

"Modersmaal er vort hjertesprog"

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EINAR HAUGEN, HARVARD

«Modersmaal er vort hjertesprog»

When N. F. S. Grundtvig in 1838 chose to write his hymn to the Danish mother tongue, it was not just a pretty poem. Coming in the midst of the Romantic Movement, its repeated emphasis on the beauties and the serviceability of Danish was part of a long-term project to raise the status of the language in the esteem of his people. It served as a motto for his book *Skolen for Livet* («The School for Life», 1838), in which he agitated intensively for the introduction of Danish into the school system and attacked the Latin school which was still the typical school for Danish youth, as it was in all the Scandinavian countries and Germany. This was the school that he himself had attended and which he had gradually come to see as an enemy of religious as well as secular education. He contrasted the «school for life» with «the school for death», as he called the Latin school. «It begins with letters and ends with book learning . . . All letters are dead, even if they are written with the finger of angels and the pens of the stars, and all book learning is dead that is not joined with the reader's life». ¹ For this reason his poem was directed at the mothers of Denmark, who «will understand his call to the rights of life over those of theory.» ² Eventually, his agitation led to the creation of his famous *folkehøjskoler* or «folk highschools» as an alternative education for the people.

The first stanza begins with «mother»: «Moders navn er en himmelsk lyd, saa vide som bølgen blaaner» («Mother's name is a heavenly sound, as far as the billows are blue»), but every stanza after that begins with Modersmaal («mother tongue»). I choose the climactic stanza to illustrate its tenor:

Modersmaal er vort hjertesprog,
kun løs er al fremmed tale,
det alene i mund og bog
kan vække et folk af dvale.
Sødt i lyst og sødt i nød,
sødt i liv og sødt i død,
sødt i eftermælet. ³

(Mother tongue is the speech of our hearts,
but loose is all foreign talk,
it alone in mouth and book
can rouse a people from torpor.
Sweet in joy and sweet in grief,
sweet in life and sweet in death,
sweet in reminiscence.)

¹ GRUNDTVIG (1943, IV: 201).

² ARONSON (1960: 250).

³ HAUGEN (1976: 431).

As far back as 1816, when Grundtvig was only 33 years old, he had written in praise of the language, in his journal *Dannevirke*. «The mother tongue is among all known languages the simplest and most trustworthy, filled with the sweetest natural euphony, equally suited to expressing the noblest thoughts, the deepest emotions, and the most spirited humor.»⁴ He deplored that it was being neglected in favor of Latin or French, or even Icelandic. It was time that the old writings should be used to bring back the old heroic speech.⁵

Grundtvig also set to work rendering into modern Danish the Latin writings on Danish history by Saxo Grammaticus and the Icelandic *Heimskringla* of Snorri Sturluson. In 1829–1831 he undertook three trips to England to seek out the Nordic spirit in Anglo-Saxon literature. In his *Nordic Mythology* of 1832 he bodied forth a whole program of religious and social reforms inspired by Old Germanic literature. In the other stanzas of his poem he celebrated the mother tongue in deeply engaged terms as «beloved in south and north», as «the rosy bond that encircles old and young», the speech «in which lives the spirit of our fathers», and «loveliest of all on the lips of young women» («dejlígst i pige-munde»)⁶.

The Latin school was solidly entrenched, and maintained its supremacy for as long as it served a purpose in the rest of Europe. Grundtvig's agitation did not affect the schools of Scandinavia until toward the end of the century, when «Modersmaal» became the accepted term for instruction in the schools. A look at the *Ordbok* of the Swedish Academy reveals that the first attestation of this modern usage came in 1894, after which it proliferated as a title of all manner of teaching positions and teaching manuals.⁷

Turning to Sweden, we see that Grundtvig was not alone in his advocacy of the language and values of the common man in the Romantic era. In 1811 a group of young students at the University of Uppsala formed a patriotic society under the name of «Götiska förbundet» («The League of Goths»)⁸. The leader was the historian and poet Erik Gustav Geijer (1783–1847), who like most of the other «Goths» came from Värmland, then a rustic, remote region, but very patriotic. Geijer, like Grundtvig, found inspiration in England. And on reading such German writers as Kant, Schiller, and Schelling he reacted against the rationalism of his elders. He like the other Goths found their ideals in the ancient Swedish past, which they identified with the Icelandic classics, the sagas which they read together at their meetings. They even adopted Old Norse names, Geijer calling himself «Einar Tambaskälver».

As the Goths romanticised the past, they saw it as a time when they were «no one's slave and no one's master», honest and hardy. They included the Swedish

⁴ GRUNDTVIG (1941, II: 162).

⁵ GRUNDTVIG (1941, II: 162–3).

⁶ HAUGEN (1976: 431), on Grundtvig see ARONSON (1960), HAY (1960), NÄGELE (1971).

⁷ *Ordbok över svenska språket*. Utgiven av Svenska Akademien, Lund 1943, XVII, M: 1252–3).

⁸ BLANCK (1918: 6 ff.), WAHLSTRÖM (1907: 69).

yeomen in their admiration, as Geijer put it in his poem to Odalbonden (the yeoman farmer):

De väldige herrar med skri och med dån
slå riken och byar omkull;
tyst bygga dem bonden och hans son,
som så i blodbestänkt mull.⁹

(The mighty lords mid shriek and groan
spread ruin on towns and kingdoms;
the silent plowman and his son,
they till the blood-stained soil.)

Contrary to Grundtvig, Geijer and his fellow Goths did not denigrate Latin; one of them, the celebrated poet Tegnér even became a professor of Greek. But most of his poetry was in Swedish, and in a poem about the languages of Europe he did not use the term «Modersmål», but described his language as «the speech of honor and heroes»:

Ärans och hjeltarnas språk! Hur ädelt och manligt du rör dig,
ren är som malmens din klang, säker som solens din gång.¹⁰

(Language of honor and heroes! How nobly and manly you move,
pure as ore is your ring, sure as the sun is your course.)

Swedes, as befit their military past, glorified the manliness of their language; it was not made for the «lower joys of the valley».

If we turn to Norway, we see that the Norwegians were also deeply affected by the Romantic spirit of their times. But they had neither a written mother tongue, like the Danes, having learned to write Danish during four centuries of union with Denmark, nor a glorious military past like the Swedes. Their first order of business was to create or recreate these traditions from anew. The poet Henrik Wergeland (1808–1845) chafed under the yoke of his literary Danish, and in 1835 wrote his celebrated essay «Om norsk sprogreformation» («On Norwegian language reform»). To the dismay of his contemporaries, he experimented with dialect verse as well as with mixing Norwegian dialect words into his Danish. He rejected current attempts to describe his language as anything but Danish: «It is the reality of an independent written language that challenges the spirits of Norway. Time must of itself give birth to this before the century has run its course («før aarhundredet nedrødmer») . . .»¹¹ Before long two language scholars went to work to realize Wergeland's dream: Knud Knudsen (1812–1895) proposed a planned evolution of written Danish to reflect the speech of the educated urban class and Ivar Aasen (1813–1896) proposed an entirely new Norwegian norm that reflected the more conservative rural dialects. Both approaches won adherents, and before long Norwegians could replace their Latin schooling with not

⁹ GEIJER (1923–31, II: 35).

¹⁰ HAUGEN (1976: 433).

¹¹ HAUGEN (1966: 27), HAUGEN (1968: 12).

one, but two Norwegian languages, known today as Bokmål and Nynorsk.¹²

Now at last Norway could join the chorus of praise for a national language. The Bokmål people could sing Grundtvig's song about «Modersmålet», which with some minor adjustment was also theirs, while the Nynorsk people in 1867 could intone with the minor poet Anders Reitan (1826–1872):

Maalet hennar mor me vil aldri, aldri gløyma!
 Kor det gjeng i verdi til, det vil tunga gøyma!
 Der me fekk i moderarv alt det beste hjarta tarv!¹³
 (Our mother's speech we will never, never forget!
 No matter how the world goes, the tongue will retain it!
 There we got as mother's heirs all the best our hearts will need!

These poems all came as expressions of apprehension on the part of Scandinavians that their national existence was threatened by aggressive neighbors. Romanticism reminded them that they had a glorious past and fired them with assurance that the future would be equally glorious. But Grundtvig and his followers were not the first to use poetry as a weapon in the national struggle. As with so many other phenomena we must look to Germany for the inspiration. Here we find at the very threshold of the century a poet who gave voice to German aspirations in the midst of despair. His name was Max von Schenkendorf (1783–1817), who was once celebrated as the poet of German liberation.¹⁴ His name may be forgotten today, but his poem «Muttersprache» (1814) still appears in German readers:

Muttersprache, Mutterlaut,
 wie so wonnesam, so traut!
 Erstes Wort, das mir erschallet,
 süßes, erstes Liebeswort,
 erster Ton, den ich gelallet,
 klingest ewig in mir fort.
 Ach, wie trüb ist meinem Sinn,
 wenn ich in der Fremde bin,
 wenn ich fremde Zungen üben,
 fremde Worte brauchen muß,
 die ich nimmermehr kann lieben,
 die nicht klingen als ein Gruß!¹⁵

¹² HAUGEN (1966: 112–3), HAUGEN (1968: 90–1).

¹³ HAUGEN (1976: 436–7).

¹⁴ I owe this reference to Grace Jungkuntz (Mrs. Richard) of Tacoma, Washington. Information on the poet can be found in GROSZ (1912), KÖHLER (1915), BAEHR (1888), and HAGEN (1863).

¹⁵ The poem has five stanzas; it first appeared in his *Christliche Gedichte* (1814) and is available in his *Gedichte* published by E. Grosz (GROSZ 1912: 84–5), also in BAEHR (1888: 25).

Like so many Romantic poets, this young Prussian nobleman died young, but he lived to fire his countrymen to resistance against the tyranny of Napoleon. It is quite possible that Grundtvig may have read his poem.

For Scandinavia we can only refer in passing to the launching of such «new» languages as Finnish in the east, Icelandic and Faroese in the west, all with their songs celebrating the virtues of the mother tongue. But let us now turn to the background of the term itself. It may come as a surprise to some that it does not exist in the ancient world, wither in the south or the north.

As far as we can tell, it is medieval, first attested in 1119, in the city of Strassburg, in the Latin phrase *lingua materna*.¹⁶ We are reminded that Strassburg, now in France, has through the centuries vacillated between France and Germany. It is a focal point between the Latin that came from Rome and the Germanic that resisted it in the North of Europe. One of the early clashes between Romans and Germans was settled here in 842 with the famous oaths of Strassburg. We do not know for sure whether the phrase *lingua materna* is originally Latin or is a rendition of a German *Muttersprache*.¹⁷ Whatever its origin, it spread rapidly to all the tongues of Europe. While «mother» is firmly established, the word for «tongue» varies: in German it became *sprache*, or *sprake*; in Dutch it was *taal* (*moedertaal*); in English it was *tongue* (*modertonge*), and in the Scandinavian languages, including Icelandic, it was *mál* (*móðurmál*, *modersmaal*, *morsmál*).

Finally we may ask the question: why was it the *mother's* tongue and not the *father's*? Modern explanations that attribute it to the mother's role as nurturer are too facile. Cicero called it *sermo patrius*, «speech of the fatherland», and *lingua paterna* is not unknown in the Middle Ages. An English cleric, Nigel of Canterbury, towards the end of the 12th century wrote a dedicatory couplet advising a colleague not to use the *lingua materni*, but the *lingua paterni*, by which he presumably meant Latin.¹⁸ The Icelandic poet Eysteinn Ásgrímsson (d. 1361) in his religious poem «Lilja» used *móðurmál* as a synonym with *dǫnsk*, his word for Old Norse.¹⁹ Archbishop Sunesen in Denmark used it to describe popular words from Danish inserted into his Latin text (c. 1210), e.g. *quas materna lingua vulgari ter bool appellat*, «which in the mother tongue is vulgarly known as *bool*».²⁰

It is impossible to avoid the impression that in the days when Latin was the dominant language of European learning, it was regarded as a male language, the language of civilized discourse. Women got no advanced education in Latin, and they no doubt brought up children in the vernacular of wherever they lived. Hence the local language came to be associated with the mothers. The first real-

¹⁶ KLUGE (1975: 497).

¹⁷ KLUGE (1975: 497).

¹⁸ I owe this reference to the kindness of Jan Ziolkowski; likewise several other references to medieval Latin attestations, not cited here. On Nigel of Canterbury see also CANTERBURY (1959).

¹⁹ See KRISTENSEN (1926), whose article has thrown great light on the history of *mother tongue* in Scandinavia.

²⁰ KRISTENSEN (1926).

ly appreciative references to the mother tongue come with the great reformers at the end of the Middle Ages. The first citation in English in the *OED* is from the reformer Wycliffe, who was also the first translator of the English Bible. In 1380 he wrote: «Secler lordys schuld, in defawte of prelatyes, lerne and preache þe law of God in here moder tonge.»²¹ In Germany Luther, the translator of the German Bible, wrote in advocacy of «die rechte mutter sprache.»²² The Danish-Norwegian writer Ludvig Holberg wrote facetiously in the introduction to his comedies: «Vort Danske Moders Maal i Aar en Moder bliver, Og med Comodie-kunst Sit første Foster giver.» («Our Danish mother tongue this year becomes a mother, and through the art of comedy brings forth its first offspring.»)²³ While these usages reflect the new respectability which translation of the Bible had given the mother tongue, they do not evidence the same kind of prestige that Latin still had. Holberg, as well as earlier Dante, wrote their serious writings in Latin.

It remained for the Romantics of the early 19th century to make of the mother tongue a national symbol, an expression of the national spirit. The German romantics, from Herder and Kant to Schiller and Schelling, had glorified the mother tongue,²⁴ culminating with Schenkendorf in 1814.

The Scandinavian romantics, with Grundtvig at their head, followed them in making the mother's tongue a symbol of the nation, which belonged as much to the fathers as to the mothers. All of them were deeply disturbed about their national prospects after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. The old kingdoms of Scandinavia had been fragmented into three smaller, monolingual countries: Denmark lost its fleet in 1802 and 1807, Sweden lost Finland to Russia in 1809, Norway, supposed to be a compensation, was torn from Denmark and given to Sweden in 1814. The German threat to Schleswig and Holstein led to disastrous wars down to 1864. There was an abundant reason for fear and insecurity, which could only be compensated by strengthening the national feelings. An important factor in this process was the honoring of the mother tongue as a precious «rosy bond that encircled the people», in Grundtvig's term.

In conclusion: we can observe a series of three steps in the elevation of the mother tongue. It began in the 12th century in a literal sense, as the speech of unlettered women, in contrast to the serious discourse of the masters of Latin. With the rendition of the Bible into the vernacular in the 16th century it achieved a higher status as the potential vehicle of the word of God. But only with the Romantics of the early 19th century did it achieve its apotheosis as the symbol of nationality with a place in the affections of all citizens, men as well as women.

²¹ Oxford English Dictionary.

²² KLUGE (1975: 497), GRIMM (1885, VI, M: 2827-2828).

²³ *Ordbog over det danske sprog*. Udgivet af det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, København 1933, (XIV, M: 254-5).

²⁴ DAUBE (1940) is a useful account of the rise of the term *Muttersprache*; Weisgerber has written extensively on the topic, e.g. WEISGERBER (1957).