

# The Logic of Language and Nation in the Emergence of *Nynorsk*

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## Introduction: Language and Nation in Norway

Norway as an independent entity has existed since the late 9th century, when King Harald the Fair-haired united the many minor kingdoms on what is now Norwegian soil into one union. The spoken language of all Scandinavia was what is called Old Nordic or *Norrøn*. The only written tradition consisted of monumental writing on rocks and other permanent objects, using the Runes, a primitive alphabet in existence since around the 3rd century. Ivar Aasen, the historical linguist and central figure in the emergence of *Nynorsk*, took *Norrøn* as his non-national, or pre-national axis of reference. Until around 900, *Norrøn* was spoken by all the inhabitants of what is today Denmark, Sweden and Norway. In addition, Greenland, Iceland, the islands of the North Atlantic, Faero Islands, the Orkneys, and Shetland, as well as coastal regions of northwestern Russia, were colonised by users of this common *Norrøn*. Norway was christianized after 1030 when Olaf, the first Christian king, fought and fell in the most famous battle of Norwegian history. With Christianity came both the Latin alphabet and the practice of writing on parchment. The written language that appears on the first manuscripts after 1050 already shows differences from the Danish and Swedish languages of the same period. Throughout the Middle Ages (in Norway, 1030-1536) Old Norwegian was used actively, among other things in the translation of religious texts.

Norway flourished economically and politically particularly in the 13th and early 14th centuries. Then, largely because of the Black Death (which came to Norway in 1349) and the general economic degeneration it caused, Norway declined in power and influence. Denmark, the most powerful of the Scandinavian countries throughout the Middle Ages, orchestrated a number of different forms of union with its Scandinavian neighbours. In 1397 the Treaty of Kalmar insured Queen Margaret of Denmark sovereign control over Scandinavia. Norway, at the outset in a weak position, gained the least and lost the most at Kalmar. In 1536, Norway was so weakened that it lost its national government and political authority and became a satellite

of Denmark. Consequently Danish became the language of bureaucracy, education, power and influence. After Napoleon's defeat in 1813, the Dano-Norwegian monarchy, having cultivated ties with Napoleon since the Battle of Jena in 1807, suffered a significant loss and was forced to negotiate a settlement which resulted in the independence of Norway and the Norwegian constitutional convention at Eidsvoll in 1814. Thereafter Norway joined in an alliance with Sweden, which had opposed the Napoleonic coalition.

Despite Norway's political independence, the norms, standards and formal administrative structures Denmark had developed remained in place for some time. Danish remained the language of administration, education and civil society in general. Though Kristiania (Oslo) University was founded in 1811, the entire generation of Norwegian civil servants educated prior to 1814 continued to dominate for some time, and with them, the Danish language. Nonetheless, in the early 19th century, nearly all Norwegians spoke their own local dialects. Civil servants and members of the higher economic and social classes in Kristiania, Bergen and Trondheim spoke a Norwegian-tainted Danish and wrote Danish. Most Norwegians thus retained a kind of two-language consciousness, alternating between an oral language or dialect that contained a vast number of words and expressions of older Norwegian origin, and the Danish written language. As the generation of 1814 grew older and its successors became educated on Norwegian premises, the questions of Norwegian sovereignty, Norwegian nationality and Norwegian language moved to the forefront. Both the expansion of Kristiania University and the intellectualisation of the question of the Norwegian culture and nation that was its consequence, as well as the wave of ideas and movements arising out of the French Revolution, contributed to a considerable national-romantic movement. The debates enjoined by these questions were to a large degree fought on the literary battlefield. Norwegian identity was in many ways associated with Norwegian literary representations and, by necessity, with the Norwegian language in which such representations were couched. Thus, among the most powerful manifestations of the desire for national sovereignty and self-determination was the question of a Norwegian language.

As noted, the political power of the Norwegian Kingdom diminished as a result of the Union of Kalmar in 1397. From that moment, arguably up until the signing of the Eidsvoll Agreement of 1814, the sovereignty of Norwegian culture and the Norwegian language were in a state of regression. Kalmar and Eidsvoll are thus the endpoints of a four-century hibernation period for the *political* status of Norwegian culture. The political representation of the interests of the Norwegian people; its spheres of influence, both national and international; its oppositional force

and institutional prestige; and its formal power of unification are subordinated to varying degrees to networks of political power are organised and controlled by others. Still, *culture* is not identical with *politics*. Without a doubt the cultural sphere is internally politicised, organised by a flux and flow of power, influence, manipulation and interest; and the political sphere is itself culturally structured, not least what is commonly described as 'political culture.' Yet culture can never be entirely reduced to the political, and politics is never pure culture. There is an incomplete dependency, a partial reciprocity, a gap between the political unity of a given people and its cultural unity. Arguably, this gap can never be closed. The tension between the cultural sense of what a people is, or what it understands itself to be, and the ability for institutionalised public forums to negotiate that understanding can be located at the base of both politics and culture. Culture is the moment of transformation of the spiritual self of the people to a public reach; politics is a realisation of the self of those who are politically represented in the interest of a collectivity which is never identical to that self. The politico-cultural dormancy of the Norwegian people is thus indeed a testing ground for theories of the co-dependency of culture and politics, of *people* as a dimension that withstands political institutionalisation and resists complete representation.

In other words, in a situation like that in which Norway finds itself in the summer of 1814, a double question arises: Does the state – the revolutionary Eidsvoll Constitution which brings Norway into the ranks of the modern democratic states – form the point of departure for the formation of a national identity and national culture, or is it the deep historical culture which forms the basis for the legitimacy of the state apparatus?

## Norway and the Aporia of Nation

The fact that Norway had in some sense previously had the status of a nation places the emergence of the modern Norwegian nation in a particularly interesting light. It also generates a cluster of problems around the ontological status of 'nation,' problematising its implicit modernity.

From a certain point of view, the formation of the modern Norwegian nation-state arises – and according to some ideological perspectives justifies itself – as a phase in a kind of cycle, a return to a situation which can be structurally associated with an earlier time: According to a certain conception of 'nation', the Norwegian nation already existed in the 9th century as the collectivity formed by Harald the Fair-haired. With reference to that general historical moment, 'the Norwegian' is thus



already firmament, already an essence which exists in the collective memory and understanding of Norwegians. Any modern 'construction' of the Norwegian nation of the type undertaken from the mid-19th century necessarily makes reference to this moment, in some cases innovating, in some cases prolonging, in some cases denying or negating but always involved in *negotiating* a relationship with the past, always forced to deal with undeniable *meaning* of this collectivity of people, sharing this geographical territory and this language communicated with the present. Thus a prototype already exists, the substance, the marrow of the everyday, the essence of the Norwegian is and always has been, and requires no legitimisation. Or rather, its basis of legitimacy is radically absent beyond the plain existence of an ordinary world and an ordinary people which simply lived together in unity in earlier times. Thus the origin, the time and place when it first became a question of 'the Norwegian,' lives and flourishes, guaranteeing the meaningfulness and legitimacy of the Norwegian in all its concrete historical forms.

At the same time, the necessary origin is necessarily invisible. It is not a mere fact among others but rather buried in the deep historical past. The Norwegian substance, though real in the consciousness of all those who seek to understand and analyse the Norwegian past or present, cannot be grasped or reduced to concretely dated and geographically placed people and places. The substance of the Norwegian is precisely something that which cannot be seized as simple *fact*, that which cannot be mastered, communicated in its totality, empiricised. It is always the object of a reference, it is always a transferred meaning, a content. This is the nature of any meaning: it always involves a displacement, be it temporal or spatial. The meaning of any phenomenon, be it a book or a painting, a war battle, the birth of a prince or the fall of an empire, becomes *meaningful* only through its retelling, only through a recounting across time or space, or both, of what the event was and what it *meant*. Meaning is distance or time from the 'source' of meaning. A phenomenon which is immediately present, which is immediate and contiguous to our consciousness, which completely fills our *hic et nunc*, would thereby have no meaning in the usual sense. Rather, it would be pure self-evidence, like the air we breath. In the moment when Norwegianness ceases to be an object of *contention*, it ceases to exist; when the relation between past and present is no longer a *negotiation*, then it is no longer.

This strange dependency on the invisibility of the origin of the Norwegian nation parallels the very evolution of the concept of nation. The concept originates in Roman society, denoting, after its etymology, birth and heritage.<sup>1</sup> It is thus associated with attachment by family or race. The category made possible a certain organisation of Roman society, distinguishing members of the Roman 'family' from foreigners.

Analogously, three varieties of rights are applicable to three types of citizens. *Jus civile* corresponds to the doctrine practised with regard to residents of Rome, *jus gentium*, its counterpart, is applicable first to those who do not reside in Rome, and later to all foreigners.<sup>2</sup> *Gentium*, *gens*, people, *populus* all refer to groups which are not organised politically, but are nonetheless bound in a non-instrumental collectivity. Such collective adhesion is nearly tribal, based on shared geographical, cultural and linguistic destinies.

The other dimension, *civitas*, plays a far less important role in the period which follows the collapse of Rome: When in 330 Constantine moves the capital of the Roman Empire to Byzantium, thereby baptising the 'Eastern Roman Empire' which would survive until the invasion of the Ottomans in 1453, the highly developed notion of 'citizen' that was common currency in Rome became virtually obsolete. Although rich and diverse forms of collective belonging flourish in the Middle Ages, the status or *de facto* use of the notion of citizenship deprives these 'nations' of any of the institutional force which is common in the modern era.<sup>3</sup> Not until the political declarations of the late 18th century does the politicisation of the notion of nation definitively oppose it to the notion of ethnic collectivities.

Still, already in the 17th century, the notion of a nation acquires status as the bearer of sovereignty: a nation is a sovereign collectivity. In the 16th- and 17th-century conceptions of nation, however, sovereignty is understood not as a republican, egalitarian distribution of power among citizens, but rather as a concentration of authority and legitimacy in the person of the king. Adhesion to the nation thus implies a certain attachment to the being of the sovereign. Without the king there is no nation; sovereignty and legitimacy are derivative. The modern nation-state is the fruit of the French Enlightenment, according to which the nation is indeed sovereign. But instead of a referential sovereignty based on the king, the sovereignty is self-referential; the nation is self-legitimising, self-sufficient, self-sovereign. The notion of the people as a cultural collectivity does not disappear; it is made principled, established as right, as law, institutionalised, universalised for all people, for all peoples, for all time. Thus Enlightenment thought does not deny the existence of the unfathomable cultural belonging which for millennia has been the band of association for people of shared destinies. It is not a question of conquering the (bad) irrational and replacing it with the (good) rational. The insight here is far more practical: The collective spirit is to be seized, protected for all from the ravages of history – that is, for others for whom its signs are less than self-evident.

It is thus far more a question of recognising the fragility of *culture* or of the *ethnic*, faced with the mutability of time and space, and seeking to seize it and



universalise it in a network of institutionalised principles. As Habermas formulates it:

With the French Revolution the meaning of the 'nation' was transformed from a pre-political dimension to a characteristic which was constitutive for the political identity of the citizen of a democratic collectivity. At the end of the 19th century the conditional relationship between the prescribed national identity and acquired, democratic constituted citizenship is even turned around....The nation of citizens no longer finds its identity in ethnic-cultural collectivities, but rather in the praxis of citizens who actively exercise their democratic rights to participation and communication. Here the republican component of citizenship is completely separated from belonging to a pre-political collectivity integrated through heritage, shared tradition and language.<sup>4</sup>

The modernisation of the nation is a process of evacuation of its moral, aesthetic and historical elements: all that resists systematisation poses a threat to the universalisability of the principles set down in the famous declarations of the late 18th century. Thus the instrumentalisation of the nation in its modern form dovetails with its politicisation. Politics understood as the negotiation of the form of *discourse* best suited to manipulate the concrete reality at hand, becomes the centrepiece of the modern nation.

A long-standing debate within Norwegian letters asks whether Aasen's language project was an expression of national romanticism of the kind common in Norway in the first half of the 19th century, or whether the project was a democratic or populist one.<sup>5</sup> There is a parallel debate in the two main contemporary interpretations of the events of 1814. Put succinctly: what is the relationship between the Eidsvoll Convention and the Norwegian sense of national self? On the one hand, Eidsvoll can be understood as a natural consequence of a Norwegian consciousness which had been developing for some time, and thus Christian Frederick's call for resistance against the union with Sweden was simply the expression of a deep and old sentiment. On the other hand, a more recently popular point of view regards the Eidsvoll Convention as the very origin of the Norwegian national sentiment, and the birth of politico-cultural thought of the Norwegian as such.<sup>6</sup>

It will be our contention in the following that Aasen simultaneously renders both sides of such a dialectic meaningless. We will attempt to show, through Aasen's own writings, that the necessary instrumentality of the nation-state presupposes its ethnic foundation, and that purely cultural-ethnic belonging is itself a kind of radical particularism without any unifying intelligibility.<sup>7</sup>

## 'On Our Written Language'

'On Our Written Language' was published in 1836 when Aasen was 22 years old and still working under the tutelage of H. C. Thoresen at Sølør. Insisting upon the right of the Norwegian people to its own language on the basis of the sovereign rights of any people, Aasen assumes a position in a long tradition of social thinking, dating well into the 18th century. While it is true that the polemic around the Norwegian language becomes most pronounced and most visible in the years after Eidsvoll and the adoption of the Norwegian Constitution, theories of the Norwegian can already be found, for example, in authors such as Hallager (1802).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, although the Constitution guarantees the right to a Norwegian language, the question in the public debates remains what the basis of that language should be. When in 1832 Wergeland published 'On the Norwegian Language Reformation,'<sup>9</sup> referring to the historical language reformation, he proposes a sort of 'norwegianification' of Danish, a process of lexical modification and modernisation that would give Danish a more truly Norwegian feel. Aasen shares Wergeland's enthusiasm for the Norwegian Constitution and the Norwegian language but differs regarding the linguistic philosophy, valuing far more a process of collection and synthesis of the Norwegian rural dialects.

## The Logic of Return

The point of departure for 'On Our Written Language' is no departure at all. It is a return. After our ancestral land became again what it once was – namely free and independent – it became our obligation to use an independent and national language, given that that is a nation's preeminent characteristic. (7/124)<sup>10</sup>

This is not just any return; it is an exemplary return, the return to the self: Norway has become itself again. Thus Norway is again what it was. Or is it, rather, that Norway is now more what it was than what it was then? One of the two possible qualitative implications of the return to the same is thus: We can best be ourselves by returning to what we *no longer are*. And yet implicit in this reasoning is the notion that to return to the self, a return to 'what [Norway] once was,' presupposes that Norway is *not* what it once was. The return to oneself is enabled by a separation, an alienation, a movement of becoming other; the *conditio sine qua non* of becoming oneself. Norway is not what it was. Still, what is the difference between what now is and what was once? Can Norway be the same Norway? Can the 'original,' true, authentic Norwegian be reproduced? Or is such a reproduction merely (literally) a re-produc-



tion, because logic itself forbids a 'return'? Today's Norway is not the same because it is a reproduction of the same. Simply put, what is cannot be what was, for then it would be what was and not what is. What is, is not at all what it would have been, had it been itself. This is the very *pathos* of identity, this non-identity in identity, the dialectical truth of being oneself. *Knowing* what we are precludes being it absolutely and immediately.

Thus the first word of Aasen's polemic, the first shot fired in the battle for the 'Norwegian' linguistic norm, is a gesture to the past, a recognition that the moment has come to seize the political possibility and render Norway complete, to make it what was – in other words, what it is in essence. But being that is associated with what it was, with its origin. Self-identity is thus always involved in a logic of nostalgia. If Norway had never *ceased* to be what it once was, it could never have become it once again, except by the nostalgia of identity. Whether or not the rhetoric of Aasen's article reflects a certain aesthetic of 'national romanticism' can never serve to render inessential the metaphysical necessity of return to an invisible, unfathomable origin as a basis for going forward.<sup>11</sup>

This origin to which we have returned signals a moment of obligation, a moral-spiritual necessity to (re)constitute the Norwegian nation, the self-presence, the self-identity of the *Norwegian*. This is 'the land of our forefathers'. The present of Norway is the Norway of the past. The reason we are able to recognise Norway as the *real* Norway and not – despite the innumerable mutations of time, the contingency introduced by the variations, the contamination, the unexpectedness of everyday existence – an other. The postulate of Norway's sovereign legitimacy thus rests on the tension between the past and the present, on the verge of declaring the impossibility of its own politico-cultural identity (*We are what we are not*). This elegant paradox is not some accidental abuse of the power of authorisation, it is authorisation itself. The 'true,' 'original,' 'authentic,' 'genuine,' 'veritable,' 'bona fide' Norwegian nation will only have been itself once it has disencumbered itself from the concept of *nation*, from the chains of the perfect return and from the constraints of an essentialist concept of nation. Such an essentialist claims that Norway is an indestructible, irreducible essence which has always been and which always will be. Norway and its concept, like Norwegians and *The Norwegian* implicitly independent, have pains to function independently.

For as long as Norway was considered a Danish province and the land's official appointments were largely occupied by Danish, it was natural that the Norwegian language's 'nationality' should disappear. As a 'Danish province' under a unique sovereign from 1660 until the signing of the Norwegian constitution in 1814, what is

today Norway was governed and administered by an elaborate bureaucratic network.<sup>12</sup> Officials were recruited from a Danish or Danish-educated elite. Danish thus naturally became the language of administration and education. All Norwegians who required scientific training were schooled in Denmark, and consequently Danish (or the Copenhagen spoken and written language) often became dominant at home. Thus the medium of power, wealth, prestige, the life-breath of *recognised* culture was Danish. The *shibboleth* of cultural knowledge was the very language in which that knowledge was transmitted. Aasen argued, however, that once the time of non-jurisdiction and powerlessness was over, Norway should demonstrate to the world its wish to be independent in all regards – culturally and politically. But the language which is *proper* to the colonised Norwegians had receded. Its 'nationality,' affirms Aasen, 'had to disappear.' In other words, not holding the key to authorised culture, to *authorised* cultural identity, the unauthorised (or non-authorised) identity, *Norwegian*, withered. In what sense can it be said to have disappeared?

Aasen conspicuously avoids the claim that the Norwegian language itself has been eradicated. And shrewdly enough: Both the notion of the *inception* of language and of its *annihilation* are in principle unthinkable. Language simply can be neither spontaneously self-generated nor self-destructed. There has never not been language, there will never not be language. The Norwegian language is thus at the very least a thought which persists, an indestructible kernel. Its reality ceases to obtain when the 'nationality' of the Norwegian language becomes alienated from the language, when the Norwegianness of Norwegian is problematised and excluded from its essential, natural seat in language. This theme persists throughout Aasen's working life. The Norwegian is not merely cultural, not simply political, it is indeed linguistic. There is a Norwegian national 'manner of expression.'<sup>13</sup> The political problem then becomes one of rehabilitating the 'nationality' of the Norwegian language which has been withdrawn for so long. Indeed it is not the language itself which has been in passive seclusion. For that 'language' has been alive and well for nearly a millennium. It is only because of the domination of a foreign language and the social and political weight which it bears that Aasen is concerned about the 'correct nationality.'<sup>14</sup> What needs a new breath of life is simply the 'nationality' of the language, its imminent essence or force. It is that nationality which is the locus of a people's sense and soul.<sup>15</sup> Further, 'our language's nationality' sways along the axis of its double genitive, subjective and objective. It implies two things: 1) the particular determinate nationality of this, *our*, language (Norwegian, Danish, Italian, etc.); and 2) the nationality of any language, including 'our' own, the inseparability of nation and language, the sticky, essential co-determinacy of the stuff of nation and any language.



As for the first, the Norwegian language persists, but without its nationality, without its Norwegianness. The relation between Norwegian (language) and Norwegianness thus obeys the logic of supplementarity. Norwegianness is at once absolutely *essential* – the essence of the Norwegian language – and contingent – an addition, an appendix which makes Norwegianness in effect more than it was. The structural logic of the Norwegian without Norwegianness, the non-Norwegian Norwegian, enables and organises the logic of return with which 'On Our Written Language' begins. Only by being separated from itself as itself can the Norwegian be the Norwegian. Once again, it is not a question of an unfortunate, accidental displacement: the essence of the Norwegian is the *movement* of displacement from The Norwegian. It is only in the return from the condition of having not possessed Norwegianness that the Norwegian language can ever find itself. The self-discovery of Norwegian as an oppressed language is the essence of the Norwegian.<sup>16</sup>

As for the second implication, of the innumerable contemporary theories of nation through which any study in social sciences necessarily navigates, several name language as the central 'feature' or predicate of a nation: No language, no nation. But we will go so far as to affirm the counter-thesis: No nation, no language. A language not couched in a national identity is not a language.<sup>17</sup>

The apparent disappearance (and reappearance) of Norway's Norwegianness also corresponds to a certain cycle of jurisdiction, an economy of authorisation and recognition. Once again the essentiality of a Norwegian linguistic origin remains undisturbed by the contingency of historical and political changes. Whereas Norwegianness is detachable from the Norwegian, essential to the second degree, essential in its (provisional) inessentiality, jurisdiction is nonetheless acquired and deployed as a function of recognition at this nexus, dependent on the other. Thus linguistic jurisdiction goes wanting because it has no essential anchoring in the real, authentic, true Norwegian ethico-legal jurisdiction. 'Now the period of our being deprived of jurisdiction is over,' says Aasen (7/124). Norwegians are once again authorised as Norwegians, authorised as such and, more importantly for Aasen, authorised as language users. Norwegians and the Norwegian language have reacquired the ethico-juridical recognition which they were deprived of during the 'period of non-jurisdiction,' the four centuries spent under foreign control. That is why, argues Aasen, we must show the world that we are indeed independent, that we have self-jurisdiction, that we have received the necessary recognition to legislate, to sanction, to act, to approve, to establish the norms and values which will give shape to that identity which Norway, Norwegian and The Norwegian have always had despite the dark period of alienation and non-jurisdiction.

### **Juris-diction**

Jurisdiction, *juris-dictio*, means declaration of right. Language is not a simple medium toward the concretisation of right, it is the very substance of right. Right is a pronouncement of right. Sovereignty has, in this sense, a phenomenological character: The right to govern oneself implies a certain expression of that right, a certain coming-to-words, a linguistic rationalisation of what is supposedly implicit. A people's jurisdiction depends integrally upon its language. Jurisdiction is the right to speak, a right whose sole foundation is the spoken right. Jurisdiction is the right-to-claim-the-right-to-speak; it presupposes the right to speak. Right to speak, right to claim, all in the quickening, circular hermeneutics of expression.

What is a language which is not born of this inner right? What authorises it to speak for the people, for the collectivity which takes it into use? According to Aasen, what holds the Norwegian people together on the conceptual level, the Norwegianness of the Norwegian people, is precisely its language. The Norwegian language is the foundation of the fellowship which *gathers* Norwegians into one. Norwegian pulls the threads of all Norwegians. If there were only one Norwegian, would he or she speak? Would he or she speak Norwegian? Is the language of one the sound of one hand clapping? Is the Norwegianness of one Norwegian determinate? Norwegianness is the expression and reception of the rights and duties of being Norwegian. It is the continual communication of the right to communicate. The normative character of the Norwegian language, the rights which Aasen associates with Norwegian as a political project are *both* self-evident – self-evidence revealed or posited in language-use – and *claimed*, through its very use. The legitimacy of Aasen's project is thus doubly self-producing, both subjective and objective, as the right of language and the language of right. Thus in 'Recollections from the Language Debate, Autumn 1858,' (1859) which we will discuss below, the axis of the question of the Norwegian language is squarely juridical. The debate with which Aasen begins his polemical recapitulation was certainly about the Norwegian language, but, that being said, a polemic about language always necessarily resolves into a polemic about right, 'or first of all, about the *right* to write books in that language.' It seems clear that a certain resonance between the theoretical foundations of Aasen's vibrant convictions and the pragmatic need to set them in motion persists throughout his life. The movement from a theoretical right, right contained in language, in the relationship between the individual, the collectivity and the language which likens them in a fellowship of communication is thus principally problematic.

The seamless co-determinacy of language and authority, of the theoretical and the pragmatic, of the right to speak and of discursive rights – *jurisdiction* – are the



ideals which Aasen seeks in public life. They correspond in some ways to the model he finds in Sweden. The Swedish language, Aasen observes, resembles beautifully the 'correct Norwegian language which can be neither heard nor seen on paper outside of the less well-regarded class' (7/124). According to Aasen, Swedish lies far closer to the 'right' Norwegian than the Danish that Norwegians are forced to use. This similarity between the official Swedish language and the unrecognised 'correct' Norwegian language is, of course, no accident. Sweden and Norway have the same culturo-political origins. Today's Sweden was once part of the geopolitical unity which in Aasen's time is split into three. Like the 'ancestral' relationship between the present Norwegian dialects and 'true' Norwegian that originates and unifies them all, Norway has an 'ancestral' relationship to Sweden which, to judge by their respective language relationships, appears to be more intimate than that with Denmark. The linguistic similarity is thus not contingent; it is part and parcel of a larger logic of unity. The relationship between them, says Aasen, is thus 'not an un-nationality, not an amalgamation' (7-8/124). The natural unity of individuals in a collectivity can thus be judged by its 'national-ness.' 'Nation' is used to designate a collective as a category which absorbs its components on the basis of the non-rational, the non-systematic. The relationship between Norway and Sweden is thus not merely categorical, not merely a formal geographical relationship, it implies the richness and the spirituality of nation. The unity of 'two stalks of the same seed' (8/124) is natural: more profound, more condensed, more intense than a mere 'amalgamation'; richer than physical, geographical, or other superficial similarities; closer than mere structural, grammatical similarities may attest to. The naturalness of the similarities between Swedish and the 'true' Norwegian is derived from a higher unity, an invisible, even transcendental synthesis. This transcendental unity is the authorising vigour of Aasen's project and the basis for the moral force of his political arguments. The question of whether these two dimension can feasibly be collapsed into one another is the central tension in Aasen's œuvre.

The Norwegian national language (*Folkesprog*) thus becomes particularly mythologised – not the least according to the logic and ideologies of traditional national Romanticism – and charged with the force of national legitimacy, in part through the double meaning of this term. 'On Our Written Language,' is thus the first systematic expression of what might be called the linguistic patriotism toward the Norwegian language that lies behind all of Aasen's reasoning. It is fanaticism neither for the nation itself, as a newly formed political unity with cultural possibilities, nor for the language itself as a grammatical and lexical construction. Both are equally constructions, lifeless mathematical entities devoid of moral or spiritual fabric. Although

Aasen often repeats the practical argument – namely that the new Norwegian language would serve the interests of all Norwegians by introducing a closer correspondence between the written word and the spoken word – his reasoning does not rest on this pragmatic argument alone. In Aasen's early writing, the stakes are consistently far higher.

It has always pained me to hear our common language criticized and ridiculed either by well-dressed ignorance or by an admittedly well-meant desire for purity. Are we, I thought, to let go of that precious treasure from our past which our ancestors have carried on through all their hardships and transferred to us like a holy inheritance? Is this possession now to make us willful at the very moment when our national freedom is once again within our grasp? (8/125)

Aasen's 'moral' debts, he feels, are profound and his outrage intense when he observes the way others have treated the Norwegian language. Despite their good intentions, the Norwegians for whom the Norwegian national language would bring both practical advantages and moral enrichment, insult and ridicule what they do not understand. That the Norwegian language is regarded as a national treasure, and nonetheless suffers the abuses of ignorance, only adds insult to injury. Thus the idealisation or mythologisation of the Norwegian language as the 'fountainhead' of the Norwegian essence far exceeds the boundaries of the concrete pragmatism with which Aasen defends it and with which it is often promoted today. Nor is it a matter of an occasional sentimentalisation of the Norwegian linguistic past. Aasen's conception of the Norwegian language, and a fair amount of his promotion of it, is programmatically fetishist. It hypostasises the 'origin' of the language as the ultimate foundation for the Norwegian nation. Thus the *origin*, the Norwegian language, reduces the two dimensions of 'nation' – gens and civitas – to unity, thereby collapsing the ambiguity of the concept.

Thus, for Aasen this thing, this 'possession,' this 'holy inheritance,' this 'national property' (9/125) is not merely a good idea, not just a well built language which happens to correspond remarkably well to the spoken dialects of the Norway, it is the Norwegian people itself, both possession and self, proximity and objectivity, same and other. But the logic of property is a strange one. On the one hand, property is contingent. Property is an expression of the non-self-evidence of property. Property about which there can be no question of property, about which property is self-evident, therefore is not property. For it belongs to the essence of property to be detachable, dispensable, disownable. Absolute property – property without the possibility of losing property – is not acquired property at all, but rather always already the



self. Property is a claim to an object which could very well not be owned, could be the property of an other, of others. It is an already constituted self – the Norwegian people as Aasen describes them – which then, having been constituted, spiritually, genetically or otherwise, possesses *a priori* the language to which it makes a claim of legitimacy by way of Eidsvoll. The Norwegian language has 'always' been intimately attached to the Norwegian people. At least as long as the memory of the people reaches back. The Norwegian language thus belongs to their 'heritage'. Its origin is beyond the reaches of the collective memory. The 'possession' of this heritage, assures Aasen, is just. Its existence is justified by the implicit unity of nation and language. The newly born political Norway, the sovereignty of the nation-state, its right to self-governance, to self-authorisation belong, in this regard, to the modern republican tradition whose principles were laid out in the juridical foundations of the Roman Empire and whose more pragmatic consequences are elaborated by the political philosophers of the Enlightenment – Montesquieu, Condorcet, Jefferson, Adams, etc. Clearly the notion of self-governance or self-authorisation is structured by a central paradox: If authority is always exterior to the object of authority, how can a state authorise itself? If juridical legitimacy is a movement of reference to a higher order of legitimacy, how can self-legitimacy ever be coherent? What is the origin of legitimacy?

The reflexivity of reason since Descartes serves as the model for modernity's project of self-legitimation in general, and the self-evidence which Aasen sees in the Norwegian language project in particular. Its consequences for Aasen, however, seem to be twofold. On the one hand, a sovereign nation chooses its own language. This is Aasen's republican, progressive moment. On the other hand, he answers the question of which language *this* sovereign nation should choose for itself in an anti-progressive, anti-republican and anti-modern way. The answer to the question 'which language?' turns out to reject the very reasoning which gives the newly born Norwegian *civitas* the right to choose. The Norwegian language project is thus based on a rejection of the facticity of the Norwegian state. Thus we return to the powerful double meaning of 'nation.' The Norwegian nation (*civitas*) authorises a self-authorisation by means of which Aasen rejects the language of nation (*civitas*) in order to return to the historico-ethno-cultural nation (*gens*) and the Norwegian language which it authorises. The presence of both logics is both totally *necessary* for Aasen's project and integrally *contradictory*.

Aasen's program thereby incorporates three moments. The first lays out the juridical premises of the Norwegian language, incorporating the discourse of *civitas* – that is, the themes and justifications of modern Enlightenment political theory. The

second provides through Old Norwegian (Norrøn) the spiritual impetus for the notion of a Norwegian language by gathering the threads of the eternal gens. The third reinscribes the universe of living dialects into the system provided by Old Norwegian. In other words, 1) having justified the *right* to the Norwegian language on the basis of principles of national sovereignty, Aasen turns to 2) the question of *which* language must necessarily be the Norwegian language with a pragmatic argument pointing to the similarities among the Norwegian dialects and 3) the *moral* right to rehabilitate the 'property' of the Norwegian people.

The resulting rhetorical movement relocates the spiritual-moral thread of the original Norwegian, the original Norwegianness in ordinary language users. Only traces remain of the original Norwegian language, but these traces are clearly determined and localisable. While the 'original' Norwegian language has been hypothesised, the messenger of the origin is clearly identifiable. The drama of one thousand years of Norwegian history has produced heroes and martyrs. Ordinary language users have one language, which the dominant geopolitical or hegemonic force imposes. The movement from one to the other, from the origin to the *status quo*, from the theoretical past to actuality, opens a space of speculation, a space of postulation and of ideology. Thus, to close the circle of principles and reality, Aasen produces a theory of historical change, a philosophy of history and of progress which, as we shall see, develops considerably in sophistication in his later writings.

## History and Contingency

As noted above, the question of the origin, of the absolute foundation of the Norwegian language contributes to the organisation of Aasen's conception of Norwegianness, of the Norwegian essence in past and present. Yet still another dimension completes the framework for understanding what we are with respect to what we have been: history itself. An understanding of history is necessary in order to incorporate the Norwegian past in a theory of what we are today, of what Norwegians have the legitimacy to authorise themselves and, moreover, of the language of that authorisation. Aasen completes the circle of his analysis with several comments about historical change, about the road from past to present and the movement of ideas and events that connect the two. His philosophy is essential to his argument for the (re-)creation of the Norwegian language. It not only provides yet another angle for rational-moral justification of the immanent necessity of the new language, but also neatly prescribes a strategic formula for political change. Aasen's



conception of history thus presents a continuity of understanding, a principle of national will and of the realisation of 'national destiny.' In harmony with the dominant forms of 19th century historiography, Aasen conceives of history as a movement of reason, as a gradual unfolding of reality as it has to be, as an expression of unavoidable, necessary reason. This teleological theory of history opens the way for both a certain amount of speculation – in the name of reason – about the future and nostalgic *ex post facto* polemicising about 'what might have been.'

If Norway had claimed its political sovereignty through all these centuries, then the main language would also have been the common language; it would have been a composite of the country's dialects, the middle point. But we let ourselves be unjustly dominated by others, with an incredible patience and for such a long time. That is why we lost our honour and our heroes, that is why we lost the language of our ancestors. It is still not impossible for us to win it back; our national doctrine demands it and our country's happily changed situation gives us the right to it. The farmer has the honour of being the language's savior; we should therefore listen to his words. (9/126)

History's true unfolding, the real meaning of human progress, would naturally have led the Norwegian language that once existed to fruition in a more advanced, higher form of language and, more importantly, to a form more in harmony with the concrete everyday reality of language use. In other words, if history had run its natural course, the language of the common man would have become the Norwegians' universal language. The gap between the way ordinary people speak and the universally recognised written language would never have been opened. The 'universal language' would have been the 'common'; commonly universal, universally common.

Aasen does not speculate about possible reasons why Norway let itself be occupied and dominated by a foreign power for so many years. His analysis of historical determinacy is limited to how the Norwegian language would have developed if Norway simply had not been occupied, the occupation which resulted in the 'common' being torn from the universal. On the other hand, Norwegians lived for centuries with a remarkable patience, with an ability to wait, to mature, to ripen. The result of this long period of oppression is the noticeable tension between the spoken and written language. If events had taken a different turn, all those living in Norway would have spoken and written one homogeneous language, some historical variant of Old Norwegian (Norrøn). What is more, Norway would presumably already have become a 'nation,' already passed through the processes of political modernisation which marked so significantly the 17th and 18th centuries. In other words, 'nation'

would have been a self-evidence. The *question* of nation, of whether or not to be or become a nation, would not have had any meaning. Having been self-evidence itself, 'nation' as a concept, as a reality which may or may not obtain, would have little or no existence. Indeed, the concept of 'nation' did pass through a process of conceptualisation during which its legitimacy was a matter of contention, its moral validity established through a process of politico-moral negotiation. But by the mid-19th century, when Aasen became engaged in polemics around the question of a Norwegian language, its contentiousness had subsided, and, as with all concepts against which *resistance* wavers, it had passed into invisibility.

Precisely the same argument can be made for language (and the similarity between the conceptual formation of language and of nation is far from accidental, as we will attempt to demonstrate). Aasen's language consciousness, his insistence on the 'Norwegianness' of a certain mode of expression, his articulation of the coterminous premises and consequences of the Norwegian language all follow from the politico-military occupation and cultural colonisation of Norway. As Aasen claims, Norwegian culture was passing through an enormous moment of cultural negation whose outcome will be the (re-)establishment of a culture that integrates in a remarkably Hegelian manner its own rejection of the Danish-based culture. The 'patience' of the Norwegian people which Aasen invokes is thus the precondition for the cultural sovereignty which Norway is to experience. The 'injustice' they tolerated was hardly thematicised before the issues of nation and of language became valid concerns. Once conceptualised – largely by the moral and political philosophies of the Enlightenment – 'patience' becomes the central virtue, the price to be paid for political and linguistic freedom. In terms of 17th- and 18th-century philosophy of history, this patience is the 'work of history' and the production of historical meaning.

Moreover, 'sovereignty' is a relatively modern politico-moral concept. Thus for Aasen to decry the loss of sovereignty after the Kalmar Union in the 14th century makes little sense. Sovereignty had first to be acquired on the conceptual battle field, in order to be perceived later as deprecated, and only then to be made the object of demand as a concrete right based on the concept. Only by *losing* its sovereignty can Norway create a narrative of its origin, the myth of Norwegians, the heroes of its originality, the legitimacy of the 'ancestral language,' etc. Recovering the ideological treasures of these conceptual artefacts is 'yet not impossible.' In the place of the heroes of old, Norway has a new entourage of heroes: the farmers. It is the farmers who are the nation's 'saviours' – those who have, for one reason or another, preserved the true Norwegian national heritage and who are best qualified to take on the work of building the nation. Indeed, what are the materials with which this notion is constructed?



It is not a matter of simply acquiring new materials in the same way one would build a new house. The raw materials of nation are never purely new. As we have attempted to show elsewhere, building a nation is never just the mechanical assembly of radically unrelated components. The work to be carried out by Norway's saviours is a process of recovery, renewal, restoration, rectification, reparation, recapitulation. It is the work of negation of the loss at the hands of tyrants that is the very process of nation-building, the cornerstone of which is the right to a national language that 'our national doctrine claims':

In addition, the other reformation of this century, mentioned above, would be an endless construction and demolition, since the language, lacking a clear basis, will forever oscillate from one to the other, so that one never knows which is the right one. That is why I fear that what is the correct national will in time yield to the foreign, that indeed the national language (Folkesprog), and not the written language, becomes that which is reformed. (10/126)

The reconstruction of a Norwegian language will thus only serve as an initiative. The work of language, of construction and reconstruction never ends. Thus the precondition for the political movement which aims at the normalisation of the Norwegian language, which derives its principled impetus from the originality, the timelessness of a certain Norwegianness, nonetheless claims its concrete or practical necessity on the basis of a constant mutation and on the need to organise and systematise the Norwegian language according to the mutability proper to any language.

### Universality, Particularity and Singularity

Since the writings of Hegel, a tension between the notions of 'particularity' (*Einzelkeit*) and 'universality' (*Allgemeinheit*) have motivated a dialectical understanding of history.<sup>18</sup> The 'particular' functions as an arithmetic sum of the individual components of reality without consideration for the overarching, universal, generalising principles which assemble the elements as necessarily and categorically intelligible. It is each individual language user, each individual completely unaware of the generality of his/her experience of language. It is the conscience of radical singularity, of oneness, solitude, and thus complete self-sufficiency, or sovereignty in which he or she who uses language does so in an un-self-conscious manner – unaware of the generality of language use, of the possibility of using another language, or of not using language at all. The notion of 'universality' arises from the insight into the contin-

gency of *this* language, of *this* use of language. The movement toward the universality of the Norwegian language thus begins with the recognition of what is accidental in the nature of this or any language, the understanding of the existence of others, of different others, of other others. The analogous insight into the contingency of language itself, into the contingency of all languages, and thus – dialectically – into the universality of the contingency of language is the very moment of passage to universality of the Norwegian language.

The universality of the Norwegian language lies precisely in the *variation* of its individual components – that is, of the dialects at its heart.<sup>19</sup> To universalise, to normalise and in this case to nationalise, is to systematically insist on the triple movement of any self-understanding, present in any cognitive event. These three moments are: 1) to take a point of departure in the *generality* of Norwegian identity, culture and language, to insist on the general notion of Norwegianness, on something common, something shared by others; 2) to insist on the *particularity* of a given dialect or model for language use – that is, to insist on the implicit value and validity of a given dialect *as if it were the only one*, as if no other language or medium for communication were homogeneous with it. This means claiming the dialect is absolutely unique, heterogeneous to all others, radically non-interchangeable with all others; and 3) to (re-)discover the universality of Norwegianness in the *generality* of its *particularity*; to grasp the fact that the basis of Norwegianness, the common dimension which holds its concept together as integral and intelligible, is precisely the ensemble of *different* dialects each implicitly making a claim to universal viability.