

Concluding Remarks

By Kristian Hvidt

The provocation in my first little story about Madam Humanity and her descendants has been the occasion of three very different fascinating commentaries. For me, and I hope also for others, they have contributed to a widening of the horizon in some way. Before commenting on the three contributions let me try to give a short outline of the present situation within the learned world of the humanities as I see it. The population of scholars has grown at an amazing rate during the last three or four decades. The number of professional scholars within each of the disciplines has been multiplied by ten or even more since 1945, and the number of learned books and periodicals still more times. In order to find a niche within their fields, scholars must specialize. This has meant that each of the classic disciplines within the humanities as well as in the sciences has been divided into a multitude of sub-disciplines. These subdivisions are interdependent in the sense that they border on each other in both subject and methodology.

But — in different ways from one university or country to another — such subdisciplines can develop into independent fields and generate their own philosophy and method. Politicians dealing with research policy have encouraged these divisions; the password has been interdisciplinary projects drawing upon good experience within the sciences. Thus there has been a tendency to lay down old fences between the “old” humanistic disciplines and encourage young students to establish homesteads on the frontiers and develop specialized farming there. In this way the family of Madam Humanity has grown to a multitude of descendants. Her realm covers about the same area but eventually each of the fields, of her own children, the nine Muses, have been subdivided and they are now crowded by the large number of scholars of our generation finding their own specialized fields to farm. No doubt the disciplines have bred by incestuous marriages, but there have also been many marriages with cousins from the sciences. This has had a great influence on most of the humanistic subdisciplines.

The classical division of the humanities goes far back in time, but the traditional division as we know it to-day dates from the first part

of the 19th century when disciplines as history of art and history of literature found their form as independent areas. The tendency towards new subdivisions began during the years between the Great Wars, but escalated especially after 1945. I think that the work of Max Weber and his new approach both in method and in developing new fields of research such as political science and sociology had a strong impact. Weber also added a new dimension to the humanities. The study of literature changed in nature — and in name. In my country, Denmark, the departments of *litteraturhistorie* changed to *litteraturvidenskab* (literary science) and *kunsthistorie* to *kunstvidenskab*. But students of literature and art who still farmed on the same historical fields felt free to introduce new tools which did not necessarily correspond to those of the historians. Indeed I see this development as a very fruitful one. It has widened and deepened our knowledge and our sense of perspective. However, what made me write my first contribution to this discussion was the feeling of uncertainty towards all the new scholarly tools which have been introduced in humanistic research. I asked myself: is it correct to lay down the fences between humanistic disciplines? Are historians able to get good crops which can serve historical aims from the literary fields. And will literary studies in historical fields contribute to better historical results?

In my first article in this issue of *A.Sim.S* I tried to give an answer from a naive conception that a “sharp line” can be drawn between “fact” and “fiction.” Reading the three commentating articles, I admit that there are no such clear border lines between the different kinds of source material used by students of literature. Of course there is a common field, a “village green” consisting of personal memoirs, biographical material (letters, diaries, etc.), newspapers, the weekly press etc. Even outside this common field there can be no source material which is reserved for historians or for literary scholars. But there are different methods of farming. During the last hundred years there has been a tendency in history to refine source material, confine it to what is primary and what is secondary. On the other side students in literature have gone the opposite way. Literature is not limited to poetry and novels, it is all human statements whether “fictional” or “factual.” Fredrik Brøgger has explained this development: The word “fact” is a dangerous term since all historical statements are *re-presentations* of symbols of events. The American bombing raid on Vietnam throwing 2,300 tons of explosives is no fact, since it can be interpreted in many ways. Hence the scholarly farmland of the past to him seems to be a swamp. There are no hard rocks on which we can base facts, but only

boggy ground in which our ploughs and harrows will sink. You can only look at the wet surface and interpret what is growing beneath!

I admire the convincing way in which Fredrik Brøgger presents his view representing that of modern humanistic research. But, as a historian I must join him in the headline of his article: HELP, I WANT TO GET OFF! No doubt the written and oral sources are swamped with subjectivity. But there is still hope for historians to find the dry, hard areas of facts on which the description of what really happened may be based. That 2,300 tons of bombs were thrown over Vietnam can be proved from American (or Vietnamese) military archives. The "fact" that some called the bombing raid a "Protective Reaction Strike" is secondary for the reconstruction of the event, but perhaps of primary interest for those studying the American public reaction on the war. Thus I quite agree when Fredrik Brøgger defines the differences in working methods of the two disciplines. Studies of literature analyse and interpret in depth one statement whereas historians compare and "sift" many sources. But I disagree when he concludes that objective knowledge does not exist. It is true that the term "objective" is as dangerous as the term "fact," but history loses its meaning if we do not strive hard to come as near to objectivity as possible and try to keep clear of contemporary tendencies. I am conscious that, seen with the eyes of Fredrik Brøgger, it is naive to talk about the "objective historian." With his semiotic magnifying glass Brøgger can read between and behind the lines of any historical account and demonstrate the frail human being behind the words. But this does not hide the main difference between the aim of the historian and the student of literature. The first one tries to reconstruct what *really happened* according to the most authoritative sources and tries to explain why. The latter tells us what *was in the mind* of those who lived at the time. In certain fields we meet each other, for instance in the art of biography, portraying an outstanding personality. Here the historian must also try to reconstruct what was in the mind of the person as it may be deduced from his deeds, whereas the literary biographer will analyse the writing of the personality from a psychological point of view.

This brings me to the contribution of Dorothy Burton Skårdal. She resents that I cannot acknowledge literature as primary sources for historical studies. It is true that many literary authors, especially after 1870, attempted to give a realistic picture of their time. These descriptions are good "mirrors," valuable illustrations of the primary historical sources such as contemporary scholarly descriptions, government archives, trade union material etc. A particular circumstance will not

be nearer to the "truth" because it is described by more than one author of novels. Vilhelm Moberg made historical studies before he wrote his wonderful novel about Swedish emigrants, but still no scholar of emigration would use it as a historical source. I think that Dorothy Skårdal will agree on this point. She will maintain that the authors have to be contemporary with the time they describe. Does that mean that the novels of Emile Zola or Henrik Pontoppidan should also be taken as primary sources of European history? I think that we have to be quite aware of the aim of the studies. If we want to describe the "spirit" of an epoch or the way people reacted psychologically to the realities of life, the literary sources are excellent. But if the aim is historical we *first* have to use the primary sources. The literary sources are secondary because they are not intended as descriptions of reality.

I admit that my first contribution in this issue of *ASinS* was to a certain degree inspired by the philosophy of Dorothy Skårdal, as expressed in her doctoral dissertation *The Divided Heart* from 1979. The subtitle *Scandinavian immigrant experience through literary sources* expresses the method, taking up sociological ideas in analysing the novels' "statements" about how immigrants ploughed their acres or maintained Scandinavian customs. No doubt Mrs. Skårdal made a lot of interesting observations on Scandinavian-American literature. But why limit all these studies in fictional sources when we have an enormous amount of non-fictional historical source material on which we can better rely? Mrs. Skårdal settled in an area which is neither historical nor literary. I quite agree with the conclusion of Reino Kero that it is "inappropriate to draw lines between disciplines." However, there are areas on the borders where the crop is difficult to sell to the neighbors.

Let me, finally, say some words about the use of statistics in humanistic research. No doubt the scholars of emigration in the 1960's relied too much on statistical answers. Historical demography was a new field of research and gave deep perspectives. Since then a certain amount of scepticism may have come. On the other hand, in my opinion quantitative analysis forms a sort of hard rock on which much soft material can be laid. When we approached the study of Scandinavian emigration some years ago we found that the "soft" material available, letters, diaries etc. was too frail a material for very large historical constructions. So we began by casting a statistical foundation, perhaps too large and too substantial in relation to the building we constructed, but the foundation exists. All new scholars now and in the future are welcome to pull down the upper, soft, part of our construction. But it will be very difficult to build new houses on other foundations than the statistical basis we created!