

NorLyr: A Scandinavian network in poetry research

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Due to an unavoidable conflict in schedule, I missed the 2017 Tallinn conference. My Nordic network for research in modernist poetry, a Scandinavian group with the same research interests, happened to take place in Turku during the very same days, and these meetings are important for me.

Background and Members

During its early years this network was called ‘NorMod’, short for Nordic Modernism. Nowadays our home page is named ‘NorLyr’¹. ‘Lyr’ is short for ‘lyrik’, which in Swedish means all kinds of poems. This change is due to that focus little by little has moved to the examination of the very latest literary achievements, poetry after the millennium shift, more than only modernism. The network was founded in 2002 by Idar Stegane, a professor in the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literatures at the University of Bergen. Strolling around at a Nordistic conference, he noticed how the participants to a high degree lacked knowledge about literature from Nordic countries other than their own. Swedes knew little of Norwegian poetry, Danes knew little about Swedish poems, and so on. Thus, Stegane decided to do something about it.

His first step was to contact Peter Stein Larsen in Aalborg, Denmark, Per-Erik Ljung in Lund, Sweden, and Hadle Oftedal Andersen in Helsinki. These four experts were the founding fathers, but their network developed quickly. Soon the group grew to include Eva Britta Ståhl, Härnösand, Sweden, Unni Langås, Kristiansand, Norway, and Louise Mønster, Aalborg, Denmark. Presently we number around twenty members, and every year new, young members turn up.

We eagerly wanted members from outside the Scandinavian main countries Denmark, Norway and Sweden. An Icelandic participant has been sought out, and for some time Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson offered the Icelandic viewpoint. But Iceland in some way seems to be situated very far away out in the Atlantic Ocean, and it has been difficult to keep the contact. Concerning the Faroe

¹ <http://www.cgs.aau.dk/forskning/faglige-netvaerk/norlyr/>

Islands we have been more lucky, as we at an early stage got Bergur Djurhuus Hansen as a member. Finland's membership has also been complicated. The Finnish language is not a Nordic language, but in Finland there is a small Swedish speaking minority which happens to have produced a vast body of high quality poetry. This minority, however, is poor in terms of travelling grants and support, which often restrains their participating.

More about the members can be found at our home page². It is in the Danish language, not English, because one of our principles is to promote our Nordic languages. Here you may study the interests and publications of Scandinavian researchers of poetry.

At our meetings the social part is essential. Evenings reserved for food, drink and friendly conversations promote friendship, something that in turn further quality in research. The safe environment of a group attracts good ideas and interesting talks. Those who want to surprise the world with their research results should be nice to each other.

Similar and Different

The different Scandinavian languages are of course distinct entities – however, Scandinavian people understand each other without many difficulties. This is a treasure to be taken care of. Looking backwards in history, these literatures sometimes have cooperated – for example, the Middle Age Swedish “Eufemia songs” were written in Akershus, the capital now named Oslo. And the region where I live was Danish land until just three-hundred years ago, with many places names still in Danish.

One Scandinavian poet who has been important for development in all the Nordic countries is Edith Södergran (1892–1923), who lived in Finland at the country's very eastern border with Russia but using Swedish as her mother tongue. She published five thin books of modernistic poetry between 1916 and 1925. At the age of 31 Södergran passed away suffering from tuberculosis. However, she became the prominent modernist figure, prefacing the change for all Scandinavia. Because of her illness, Södergran happened to spend some years before the first World War at a sanatorium in Switzerland, a place and a period burning with new ideas of literature. She happily sipped them in, and when she had to leave because of the out break of the War, she brought them home to Finland.

² <http://www.cgs.aau.dk/forskning/faglige-netvaerk/norlyr/medlemmer/>

Because of a conservative cultural climate in Finland and Sweden at this period, it took some time before her poetry was acknowledged for its brilliance. However, once it happened her influence was overwhelming, and spread just as well over the borders to both Denmark and Norway. Today her work is translated into languages from English to Chinese, and everywhere in between. This time it happened to be a female poet, among other things producing a lovely free verse. Reviewing poets of the early Scandinavian modern movement you may notice how female poets often developed the new free versification more eagerly than male. I think this has to do with Södergran as a primary model. During the last century a critic's reference to Södergran came to imply female quality, a new woman poet of true talent. However, Södergran's influence transcended gender. For example her affect was heavy on the prominent author Gunnar Ekelöf (1907–1968), who for his part meant much in the development of Norwegian Modernism.

The details of this process, however, are in need of a better mapping, to be ready for literary scholars. Exactly when did Södergran reading cross borders to Denmark and Norway? What are the relationships between the early Finno-Swedish modernism and the poetics of the Dane Emil Bønnelycke and the expressionism of the Norwegian Kristofer Uppdal? Here is also an aspect of literary critique where the Dane Torben Brostrøm, the Norwegian Paal Brekke, and the Swede Bengt Holmquist all played important roles for crossing language borders.

Rules and Books

Our network is governed by some rules. We meet once a year for a 2–3 day conference at a Nordic university, where a member takes care of the arrangements. Every year, there is a carefully prepared theme, such as translations, gender, political poetry and so on. But the most important rule is the crossing of at least one country border. As a Swede, I have to work with poems from another Nordic language as well as poems from my own one. This rule implies a quantity of comparative studies. The subject of this year, song lyrics, invited comparisons between Danish and Swedish hip hop, and Faroese and Norwegian Psalms, among other things. You really learn something in this process, and I have been able to find new favorites in the literatures of my neighbour countries.

The process also means a yearly, moderated challenge from colleagues who together represent a substantial part of the Scandinavian research field. We are

stimulated to look into themes that are outside our usual competences, well aware that the others are in the same unstable situation. In that way we widen our frames of understanding.

Each meeting results in the publication of a collection of essays exploring the year's subject. The host of the meeting is also charged with editing the next volume. The first four books in the series belong to the Nordic department of Helsinki University, "Nordica Helsingiensia". After that we partnered with a Norwegian editor, Alvheim & Eide Academic Publishers of Bergen. The whole series is called "Modernisme i nordisk lyrikk" ["Modernism in Nordic Poetry"]. To date, nine separate volumes have been published, with the following catalogue of titles:

1. Andersen, Hadle Oftedal; Stegane, Idar (eds.) 2005. *Modernisme i nordisk lyrikk 1*. Helsingfors: Helsingfors universitet. [Modernism in Nordic Poetry]
2. Andersen, Hadle Oftedal; Larsen, Peter Stein; Mønster, Louise (eds.) 2008. *Stedet. Modernisme i nordisk lyrikk 2*. Helsingfors: Helsingfors universitet. [The Place]
3. Andersen, Hadle Oftedal; Ljung, Per Erik; Ståhl, Eva-Britta (eds.) 2009. *Nordisk lyriktrafikk. Modernisme i nordisk lyrikk 3*. Helsingfors: Helsingfors universitet. [Nordic Poetic Traffic, Translations]
4. Bäckström, Per; Langås, Unni; Andersen, Hadle Oftedal (eds.) 2010. *Samspill mellom kunstartene. Modernisme i nordisk lyrikk 4*. Helsingfors: Helsingfors universitet. [Cooperation between Art Forms]
5. Nielsen, Ingrid; Stegane, Idar (eds.) 2012. *POESI PM [post millennium]. Modernisme i nordisk lyrikk 5*. Bergen: Alvheim og Eide akademisk forlag. [Poetry Post Millennium]
6. Kjerkegaard, Stefan; Langås, Unni (eds.) 2013. *Diktet udenfor diktsamlingen. Modernisme i nordisk Lyrikk 6*. Bergen: Alvheim og Eide akademisk forlag. [Poems outside the Book]
7. Andersen, Hadle Oftedal; Kemp, Susanne; Alfredsson, Johan (eds.) 2015. *Kjønnskriфт, Kjønnskriфт, Könnskriфт. Modernisme i nordisk lyrikk 7*. Bergen: Alvheim og Eide akademisk forlag. [Writing Gender]
8. Lilja, Eva; Hansen, Bergur Djurhuus; Vest, Rasmus Dahl (eds.) 2016. *Långa dikter. Berättelse, experiment, politik. Modernisme i nordisk lyrikk 8*. Bergen: Alvheim og Eide akademisk forlag. [Long Poems. Narrative, experiment, politics]

9. Larsen, Peter Stein; Mønster, Louise; Rustad, Hans Kristian 2017. *Økopoesi. Modernisme i nordisk lyrikk 9*. Bergen: Alvheim og Eide akademisk forlag. [Ecological poetry]

The themes that have been chosen come close to things commonly discussed during later years, like multimodality, gender, ecology and so on. One such topic, poetry connected to a place in the second volume, found significant success. Obviously we had selected an actual theme in need of discussion. Volume 7, focused on gender, turned out to be complicated with many conflicting perspectives. After the volume 9, with the topic ecology, some of the writers were inspired to go on and further develop their understanding within this field.

Contemporary Poetry

Volume 5 directed a somewhat new orientation on contemporary conceptual or avant-garde poetry. This was a consequence of the establishment of Centre for Research in Contemporary Poetry (or for short CERCOP)³ in Aalborg, financed with a grant from the Danish Council for Independent Research in Humanities 2013 to the project “Contemporary Poetry between Genres, Art Forms and Media”. This project collected about ten poetry researchers from different Scandinavian universities – some of them from NorLyr – and some researchers even from outside Nordic countries. At the same time the contemporary poetry scene in Scandinavia went into a flourishing period.

CERCOP looks for three different fields of tension: genre-decomposing, multimodality, and media outside the book. They also embrace an orientation towards the sound and performance in which poetry, drama and music have entered into new constellations. The technological development of the media has contributed to the development of new poetic forms of interaction on the internet. The Aalborg project spread results and inspiration to our network. Volume 5 (2012) was titled *Poesi PM [Poetry Post Millennium]*, and plunged into the newest poetical texts of conceptualism and language materialism. Also, the following volumes have been reoriented toward the contemporary scene, and nowadays our network finds itself at home in this very latest period. At first driven by curiosity, we now are competent interpreters of the latest ideas and trends in poetics.

³ <http://www.en.cgs.aau.dk/research/research-groups/cercop>

For the moment there is a strong tendency to a new wave of politics in poetry, and this will be our theme for next year. In October, we will meet again in Lund, prepared with curiosity, collegiality, and the latest viewpoints on political poetry.