



Sons of Norway Information Banks

# #214: NORWEGIAN POETRY AND POETS

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## INTRODUCTION

Norway has a long tradition of poetry dating back more than a thousand years to the Skaldic verse of the Viking Era. As time progressed, the style of poetry in Norway changed from the ballads, occasional poetry and improvised poems known as *stev* produced during the Middle Ages to more structured forms of poetry and finally to the more political and aesthetic poetry of the 20th century. Many of Norway's poets have been recognized internationally for their skill in crafting a quality poem.

## A TIMELINE OF NORWAY'S POETRY STYLES

**9th and 10th Centuries** – This was the time of Old Norse poetry, which is usually categorized into two types of poems: Skaldic and Eddaic verse. The poetry of this time was typically written by unknown authors, was characterized by the use of alliteration, and often told stories of the social and religious world of the Vikings.

**Middle Ages** – Anonymous works epitomized this time period, with its informal poetry used for storytelling and amusement. The most common styles of poems were the ballad and the *stev*. As Christianity moved into Norway, along with the spread of education, hymn writing also became a popular form of poetry and more poems were put on paper.

**19th Century** – During this century poetry in Norway began to play more of an important role by bringing society together to create a national identity for the fledgling nation after the "Four Hundred Years of Darkness."

**1900s** – Moving into the 1960s Norwegian poetry becomes less dependent on structure with the growth of Modernism, causing non-rhythmic and experimental poems to be written. As the century progressed poems began to be characterized by their more political nature and were aimed at promoting social change before—in reaction to these controversial themes—poetry became more aesthetically oriented. The 1990s saw a combination in the styles of poetry from the two previous decades as politics and aesthetics, with content and form, were used in a new fashion.



1455 W. Lake Street, Minneapolis, MN 55408  
(800) 945-8851 or (612) 827-3611  
[www.sonsofnorway.com](http://www.sonsofnorway.com) (Rev 10/2013)

## FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF DARKNESS

During the 400 years that Norway was part of the Scandinavian Union and under Danish rule, poetry in Norway was essentially nonexistent. Very few works are contributed solely to Norway during this time period. This time in Norway's literary history was referred to by Henrik Ibsen as the "Four Hundred Years of Darkness."

## NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN POETRY

As Norwegians immigrated to North America, new writers began to work to creatively express the experience of Norwegian immigrants. These stories and poems revolved around the experience and struggle of moving to a new land while feeling the longing for one's home country. A wonderful example of poetry by a Norwegian immigrant is Ingeborg Repling Hagen's collection of poems.

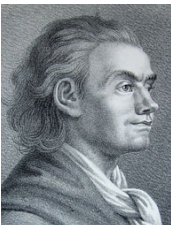
## SOME OF NORWAY'S POETS



### Peter Dass (1674-1701)

Pastor of an Alstahaug parish in northern Norway, Peter Dass only had one poem published during his life time, "Den nordiske dale-viise" ("The Norwegian Song of the Valley"). During the rest of Dass' life, his poems were circulated in manuscript form among his parishioners to be remembered

by heart. This remarkable, bold and adventurous pastor and poet became somewhat of a folk hero in Nordland, and stood out among his contemporaries for his use of fresh and everyday language. In his work "The Trumpet of Nordland," he sketches a vibrant, detailed picture of the land and people up in the North with loving accuracy and homely humor.



### Johan Herman Wessel (1742-1785)

Johan Herman Wessel is best known as a humorous and satirical writer. His famous wit made him one of the leaders of the *Norske Selskab* (Norwegian Society) in Copenhagen – a literary and patriotic society formed by Norwegians who lived or studied in Copenhagen. *Norske Selskab* promoted the

classic literature ideals of clarity, restraint and a pure style in reaction to German Romanticism. Wessel's short, striking verses are among the best known and most often quoted literary phrases in Norwegian literature and his comedy "Kiærlighed uden Strømper" (Love without Stockings) is still a popular play today. People of modern times appreciate and understand Wessel's parodies even if they reflect the ridiculous aspects of a society which no longer exists.

### Henrik Wergeland (1808-1845)

Henrik Wergeland was a legendary literary figure of Norway. Known best for his work "Skabelsen, mennesket og messias" ("Creation, Humanity, and Messiah"), Wergeland's humanitarian activities and revolutionary ideas made him a loyal supporter of freedom. While he supported Norway's constitution of 1814, he also fought hard and successfully to remove the paragraph in the constitution that excluded Jews from Norway.

### Aasmund Olafson Vinje (1818-1870)

Aasmund O. Vinje is one of Norway's finest lyric poets, even though he did not start writing poetry until he was 40 years old. Originally, making his career as a journalist, Vinje was instrumental in helping to establish Nynorsk as a new rural variant of the Norwegian language with the newspaper (*Dølen – The Dalesman*) he started in 1858. His best-known work was a book that combined essays and poems depicting Vinje's travels on foot from Oslo to Trondheim called *Ferdaminni fraa sumaren 1860* (Travel Memoirs from the Summer of 1860).



### Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906)

While Henrik Ibsen is most commonly known for his insightful plays with penetrating dialogue, Ibsen also wrote poetry. His most widely read poem "Terje Vigen" tells the dramatic tale of Terje who was captured in the 1809 English blockade of Norway's southern coast as he was attempting to smuggle food to his starving wife and daughter.



### Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910)

Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1903 "as a tribute to his noble, magnificent and versatile poetry, which has always been distinguished by both the freshness of its inspiration and the rare purity of its spirit," Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson wrote "Ja vi elsker dette landet" ("Yes, We Love This Land") which

became the Norwegian national anthem and was performed on Norwegian Constitution Day, May 17th, in 1864 in Christiania (Oslo).

Through a long and prolific career, Bjørnson established his reputation not only as a major literary voice, but as an advocate for common Norwegian people who eagerly participated in the many social and political controversies of the time, from women's rights to linguistic reform. Bjørnson was so admired by the Norwegian people of the world over that the founders of the Sons of Norway actually considered naming the organization after him (the idea was rejected only on the grounds that Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson would be hard for Americans to pronounce).

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### Sigbjørn Obstfelder (1866-1900)

A symbolist poet, Sigbjørn Obstfelder is often considered an innovator of style and prose in Norwegian poetry circles with his unrhymed verse and atmosphere of unfocused imagery. While his poems tended towards intensely personal material that reflected a wonderment of life they became an important representation of early modernism. The majority of his writing was published in the 1890s, including his first volume of poetry, *Digte*.

### Rolf Jacobsen (1907-1994)

One of the early modernist poets in Norway, Rolf Jacobsen used free verse and vivid images. He wrote mainly about his concerns with the world, such as his worries about the destruction of the environment. In 1933, Jacobsen published his debut collection of poems *Jord og Jern (Earth and Iron)* which was, and still is, considered to be unconventional. Along with Sigbjørn Obstfelder, Rolf Jacobsen has been translated into a variety of different languages and included in poetry anthologies as prominent examples of European modernism.

### Olav H. Hauge (1908-1994)

Another notable modernist Olav H. Hauge was known for writing in Nynorsk about everyday life. While the topics of Hauge's poems appeared to be simple, they were actually much more complex and included cross-cultural allusions not just to Old Norse literature and the Bible, but to Homer as well as classical Chinese and Japanese poetry. Besides writing many collections of poetry, Hauge also spent his time translating the works of other great poets, like Alfred Tennyson and William Butler Yeats, into Norwegian.

## READING LIST

Here is a short list of a few suggested works of Norwegian Poetry available in English. References to particular editions and recommended translations are included in some cases. Many of these books can be found at your local library, through specialty retailers like [www.ingebretsens.com](http://www.ingebretsens.com) and <http://store.vesterheim.org/> or through mainstream booksellers.

- Olav Hauge, *The Dream We Carry: Selected and Last Poems of Olav Hauge*. Trans. Robert Bly and Robert Hedin.
- Henrik Ibsen, *Terje Vigen*.
- Rolf Jacobsen, *The Roads Have Come to an End Now: Selected and Last Poems of Rolf Jacobsen*. Trans. Roger Greenwald.
- Tarej Vesaas, *Through Naked Branches*. Trans. Roger Greenwald.
- Henrik Wergland, *Jan van Huysum's Flower Piece*. Trans. John Irons.



## LEARNING MORE

Keep track of your reading through Sons of Norway's Cultural Skills Program. To learn more, check out [www.sonsofnorway.com](http://www.sonsofnorway.com).