



**Stig Sæterbakken**

## My heart belongs to Europe. Therefore it is broken

Norwegian national cultural identity is often thought of as being hermetic, untarnished by external influence. Norwegians' relationship with the new Europe is wary — they have twice returned "No" votes to referenda on the EU — while the traditionally strong influence from America goes unchallenged. But what is truly Norwegian, truly European, and truly American in all this? As an author whose influences span Europe and the US, Stig Saeterbakken asks whether literature helps maintain individual and collective identity, or whether it inspires us to discredit it. When the Cyclops demands our name, how should we answer?

### 1

*No Norwegians were hurt:* this is how every headline news story in Norway about accidents, terrorist attacks, or disasters abroad, concludes. And when I say every, I mean every, except on those occasions when Norwegians *have* been hurt, which also means that what would have been a short bulletin, or a single report, becomes a succession of reports, continuing for days, if events prove disastrous enough.

*25 July 2005: At least 88 people lost their lives in a terror attack on the holiday resort Sharm el-Sheik in Egypt. No Norwegians were hurt in the attacks.*

*14 August 2005: 121 people died when a plane belonging to the Cypriot airline Helios crashed just outside Athens. No Norwegians were among the passengers.*

*28 September 2005: 12 people were killed when a suicide bomber blew himself up at the headquarters of the Kabul International Brigade in Afghanistan. No Norwegians were hurt in the blast.*

Of course, each nation has an obligation towards the possible relatives of possible citizens abroad, and in this respect the reassurance in itself makes sense. But why "Norwegians"? When the earthquake hit Pakistan in October 2005, why, considering the big Pakistani population in Norway, was the message still only "one Norwegian missing"?

### 2

I think all of us share a certain distaste for such obvious outpourings of egocentrism. There are also some among those not hurt, in this case Norwegians, who periodically express disgust at this "first myself and then myself" perspective to which it openly bears witness.

Still, the sentence continues to be appended to incoming reports of suffering from all over the world, like an embarrassing refrain from a pop song you dislike but can't get out of your head.

It is truly a grotesque scenario: while mutilated children are screaming in agony, it is presumed that we heave a sigh of relief because none have the same nationality as us.

How far, then, does our identifying with, and hence compassion for, those in pain go? How wide is the radius of this compassion? Or put differently: How many does our list of "unhurt" include?

### 3

Could we imagine, for example, breaking news concluding with the following reassurance: "No Europeans were hurt".

I don't think so.

Why not?

Firstly, because of the dubious associations evoked of a wealthy western continent's frontier against the rest of the world, of the rich providing for themselves, on the verge of the "Third World"; the implication that our feelings of kinship and solidarity reach this far but no further, that to this point, but no further, we are willing to invest our moral and emotional capital.

Secondly, because it probably would wake too many memories of the oppression and imperialism of the past, things we don't like to be reminded of, this together with its fascist connotations, the idea of a united European people, superior to people from other continents, a *Festung Europa* as a bulwark against the rest of the world and its needs.

### 4

Or if we went the opposite way, making the radius of compassion narrower instead of wider? Would that be approved of?

As some readers may know, Norway has two official languages. The first is *bokmål* — literally the "language of books" — a modernised form of what was once standard Norwegian, which in turn was derived from Danish. The other is *nynorsk* — literally "new Norwegian" — a language created by the linguist Ivar Aasen in the mid nineteenth century, a synthetic language based on Norwegian dialects from all parts of the country.

Our two different languages have been — and still are — subjects of dispute, since different parts of the country have *bokmål* or *nynorsk* as their main language. For example, we have controversial laws regulating the use of *nynorsk* on the radio and television. We have *nynorsk* Publishing Houses, papers written solely in *nynorsk*, and so on. And conversely: papers that refuse to print articles in *nynorsk*.

This language dispute has been going on for over 150 years, and has become a part of our political everyday life, to such a extent that some claim Norway is divided into five or six independent zones, defined in terms of the prevailing language spoken within them, zones that have a minimum of contact with each

other, like states-within-the-state. Although this is an exaggeration, the fact that it is possible to say such a thing in all seriousness reflects how deeply this language dispute goes within the nation, and shows how irreconcilable both sides have been from time to time.

Could one imagine, then, a local news station in the west of Norway reporting a car accident, at the end informing viewers that no *nynorsk*-speakers were among the dead? Or, on Øst Nytt, a news programme that covers the county Oppland, where I live: *No one whose main language is bokmål was hurt in the accident.*

Of course not, since this would be regarded as offensive, immoral, not to say inhuman.

The absurdity of the narrow limit — compassion according to dialect — meets the dubious political and historical implications of the wide limit: concern for Europeans before Asians, Africans, and so on.

But between these offensive limits, or discriminations, there exists a limitation, or discrimination, which appears logical.

Between the morally reprehensible and politically impossible "no speakers of new Norwegian were hurt", and the fascist, racist, and imperialist "No Europeans were hurt", we have the "No Norwegians were hurt". For some reason or another, we find this acceptable.

If one tried to measure this discrimination accurately, one would probably find that its strength weakens in proportion to geographical distance. In Norway, accidents happening to Danes or Swedes attract quite a lot of attention, evoke quite deep compassion, lead to a quite big commitment... Accidents happening to Britons or Germans a little less, but still quite deep, quite big, and so on, gradually weakening the further south, east, or west one goes. With one major exception: the US, which is far away, in fact literally on the other side of the globe, but still, in spirit and culture is so close to Norway that it is easily mistaken for a neighbouring country.

*A car bomb exploded in Baghdad this morning. No Norwegians or North Americans were hurt in the blast...*

## 5

Norway's history as an independent nation is short. Norway has twice been in union with other countries, first Denmark, then Sweden (in 2005 we celebrated the centenary of the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian union). And Norway has, interestingly enough, twice voted "No" in referenda on joining the European Union.

That our past as a union partner, which in our national mythology is made synonymous with periods of occupation, plays an important role in our strong resistance towards the European Union, is I think beyond doubt. Once "governed from Copenhagen", then "governed from Stockholm", we are now resisting being "governed from Brussels".

At the same time, since WWII, our foreign policy has been heavily influenced by American foreign policy and American interests in Europe, this to such a degree that one might say that we have been "governed from Washington".

Our Nato membership has, as opposed to a possible EU membership, been fairly uncontroversial in Norway, and it is not without reason that Norway has been characterised as the nicest — and even the most eager — pupil in the Nato class. In the same way that American film and music, American food, and American culture as a whole has pervaded us in such a way that we have made it ours. So, while the American influence has gone almost unchallenged politically, culturally, and commercially, Europe has been regarded with the anxiety of influence, as Harold Bloom might put it, as if infested with something America is free from. While the door to Europe has been more or less shut, the door to America has been held wide open.

*A car bomb exploded in Baghdad this morning. No North Americans or Norwegians who for three generations or more have had no Danish or Swedish blood in their veins were hurt in the blast...*

## 6

Our union with Denmark lasted over 400 years. The Danish rule is often referred to as the "400-year-night", an expression taken from Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (prompted, by the way, by a madman called Huhu, who Peer Gynt meets in Cairo).

Recent research, however, has cast doubt over our conception of this long lasting oppression that we, obviously being the weaker half of the siamese twin Denmark–Norway, experienced during the union. For example, excavations at Kaupang, considered to be the first town founded in Norway and as such an important national symbol, shows that it wasn't founded by Norwegians, but by Danes engaged in trading in this area at the end of the eighth and beginning of the ninth century. Today, as recently pointed out in *Norge -- et lite stykke verdenshistorie* (Bromark and Herbjørnsrud, 2005), scientists and historians are also altering their interpretation of important archaeological finds from the Viking Age, such as the Oseberg ship, again a significant national symbol, now said to have been left in Norway by Danish kings. In other words: a considerable part of the culture we think of as fundamentally Norwegian, as symbols of Norway as a nation, has been given us by foreigners, Danes mainly, and the influence from Danish culture, especially through trading, goes much further back in time than those 400 years of Danish reign. Rather than a positive and constructive period of independence, succeeded by a negative and destructive period of oppression and force, there has been a massive influence from Denmark throughout. The 400-year night turns out to have been a thousand-year day and night.

This should be obvious. But it isn't. On the contrary, it collides violently with a basic concept, a basic idea. Because we are raised to think that it is in our emancipation from others, in our struggle for freedom, that what we hold as our national heritage has been shaped. Only when we have been shielded from influence, not exposed to it, have we found ourselves. Our genuineness, our *Norwegianess*, is that which was repressed during the unions, and that which, after winning back our freedom, was once again able to flourish.

## 7

As a small country, young as regards independence, it is as if Norway is still in a phase of bragging self-contentedness, emphasizing the Norwegian as a quality in itself, applauding the Norwegian as *Norwegian*. Ibsen is not a great writer. Ibsen is a great *Norwegian* writer. It is not his outstanding authorship

one is interested in Norway, it is the magnificent fact that this outstanding, internationally acclaimed author was Norwegian.

As if our thinking originates from a kind of deficiency... As if our starting point is that the Norwegian is insufficient, insignificant, not held to be by the others, those we measure ourselves to, the great and mighty nations, the old civilized societies... As if we have something to prove... Something to justify... So, as we tell the world about Norwegian greatness, it is as if in reality we express a deep frustration, a paralyzing inferiority complex. We regard ourselves as provincial, hence are delighted by any sign telling us that we are not, stressing this sign for all it's worth, failing to understand that what we are really stressing is our need to do so, our need for acknowledgement as a people, as nation.

Even long after the Oslo-agreement has been wrecked and Palestine intellectuals have made it synonymous with "a new apartheid", we are proud that the first peace-treaty supported by both the Israeli and the Palestinians bears the name of our capital... When Mossad agents killed a man that they mistook for an Arab agent (in my home-town Lillehammer, by the way) — this was in 1972, and it is the only political murder that has ever taken place on Norwegian soil — Norwegian papers were full of pride for the attention drawn to the small Norwegian city. "The world looks to Norway!" they read, referring to the fact that the American, British, French, and German newspapers were all carrying the story on their front pages. The obvious tragedy of the events was completely drowned in a kind of morbid enthusiasm for the fact that Norway — at last! — was scene of an incident of international significance.

Rhetoric that would return 20 years later, again to Lillehammer, when the city was chosen to host the 1994 Winter Olympics. Yes, rhetoric was every inch identical: "The world looks to Norway!" "Lillehammer on everybody's lips!"

Political homicide, or Olympic Games, who cares, as long as it makes the world look in our direction, makes it attach some importance to our humble outpost?

And if we're still impressed by our own greatness, I guess it's because we haven't quite reached it yet.

Or as Gombrowicz puts it in his diaries: "If a mature nation judges its own merits with moderation, a vital nation learns to neglect them."

## 8

My point is simple. Norway didn't produce Ibsen. A conglomeration of influences and impulses, and not the least a whole world of literature, produced Ibsen (including, I have to stress, a Norwegian influence, Norwegian literature). Just as our specific Norwegian values, as we like to think of them, have been created not in periods of isolation and autonomy, but in periods of massive influence, forced as well as chosen. Our *Norwegianess*, if such a thing exists, is something that has developed in a crossfire of external influences, right from the very start.

When Ibsen wrote *Peer Gynt* — which can be seen as a brutal execution of Norwegian pride and conceit, or one could say human pride and conceit in general — he was living in Italy. He turned the perspective upside down, so to speak. Instead of sitting in Norway, studying the world, he placed himself in

the world, in order to study Norway.

Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger was such a great admirer of Ibsen, and of *Peer Gynt* in particular, that he (like Joyce later) learned Norwegian (that is to say Danish) in order to be able to read Ibsen in original. Weininger travelled to Kristiania in August 1902 to be present at the premier of *Peer Gynt* at the *Nationaltheatret*; he returned to Vienna completely beside himself, having witnessed his favourite play, with its infamous, not to say hateful representation of the Norwegian national spirit, transformed into an idyllic national romantic melodrama (as told by Terje Holtet Larsen in: *Peer Gynt-versjonen*, 2003). This is how the play has been performed ever since, right up to the present day.

Even this, a mortal criticism, we've managed to convert into a gala performance, a romantic celebration of our "national spirit", our character and our particularity.

## 9

I can't help observing that the name of one of our leading national icons — Peer, a very common Norwegian name — is written in the old manner, with two "e"s; furthermore that the Norwegian word for "European" is "*europpeer*", also with two "e"s.

Euro–Peer Gynt.

## 10

Do I feel any kinship with Europe? Yes, through literature I do. Some years ago, at a reading at the time of the publication of my first collection of essays, I was introduced by the compère as a Norwegian writer who reads much foreign literature, one that has an "international orientation". I was astonished. The thought had simply not occurred to me that for the most part I read books by foreign authors. Nor had I reflected upon the fact that in the collection of essays that I was about to present not a single Norwegian writer was mentioned. The thought had not occurred to me because I had always, until that night, thought of the literature I read, and which was important to me, as literature, not foreign literature.

My forefathers are not Ibsen, Bjørnson and Hamsun. My forefathers are Kafka, Beckett, and Céline. I see nothing sensational in this, and would not have given it thought had I not been introduced in this manner, that night, some ten years ago.

In this respect, I may say that my heart belongs to Europe, more than it belongs to Norway. I know Europeans better than I know Norwegians. I probably know European literature — and here I bring in the compère as a witness — better than I know Norwegian literature.

And this heart, my European heart, is broken, in the sense that what it belongs to, is so complex and mutually inconsistent that it can never act — or be regarded — as one. And that my heart, my European heart, whenever it was that I became aware of it, was in pieces even before it had had time to have its first contraction.

I therefore see the term "European" primarily as a negative one. That defining myself as a European makes it a little more difficult for me to define myself as a Norwegian. In the concept of the European lies a threat to the national. A European is a dysfunctional nationalist.

I like my European identity, because it takes away some of my Norwegian identity and replaces it with... nothing.

Because Europe is, strictly speaking, nothing. Europe is an impossibility, a contradiction in terms. Europe is a fiction. Europe is a literary construct, held together by novels and poems, more than by nations and governments.

## 11

To declare oneself a European is to reply "I am Noman" when Polyphemus asks for one's name. The Cyclops demands a clear answer: Odysseus repels him with an absurd one, and by the help of his clever reply, he gets away, he saves himself. The answer "I am Noman" gives him his freedom back, the freedom he needs to rescue himself and his crew (or what's left of it). It gives him the freedom of movement necessary for him to continue his journey, and to accomplish his higher goal: *to return home*.

## 12

Odysseus' reply is a literary one. He uses a literary effect to escape his own destiny. Isn't this what literature does? To lift us away, away from ourselves, our own pre-destination... We become no one. That is to say, we can be anyone, in the same way that a novel, by force of its poetic language, opens for us any mental universe, makes it possible for us to enter any world, by making it readable, not acceptable necessarily, but readable, and in that sense understandable. Thus a novel — a good novel that is — can make the thoughts, the moral and emotional universe of, say, a paedophile or a Nazi understandable, can make it possible for us to identify ourselves with it, bring us to the point of recognizing this as an option in ourselves as well. Because we are human. And being human means containing this too as an option. The question, *Who are we?* is rejected in favour of the question, *What is it possible for us to become?*

In the same way that I see Europe as something negative, I regard literature as something destructive, in the sense that it makes it more difficult for us to be ourselves fully and completely, that it destroys our chances to establish once and for all, that *this is who we are, this is us*. To write (and to read) is to become another, in Rimbaud's words. Or others, the one after the other. To write (and to read) is to change identity all the time, to remind oneself constantly of the possibilities of all the others we might have been, or still may turn out to be. In writing (and reading) we become changeable. We become anybody. We become no one...

## 13

The cunning assertion "I am no one" is a paradox, since the statement itself presupposes a person stating it. Denying one's existence ultimately means confirming it. As much as the confirmation continues to constitute a denial. And so forth...

It is in this sense that I understand myself as a European. My claim for a European identity is that of a nobody.

It is a claim that should be taken seriously. And it is a nothingness I feel at ease with.

*Speech held at the symposium Re-Visions: Literary Exchange in an Enlarged Europe, organised by Literature Across Frontiers and Inizjamed in Valetta, Malta, November 2005.*

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Published 2006-02-02

Original in English

Contribution by Magyar Lettre Internationale

First published in *Magyar Lettre Internationale* 59/2005 (Hungarian version)

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