

Satirising the Norwegian Language Conflict: Gabriel Scott's *Babels taarn* Contextually Reconsidered

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Abstract

Gabriel Scott's comedy *Babels taarn* (Babel Tower), first performed at the National Theatre in Kristiania in 1911, satirises the language controversy that was raging in Norway at the time. The play is regarded as important in linguistic and literary terms, but has been largely forgotten. This article argues that Scott was disillusioned by the politicisation of the language controversy and regarded the advance of *landsmål* as an artificial and unwelcome phenomenon in the unfolding of Norwegian culture which failed to understand the complexities of inevitable cultural syncretism. *Babels taarn* is discussed as a means by which Scott critiqued the defenders of *riksmål* for their passivity. Finally, it is argued that *Babels taarn* is a scathing indictment of what Scott perceived as misdirected and shallow nationalism.

Keywords

Gabriel Scott, *Babels taarn* (play), Norwegian drama, *landsmål*, language politics

For many decades the history of the Norwegian language controversy, or *språkstriden*, has attracted the attention of linguists and other scholars both in Norway and abroad. They have illuminated many facets of the endeavours by advocates of *landsmål* or *nynorsk* to place their form of the tongue on an equal footing with *riksmål* or *bokmål*, as well as the establishment and life of Det Norske Teatret, the politics of Riksmålsforbundet, and other dimensions of the protracted strife. Historians of the Nordic languages thus have at their disposal a moderate wealth of scholarly literature in which such works as Einar Haugen's *Language Conflict and Language Planning: The Case of Modern Norwegian* (1966) and Egil Børre Johnsen's *Vårt eget språk* (1987) figure prominently. The reputable journal *Maal og minne* has long served as a worthy vehicle for scholarship about individual aspects of the topic.

Yet many corners of *språkstriden* remain tenebrous, having been either entirely overlooked or given inadequate attention. Among these is a comedy which caused a public outcry when performed at Nationaltheatret in 1911, namely Gabriel Scott's satirical comedy *Babels taarn* (The Tower of Babel). Underscoring its significance in both the linguistic and the literary history of Norway, the eminent historian of Norwegian language planning Ernst Håkon Jahr (1987: 97) has pointed out that 'Dette skodespelet er det einaste vi har som heilt er vikt språkstriden i landet.' (This play is the only one we have which is entirely devoted to the language struggle in our country).¹

This neglect is one of the breaches in the uneven front on which research on Scott has advanced. Since the 1990s, the recrudescence of both scholarly and popular interest in this versatile and once very popular author has illuminated several hitherto murky corners in the history of Norwegian letters. Gabriel Scott Selskabet (The Gabriel Scott Society) was established in 1997 and continues to flourish. His most popular books have been reprinted. Numerous articles about aspects of Scott's authorship have appeared in both Norwegian and foreign journals. A new if seriously flawed biography was published in 1998 (Dahl 1998).² However, preoccupation with the mystical elements which are incorporated in a minority of his novels but are absent from his dramas, and the disproportionate attention given his masterly

novella of 1918, *Kilden* (The Source), has militated against serious consideration of most of his less well-known works. Among these is *Babels taarn*, which was published in the autumn of 1910 and staged in Kristiania the following February. A heavy-handed treatment of the contemporary strife over language policy in Norway, and particularly the advances made by the advocates of *landsmål*, this work further sharpened public discord over the debate which it lampooned. Historians of the Norwegian language and of the Norwegian theatre have occasionally mentioned the work and how it related to the controversies with which it dealt, but they have yet to examine either it or critical responses thereto.

In a brief article first published in 1956, i.e. two years before Scott's death, the eminent Norwegian author André Bjerke commented on the ongoing relevance of *Babels taarn*. To this like-minded linguistic conservative who, like Scott, had keen interests in a variety of national cultures and literatures, the satirical comedy first staged forty-five years earlier was 'fremdeles hyperaktuell' (Bjerke 1959: 10) (still extremely relevant). Bjerke, who unsheathed his dagger in the language debate much of his adult life and frequently pointed to inconsistencies among the champions of *nynorsk*, revelled in the disputes of the *maal* advocates in *Babels taarn* and saw in Scott's caricature of them 'en overordentlig realistisk beskrivelse av hvordan sprogutviklingen har foregått efter at "Babels taarn" ble oppført' (11) (an extraordinarily realistic description of how language development has unfolded since The Tower of Babel was first performed). Moreover, Bjerke incorrectly believed that Scott was 'fremsynt' (far-sighted) in predicting, through the words of a publisher and bookseller in the drama, that *samnorsk* would gain much traction in Norwegian language policy (13-14). Bjerke's piece was provocative, tendentious, and present-minded; he credited Scott's satire especially for predicting how and why *riksmål* would continue to lose ground:

Han avdekker alle de karaktertrekk som har bidratt til å gi riksmålsbevegelsen et dårlig ry i norsk åndsliv: en viss tendens til gold konservatisme og kultursnobberi, en altfor høy nese og et altfor godt sovehjerte, en egen frøkenaktig, sur pertentlighet,

en paraplyfektende indignasjon – som munner ut i total avmakt under alle virkelige oppgjør. (17)

(He uncovers all those character traits which have contributed to giving the riksmål movement a bad reputation in Norwegian cultural life: a certain tendency to dry conservatism and cultural snobbery, to being far too stuck-up and sleeping far too soundly, a peculiarly prudish, sour punctiliousness, an umbrella-waving indignation – leading to total powerlessness in the event of any real confrontation.)

However, Bjerke shed little light on the immediate historical context of *Babels taarn*; he said almost nothing about Scott; and, rather than analysing the text of the drama, he contented himself with reproducing extensive, undigested portions of it. Instead, Bjerke called attention to what he termed ‘den aktuelle borgerkrigen i Noregs Mållag’ (15) (the ongoing civil war in [the nynorsk activist organisation] Noregs Mållag), which seemed reminiscent of the disunity of the *maalfolk* in Scott’s drama, and called for a revival of the play at Nationaltheatret (24).

Despite its brevity, Bjerke’s article has remained virtually the sole scholarly commentary on the significance of *Babels taarn* for more than half a century. In the present article it is my intention to take vital steps towards filling the lacunae in scholarship about both Gabriel Scott and the history of the Norwegian language conflict by discussing major themes in this comedy against the background of Scott’s attitudes towards the *landsmål* movement and the rural residents of southern Norway early in the twentieth century. It will be argued that to a significant degree his critical perception of the bucolic mind of that region (which had come to the fore in such works as his first comedy, *Himmeluret* [1905, The Clock of Heaven] and his bitterly satirical *roman à clef* published in 1898 under the pseudonym Finn Fogg, *Fugl Fønix* [The Phoenix Bird]) shaped his dramatic caricature of *landsmål* advocates. However, it is also stressed that Scott was disillusioned by the politicisation of the language controversy and regarded the advance of *landsmål* as an artificial and unwelcome phenomenon in the unfolding of Norwegian culture which failed to understand the

complexities of inevitable cultural syncretism. Moreover, Scott used *Babels taarn* as a scourge for flailing the defenders of *riksmål* for their passivity and lack of vigour for the cause they ostensibly represented. Finally, it will be argued that *Babels taarn* is a scathing indictment of what Scott perceived as misdirected and shallow nationalism which lacked an understanding of the organic nature of cultural history and, in this regard, an appreciation of the interplay of Norwegian with other European cultures.

Scott's Attitudes towards Norway and *Landsmål*

There is no reason to question Scott's overarching devotion to Norway, not least elements of its natural beauty which come to the fore in many of his works as a manifestation of the divine and as a suitable habitat for those Norwegians who were content to live in harmony with nature. On the other hand, though sometimes misleadingly regarded as an archetypical southern Norwegian regionalist, Scott could be severely critical of the rural residents of Sørlandet, and his verbal scourging of their pietistic hypocrisy, backbiting, gossiping, and other foibles figures prominently in many of his works from the 1890s and the first two decades of the twentieth century, such as *Fugl Fønix*, *Himmeluret*, *Camilla Dyring*, and *Kilden*. Scott's family background and the first three decades of his life set him far apart from what he perceived as the narrow-gauged mentality of rural Norway. Born in Leith, Scotland, in 1882 while his father, S. Holst Jensen, was the Norwegian seamen's pastor in that port, he spent part of his childhood in London. While there is scant evidence that his formative years in the United Kingdom endowed him with anything British other than a knowledge of the English language, the opposite is true of his time in Germany and, to a much lesser degree, Italy. His affinity with German culture is manifest in many of his works beginning in the quinquennium before he penned *Babels taarn* and would reverberate in his subsequent writing. Almost immediately before his first drama, *Himmeluret*, was successfully performed in Kristiania in 1905, Scott broadened his cultural horizons by spending nearly a year in Florence and San Godenzo, Italy, followed by the first of several stays in Dinkelsbühl and elsewhere in Bavaria. As

the present author has demonstrated elsewhere, during the 1930s he admired certain aspects of social policy in the Third Reich, although unlike Knut Hamsun he also criticised other dimensions of National Socialist rule and eventually became a thoroughly disillusioned and outspoken critic of Hitler (Hale 2007). After returning to Norway, Scott lived alternatively in Kristiania and Sørlandet (interrupted by brief periods of residence in Italy and Bavaria) for some three decades before settling permanently near Arendal. During the early stage of his authorship, i.e. in the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, he evinced a critical attitude towards southern Norwegians which would eventually soften. His hostility and condescending attitude towards them came most vividly to the fore in an essay he contributed to *Christianssands-Tidende* in January 1909. In response to Olaf Benneche's critical review of his *Sjøpapegøier* (Sea Parrots), he relied explicitly on Andreas M. Hansen's *Norsk folkepsykologi*, wherein the theory had been advanced that what would become Norway had been populated by two ethnic groups, namely the Nor and the Gor. Their respective descendants, according to Hansen, could still often be identified by their cephalic indices and divided into two general categories, *Langskallerne* (long skulls) and *Kortskallerne* (short skulls). Scott noted that Sørlandet had a third category of inhabitants, *Tykskallerne* (thick skulls), and that according to recent – though unidentified – investigations there were not so few of them in the region. In a parting shot, he explicitly distanced himself from the regional populace. 'Jeg er ikke Sørslænding – ikke det mindste!' he insisted. 'Jeg er fuldblods Østslænding, men lod mig for Sikkerhets Skyld føde i Utlandet!' (Scott 1909: 2) (I am not a southerner – not in the least! I am a full-blooded easterner but, to be on the safe side, allowed myself to be born abroad!). This acerbic attitude continued to reverberate in Scott's writing for many years and, with regard to what Scott perceived as cognitively limited, uncultivated rural Norwegians generally, is apparent in the drama under consideration. However, he often tapped their language as a source of cultural authenticity and humour. Only a few years before writing *Babels taarn*, Scott crafted *Pider Ro's historier* (The Tales of Pider Ro), in which an idiosyncratic character from southern Norway related accounts in his regional dialect.

Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that Scott categorically despised *landsmål* as such or believed that it could not be a worthy vehicle for conveying Norwegian thought. Indeed, he found value in the works of certain *landsmål* writers. Scott particularly respected Arne Garborg and acknowledged that liberal thinker's considerable influence on the unfolding of his own post-orthodox religious views. In a letter written to Garborg's wife Hulda in 1921, he declared his long-standing devotion to her ailing, ageing husband: 'Jeg har været hans store beundrer fra jeg som unggut læste "Trætte mænd".' (I have been a great admirer of his since I read 'Tired Men' as a young boy). Scott expressed his desire to shake hands with him and thank him 'for alt det gode og fine og sande, han har skrevet, for hans stille, rakryggede gang mellem menneskene' (Scott 1921) (for all he has written that is good and fine and true, for his quiet, straight-backed movement among the people). What would come to the fore in *Babels taarn*, however, were Scott's rejection of the *landsmål* movement as a poorly informed phenomenon which was being politically forced on Norwegians without regard to normal, organic processes of language change and his scathing critique of naïve attempts to create a purely 'national' language hermetically isolated from foreign influences.

***Babels taarn* in Historical Context**

In brief, *Babels taarn* is a symbolic binary representation of *språkstriden* during the first decade of the twentieth century, particularly with regard to its political implications and, from Scott's perspective, how the campaign for official recognition of *landsmål* had become politicised and that this form of Norwegian was being artificially imposed on the public despite extensive popular opposition. The plot unfolds in an unidentified small town where 'maalstræverne' (those on the side of *landsmål*) and 'riksmåls mænd' (those on the side of Dano-Norwegian) vie for the loyalty of their fellow citizens. The knife-wielding fanatics in the former camp, some of whom wear wooden shoes, are portrayed as a diverse lot whose cultural disharmony, according to Scott's stage directions, is immediately revealed in their miscegenated costumes which amalgamate breeches from Setesdal, shirts from Telemark,

and knitted caps from Gudbrandsdal. In contrast to these bumpkins, the refined *riksmålsænd* have donned coats in Empire style and carry walking sticks adorned with silver. Whereas the former group insists that they represent national sentiment, the latter defend Dano-Norwegian as a precious embodiment of international culture. Each of the two linguistic parties has its office on the town square. To the left, appropriately, the headquarters of the *landsmål* organisation, Maalsmannalaget, occupies a building adorned in *rosemaling*, a folk art which throughout *Babels taarn* symbolises *landsmål*; its proliferation to other buildings, regardless of their architectural style, represents the advance of the movement. The principal champions of *landsmål* have such names as Brauskeland, Dulsmal, and Hoprakarhand. Opposite the edifice housing Maalsmannalaget, Riksmålsforening, the association for Dano-Norwegian, is in a structure in Empire style. Dripping self-confidence, the reformers mount offensives against their conservative detractors, gain considerable ground in the battle, and eventually emerge victorious, at least politically. Parading what they insist is their nationalism, they try – and in some instances torture – individual *riksmål* advocates, condemning some to the gallows. In the final scene, the disunity of the *landsmål* party, particularly with regard to meta-linguistic principles, is satirised in a protracted argument in which proponents of various names for Norway (e.g. Noregr, Ny-Norig, Gamall-Norig, Thule, Ultima Thule, Ultima) each seeks without success to convince the others that his particular suggestion is the most national. A farmer who witnesses this argument has the final word before the curtain comes down: ‘Det var e’ Guds løkke, at je itte var med her!’ (Thank God I didn’t get mixed up in this!)

Babels taarn was written in the wake of a flurry of tightly clustered milestones in Norwegian linguistic and literary history, several of which are mirrored in this work. In 1906 champions of *landsmål* formed Noregs Mållag; the following year their opponents counterpunched by establishing Riksmålsforbundet. 1907 also witnessed the first major orthographic reform of the twentieth century, which inter alia replaced the Danish ‘soft’ consonants b, d, and g with the ‘hard’ Norwegian counterparts p, t, and k, respectively. Two years later there was a minor spelling reform in *landsmål*. Furthermore, the ‘Four Greats’ of

Norwegian literature had all recently departed. Both Henrik Ibsen and Alexander Lange Kielland died in 1906; Jonas Lie followed them to the grave two years later; and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson completed his life in Paris in April 1910, some six months before *Babels taarn* was issued.

Hypocrisy in a Linguistic Struggle?

Among the many targets in Scott's cross-hairs when he surveyed the *språkstrid* were the hypocrisy evident in both camps, the politicisation of the dispute, and the spirit of coercion which he believed dominated the *nynorsk* campaign. As the *maalfolk* and their cultivated *riksmål* despisers contended for ground on the battlefield before this observer, they both seemed to have adopted certain rhetorical conventions to justify their own moral uprightness while in fact violating their own principles. To be sure, the lion's share of the satire in this regard is directed at the *landsmål* advocates. In the opening scene, Brauskeland trumpets the intrinsic solidarity of his movement. 'Me er born hjaa ei mor', (We are children of one mother) he professes. 'Difyr er me brør og vener kor me raakast.' (Therefore we are brothers and friends wherever we meet). Moreover, Brauskeland vows, the struggle to advance *landsmål* would be a peaceful one, for 'me vil ikkje fara vandeleg fram' (we will not act angrily) and 'me vil ikkje hava saki fram med tvang' (we will not advance our case with force). Rather, he and his comrades would occupy the moral high ground: 'Me vil ikkje truga og ljuga og nytta magt.' (We will not make threats or lie or make use of power). Such means were simply unnecessary, because 'me hev retten paa vaar sida, og difor held me ikkje upp, fyrr me hev sigra paa alle moglege leider.' (we have right on our side, so we will not give up until we have achieved victory on every possible front). Indeed, theirs was virtually a holy cause. Adducing allusions to both the New Testament and the Old, one of his colleagues declares, 'Annars skal det ikkje verta stein paa stein att av tabernaklet deira!' (Besides, there shall not be left here one stone upon another of their tabernacle) while kicking in the direction of the *riksmål* office, and another promises that when he blows through the ram's horn of *Maal-luren* 'so det gjeng som med murarne um Jeriko' (pp. 6-7) (may the same thing happen as with the

walls of Jericho).

Almost immediately in the opening scene, however, Brauskeland and his fellows change their moral spots. Their ostensible unity notwithstanding, they cannot even agree on whether their country is Noreg or Norig. The shallowness of their understanding of nationalism is underscored by Hoprakarhand, who acknowledges that 'Noreg' was previously used 'men det var ikkje so nasjonalt – difor hev me døypt det um' (but it wasn't national enough – so we've rechristened it). Further discussion of this matter is postponed until the final act because Brauskeland returns and announces that he has discovered a conspiracy, 'ei styggeleg og lynsk samansverjing, med det skamlegaste fyremaal' (a grievous and insidious conspiracy with the most shameful aims) which must be countered. Instead of high-minded tactics, those of the enemy will be used. 'Kumplot maa møtast med kumplot,' (intrigue must be met with intrigue) he explains. 'Me lyt interpellera i Folkstinget, me lyt spionera og eksera og freista stagga baade dei og adressa.' (We must ask questions in parliament, we must spy and order people about and try to stop both them and their petition). His friend Hoprakarhand responds to this assurance of salvation by way of counter-conspiracy by assuring Brauskeland, 'Eg skal dikta eit vent kvæde aat deg til aaminning um kva du hev skapt i dag, du meistermeister der du stend' (pp. 8-11). (I shall compose a kindly ode to you by way of tribute to what you have given rise to today, standing here as a champion of champions).

Disagreement about other linguistic matters is also foregrounded. The *landsmål* folk are not of one mind with regard to such matters as the gender of nouns – not surprisingly, given the diversity of the dialects they represent. One of the lesser figures in their camp, Lars Tuftekall, is audacious enough to challenge his leader on these issues. After Brauskeland insists that he has studied so much on a certain day that 'eg hev eitrende vondt i ennen' (I have an aching pain in my behind), Tuftekall retorts, 'Nei, nei, Brauskeland, du lyt umaka deg lite med maalet ditt – du lyt normalisere det meir. Eg hev merke fleire gonger, at du hev misteke deg –.' (Oh, no Brauskeland, you must make a bit more effort with your language – you must normalise it more. I have noticed you making mistakes several times –.) As an immediate

example of such fallibility, he calls attention to Brauskeland's reference to his hindquarters: 'Jau, med di enne er inkjekyn –.' (Yes, for you *enne* [arse] is a neuter noun –.) Tuftekall also upbraids his leader for uttering 'meister' instead of 'meistar' and 'der' and 'det' when he believes 'dar' and 'da' would be consistent with the principles of the movement (pp. 98-99).

Not only with regard to their disunity and lack of ethical consistency, but also in terms of their incognisance of their participation in the intrusion of foreign cultural elements into Norway do Scott's *maalfolk* undermine the cogency of their case that they must resist such syncretism in the interests of national purity. The previously mentioned Biblical allusions are obvious illustrations of this; the nationalists who utter them evince no awareness that Christianity was an imported faith. Furthermore, *rosemaling* was another medieval addition to Norwegian culture, but it serves the *maalfolk* as a symbol *par excellence* of their nationalism. While discussing ways of fighting one *kumplot* (plot, a noun which proceeded from Old French *complotte* into several other European tongues) with another, they decide to adulterate their bodies with what was becoming a supposedly quintessentially Norwegian beverage, coffee, the consumption of which became widespread in Norway only in the middle of the nineteenth century but whose lineage goes back to Ethiopia and Yemen on opposite sides of the Red Sea (p. 10). Other words of obvious Greek and Latin derivation like *proselyt* and *national* also flow from the mouths of the *maalfolk*. The linguistic purist Brauskeland unabashedly utters the English phrase 'Never mind' to his colleagues (p. 21). Referring to a national hero called 'Folkestad' (who apparently is an embodiment of Henrik Wergeland), his colleague Hoprakarhand declares that he was born 'under ei uheppi stjerna!' (p. 93) (beneath an unlucky star).

Scott also took to task the political captivity of both the *landsmål* movement and the defenders of *riksmål*. Again eschewing all subtlety, representatives of both sides attempt to recruit a farmer for their respective causes by offering high positions. 'Kunde De ikke ha lyst til at bli amtmand?' (Wouldn't you like to be a county prefect?) asks Rød. 'Vi har tre embeder, som De kunde vælge imellem.' (We have three positions from which you could choose). Per Dulsmal counters with

a higher bid: 'Kva skulde du segja til aa verta statsraad – kva? Me hev ein kragg ledug, so du veit det!' (p. 69) (What would you say to being a cabinet minister – eh? We've got a free stool, you know!).

Lamponing the Weaknesses of the *Riksmål* Defence

Although in *Babels taarn* Scott threw most of his darts at the *landsmål* offensive, he also flayed weaknesses among the defenders of *riksmål*. Some wish to ape their foes by playing a game of appearances in an era of fervent nationalism. Viewing the *rosemalt* headquarters of Maalmannalaget, Graa declares that he and his fellows are 'likesaa nationale invendige!' (just as national inwardly), prompting Rød to insist that in order to be effective 'vi maa ogsaa være nationale utvendige!' (we must be national outwardly too!). Their conversation underscores that their side, no less than the *landsmål* movement, suffers from internal discord and has become a pawn of politics. Alluding to the coalition of interests that have ineffectively opposed linguistic reforms, Rød insists, 'De to andre partier har ansvaret, sier jeg – de har aldrig villet høre paa vore advarsler!' (The other two parties are responsible, I say – they never would listen to our warnings!) Graa counsels suspending partisan bickering, a suggestion which Rød accepts in the hope that 'saa blev vi alle tre enige for engangs skyld!' (then all three of us would agree, for once!). Immediately, however, it becomes obvious that they cannot even agree on a common strategy. Hvit proposes first using the press to advance their cause, but Graa rejects this: 'Nei, først maatte vi holde møte, saa kunde vi bakefter skrive saa meget desto mere i avisen!' (No, we should hold a meeting first, then we would be able to write so much more in the newspaper afterwards). Rød disagrees: 'Nei, nei, nei – først maatte vi naturligvis stifte forening, før vi kunde holde noget møte!' (No, no, no – we would have to set up an association first, of course, before we could hold any meetings!) But within seconds Rød adds another layer to the satirising of disunity by criticising his own proposal and acknowledging the ineffectiveness of an organisation; 'den har vi jo hat i hundrede aar, uten at det har nyttet noget!' (pp. 23, 25-27) (we have had one for a hundred years anyway, not that it has helped much!).

Exacerbating the effete character of the *riksmål* cause is its ineffective and vacillating leadership. Before the end of the first act, Rød, Hvit, and Graa appeal to the *riksmål* office but, in a scene lacking all subtlety, ringing the bell gets no prompt response. Finally a man emerges from an upstairs window and, before identifying himself as the secretary of the Riksmålsforening, admits that he was ‘vist ikke ganske vaaken’ (probably not fully awake), a confession which prompts Rød to advise him to ‘vaagne og se, hvad der kan hænde ham i virkeligheden’ (wake up and see what might happen to him in real life). This somnulant gentleman opens his eyes only when he sees the extent to which his *landsmål* adversaries have adorned the town with *rosemaling*. Rød does not mince words in locating the responsibility for this advance: ‘Sludder mand – det er Deres skyld og ingen andens! De har ikke passet ordentlig paa – tænk, like utenfor vinduerne her!’ (31-32, 34) (You ridiculous man – this is your fault and nobody else’s! You have not been paying enough attention – think about it, just outside the windows here!).

Even when finally prodded into confronting Brauskeland at the Maalmannalaget, however, this obsequious secretary timidly apologises for disturbing him and insists that they have hitherto been good neighbours, an assurance which Brauskeland does not accept. Quaking, the secretary is reluctant to complain directly about the *rosemaling*, which he professes to be ‘i og for sig meget pen, overmaade pen’ (very beautiful in itself, exceedingly beautiful) and ‘stilfuld og karakterfuld’ (elegant and full of character), but apologetically asks whether ‘den skilte sig vel meget ut fra omgivelserne?’ (it might not be entirely in keeping with its surroundings?). Unimpressed by the lament of this weak-kneed foe, Brauskeland assures him that the adornment will not be conspicuous ‘naar grannelaget hev fenge same stasen’ (pp. 36-39) (when the surrounding area has taken on the same level of ornamentation).

It is not only the secretary of Riksmålsforeningen who has done virtually nothing of consequence. When Hvit, Graa, and Rød are hauled before a kangaroo court to respond to a charge of promoting national disunity (‘Og endaa hev de ikkje kløyvt folket?’ [And haven’t they also divided the people?]), which in the broad scheme of *Babels*

taarn applies just as clearly to the *landsmål* warriors, Graa defends himself and his fellow defendants by assuring Brauskeland, 'Vi har hele tiden forholdt os fuldstændig passiv – til nød har vi latt en av de andre støtte sig en liten smule til os' (102) (We have always remained entirely passive in our behaviour – we have only let one of the others lean on us a little when they needed to).

Another kind of linguistic cowardice comes under the loupe, namely the willingness of *riksmål* advocates to compromise under duress. Schoolmaster Rør serves as the archetype. Tried before Brauskeland immediately after Hvit, Graa, and Rød have been sentenced to death by hanging, this educator, who in the first act stood at the forefront of the *riksmål* movement, has had a change of heart. 'Eg er maalstrævar med liv og sæl – dat er ei rein feiltagelsa, at eg er bleiva fængsla!' (I am a *landsmål* enthusiast with all my life and soul – I have been wrongly imprisoned!) he insists. Unconvinced of the sincerity of Rør's conversion, Brauskeland tests him in a dialogue which reflects Scott's recent residence in Tuscany. 'Kva heiter Florentiner?' (What's a Florentine called [in *landsmål*]?) he asks, and when Rør stammers possibilities uncertain whether to utter a diphthong which he apparently believes would suggest adherence to *landsmål* pronunciation, Brauskeland enlightens him with a miscegenated correct answer: 'Det heiter: Firenzemann' (103-104) (He's called a Firenzemann). Rør's sacrificing of his principles proves ineffective; he joins Graa, Hvid, and Rød on the gallows.

Criticising the 1907 Orthographic Reform

Although Scott as *de facto* practitioner of *riksmål* resented what he perceived as the aggressiveness and artificiality of the *landsmål* movement, in *Babels taarn* he fired salvos across the bow of the way in which the received literary language was being reformed. The new orthography mandated by the Storting (Parliament) in 1907 had clearly aroused his ire. It is caricatured here as a gratuitous consequence of political horsetrading which did not accord with spoken Norwegian. Graa and Hvit trade quips to illustrate this. Corroborating his friend's assurance that 'nu er vi ogsaa begyndt at bli nationale!' (now we have

started to turn national too), Hvit replies, 'Ja, nu har vi anskaffet tre nye nationale bokstaver paa engang,' (Yes, now our alphabet has acquired three new national letters at once) which Graa immediately illustrates by saying 'og skriver spraakbruk, skip, læpe og utmerket' (when we write *spraakbruk* [language usage], *skip* [ship], *læpe* [lip] and *utmerket* [excellent]), which Hvit declares are sounds 'som vi næsten ikke kan si engang!' (that are almost impossible for us even to utter!) Their willingness to make such a sacrifice, Graa concludes, is proof that 'nu er vi da norske nok!' (we are Norwegian enough now!). Hvit agrees: 'Ja, vi knækker snart tænderne, bare vi snakker!' (54) (Yes, soon we'll break our teeth just by speaking!).

Midway through the second act, Rød, who in places serves as one of Scott's most direct spokesmen, departs from the burlesque modality which has characterised much of the dialogue and delivers a reasoned speech in which he advocates a more sophisticated understanding of the interplay of culture and national fervour. Alluding to the recent movement which resulted in independence from the Swedish Crown in 1905, he thunders against what he perceives as the misdirected and fruitless chauvinism driving *landsmål*. 'Det er et missyn paa nationalfølelsen, som ligger til grund for hele bevægelsen, og det er pinedød en skrøpelig grund!' (The foundation of the whole movement is a misconception of national sentiment, and a damn weak foundation it is!) Rød declares. This 'dundrende humbug' (massive humbug) in Norway was unparalleled as a manifestation of national sentiment, and it would have disastrous consequences which, however, he does not specify. Instead, Rød underscores the superficiality of attempts to superimpose Norwegian national culture where it does not belong. Consider a house which evinces Dutch architectural influence, he proposes, one whose style 'repræsenterer et stykke gammel kultur' (represents part of cultural heritage). It does not fare well when subjected to the mindless whim of Norwegian chauvinists: 'Og saa kommer disse herrer nationalister og finder, at det virker ikke nationalt nok og smører det over med et tyndt lag national farve og tror, at dermed er det gjort! Nu er det ikke hollandsk længer - nu er det pære norsk!' (And then along come these nationalist gentlemen who find it not to be national enough, so they cover it up with a thin layer of national paint, believing

that that's it! It's not Dutch any more - now it's Norwegian through and through!) Rather than being preoccupied with external appearances, Rød counsels, Norwegians should seek to 'bli litt mere indvendige av os' (express ourselves a little more inwardly). He explains that he has no desire to criticise their lack of sense for style in garnishing buildings with *rosemaling*, 'deres foragt for natur og utvikling eller den ukyndighet i faget og utførelsen, hvormed de gaar frem.' (their disdain for nature and development, or the lack of professional skill they display in executing their work). Instead, Rød stresses that instead of imagining that they can transform a Dutch house into a 'norsk sætherytte bare ved at smøre op nogen bonderoser utenpaa det' (Norwegian mountain sheiling merely by painting a few rustic flower patterns on the outside) they should attempt to fathom the meaning of cultural development. That, he informs his audience, 'sker litt efter litt ved en langsom, gradvis og naturlig forandring helt indenfra, eftersom landets klima, skikke, natur og eiendommeligheter gjør sig gjældende' (pp. 63-64) (takes place little by little, through a slow, gradual, natural and fully internal transformation, as the country's climate, customs, nature and idiosyncrasies manifest themselves).

Torbjørn Digre, a thinly veiled and imperious reincarnation of Bjørnson who serves as the champion and authority figure of the *riksmål* advocates, echoes a similar sentiment, though rather more bluntly and in greater detail, near the end of the final act when the *landsmål* enthusiasts interrogate him. Again one hears Scott's voice as this giant turns the tables on his tormenters and renders his opinion of Norwegians' cultural shortcomings. 'Vi har iøvrig altid hat fuldt op av slike folk - for saavidt er jo den nationale i orden - folk som av lutter lediggang ikke har hat andet at gjøre end at befænge landet med aandelig uformuehet ... i husflidens og nationalfølelsens navn,' he thunders. (Besides, we have always had plenty of people like that - in that sense the national dimension is in order - people who out of sheer idleness have nothing other to do than infect the country with cultural impecuniousness ... in the name of arts and crafts and national feeling.) Digre wonders whether the country is 'for dyrebart til at tjene som prøveblok for nationale frisører og bygdeskræddere?' (too precious to serve as a sampler for national hairdressers and village tailors?).

Shifting gears to a direct critique of the supposedly salvific power of linguistic politics and the superficiality of the results thereof, he asks his interrogators, 'er landet blit norskere nu? Jeg ser nok den nye dragt, men jeg spør: hvor er den nye aand?' (has the country become more Norwegian now? I can certainly see its new outfit, but I wonder: where is its new spirit?). Continuing to a theoretical plane in the essence of national culture, Digre rises to a challenge by Brauskeland who accuses him of importing 'utanlandsk herk, som aldri vert nasjonalt!' (foreign rubbish that will never be national!) by arguing that much that is ostensibly essentially Norwegian was originally foreign but brought to Norway in ways that by analogy were similar to the gold captured by Vikings in raids overseas but eventually transformed into 'herlige nationale smykker' (glorious national jewellery) which vividly reflect 'norskheten' (Norwegianness). Pedantically, he places this lesson into a global context: 'Det er kulturens historie verden rundt – den ene har laant av den anden.' (This is the story of cultures around the world – one borrows from the other.) As a parting shot, Digre declares 'at det, at en ting er national, ikke er den ringeste garanti for, at den ogsaa er værdifuld!' (that the fact something is national offers no guarantee in the slightest that it is also of value!) and in response to lamentations that Norway is culturally enslaved judges that the country is presently in the thrall of nationalism (116-120).

Demonstrations against *Babels taarn*

As some reviewers of the book had predicted, public responses to Scott's play would include angered hostility, and indeed this erupted at the initial performance at Nationaltheatret. Who the in-house demonstrators were and the precise motives underlying their opposition to the piece are questions which may never be conclusively answered, because the historical evidence, nearly all of it in the daily press, is sketchy and partisan. As will be seen below, the Kristiania daily newspaper *Social-Demokraten* carried a pseudonymous letter a week later purportedly written by one of the demonstrators, but its authenticity seems questionable.

Nearly every review included a brief section about the outbursts;

some also described how the house manager had responded by ringing a gong to quiet the audience.

What can readily be established empirically, i.e. by the harmonious evidence of at least two witnesses, is that while part of the audience enthusiastically applauded the performance at numerous points, another segment began to express its displeasure by hooting or hissing or booing (Piper 2011). The negative responses appear to have begun near the end of the second act. At that time, in the words of one reviewer in a front-page piece in the Kristiania daily *Aftenposten* which featured a large black and white drawing of a scene from *Babels taarn*, the malcontents began to express their displeasure on a small scale, and when the curtain went up for the third act, 'a fight broke out between the applauders and the hooters, and it ended only when the gong was sounded a third time.' He added that the tension in the theatre nevertheless continued unabated, and even after the curtain fell at the end of the performance it reached its summit in what he termed 'en efter vore fredelige Theaterforhold noksaa sjelden Høide' (quite rare heights by our peaceful theatrical standards). This was apparently during the curtain calls when the cast, especially the man who played Torbjørn Digre, were repeatedly brought back by the appreciative segment of the audience, and Scott also took bows twice (Caspari 1911: 1).

But what lay behind the hostility? One should not assume that it was merely a defensive reaction to Scott's lampooning of the *landsmål* movement, though that may well explain part of it. It is entirely conceivable that nationalistic sentiment on a broader scale was involved and transcended linguistic divisions. One reviewer emphasised that the hostility of the audience came to expression especially the first time Torbjørn Digre was presented as a cripple (F.N. 1911: 2). This, it will be recalled, was only about ten months after the lionised Bjørnson had died in Paris and been buried with national honours in Norway.

At any rate, the demonstrations were not a one-off phenomenon. As reported in the daily *Morgenbladet*, in its second performance, on February 5, *Babels taarn* played again to a full house. The hostile reaction of part of the audience now seemed to have been, as was playfully described by a journalist, 'mere organisert, mere -

maalbevisst' (more organised, more – determined [in a play on words that could also mean more linguistically aware]): 'Allerede i første Akt begyndte Spektaklerne. Repliken om Oprettelse av en Forening til Motarbeidelse av nationalt Utslet gav Signalet; fra Amfi skingret Piperne indover Scenen, saa Skuespillerne ikke kunde høre, hvad de selv sa.' (The commotion began right from the first act. The line about the establishment of an Association to Counteract the National Rash was the signal: the booing and hissing shrieked down on the stage from the gallery, so the actors could not hear themselves speak.) When Torbjørn Digre was carried in, a 'hvinende Uveir' (storm of whistles) broke out, forcing an interruption of the performance for several minutes. Only after the gong had been struck twice could it resume. In an accompanying commentary written in a style suggesting that it came from the pen of editor C.J. Hambro, it was asserted that such undignified conduct would probably unfold if *Babels taarn* continued at Nationaltheatret. They would cause that institution to lose the respect of 'den velsindede Del av Almenheten' (*Morgenbladet* 1911: 1) (the cultured segment of the public).

Writing after this second incident, a journalist from *Aftenposten* suspected political motives (*Aftenposten* 1911: 2). The performance on February 5 had been attended by many deputies in the Storting, he reported, mainly those who were sympathetic to *landsmål*, and the audience also included 'en hel Del brave Borgere, som til daglig neppe er flittige Theatergjængere' (a great deal of bold citizens who are hardly frequent theatregoers normally) who seemed to be strategically situated at various places, 'alle aabenbart i glad Forventning om, at noget vilde ske.' (all clearly in cheerful expectation that something would happen). They were not disappointed. The hissing, he wrote, reached a high point 'da de gamle, stivbenede Rigsmaalsherrer begyde at øve sit edderfyldte Vid paa det rosemalte Hus med alle de sterke Farver.' (when the old, stiff-legged *riksmål* gentlemen began to exercise their full wit on the traditionally decorated house with all its strong colours). This journalist was not in doubt that it was 'nogle Bænke organiseret Maalungdom i Amfiteatret, som havde Têten under disse musikalske Øvelser under Anførsel af en ung Arving til et kjendt Maalnavn.' (a few rows of organised [lands]maal youth in the

amphitheatre who led these musical recitals, under the direction of the young heir of a well-known name from the [lands]maal movement). The identity of this alleged instigator, however, he did not disclose. *Aftenposten's* reporter found it gratifying that the police and the director of the theatre, Scott's friend Vilhelm Krag, had been able to silence the demonstrators promptly by pointing a powerful floodlight at them.

A Rainbow of Critical Reception

Not surprisingly, critical responses to the staged version of *Babels taarn* tended to reveal more about critics' stances in the national language dispute than they did about the artistic merits of the play. A minor flurry of reviews appeared in the press after the premiere; others followed later in February. In most instances, critics' views were conjoined with coverage of the disturbances in the theatre and in some cases appear to have influenced the verbal construction of the latter. Dispassionate reviews were the exception.

In a front-page review in *Den 17de Mai* (4 February 1911), the organ of Noregs Maallag, a hostile commentator took umbrage at what he perceived as Scott's unjust and insensitive assault on national linguistic sensitivities. 'Næst religionen er maalet det mest 'indre' som finst millom aalmenne spursmaal,' he argued. (After religion, language is the most 'personal' of universal matters). 'Aa gjera narr av at folk hevdar maalet sitt, er aa gjera narr av alle menneske og alle folk.' (To ridicule people defending their language is to ridicule all people and all peoples.) This reviewer declined to respond to what others identified as the cutting edge of Scott's satire, such as the internal divisions within the ranks of the *landsmål* advocates or the politicisation of their movement. Nor did he inform readers that Scott had also used *Babels taarn* to lampoon the effeteness and archaic nature of the poorly organised efforts to defend *riksmål*. Instead, he strung together unsubstantiated generalisations in asserting that there was 'ingen traad i stykket' (no thread running through the piece) and no noteworthy thought underlying its creation. In an *ad hominem* slur, this reviewer declared that Scott 'er ikkje mannen, korkje til aa

kveike elden eller til aa slokje han.’ (is not the man to kindle the fire, nor to put it out). Scott’s only achievement, he insisted, had been to convince the leadership of Nationaltheatret to stage his work. The commentator in *Den 17de Mai* even refused to identify the piece as a *komedie* (comedy), explicitly insisting that it would more appropriately be called a *revy* (piece of revue theatre).

At the other end of the linguistic spectrum, J.C. Hambro, the editor of the Kristiania daily *Morgenbladet* who gave many of Scott’s books enthusiastic reviews, published his favourable commentary only after hours after the curtain fell. Having predicted in a review of the book three months earlier that it would ‘vække Vrede og Forargelse paa mange Hold, baade blandt de Maalmænd den spotter og blandt de Riksmåls mænd den haaner,’ (H[ambro] 1910: 2) (arouse fury and indignation in many quarters, both among the *maalmænd* [supporters of *landsmål*] that it mocks and among the *riksmåls mænd* [supporters of *riksmå*] that it scorns), Hambro now praised Scott’s biting wit anew. This editor immediately acknowledged that the playwright’s axe had cut in both directions. Scott, he emphasised, had felled many trees in the grove of the *landsmål* tribe by swinging at the ‘urokkelig selv gode, trygt uvidende og kraftig realistiske Fanatisme hos den store Tyngde av Maalfylkingen’ (unshakeably self-righteous, confidently ignorant and strongly realistic fanaticism of the great weight of organised [lands]maal supporters). Taking on the *riksmåls mænd*, Scott had ridiculed their ‘frugtesløs Adresseskriven’ (fruitless petitioning) as well as their ‘knæhønlige Forskræmthet og like endeløst som virkningsløst Kulturprat’ (cowardly fearfulness and their waffling about culture, which is just as endless as it is ineffective). Yet Hambro judged that Scott had caricatured the conservatives excessively, and he stressed that Scott’s use of Bjørnson in the guise of Torbjørn Digre was out of place. Like most other reviewers, Hambro lauded the acting and staging, but he wondered whether *Babels taarn* had been performed in the wrong theatre. ‘Hører det til god Smag eller god Tone at hænge op en Karikatur av en let kjendelig og vel kjende Mand – og av ham alene?’ he asked. (Is it good taste or good form to hang up a caricature of an easily recognisable and well-known man – and him alone?) Perhaps Scott’s work would have been more fittingly performed by the Student

Society in Kristiania (H[ambro] 1911: 1).

Ideological tropes patently shaped reportage of the public responses to *Babels taarn* during an era of increasing political cleavage. Writing in the daily *Social-Demokraten*, a critical journalist assured readers that ‘det er selvfølgelig bare ren overklasseungdom – fra de høiere gymnasier og seminarier – som deltar i demonstrationerne.’ (of course it is only the purely upper-class youth – from the upper high schools and seminaries – who participate in the demonstrations). He adduced no evidence in support of this supposedly self-evident truth but merely asserted: ‘Maalstriden er en overklassestrid.’ (The language struggle is an upper-class struggle.) This socialist asked rhetorically whether there was not enough intelligence and mental freedom among the socially privileged youth of Kristiania to see the ridiculousness of the demonstrations in the theatre. In conclusion, he professed in words reminiscent of Marx’s assessment of religion as ‘the opiate of the people’ that they were a worthless sideshow which diverted attention from the burning issues of the day: ‘De barnslige demonstrationer paa Nationalteatret beviser bare en ting: og skolekapitalismen holder sine lærere og elever i avsondret uvidenhed om tidens store og virkelige kampspørmaal.’ (*Social-Demokraten* 1911: 2). (The childish demonstrations at the National Theatre prove only one thing: capitalist schooling keeps its teachers and pupils in isolated ignorance of the great and true struggles of our time.)

A reader who claimed to have been one of the demonstrators wrote immediately to *Social-Demokraten* (though the fact that his letter was published a day after this critical reportage appeared calls into question the authenticity of his letter, which was signed pseudonymously ‘Hans Piper’ [Hans Booer]) and offered a more detailed explanation of the motives behind the disruptions. ‘Rigtignok er pipekonserter barnekomedier,’ (Of course booing and hissing are the stuff of children’s plays) he allowed, but they revealed something deeper than merely taking a stance on the language question: ‘Vor hensigt var at vække harme mot Nationalteatrets styre, saa vi kunde faa komedien ind for Studentersamfundet, hvor pipekonserter og demonstrationer i maalstriden hører hjemme.’ (Piper 1911: 2). (Our intention was to arouse anger among the management of the National Theatre, so

that we could get the play to the Student Society, where booing and language demonstrations belong.)

Conclusion

There is no evidence that *Babels taarn* and the strife which accompanied its performance at Nationaltheatret affected the course of Norwegian linguistic history. Rather, in that regard the significance of the work and reactions to it undoubtedly lies in the light the matter shed on the heated emotional state of the participants in the debate at the time Scott's second comedy was staged. Properly considered as a satirical microcosm of *språkstriden*, it opens a hitherto usually closed window on the language politics which bedevilled Norway in the early years of its existence as an autonomous nation.

With regard to Scott himself as one of the most popular multiple-genre Norwegian authors of his day, he remained a staunch, lifelong supporter of *riksmål*. Although as a novelist he frequently wrote dialogue in southern Norwegian dialects without evincing a condescending attitude towards them, and he had great respect for Arne Garborg, he had no regard for the movement to recognise *landsmål* as an official form of the national language. What particularly riled Scott was what he perceived as challenges to the freedom of authors to express themselves in their preferred form of Norwegian – especially when that was *riksmål*.

In 1917 Scott learned from a Lutheran pastor that Jørgen Løvland, a native of Aust-Agder and a teacher by trade who served as minister of education and ecclesiastical affairs in the Liberal government of Gunnar Knudsen from 1915 until 1920, had recently sent a circular to the clergy of the established church requesting them to take a collection earmarked for, in Scott's words, 'maalsakens fremme' (the promotion of the language cause). Incensed, he reported this to Ola Christoffersen, the editor of the daily newspaper *Aftenposten* in Kristiania. How could it be justified, Scott asked, that 'maalfanatismen skal drives saa utilladelig vidt i denne brødmangelens og matnødens tid uten at nogen sier fra?' (Scott 1917) (language fanaticism should be taken to such flagrant extremes in this time of bread and food

shortages without somebody speaking out?).

In September 2010 the eminent Norwegian linguist Professor Ernst Håkon Jahr of the University of Agder held popular public lectures about *Babels taarn* in both Kristiansand and Arendal and found considerable interest in the piece 100 years after its publication. To be sure, the stream of linguistic politics has shifted course immensely during the century since Scott crafted his drama, and Bjerke's plea in the 1950s that it be revived at Nationaltheatret is hardly likely to be fulfilled in our own time. Nevertheless, when read as a comedic product of its era, *Babels taarn* can continue to illuminate dimensions of *språkstriden* which sent shockwaves through both Norwegian politics and literature for decades.

Endnotes

¹ Translations from Norwegian in this article are by Guy Puzey in collaboration with the author. Translations are literal and not intended to communicate the distinction between dialogue in *landsmål* and *riksmål*.

² Dahl's treatment of *Babels taarn* in his unscholarly, self-published book is sketchy at best, in my opinion. He includes several undigested 'fragmenter' (fragments) from the text of the play (129-133), a full-page reproduction of the theatre programme (132), and a description of the advertisements in that programme (127). There are also some undigested and unanalysed excerpts from reviews of the performance. Virtually all of this is unreferenced.

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