

Authorship in the Norwegian Welfare State, c. 1950 – 1975

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Abstract This article examines the survival of a Romantic role of the author in post-war Norwegian literature. It shows how an important group of writers in the late 1940s and the 1950s still shared a vision of the writer as an isolated individual, opposed to society and the state. During this time, this old role was reactivated and given a new function in opposition to the developing Welfare State. The writer and intellectual Jens Bjørneboe (1920 – 76) was a prominent member of this loosely organized group, and someone who makes for a particularly interesting case when exploring authorship in the Norwegian Welfare State. He started out in a right-wing opposition to social democracy, but in the 1960s and 1970s took up a left-wing oppositional role. His view of the writer's relationship to society, as well as of the relationship between culture and politics, remained relatively stable, however. The article explores how such a Romantic role survived in modern Norway, and how the Welfare State project may be said both to have contributed to its long survival, and, in the end, through a generally democratizing movement, to have made it impossible.

Key words author's role; Jens Bjørneboe; welfare state; social democracy; meta culture

The End of a Role

During the late 1960s and early 1970s a new and radical generation of Norwegian writers began to oppose what they saw as the hitherto available roles for authors in bourgeois society. At least in part acting from their own communist persuasions, they stressed the need for a professionalisation of the role, based on a conviction that authors were hard-working labourers, producers of a commodity of which society was in need. As a consequence they wanted to dethrone the Romantic author, to demystify the idea of the lonely, misunderstood and socially excluded genius. For the leading writer of this generation, Dag Solstad, a central problem lay in liberating oneself from what he termed “some kind of general, mythical notion” of the author (“En samtale om litteratur i dag” 261; “Spilleren” 81, 76). He argued that an author's authority must be based on something other than the traditional role. The author can no longer be a prophet and leader of the people”, he noted, nor “alchemist” or “sufferer”. In order to do his work, he claimed, in what was a criticism of certain ideas of authen-

ticity, the author had to become “a player”.

Before indicating the general direction for my article’s discussion of certain aspects of literary life in the Norwegian welfare state, it is worth identifying one of several striking paradoxes in the historical material under investigation. Those who articulated the most vociferous criticism of a traditional, Romantic image of the author were at the same time oppositional voices within the Welfare state, from the left, while those who most clearly adhered to such a traditional role were also critics of the Welfare state, but from the right, or at least from what they themselves considered an a- or unpolitical position. Jens Bjørneboe (1920 – 76), who, for reasons which should become clear, will play a central part in my discussion, in political terms went from the latter position in the 1950s to the former in the 1960s. But both his critical approach to the Welfare state and his view of his own role as author were remarkably consistent. My aim is to contribute to the understanding of some of the central premises for literary life and authorship in a developing Norwegian Welfare state, including, not least, views of the author’s role in society. Bjørneboe, who was a poet, novelist, playwright and essayist, the perhaps last of a certain kind of Sartrean author-intellectual, was active in Norwegian public life from 1948 – 1976, and may be said to be the best example of the kind of authorial role against which Solstad rebelled. In Norwegian cultural discourse in the first decades after his death, Bjørneboe indeed became something like the incarnation of this role. When the question “Where is the new Bjørneboe?” is asked in almost ritual fashion, it is clearly with reference to a role rather than a person. But such a question is not only based on a particular kind of nostalgia which necessarily involves the erasure of many of the historical meanings connected with Bjørneboe; it assumes that such an investment in the authority of the author figure is desirable.

A Conservative Opposition

In order to understand how a fundamentally Romantic notion of the author could survive for so long in Norway — and I am not suggesting that it is absolutely extinct, but that it is theoretically discredited and, due to a general process of democratisation, made structurally difficult — it is fruitful to see it in connection with the development of the Welfare state and a particular form of conservative opposition to the same. The traditional story of the author as outsider, as misunderstood genius, was one of the most distinct narratives which young authors could enter in the 1950s. But during this decade this strong narrative came to be decided by a particular negation, not of society or the community more generally, but of the state. The state which a number of authors came to oppose was, more particularly, a state which was becoming a welfare state during the phase of post-war reconstruction.

An important context for a number of writers who were to maintain a Romantic role of authorship, and who represented some of the most important oppositional voices against the Norwegian Welfare state in the 1950s, lay in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and the founding of the journal *Spektrum* (*Spectrum*) (1946 – 1954), since continued as *Horisont* (*Horizon*) (1955 – 1967). The idea behind the first of these journals was that it would have the strength of the inter-war *Mot Dag*

(Towards Day) group, but as a negation of the latter's political radicalism. The ambition was, furthermore, to stand outside of political parties, to advocate a certain holistic anti-materialism, and, in an attempt at finding a middle ground, neither to support the capitalists nor the proletariat ("Spektrum"). Humanity had reached a low point, and *Spektrum* was to work for freedom and "a spiritual restructuring", while they noted, and I will claim that this is absolutely central to their undertaking, that there was nothing to "achieve via politics".

A number of literary anthroposophists, the followers of the Austrian esotericist and philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861 – 1925), came to make up a substantial part of the *Spektrum* group, and became absolutely dominant in *Horisont*. Their views can, apart from their esoteric and occult persuasions, be characterised as strongly individualist and anti state. When an influential literary critic in 1955 attempted to identify the surprising and conspicuous influence that this group had asserted in the first decade after the war, he called them "the strongest spiritual group in Norwegian cultural life" (Eidem 3, 8). It was within these contexts that Bjørneboe found his literary and intellectual voice. The most important conclusion he and his circle seems to have drawn from the war was that the mass movements had been discredited, whether they were called communism, fascism or nazism, and that it was necessary to reject all such collective efforts, in addition to totalitarianism and the state. For them, the very survival of the individual was at stake. Such perspectives meant that they from the very outset were hostile to the idea of giving the state sector an increased role within a social democratic society.

Bjørneboe was on the whole to remain faithful to his anti-stateism. When here-published his novel *Under en hårdere himmel* (*Under a harder sky*) (1957) in 1969, he had in the meantime, at least outwardly, moved from the right to the left. But his attitude towards the state's role seems to have been pretty much the same; "Not under Quisling, — but after the war, came the fascist period of Norwegian history" (Bjørneboe, "Etterord" 186 – 91). In making such a provocative claim, he seems to have had state influence, the minority's role under a mighty majority and a more general liberal deficit in mind.

In the 1950s Bjørneboe involved himself in a number of debates where the social democratic state may be said to have been the main opponent. A central premise for the role he and his closest friends and colleagues advocated and believed in, lies in the relationship between culture and politics, historically often thematised through the binary pair of culture and civilisation. During this period Bjørneboe was convinced that "radicalism" had gone wrong by becoming political ("Hans Jæger" 23 – 28). "Real radicalism", he would claim, "goes far deeper than to the political" ("Vi er blitt provins: Nasjonal-radikalisme er en karikatur" 1 – 2). There are a number of examples of how Bjørneboe explicitly places culture (including for him aesthetics and metaphysics, in fact inextricably linked to the latter) above politics. One of the reasons why such an oppositional role arose just at this historical juncture, may very well be an experience of what the historian Jens Arup Seip has characterised as "the one-party state", a fairly monolithic post-war political structure dominated by the Labour Party and what may be termed a "reform technocracy" (Seip 7 – 42). But Bjørneboe

and his literary (and spiritual) circles in any case go further than to advocating a resistance towards or even a rejection of the Welfare state project; they seem more generally to be rejecting the legitimacy of the political sphere. These arguments are reminiscent of the young Thomas Mann's (1875 – 1955) argument that it was useless and self-contradictory to oppose modern civilisation via politics. For him and a number of other European cultural critics of the twentieth century, modernity was simply the triumph of a political, as opposed to a cultural, mentality.

The British critical theorist Francis Mulhern has coined the term "meta culture" or a "metacultural discourse" in an attempt at exploring culture's own self-reflexivity, how it describes itself and its relationship to other fields, including the political (xiii – xiv). It is a matter, then, of how culture "speaks of itself", how it "addresses its own generality and conditions of existence". In order to grasp the reasons behind Bjørneboe and his literary group's opposition to the Welfare state, i. e. , how this particular tradition of *Kulturkritik* or cultural criticism shaped their views, it is not enough to see their position as a traditional conservative or right-wing one; it is clear that they were more fundamentally opposed to politics, both as a field and as a *praxis*. They questioned its authority as such. Holding the view that culture stands in a hierarchical position to politics, as superior, is both problematic and potentially productive, at least in literary terms. What makes this position particularly interesting in this case, is that it is held by a writer, Bjørneboe, who has also become the key representative of the socially and politically engaged artist in the Norwegian literary history of the latter part of the twentieth century.

One of the things most obviously at stake in metacultural discourse is "social authority", seen as a struggle for the status of culture, not least in relation to society's most established form of social authority, i. e. , that achieved through politics (Mulhern xix). A whole series of European cultural critics of the last century seems to have worked towards reinstating their own notion of culture in what they considered an organic unity, and as the central principle of social authority, thus, at least potentially, dissolving political reason. T. S. Eliot symptomatically put the question as to why "the man of letters", in other words someone very much like himself was so particularly suited when it came to solving the greatest political challenges of the time (North 11). In "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture" (1948), he argued in similar fashion that his own class ought to use their positions in order to solve the problems which society could not solve. Like so much anti-liberal critique, whether from the left, or, as in this case, from the right, Eliot inevitably ended up by referring to hidden value systems and mystified forms of power.

Metaphysics and State Involvement

Jens Bjørneboe's understanding of himself as artist was shaped by the experience of a small literary community during the war and in the first post-war decade, but it was also founded in theory, i. e. , in Steiner's energetic production of books and lectures. In his view of the artist, the founder of The Anthroposophical Society was guided by ideas of fate, and of Platonic and Occult notions leading to a vision of the artist as a medium between this and a more spiritual reality. This special status inevitably also

included sacrifice, if only as a confirmation of the fact that the great artist must necessarily be a heretic, an outsider. While Bjørneboe was still among the most important voices of Norwegian anthroposophy, he noted that “if one is to speak truth, one must accept being treated as a liar” (“Til årets russ” 92 – 107). This was in line with Steiner’s idea that the (few) initiated would always be misunderstood (by the masses). Such ideas led to a strong emphasis on the individual, and, by implication, to a general scepticism of all kinds of collective bodies, with the new Welfare state as a strong version of the latter. In 1952, Bjørneboe had been crystal clear in his views on the relationship between the state and culture: “I consider it absolutely impossible that a writer with his sanity intact would want to give the state a right to influence our cultural and religious life” (1952).

While the state intervened in the controversial Norwegian language question, in an attempt at merging the nation’s two written languages into one, Labour’s cultural politics in 15 years after the war were otherwise remarkably *laissez faire*. It was not until the early 1960s that Norwegian social democrats admitted that they had failed in their cultural policies. It was wrong, they now realized, to have left literature to itself to such a large extent. The result had been an increasingly poor output of Norwegian books, and a sense of a crisis in a book market dominated by translations and non-fiction. Within the next few years this led to the most important, and still existing, systems for the regulation of Norway’s literary life, namely the so-called “Innkjøpsordningen” (The Purchase System) (1965), in which the state agreed to buy one copy of new fiction books for every public library (i. e., of Norwegian novels, short story collections, poetry and drama), and the “Momsfritaket” (exemption from VAT) (1967). By this time, it should be added, a radicalised Bjørneboe had for a while reached the conclusion that the state indeed *had* a role to play within the cultural field. His cousin and friend André Bjerke, who stayed faithful to the views the two had shared in the fifties, would conclude, however, that artists who could not do without support from the state might as well become salesmen (1962). He went on to mock the vision of writers in a new “Age of social security”.

Even if Bjørneboe at this time had changed his views about state involvement in the nation’s cultural life, his view of his role as a writer was remarkably consistent. In the first number of the literary journal *Vinduet* in 1961, Bjørneboe figures in an *enquête* about the writer’s calling. For him the writer is nothing less than a prophet: “We suffer from some kind of prophetic clairvoyance” (“En dikters kall profetens var – ” 74 – 76). Authors are “supersensitive” with a special ability to “sense the suffering of others as if it were their own”. A writer’s “prophetic force” is gained through experience, Bjørneboe continues, thus making suffering and loneliness central ingredients in his view of the artist. This was a view, it may be added, which he went on to practise, more and more in the last decade of his life. His life and works thus also became inextricably connected in what developed into a Bjørneboe mythology.

In spite of the fact that he took up new political positions, including, for a while, also adopting a more positive perspective on the Welfare state, Bjørneboe’s worldview remained as manicheistic as before, if not, as the sixties came towards

their close, even more so. After a more open if ambivalent approach to the state in the first half of the sixties, he lost faith, again seeing his own role as part of the battle between state and individual, good and evil. In a response to the culture budget of 1972, he articulated his views in clear terms: the state represents lies; authors stand for truth (Bjørneboe, “Staten og litteraturen”, 6 and “Staten og litteraturen II”, 6). Politicians were liars and hypocrites, he noted, and politics was “an obscene word”. Bjørneboe’s old views seem to have become solidified, and even hardened, and this in the very period in which he, as a celebrated writer among the new radical left and the so-called “68 – ers”, became precisely a role model for the kind of social engagement which was now so often deemed to be required of writers and artists. Bjørneboe remarked that he was concerned with greater and deeper things than politics, namely with what he now called “spiritual culture”. In this response to another depressing budget, he drew on what he referred to as one of his favourite verses in the gospels, albeit a somewhat inaccurate version of Christ’s warning to Jerusalem and its pharisees in Matthew 23:37: “But you have stoned the prophets!” The powerful will always persecute the truthsayers, he claimed. As long as there are states, the list of “killed, imprisoned and at best exiled poets” would be endless. The authors and the “professional liars” would never be reconciled, while literature was in fact the “real, secret and innermost life” of the people. Bjørneboe was clearly preaching a highly elitist gospel, one connected to a Romantic and even esoteric view of the author, a scepticism towards the existing Welfare state, and towards politics and the state more generally. “The state is our enemy”, he observed, and went on to claim that any writer who did not take up a hostile position in relation to the state was “a betrayer of culture”.

In a Norwegian context Jens Bjørneboe represents a rare example of continuity between the conservative literary opposition of the fifties and the new and radical stance of the 68 – ers. But his role seems almost consistently to have been constructed from the premise that individual integrity would always be at odds with collective self-delusion and corruption. He argued as if intellectual integrity could only exist outside of the collective, outside of institutions, democracy and politics, the Welfare state included.

Conclusions

The 1950s literary opposition against the Norwegian Welfare state and social democracy can hardly be understood without an insight into these writers’ views of politics and the role of the author. The only prominent figure among this group who managed to revitalise and keep this role alive in the 1960s, was Bjørneboe, and this primarily seems to have happened because he changed his political position at the right moment. By becoming radicalised at the beginning of the decade, he found his historical moment towards the decade’s end, both in literary and political terms. This also meant that he became positioned on the winning side in the cultural and political battle of the 1960s, and the group which won this battle also went on to write their own history, thus to a large extent controlling our later perceptions of them. But there is another paradox at work in relation to Bjørneboe’s status as a prophet-writer at this

particular time, and that for a new generation of radical youth. The rebellion against authority which Bjørneboe preached, contributed, albeit as part of a larger movement towards a more general democratisation, to the very deconstruction of his own authority. He was, it might be said, a somewhat authoritarian critic of authority. Furthermore, and equally relevant to the concerns of this article, such an investment in a role, that is the role of the author, became more difficult as part of this rejection of authority.

The question “where is the new Knut Hamsun” is not often asked in Norwegian public life. The historical trauma of the nation’s great writer who sided with the Nazis and German occupants during the war may have meant that it would be impossible to emulate his role, a role in which he would consider himself both an outsider and a leader of his nation, after the war. It is, from this perspective, curious that a similar role would still be available after Hamsun, and this should, I will suggest, be seen in relation to the development of the Welfare state. This grand social and political project may, at least in the literary field, be seen to have created its own negation. In this way the old role of the artist as prophet and heretic was given a new, if limited lease, and it was given a new political, and even *über*-political rationale, in opposition to collectives, to mass movements, and to social democracy. For Bjørneboe and a number of other writers during this period, a Romantic view of the artist seems to have been a prerequisite for finding a voice. Through a strong, if not unfettered individualism, combined with a particular belief in the special role artists still ought to play in society, if only as a misunderstood elite, these writers found motivation for their many and vehement attacks on the Welfare state and its different manifestations. They lived, in their own perception of the situation, at a time and within a political system which had voluntarily chosen to “stone its prophets”.

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