

# LITERARY NORWAY

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NORWAY'S present population is not much above two millions. Among the independent nations of the world she is one of the smallest. Yet this little commonwealth has created a remarkable literature. Not only have the Norwegians established a new form of drama but they have, within fifteen years, twice captured the Nobel prize for idealistic productions in the field of literary art—an achievement which is so far unsurpassed.

There is an old Norse legend called the *Voelv*, or *Voelven*. It relates how, in the dawn of Norwegian life, a strange creature emerged from the ocean of time, and took a good look at the world. Then he—or it—commenced a long oration, in the course of which every subject in heaven and earth was discussed and elucidated. When the oration was concluded, the *Voelv* sank back into the ocean, and disappeared.

This legend has been recalled many times during the present generation. It has been asked, Is *Voelven* a prophecy? Has he appeared at last, dispensing his wit and wisdom, "singing his songs of the silvery North," and proclaiming the deep mysteries of Nature and the human heart? Two generations have already listened, and there is nothing to indicate that the fountain of inspiration is drying up.

## I.

The wandering bard, in Norway as elsewhere in Europe, was the earliest representative of the people's literary instinct. This bard was unquestionably a civilizing agent, and Mr. H. G. Wells is one of the few historians who have recognized him as such. He was invariably a combination of the poet and the historian, a combination which we find even in the greatest of the bards—Shakespeare himself. In the thirteenth century the Icelander Snorre Sturlason, the most renowned of the Norse singers, gave to his countrymen his unique opus, the *Edda*, a work which has been much talked about and but little understood. "Edda" does not mean "Great-grand-mother," as the encyclopædias inform us.

Its equivalent in present-day Norwegian is "digtekunst," i. e., poetic art. The origin of this marvellous anthology has been a matter of controversy, quite as much so as the authorship of the Homeric poems; but Icelandic and Norwegian scholarship seems to be resting in the supposition that the *Edda* is largely a collection of wise sayings, proverbs, and poetry, that had floated down from the heathen antiquity of the Norsemen, and was finally brought together into a single volume and edited by Snorre Sturlason. That Snorre himself added something to the collection is not improbable. The editorial work is half heathen and half Christian. In the introduction to the *Edda*, Snorre gives an account of the condition of humanity after the great flood recorded in the Old Testament,—how the people spread themselves over the continents, lost their faith in the true God, and invented gods to take his place. A race of supermen, or demigods (the *Aeser*, or Asiamen), with Odin as chief, emigrated to the North, where, in a conversation with the king of Sweden, they recited to him the wonderful tale which is known as Norse Mythology. The story carries us through the entire reign of the gods, until they themselves are whelmed in the cataclysm of Ragnaraak. The other two divisions of the *Edda* deal with poetry, its origin and evolution, and tell us a great deal in regard to the art of poetic expression.

Snorre Sturlason is supposed to have been far advanced in years when his second great work was published—the *Kongesagaer*, or history of the early Norwegian kings,—a book which has been a source of delight, instruction and inspiration to every succeeding generation of Norwegians. Like Shakespeare's historical dramas, the *Kongesagaer* is a mixture of poetry and history; and the bard of Iceland, like the bard of Avon, united the two elements in his fertile mind.

Snorre, however, was only a shooting star. Darkness closes up around it. For a period of three hundred years, Norway produced no literature. Her union with Denmark, in the fourteenth century, changed the current of her life. A new language was forced upon the people, and their men of promise invariably found their way to Copenhagen, where they were lost in a culture of a different type. The spirit of the great Renaissance scarcely touched the Norwegian mind, and the reformation of the Church in the sixteenth century was little more than the exchange of one superstition for another. It was a long night during which the people lost not only their Viking spirit, but their political and spiritual independence as well.

## II.

For a moment this darkness is pierced by a single ray of light. Late in the seventeenth century a singular literary genius makes his appearance—Ludvig Holberg, born in Bergen in 1684. To readers of Anglo-Saxon blood Ludvig Holberg should be an interesting study, because his genius was kindled at the hearth of the English Renaissance. There was, in truth, no other country in Europe where such a genius could have been warmed into life. In its general culture, in its consciousness of freedom, and in its intensity of public life, the English nation stood head and shoulders above the continent. The view of royalty advocated by Bossuet and the Lutheran theologians found no lodgment in the English mind; while the edict of toleration, promulgated by William of Orange, had laid to rest the pounding waves of religious controversy. Besides, a new world-view was gaining ground, due largely to the labours of the Royal Society—labours which culminated in the epoch-making works of Newton. Here was the true cradle of Holberg.

After a brilliant career at Copenhagen University, and after travelling on foot through the various countries of southern Europe, the young Hercules landed in England. For several years he remained at Oxford, breathing the new atmosphere of mental freedom, and devouring the literature of the Renaissance—a literature which remained his spiritual food till the end of his days. Returning to Copenhagen he commenced his life's work as a writer of comical plays, a career which earned for him a European reputation and a lasting place in his country's literature.

Holberg accomplished one great thing for the people of the Danish capital. He compelled them to laugh at their own follies and stupidity. The task was not without danger, and murmurs were heard, but we forgive him much who can make us laugh. So he escaped without serious interference. It is, however, doubtful whether any other great city has ever been so thoroughly held up to ridicule as was Copenhagen during the first half of the eighteenth century. Its appalling ignorance, its pretence to classical learning, its social bombast and official arrogance—all was mirrored in Holberg's comedies with deadly accuracy and irresistible humour. "If Copenhagen had sunk into the sea," says a commentator, "its social life and habits could easily have been reconstructed from Holberg's plays." Two of his works stand out conspicuously—*Peder Paars*, and *Jeppe Paa Bjerget* or "The Metamorphosed Peasant." *Jeppe* will remain a "scream" as long as the Danish language is spoken.

Some thirty years ago, Georg Brandes wrote a "fest-skrift" in honour of Holberg. In this remarkable monograph the playwright's genius is shown in all its splendour. In the fatal aim and execution of Holberg's comedies, we are told, he often equals, and sometimes "even surpasses", his great prototype—Molière.

In the meantime, a "Norwegian Society" had been organized in Copenhagen, and became the rallying point for Norwegians of literary aspiration. Its poetical output was negligible, but it gave birth to one genius who in his brief career made himself famous. This man was Johan Herman Wessel, one of the foremost satirists of the North. Wessel had read with increasing indignation the French drama of his day—largely an offspring of the silly court life of Louis XIV. A parody on this French drama, *Love Without Stockings*, soon came from Wessel's pen, and achieved immediate success. In this biting comedy the author, with an apparently sound psychology, and with fearful logic, drives a number of innocent people to suicide, and sets in motion an endless train of human misery,—and all on account of the absence of a pair of stockings! The French drama of that age was never more soundly ridiculed. Wessel himself died young, a victim of "drink and the devil," and ordered the following epitaph to be inscribed on his tombstone:

He ate and drank; was happy never;  
His crooked shoes he wore in calm and storm;  
He never cared to work; was lazy ever;  
Too indolent to breathe, he died—an abject worm.

A group of lesser poetical lights arose in Norway during the eighteenth century. They sang the simple songs of the peasants, the fisher-folk, and the seafaring people, and were particularly successful as Nature poets. But Norway was in a state of stagnation; there was no outlook, no large vision, nothing to grip the imagination. The literary movement in Germany, which included the names of Herder, Klopstock, Wieland, Goethe, and Schiller, had no appreciable effect on the minds of the far North. Germany has never been an inspiration to the Norwegian people. But, meanwhile, the world was preparing for great changes. Suffering France arose in rebellion, and the French and American revolutions gave warning that a new age was coming. Here was food for the imagination. The next great literary movement in Norway must trace its beginning to that spiritual conflagration which devoured the house of the Bourbons, and enthroned Napoleon.

## III.

Henrik Wergeland, born in 1807, was the first and greatest Norwegian offspring of the new view of life ushered in by the French revolution. As a lyric poet he is placed by Georg Brandes on a level with Shelley. But Wergeland was much more than a poet. He united in his glowing soul an intense enthusiasm for humanity and an equally ardent patriotism. At the age of eighteen he was found to be the author of a vast epic poem, "The Creation, Messiah, and Man," in which he unfolded his youthful views of the world's beginning, the mission of the Saviour, and the life of man in this world and beyond the grave. In its printed form this poem occupies seven hundred pages. It is by no means a perfect piece of work from the artist's point of view; indeed, it is perhaps the most chaotic work of literature that ever a young giant of genius has strung together. Yet the poem has lived, and will live. Full of the most daring flights of the imagination, and teeming with ideas of a redeemed humanity, this colossus of a poem has made an indelible impression upon two generations. On his death-bed Wergeland re-wrote it, called it "The Republican Bible and the Epos of Humanity," and persisted in regarding it as the crowning achievement of his life.

A satisfactory review of Wergeland's poetical works is impossible within the space of this article. In justice to the poet, however, it must be said that with advancing years his art was gradually perfected. He was possessed of an imagination so rich and vital that, as Henrik Jaeger has remarked, we must go back to the Renaissance for a parallel. During the last years of his life he produced a vast number of poems, so noble in form and weighty in content that they remain unsurpassed in the literature of Scandinavia.

Wergeland became the chief representative of a new current in the nation's life. The time had come, it was believed, when the Danish yoke must be thrown off. Norway must be free. Wergeland threw himself into this movement with boundless enthusiasm. But in the struggle he and his friends encountered a group of strong and conservative men, who opposed to the young enthusiasts a balanced judgment and superior mental culture. This group was also led by a poet, J. S. C. Welhaven, a professor of philosophy at Christiania University. In a powerful poem, "Norway's Dawn," this philosophical professor gave vent to his irony, and incidentally produced one of the most perfectly constructed poems in the language. The struggle was too much for Wergeland. Wounded by the

keen shafts of his enemies, he sickened and died—at the age of thirty-eight. To his sister, Mrs. Camilla Collet, who also gained distinction as an author, he said, just before he died, “I have been a poet.” To which she replied, “I could wish you had never tried to be anything else.”

Norway's political freedom was regained in 1814, but her spiritual independence was still to be achieved. Wergeland, as already observed, was largely a product of the French revolution, and Welhaven was of German ancestry, without any real interest in the development of Norwegian life and thought. With Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Bjornstjerne Bjornson (1832-1910), and their contemporaries, Norway enters upon her maturity, and becomes a teacher instead of a pupil. A bird's-eye view of the literary situation in Norway, thirty years ago, is thus presented by Johan Bojer, one of the younger novelists, who has already gained for himself European recognition:—

Most books were written to champion certain ideas, and we hailed a new book by Ibsen, Bjornson, Lie or Kjelland with the anticipation that it would give us the next “new ideal”; many people indeed nourished a secret hope that now the riddle of life itself would at last be solved. So we read the book, closed it, and sat there in deep thought. . . . And then a great discussion would follow—in the homes, in societies, and in the press—as to what the writer “meant” this time. His authority was so great that one considered him an oracle on questions far outside the field of literature. What did Bjornson think about the “future of Europe,” about the inspiration of the Bible, about the sun myths? What stand did Ibsen take regarding the laws of heredity? Oh, yes, at that time the poet really was the prophet of his people.

Here is revealed that measure of childlike confidence with which many persons looked up to the men who had created the new literature. But it indicates also the impression those men had made, and the impact of their minds not only upon the Norwegian people but upon Europe as a whole. It was a new experience for the Norwegians to have their literary works immediately translated into all the leading languages of the continent. A hundred years ago an author would have considered himself highly flattered if his book had been translated into a single foreign tongue. The people could not be insensible to the fact that their authors had “broken through,” had crossed the line which divides the small and poor nation from the mighty empire, and that they were being discussed in Berlin and London as intelligently as in Christiania or Copen-

hagen. It makes a difference whether an author, as in Norway, addresses himself to a linguistic family of two millions, or whether, as in England or America, he may presume upon an audience of a hundred millions or more. Wergeland, for instance, must for ever remain unknown outside his own country, because his works are untranslatable. The same is true in regard to Welhaven.

But there was another reason for the somewhat exaggerated confidence of the reading public. The great Norwegian poets of that period were pathfinders in a wilderness where the novelist of to-day is seeking his material and his fame. There are but few problems, whether social, economic, religious or intellectual, discussed in present-day fiction, that are not somehow present, at least in germ, in the great dramas and novels of Bjornson. His was emphatically the prophetic mind. The people felt his irresistible power and charm, as they felt the mysterious strength of the ocean in the long summer's night—an ocean not wholly comprehensible, but wafting to the shore its pregnant message from a mighty deep.

#### IV.

The life and labours of Ibsen have been so often discussed in books and lectures that it would seem as if but little remains to be said on the subject. His critics are men and women of the highest literary culture. Ibsen himself had his doubts about cultured criticism. Said he, "I have found my most intelligent critics among the uncultured peasants." This may perhaps be set down as a sample of his frequent outbursts of eccentricity; but there may also be found in it a certain amount of truth. He has been a riddle, and will remain so, until we have studied the history of his mental development—a history too long and complicated to be presented here.

Ibsen possessed but a single gift, which slowly developed itself. Hence his long and pathetic struggle to "find himself," his tormenting doubt as to whether he really possessed any gift at all, and his heartrending fight for recognition. There is no lack of strength in his earlier works, but the public would have nothing to do with them. Dramas like *Fru Inger* and *Haermaendene* are groaning with force, but made no impression. *The Comedy of Love*, a scorching satire, was no more successful. Ibsen went home in anger, his friends tell us, and wrote *Kongsemmerne* ("The Pretenders") in six weeks. As we read this play now, we cannot but wonder why the public did not surrender. The inevitable inference is that, if there was something wrong with Ibsen, there was also

something wrong with the public. Here was a new and original force the people did not understand.

From his voluntary exile in the south of Europe, Ibsen sent home the thunderbolt that finally battered down the ramparts behind which the public had entrenched itself. This thunderbolt was *Brand*. The author was now on his way to immortality, and his next work (*Peer Gynt*) is a sort of "thank you" to the people he had finally whipped into obedience. If *Brand* made them weep, *Peer Gynt* made them laugh. Yet in *Peer Gynt* the Norwegians are lashed as in no other work ever written. Ibsen had an account to settle with society, a fact which in no small measure prepared and moulded his mind for the great work of his life.

He himself has acknowledged this. In a poem written during the festivities incident to the celebration of the one thousandth anniversary of the unification of Norway, the aged dramatist recalls those early days of fiery baptism when nobody believed in him, and admits that whatever has come to growth in the garden of his life is rooted in the soil of those by-gone years. And the crop is big—a long series of social plays in which society is dissected and analyzed, and its moral defects are exposed with merciless frankness. He was grateful for the recognition at last accorded him, but there was in Ibsen something of the falcon—the bird that can fly to advantage only in adverse winds.

Much solicitude has been expressed in regard to the effect of his stinging satire. His Pegasus, it is said, is a devastating monster; where his hoof has trod, no grass may grow. Ibsen himself did not share these fears. In an oft-quoted poem of his we read:

Tradition says, the seed's aspiring bud  
Most sweetly thrives when in the west it lightens.

If Ibsen had only one gift, Bjornson had many. An orator of great power, and a far-sighted statesman, he was for nearly half a century the most popular figure on the Norwegian rostrum. His literary labours include every form of composition—epic and lyric poetry, the drama, and the novel; and he was equally successful in all. Yet he had his struggles. Although the son of a clergyman, he had an innate aversion to the established Church. The difference between him and the Church was this: Bjornson, like Lincoln, was possessed of an unbounded faith in the people, but had practically no faith in the deity preached by the Lutheran theologians. The Church, on the other hand, while professing a strong attachment to the God of Luther, had little or no faith in the people.



Bjornson's faith saved him. It was but natural that the people he had taken to his heart, and whose cause he espoused, should respond in kind; and when the aged poet died fourteen years ago, he was probably the most beloved and most popular man of his generation.

Bjornson broke into the literary field with a crash that resounded throughout the Scandinavian peninsula. On his part there was no struggle for recognition. In his early peasant novels the nation read its own heart and mind, and was dazzled. Then he solved the difficult problem of writing a national hymn that could look a hundred disagreeable facts fairly and squarely in the face, and yet was singing with joy and hope. A large epic poem, *Arnljot Gelline*, deals with the transition from heathenism to Christianity, and showed his power to transform history into poetry. His most ambitious work, however, is the historic drama *Sigurd Slembe*, one of the masterpieces of Scandinavian literature. In one single instance, Bjornson ventured into a foreign field of history, and composed another masterpiece, *Mary Stuart in Scotland*. His last great drama, *Over Aevne* (Beyond Our Strength), deals with the incipient economic struggle, and the faint yet distinct growl of the world's anarchistic spirit. With his beautiful story, "In the Ways of God," published in the early nineties, Bjornson practically closes his literary career, although some minor stories and poems still occasionally came from his pen. For many years he had maintained a struggle with King Oscar, whose attitude towards Norway was not entirely to the poet's liking. A few years before his death, when he was invited to Stockholm to receive the Nobel prize at the hands of the committee, a cordial invitation came from the palace, and there a lasting reconciliation was effected.

Georg Brandes, in his masterly survey of Norwegian literature, has dealt extensively with this "man of the people," the "throbbing heart of Norway." He recalls how Arnljot Gelline in Bjornson's poem,—the half-heathen, half-Christian giant, in his "Ode to the Ocean"—soliloquizes on his own impending death in the deep, and consoles himself with the thought that in the far-off future, when his name shall have been forgotten, the waves which craved his life shall roll his name towards the shore in the long moonlight nights. We may imagine, thinks Brandes, that in future ages some loving couple, reposing on the rocky ocean shore in the moonlight of a summer's evening, their hearts still aglow with the love songs of Norway's greatest singer, will hear the whisper of Bjornson's name rolling in on the waves of the northern sea.

Ibsen and Bjornson, however, were only the Mont Blancs

among the Alpine peaks. The witty Alexander Kjelland, whose original mission it was to expose the shams and follies of his native city, was one of the most productive of the authors of his generation; and, what is still more significant, his works are in increasing demand as the years come and go. In his day it was said that whenever Kjelland shook his head, a new book dropped out of his mind. But Kjelland was not entirely a product of the Norwegian soul. Even Brandes, who was a great admirer of the novelist, concedes that he was largely influenced by the French writers, especially Guy de Maupassant. Jonas Lie, on the other hand, "the genial realist," was entirely Norwegian, born and bred in the far North. His marine stories, embodying the traditions, the superstitions, and experiences of seafaring life, have worked themselves so thoroughly into the minds of the people that it seems impossible to think of Norway without a Jonas Lie in it. Some five or six of his novels have become classics. His last considerable work, *Niobe*, depicting the mythologic daughter of Tantalus, is a story which, as a sympathetic reviewer remarks, "one can read only with the heart in one's throat."

Space permits the mention of only one more writer among the younger contemporaries of Ibsen and Bjornson, a man of startling originality and independence —Arne Garborg. He may be said to open a new chapter in the history of Norwegian literature. Ibsen was a preacher, so was Bjornson and Kjelland; so were indeed practically all the great writers of that day. They all joined in the "uplift" movement, endeavouring through their writings to lift the nation to higher levels of moral and intellectual life. Garborg was watching this movement; he felt the pressure of the moral burden thus laid upon the young people, and was aware of a growing impatience and life weariness. There was too much moralizing. Hence his novel, *Tired Men*, which created a sensation, and pointed the way for the younger generation of writers. Garborg's works are many, and all decidedly worth reading, but *Tired Men* is monumental. His genius is unique; he has had no teacher and no disciples, as an artist.

## V.

With the notable exception of Mrs. Sigrid Undset, and a few poets who have turned to religion as the final solvent of all human problems, the latest school of Norwegian authors have followed the finger-point of Garborg, and renounced all moralizing and all reform labour. To-day it is "art for art's sake." The leader of this school is the now celebrated Knut Hamsun, winner of the Nobel

prize for 1920, and one of the most remarkable literary characters in the world.

Thirty-five years ago Hamsun, a peasant boy, arrived in Newfoundland, and made a desperate but apparently unsuccessful effort to win a living as a fisherman. When next we hear of him he is a street-car conductor in Chicago, and from this position he was ousted because he was "too stupid." In the early nineties the author of this article met him in Minneapolis, where he made his home with a Norwegian preacher, the Rev. Kristopher Janson, who was also a poet and a novelist. During his sojourn in Minneapolis, Hamsun was gathering material for a book, *The Intellectual Life in America*, a work which, as a witty woman has observed, was inspired by the sight of a farmer wearing corduroy trousers. Then he returned to Norway, and published his *Sult*, ("Hunger") which attracted the attention of the Swedish king, and moved that monarch to send the starving author a contribution of five thousand crowns. That was the beginning of Hamsun's career. His next work, *Pan*, is recognized as the greatest Nature poem in the Norwegian language. His literary labours culminated in a masterly piece of fiction—*Growth of the Soil*, which procured for its author the Nobel prize, and gave him an international reputation.

The appearance of Hamsun was the signal for the "outbreak" of a new poetic spirit in Norway. Poets and novelists are literally swarming, and all are young men and women of high intellectual and æsthetic culture. Johan Bojer, who is fast filling the place left vacant by the death of Bjornson, has enumerated in a recent article not fewer than fifteen young men and women who have already made permanent contributions to the literature of the nation. One of the objects of these young writers is the re-creation of the Norwegian language.

But the latest oracle of the Voelv is a woman—Sigrid Undset, perhaps the brainiest female that ever used the Norwegian tongue. She is young, and it is too early to estimate the true range and power of her genius, but the impression she has already made is extraordinary. One thing, however, is certain—Sigrid Undset is no child of this age. Scarcely out of her teens, and alone and single handed, she flung herself in the teeth of the feminist movement which swept Scandinavia, and told its devotees that the steam-and-electricity civilization which gave it birth is little more than foam and froth. In a mighty trilogy, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, brim full of searching thought and a deep knowledge of the human heart, Mrs. Undset carries us back to fourteenth century Norway, and there bids us study the development of a female character in all the social

and religious conditions of that remote age. She makes it clear—if it was ever made clear—that as yet woman has found no higher calling than that of wife and mother. *Kristin Lavransdatter*, as Johan Bojer observes, is an "eternal human document."

Before this sketch closes, tribute should be paid to that ever alert watch-dog of the literary treasures of Scandinavia—Dr. Georg Brandes, of Copenhagen. This Danish-born Jew is one of the foremost representatives of his race in the present generation. His lively and sympathetic interest in the development of Norway's literature, and his readiness to assist every budding artist in whom he discovers real capacity, have been a steadying and wholesome influence in the Norwegian literary circles. His vast knowledge of the literatures of Europe and America has long been recognized. As a literary critic, Brandes stands second only to Taine himself. He has been an interpreter of Ibsen to his own people, and the present writer can remember the time when but few men cared to "commit" themselves on a new drama of Ibsen until Brandes had delivered his oracle. The Norwegian writers have been fortunate in enjoying the services of this gifted critic, with his vast experience and his keen intellect.