tore Renberg's bittersweet depictions of adolescence, Trude Marstein's cool portrayals or the style-conscious crime plots of

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Unni Lindell, Jo Nesbø and Karin Fossum. *The Naked Madonna* (*Kvinnen som kledde seg naken for sin elskede*) by Jan Wiese is an untypical Norwegian book: a sensual and dynamic narrative with pronounced best-seller qualities. From the start of the new millennium Anne B. Ragde enjoyed unparalleled popular appeal, particularly with *The Berlin Poplars* (*Berlinerpoplene*). Our minority language, Nynorsk, has received a big boost in contemporary literature. Besides Kjartan Fløgstad, Jon Fosse and Frode Grytten, younger talents such as Olaug Nilssen, Carl Frode Tiller and Gunnhild Øyehaug are using Nynorsk. This minority language is based on Norwegian dialect, whereas the majority language, Bokmål, is a Norwegianised version of written Danish. All Norwegian schoolchildren are taught both languages, but everyday life is heavily dominated by Bokmål.

Training for writers took off slowly in Norway, the first course was started in 1982 by the well-known poet Eldrid Lunden. The new authors from the 1990s were the first generation to receive systematic training in creative writing. To just what extent this causes artistic standardisation is a question still being debated in Norway. The creative writing academies continue to build on the creative reflection of the 1980s. In addition, the prose text, ambitious in literary terms, has found greater public appeal.

It has been repeated *ad nauseam* that the new writers of the 1990s are the family break-up generation in Norwegian literature: now it's the children's turn to give their version of fragile families and threadbare parenting. Perhaps such a thematic interpretation doesn't provide the best picture. "The family" certainly fails to capture the aesthetic breadth. It's just as productive to read this literature in the light of the developmental characteristics of late modern society, as Professor Per Thomas Andersen does in his fine essay collection *Tangled Thoughts. On the Norwegian Literature of the 1990s* (*Tankevaser. Om norsk 1990-talls litteratur*). Andersen sees the 1990s as a new *fin de siècle* epoch in which literature manifests diverse survival strategies in its meeting with "the collapse of the big story". The so-called performer model is characterised by the striking of poses and self-staging,

other strategies may include retreat and narcissism.

One of the finest novels to come out of the 1990s clearly contains elements of this narcissistic strategy. I'm thinking of *Love* (*Kjærlighet*) by Hanne Ørstavik. The author made her debut in 1994 with an anthology of short texts, and has written a total of seven novels. But *Love* (1997) has remained the high point of this author's work so far. It's a compact, intense story about the arm's-length relationship between a mother and her child, in which Ørstavik - without any dramatic gestures - manages to address one of the greatest taboos of our age: the ignorant mother.

As a rule, Hanne Ørstavik's principle characters belong to a traditional sphere of intimacy. The adults in her books are social workers, priests, authors and teachers - without this giving them any insight into human emotions. The main character in *Love* works as cultural advisor to a small local authority in northern Norway. She cultivates values such as confidence, well-being and affinity, but feels almost nothing except irritation towards her eight-year-old son, Jon. Quite unobtrusively, Ørstavik sets up a human drama in the dark winter landscape of northern Norway, and at the same time shows how the rhetoric of closeness operates on a superficial, glossy-

magazine level, where self-affirmation and self-admiration are the real aims of intimacy. It's an outward intimacy well suited to covering coarser emotions like aggression and contempt. A more explicit and extreme form of this neo-narcissism can be found in the novel *Deep Red 315* (*Dyp rød 315*) and Helene Uri's depiction of a woman who judges the quality of her surroundings according to a theory about who and what "suits" her best and puts her in the best possible light.

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Trude Marstein blends narcissism with what one might call hyper-reflection: she portrays characters who have enjoyed a privileged upbringing and education within the Scandinavian welfare state, but who seem almost damaged by their intellectual labour. Her books are merciless. Marstein has a taut, intelligent style which reveals crises in brief, deadly glimpses. This is an author who appears to collect what might be called refined literary idioms, only to twist them into compromising forms. In the novel *Suddenly the Sound of Someone Opening a Door* (*Plutselig høre noen åpne en dør*) she portrays an ambivalent, hyper-conscious single mother who constantly, and with critical detachment, measures her daughter against herself. This is a modern woman who is utterly self-centred, ruled by idiosyncrasies and completely engrossed in her work on an academic dissertation.

Retreat, nostalgia and misanthropy are attitudes that permeate the work of Thure Erik Lund. Both in the novel and essay form, Lund mangles modern Norway. He is one of our most remarkable authors just now. The trilogy *The Ditch Incident Mystery* (*Grøftetildragelsesmysteriet*), *The Elvesteng People* (*Elvestengfolket*) and *Uranophilia* is the portrait of an intellectual misfit on the brink of a nervous breakdown. Lund has a reckless, powerful, break-neck style which would undoubtedly be a huge effort to translate,

As a minor language Norwegian is sensitive to English influence

but which certainly deserves a wider public. In his most recent novel, *Inn* (*Inn*), the main character embarks on an unbridled mockery of youth, latte bars, the so-called blogging hell, apologists for queers and Norwegians in general, to mention just a few of his targets. And when they don't feel comfortable in the streamlined welfare state, Lund's intellectual nervous wrecks can fantasise freely about all the qualities of the old peasant society. Lund's dystopia runs in parallel with a vision of art as a refuge from the workings of society, and it's precisely his own ability to create such hypnotic sanctuaries that makes him an important writer.

Norwegian literature is obviously in a phase of trilogies at the moment. Under the pseudonym Abu Rasul, Matias Faldbakken has recently completed *Scandinavian Misanthropy*

1-3 (*Skandinavisk misantropi 1-3*), one of Norway's most sensational literary projects of recent years. *Coca Hola Company*, *Macht und Rebel* and *Unfun* are peppered with analyses of the Scandinavian welfare state, lightly tossed off by main characters who develop various radical strategies for testing the limits of the all-encompassing tolerance. But it seems that neither pornography, paedophilia nor flaunting Nazi symbols has the desired subversive effect in

Scandinavia; on the contrary, all "extreme" ideas are welcomed and included in

civil society. In such a society counter-cultures lose their effectiveness, to the despair and despondency of people with an urge to protest. Like some self-fulfilling prophecy, Faldbakken's work has won great acclaim.

Last year, Carl Frode Tiller published the first volume of a trilogy about a young man who loses his memory. *Entanglement* (*Innsirkling*) draws the reader in, only to start sowing doubts about the plot and the author's intentions. The reader is thus forced into the same dilemma as the book's three characters. They're working to three very different versions of their own - and of each other's - lives. The novel is a stylistically assured experiment, full of sadness and comedy.

As a minor language, Norwegian is sensitive to English influence. Sylfest Lomheim, the director

of the Norwegian Language Council, believes that Norwegian may actually be dead in a hundred years' time. Few people share his pessimism, but in fact one of the most interesting experiments in modern Norwegian literature is a synthesis of western Norwegian dialect, English, German and French. This is the poetry collection *Solaris Revised* (*Solaris korrigert*) by Øyvind Rimbereid, in which the lengthy title poem - that rarest of beasts, Norwegian science fiction poetry - is set in the year 2480. The title is a reference to the Russian film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky, and the narrator in *Solaris Revised* seems to be some kind of employer or manager of advanced submarine robots in the North Sea. Gradually the reader begins to feel he is what we, at the moment, would call a poet. But in 2480 he is diagnosed as having "ein litl defect i venstr phantomic breyn-bark". Rimbereid has constructed a futuristic language, some aspects of which can seem terrifying, but which above all is characterised by an inner

consistency and beauty. This is how the author describes his home town of Stavgersand: "STAVGERSAND, ein nearli emti place midt i flowen af so mang cells, organics, konnects, pow og del-lovar. Men «beauti» dei seis her er, midt millom sand og fjellr."

Even now, many foreign readers would be able to understand parts of *Solaris Revised*. In 400 years' time Norway may perhaps be part of a larger linguistic union. In the meantime we belong in a rather marginal group of languages which doesn't really expect to be heard in Russia, America or Belgium. That's why we get brought up short for a moment when we see *Out Stealing Horses* in Central Park, New York, or *Love* on the metro in Moscow.

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Translated by James Anderson.

NORWEGIAN NON-FICTION

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

For many years languishing in the shadow of more glamorous prose fiction and more prestigious poetry, Norwegian non-fiction – always a central part of the domestic book world – is finally beginning to gain recognition qua writing. Although novelists still get the lion's share of media attention and awards, the authors of history books, biographies, popular science and essays – to mention a few subgenres – are slowly catching up. A two-volume study of Norwegian non-fiction, the fruit of several years of research, was published in 1998 under the editorship of Trond Berg Eriksen and Egil Børre Johnsen. Tellingly, the work was titled *A history of Norwegian literature: Non-fiction from 1750 to 1995*. (*Norsk litteraturhistorie: Sakprosa fra 1750 til 1995*), thus indicating a wider definition of literature than what had hitherto been common. In 2005, a Chair was designated in non-fiction research at the University of Oslo, and its appointee, Johan Tønnesson, published a small, but acclaimed book, *What is non-fiction (Hva er sakprosa?)* in 2008. Moreover, as from 2005, the generous Norwegian policy of spending state funds to purchase new books for libraries was extended to include a modest number of non-fiction books.

The world of Norwegian non-fiction for the general reader is vibrant, lively and extraordinarily diverse. Considering the small size of the language community (4.5 m), the extent of contemporary non-fiction publishing is nothing short of astonishing. In 2006, 602 new titles were published (excluding academic books and textbooks) on topics ranging from ecological gardening and postmodern cooking to learned biography and international reportage. The domestic non-fiction share of the total book market amounts to roughly ten per cent. If translated non-fiction is included, the total non-fiction share of the book market adds up to roughly 20 per cent or 3.7 million books sold, excluding the paperback segment.¹

In the international book world, the position of the Scandinavian countries is totally out of proportion to their tiny populations. According to statistics compiled by the UNESCO, Norwegian ranks 16th as a source language for translations, just ahead of Arabic, with 9,419 translations from Norwegian undertaken between 1979 and 2005. As a target language, Norwegian ranks 15th, with 37,895 translations. The discrepancy between export and import, characteristic not only of the Norwegian situation, is a di-

¹ The source for all these figures is the trade statistics of the Norwegian publisher's association, Bransjestatistikk 2006. Oslo: Den norske forleggerforening. The statistics are incomplete as they only reflect sales by members of the association, thereby excluding, notably, popular or «pulp» fiction

rect result of the globally dominant role of English: Far more is translated from English than to English. In fact, nearly as many books are translated in Norway as in the United States.²

Given the volume and diversity of Norwegian nonfiction, it would not only be controversial, but patently impossible to generalise about trends and tendencies. Instead of trying to give an overview, I shall concentrate a few important subgenres, in order to give some hints about the topography of this particular literary landscape. In this context, it can also be relevant to reflect on the cultural ecology of translations. Browsing NORLA's (and, until 2002, MUNIN's) lists of Norwegian books translated abroad, one cannot help asking why it is that certain works which are lavishly praised by reviewers and enjoy reasonable to healthy sales at home, fail to attract the interest of foreign publishers. To this question I shall eventually return.

It could be argued that nobody is in a better position to write about Norwegians than other Norwegians. Yet, time and again it becomes apparent that a searchlight aimed from afar may shed light on areas otherwise left in the dark. Robert Ferguson's magisterial biography of the novelist Knut

Hamsun (Ferguson 1988) is a good example; another is Michael Meyer's still in many ways unsurpassed biography of Henrik Ibsen (Meyer 1967-71). These foreign scholars, unhampered by the homeblindness so common among native writers, could make reasoned judgements about Norwegianness without having been shaped by the very same Norwegianness themselves.

The discrepancy between export and import, characteristic not only of the Norwegian situation, is a direct result of the globally dominant role of English

It is nevertheless from Norwegian authors we have the vast majority of books about people, places and periods in the country. As a rule, they

are written with the domestic market in mind. The Norwegian market never seems to be quite saturated with books about the country's national heroes. A steady trickle of books about canonical cultural figures like Ibsen, Hamsun, Sigrid Undset and Edvard Munch, but also about polar explorers such as Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen, is a mainstay of Norwegian non-fiction.

A few books from recent years deserve mentioning. Tor Bommann-Larsen, a self-taught historian (and occasional cartoonist), wrote two massive biographies of Nansen and Amundsen in the 1990s (Bommann-Larsen 1993, 1995), both characterised by outstanding scholarship, a fluent literary style and, occasionally,

the author's quirky sense of humour. Although he remains loyal to his sources and treats his subjects respectfully, Bommann-Larsen clearly distances himself from the hagiographic approach that was standard fare in this subgenre for many years.

Of the most recent studies of Henrik Ibsen, the young historian Ivo de Figueiredo's two-volume biography (Figueiredo 2006, 2007) was almost unanimously well received among critics and scholars, which is no mean feat considering the massive scholarship on Ibsen produced in the last hundred years. The originality of Figueiredo's book is largely a result of his decision to produce a contextual cultural history with Ibsen as the main protagonist. Rather than a narrow biography or a chronological reading of Ibsen's plays, this work, in accordance with international trends in biography, paints a vivid picture of Norwegian society (and Norwegian exile society in Italy and Germany) in the latter half of the 19th century and the major transformations in the realms of ideas, politics, economy and culture leading up to the 20th century.

The biography is an important subgenre that occasionally produces bestsellers, and Norwegian readers seem to prefer reading biographies about other Norwegians. Biographies of non-Norwegians are

rarely written in Norway and even more rarely commercially successful (an exception being Dag Østerberg's 1993 biography of Jean-Paul Sartre; his 2003 book on Brahms, however, was a commercial failure). As a compensation of sorts, Norwegians who belong to the second rank of fame, or who might even be relatively unknown, are also occasionally the subjects of major biographical works. Arild Stubhaug's rich and detailed biographies of the mathematician Sophus Lie (2000) and Niels Henrik Abel (1996) belong to this category, as does his book about the lawyer and poet Conrad Nicolai Schwach (2003). Schwach, a respected and influential poet in the early decades of the 19th century, fell swiftly from grace in the 1830s, when new sensibilities, epitomised in the rivalry between Henrik Wergeland and J. S. Welhaven, came to dominate. Few contemporary Norwegians had heard of him before Stubhaug's biography.

Books about Norwegians do not concentrate exclusively on dead white males. Icons from popular culture are often portrayed in books, ranging from Håkon Harket and Henning Kramer Dahl's account of the career of the internationally famous pop group A-ha (1986) to author and composer Ketil Bjørnstad's book-length dialogue with the actress and film director Liv Ullmann (2005). Naturally, the many books published about celebri-

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² The source for these figures is the Index Translationum, http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=7810&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

ties who are unknown abroad, whether politicians, television presenters or pop singers, are never translated, but the linguistic and cultural proximity of Norway to Sweden and Denmark has created a space of cultural semi-intimacy between these countries, where books and other cultural products are exchanged frequently and rapidly. If something is huge in Sweden, it is likely to become big in Norway even if it is unheard of in Germany.

Whether a book is translated or not is a function of its place in a transnational ecology of ideas, and does not follow directly from its intrinsic merits. A great number of highly accomplished books never get an international readership. Books about Norway and Norwegians during the Second World War – still a strong presence in the domestic market – are rarely of interest to non-Norwegians; they are meant for internal use, much like the autobiographies of politicians. Books may, moreover, be learned, erudite and elegantly written, but if the subject is too clearly domestic, or inscribed into a domestic discourse, they cannot expect to travel. Thus, a major work in Norwegian history of ideas and politics, namely Rune Slagstad's *De nasjonale strateger (National strategists)*, 1998), does not seem to have been translated once. This very comprehensive (667 large pages) study has become a major point of reference in debates and research on the emergence of modern Norway, but it has failed to make an impact outside the country.

To illustrate the forces at play in determining whether or not a book about Norway and/or Norwegians is of international interest, it might be useful to consider some examples. Books about internationally famous Norwegians are often translated, but even more often, they stay in the domestic circuit. It is therefore, initially, somewhat surprising that the journalist Per Egil Hegge's book about Fridtjof Nansen was translated into Armenian

in 2007 (following, admittedly, a 2006 Russian translation). Why this interest? Books by and about Nansen have been written and translated for more than a hundred years. And why Armenian? The explanation is simple: Armenians have a special relationship to Nansen, since his humanitarian efforts in the 1920s averted famines and mitigated a deep crisis ravaging the fledgling country. In fact, the even less known *Eva og Fridtjof Nansen* by the great man's daughter Liv Nansen Høyer (originally published already in 1954) was translated into Armenian in 2006. In other words, there may be idiosyncratic reasons for particular translations, indicating the presence of transnational ties between specialised segments of the public spheres in different countries.

Thor Heyerdahl also has a market in Armenia, as he does elsewhere in the world. His classic and more recent books alike are still being translated into a number of languages, confirming his status as one of the most famous Norwegians of the 20th century. Indeed, Heyerdahl is the

most frequently translated, and bestselling, Norwegian author of recent years, with global sales of 50 million copies (followed by Jostein Gaarder, 30m. and Åsne Seierstad, 2.7m.). It may be worth noting, in the present context, that two of the three currently bestselling Norwegian authors are writers of non-fiction!

However, less illustrious Norwegians writing about less spectacular things than Heyerdahl or Nansen also find markets overseas, and to them we now turn.

A handful of Norwegian academics are internationally known, yet prefer to publish mainly in Norwegian. There are some who publish widely read works in English, but they fall outside the scope of this article. Among the foremost of those who mostly use the vernacular is the criminologist Nils Christie, whose critical works on prisons and punishment, surveillance and schools, drugs and victimisation have given him a readership well outside the narrow confines of academia at home. Christie's credo is that if you cannot explain what you are doing to your aunt, you probably haven't understood it yourself. His books are always lucid and easy to follow, although often underpinned by massive statistics and careful research. A typical Christie book is *Kriminalitetskontroll som indus-*

tri (Crime control as industry, 2000), which argues that new prison regimes and crime prevention policies are dehumanising in that they fail to make people accountable and punish culprits in futile ways.

Is there anything peculiarly Norwegian about books on "ideas, politics and global issues" which happen to have been authored by Norwegians? I should argue that there often is. Norway is a well-organised society with low levels of social conflicts and an obsession with gender equality, a rich society where the reading classes have

a strong urge to contribute to making the world a better place; and Norwegian culture is, as the Polish cultural analyst Nina Witoszek, a resident of Norway for many years, has shown with eloquence and gusto (Witoszek 1998), wedded to the idea that nature is good, and that interacting with nature in a sustainable way makes men and women better in a moral sense.

Take, for example, philosopher Arne Næss's books. Næss (b. 1912), the most influential Norwegian philosopher in the latter half of the 20th century, was a founder of the "deep ecology" movement and has written widely read works, both systematic and autobiographical, about the moral and existential importance of ecological sustainability, permeated

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with his asceticism. His main philosophical treatise is *Økologi, samfunn og livsstil* (*Ecology, society and lifestyle*, 1974), while one of his latest books, *Livsfilosofi* (*Philosophy of life*, 1999) praises the virtues of simplicity. Somewhat in the tradition established by Næss, but also drawing on other sources of inspiration, is the most important populariser of biological thinking in Norway, Dag O. Hessen, whose books simultaneously explain ecology to the layman and promote a love of nature. His latest book, *Naturen – hva skal vi med den?* (*Nature – what's the use of it?* 2008), is his most personal statement to date, an attempt to convey the emotions and enlightenment arising from the rugged life in the great outdoors.

Another characteristic example is Åsne Seierstad's *Bokhandleren i Kabul* (*The Bookseller in Kabul*, 2002), one of the few Norwegian books of recent years to have become an international bestseller. Seierstad's account of her experiences in a cultured middle-class Afghani family, and her depiction of her ongoing outrage resulting from observations of their gender roles and interpersonal relationships more generally, is quite clearly permeated by a Norwegian perspective on gender roles and individual choice.

Books that glorify nature and journalistic books about "the others", such as Seierstad's, are debated vigorously in the press, at meetings and in cultural magazines, and there are countervailing forces at work; but such books could nonetheless be assigned to a mainstream in the Norwegian public sphere.

It must, in all justice, be added that many of the books published in Norway, and occasionally translated into foreign languages, could have been written anywhere in the North Atlantic world. There is no strong trace of provincial Norwegianness in Karsten Alnæs's *Historien om Europa* (*The history of Europe*, 2003-2007). The country's leading historian of ideas, Trond Berg Eriksen, writes as fluently and knowledgeably about Dante (1993) as he does about St. Augustine (2000) or, for that matter, about Freud (1991). The musicologist Jon-Roar Bjørkvold's idiosyncratic and original *Det musiske menneske* (*The musical human*, 1989) is simply a book about the experience of music through the stages of life. To continue, one of the most translated non-fiction books from recent years, the publisher and critic Halfdan W. Friehow's *Kjære Gabriel* (*Dear Gabriel*, 2004), is a beautifully written personal account of his life with a son with a rare psychiatric ailment. Moreover, the philosopher Lars Svendsen, who has specialised in pithy, pointed essays on philosophical questions – *Kjedsomhetens filosofi* (*The philosophy of boredom*, 1999), *Ondskapens filosofi* (*The philosophy of evil*, 2001), *Mote – et filosofisk essay* (*Fashion – a philosophical essay*, 2003) – engages with an international market of ideas, as do others. Many other examples could have been mentioned. Yet, if one were obliged to characterise the Norwegian ecology of ideas as something peculiar and inscribed in a national public sphere, then one would be hard pressed to avoid the central themes of gender equality, nature, social democratic values, peacefulness, Protestant puritanism and – if I may say so – a certain amount of national self-righteousness.

Perhaps the social scientist Johan Galtung simultaneously incarnates and reacts against this spirit when he routinely dismisses Norway as the 51th state of the USA? Galtung, like many other Norwegian social scientists, writes chiefly in English, but he chose to write his autobiography *Johan uten land* (*Johan without a country*, 1999) in Norwegian. This book can be read partly as an annotated catalogue of some of the main political disagreements surfacing within Norway in the postwar years, over third world aid, NATO membership, peacekeeping and hypocrisy.

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A very substantial proportion of the books published in Norway (as in other countries) are textbooks for schools and higher education. They rarely receive much in the way of media attention, but they are economically important for the publishers and much more influential culturally than their meagre media exposure would suggest. In recent years, political demands of "internationalisation" of higher education have put pressure on scholars to publish in English rather than Norwegian, but in the realm of textbooks, the proportion of Norwegian-language textbooks seems, if anything, to be growing. Social sciences such as political science, sociology and social anthropology offer standard introductory books in the vernacular; in the case of sociology and political science, there are several com-

peting titles. Some of them have been translated into a number of foreign languages. Jostein Gripsrud's authoritative *Mediekultur, mediesamfunn* (*Media culture, media society*), moreover, was published in Hungarian in 2007. Helge Jordheim's *Lesningens vitenskap* (*The science of reading*, 2001) was translated into Bulgarian in 2003. Gunnar Skirbekk and Nils Gilje's *Filosofihistorie* (*History of Philosophy*, 1st edition 1980) has been published in a large number of foreign languages, and new languages are still added to the list as the book is going into its eighth edition. The fact that Norwegian college and university textbooks travel

the world in various linguistic guises is reassuring, since it indicates that Norwegian academics keep up with international standards.

Some books find specialised market niches abroad. Just as the Armenians seem to translate anything written about Fridtjof Nansen, there is a vibrant demand for books on Madagascar in France, the island's former colonial power. Thus, Øyvind Dahl's *Meanings in Madagascar* (1999) found a French publisher in 2006, and Peter Normann Waage's original development of Rudolf Steiner's thought in *Mennesket, makten og markedet* (*Man, power and the market*, 2002) was translated into German in Switzerland, a country where the interest in anthroposophy is substantial.

Other books are simply unclassifiable. Take the journalist Bjørn Gabrielsen's travelogue from the USA, *Lutefisk på prærien* (*Lutefisk on the prairie*, 2001; lutefisk is a highly controversial Norwegian culinary specialty). It is, among other things, an enjoyable account of the author's encounter with Norwegian-Americans, but it was – almost inexplicably – translated into French in 2007. The sociologist and copywriter Nils-Fredrik Nielsen's *Tristesser i utvalg I-IV* (*Collected sadnesses I-IV*, 1993-1999) was published in the UK in 2005; a “sadness” is a misanthropic aphorism. And what to make of philosophers Jørgen Gaare and Øystein Sjaastad's *Harry Potter – en filosofisk trollmann* (*Harry Potter – a philosophical wizard*, 2006) and its sudden translation into Polish in 2007?

The world of books is enormously diverse, specialised, differentiated. A few books tap into the humanly universal, or happen to be in the right place at the right time, or hit common denominators in other ways. Many Norwegian books are hugely successful, either critically or commercially, at home, but fail to find a readership elsewhere. More rarely, Norwegian books are widely translated but unknown at home. The international bestseller written by a Norwegian author is rare. Jostein Gaard-

er's *Sophie's World* or, from the realm of non-fiction, Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul*, are unusual. On the UNESCO's list of the 50 most translated authors in the world, Hans Christian Andersen and Astrid Lindgren are the only Scandinavians.

This does not mean that we have failed. The scope of Norwegian non-fiction is breathtaking, and a surprisingly large number of books find their way into non-Norwegian bookshops and libraries. As the 21st century moves on, an in-

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creasing number of Norwegians are likely to write books for the general reader in English, but there is no reason not to assume that Norwegian will remain a fully-fledged language for generations still. Regarding sales, it is true that translations from Norwegian rarely do particularly well. However, this is the case with most books published in any country. Among the many books published in the USA every year (the vast majority untranslated), only two per cent sell more than 5,000 copies. This does not mean that the remaining 98 per cent are failures. They find their readership, whether they are textbooks in transport logistics, manuals in ecological pumpkin growing or histories of the Dano-Norwegian slave trade. Moreover, a lot of books were simply not meant to travel very far. There is nothing wrong with that.

The author

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