

Fact and Fiction: A Case for the Complementary Study of History and Literature

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The aim of the following pages is to clear up for myself and perhaps for some others the relation between studies in literature and history.¹ To me it has become more and more clear that we historians miss a dimension of the past. There are historical relations which can never be described by means of historical source material — a sort of blind point or black hole where historians cannot see and find the right words. This dimension can be seen and described by artists, painters and writers. They have the freedom and the intuition to catch facts impossible to describe by scholars.

This observation seems especially clear to me when considering the Scandinavian-American literature, which partly consists of historical descriptions of the emigration and partly of fictive literature dealing with the same object but in an imaginative way free of ties to the historical source material. The two types of literature together cover the reality. Rølvåg and Enok Mortensen, a Norwegian and a Danish immigrant, who both have undertaken to describe the situation of the Scandinavian immigrant, did this both in the form of fiction (novels and short stories) and in the form of historical accounts based on source material.

The relation between the historian and the author is similar in many respects to that of the photographer in relation to the painter. They can describe the same scene but in two different ways. The good photographer will present a precise picture of the real scene with all its details, while the artist will simplify the same motive and emphasize some main features in order to show what is seen as essential and suggest the atmosphere. The photographer can learn a lot by studying the way in which the artist looks at a scene but, on the contrary, the artist generally will learn very little by looking at the photographer's

pictures. In my opinion, the conclusion must be the same in the case of the historians in relation to the authors and the students of literature. Historians can learn a lot by reading novels and short stories. They can improve their written style (which is often very bad!) and they can learn how understatement and emphasis can make a clearer picture than the detailed one.

Students of literature, on the other hand, tend to read too much history in their mistaken attempt to see whether fictive literature reproduces a true picture of the scene. The ideal relation between the two disciplines is difficult to describe. Let me try to do it by way of a fairy tale:

Once upon a time there was a woman, a big warm mother, called the Humanities. She had quite a number of children. The oldest one was History. Like most eldest sons in big families he was a serious boy who felt that he had some responsibility for his younger brothers. The next brother was Studies in Literature. He was a rather pale and shy chap as a child, but his mother loved him especially well. The two brothers were brought up far from each other and developed in different ways according to their different societies. But as they grew older — and I mean after the first 150 years or so of their lives — History and Studies in Literature came closer to each other and realized that they had many features in common deriving from their mother, the Humanities. But actually they never adopted the same methods although they expressed themselves with almost the same vocabulary. History showed esteem for the younger brother but did not acknowledge Studies in Literature as relevant to his work. On the other hand Studies in Literature felt more and more attracted to the elder brother, adopted his good and bad habits as to method, approaches to problems, and style. Actually, Studies in Literature in Europe have for the last decades often seemed more or less a copy of History.

This development between the two brothers has its background in a number of changes in society which I shall turn to below. The conclusion must be that the two eldest sons of Mother Humanities should realize that they are complementary to each other and they should make a new dividing line between their areas.

The Scandinavian-American literature is a well defined area. It consists of some hundred larger novels, volumes of prose fiction and poetry and many stories and poems in Christmas-booklets, journals, and the weekly press. Most of it describes the situation of the Scandinavian immigrant. As a field of research this material is relatively new. Although good books and articles have been written about this literature let us

for the sake of the argument assume that we stand before an unreclaimed and uncultivated mass of material and ask the question: where do we place our scholarly forks and knives in order to cut into those slices which best reveal the true nature of this literature both for the historian and for the literary scholar? Before attempting an answer, we should look at the situation of the historians who have made studies in Scandinavian-American emigration and see where they stand now.

The boom in emigration studies in Scandinavia took place in a period where history as a discipline was in a stage of transition. The transition can be seen in the different approach in Ingrid Semmingsen: *Vägen mot vest* from the 1950's and the large number of books on the same subject which emerged 1965-75 from the Uppsala Institute. The main difference was a new attitude to the source material, a tendency to give priority to the "hard sources," statistics etc. and to reject the "old-fashioned" soft sources, letters, diaries etc. The highest qualification was quantification. The reason was above all the vexing question of representativity. Only quantification can secure that the conclusion really mirrors the reality that the historians want to describe: when Olle Jönsson wrote back to Småland that he voted the Republican ticket it is interesting for Olle but it says nothing about the political attitude of the Swedes in America. I belong to the generation who plunged into statistics and computers and felt the complications which follow from using soft sources that make up the essential part of the research. The tendency towards quantification was a parallel to the reaction in economic history that the orthodox source-critical school had given to ordinary historical research.

The difficulty lies in the fact that history has no defined borders to other disciplines. Or to return to our fairy tale: history has married a cousin, a daughter of the Social Sciences, adopting her methods and rules as to what sort of sources can be recognized as mirroring the truth. In this way History by now is as far away from Studies in Literature as it can be. Historians dare not throw more than a shy glance at novels. They are not in their line of business. And in the large gap between the two disciplines a number of new disciplines have appeared, grandchildren of the big mother, Humaniora: anthropology, social history, ethnology, folklore, demography etc. And the gap is really crowded, because all the cousins of history, children of the Social Sciences, sociology, economics, political science etc. each have a historical dimension. They cannot exist without drawing water from historical sources. In the crowd we also have to mention another discipline, history of civilization, a younger son of Mother Humanities. She got him very

late in her life, the father was German and the son was baptized *Kulturgeschichte* sometime in the late 19th century. But this brother did not assimilate very well with his sisters and brothers. He never got a niche or recess of his own.

Although the border lines between the cousin disciplines are very vague, the border line between history and studies in literature is clear and sharp. It is the line between fact and fiction, a border which ordinary historians cannot pass, whereas students in literature must pass it when they analyse fiction.

Studying literature is a discipline which also has gone through many transitions during the last century. Its point of departure is aesthetics. Up to the turn of the century, lectures in literature in Copenhagen were held by the Professor of Aesthetics. But in this century the discipline moved slowly away from a purely aesthetic point of view. Literature is now evaluated according to the sort of reality it mirrors regardless of whether it is realistic or symbolic. The departments of literature in many countries have been houses divided against themselves in the discussion of the relation between the literary work, the author and the society which it mirrors. Studies in Literature also married a cousin from the Social Sciences, and Mother Humanities has got more grandchildren, the most important being Sociology of Literature. But there are also other grandchildren who throng the gap between fiction and fact. Studies in literature in Scandinavia have been in what I dare call a serious crisis during the last ten years. All traditional notions have been turned upside down between two vigorous magnetic fields: influence from the social sciences and influence from political ideologies. Both these magnetic poles have tended to draw studies in literature away from the aesthetic area and more towards history. The extremists apply the marxist point of view that literature is an expression of the class struggle and that there is no distinction between literature as art and popular literature. From the top to the bottom, literature is an expression of class consciousness. The hard core of teachers at the institutes of literature in Denmark keep to the marxist ideology. But all teachers and students are reflecting the same movement: understating the aesthetic point of view and becoming more and more students of social and political history in order to have a background for their literary study of literary works.

The marxist approaches are not important issues for the study of Scandinavian-American literature. But no doubt we will have many differences of opinion when answering the question: what sort of reality does fictive literature mirror? Students of American literature in Europe are asking the same question. At a recent conference of the European

Association of American studies there were four lectures on literary studies. Three of them were theoretical discussions about fiction and fact in literature:

- 1) "Literature as Symbolic Action: The Contradictory Status of Fiction",
- 2) "Theories of Fiction and their Relation to Evolving Concepts of Society", and
- 3) "The Image of the Artist".

All three titles suggest some sort of bewilderment as to the situation of the discipline. However, there is no reason for pessimism as to the future of studies in literature. It is mainly a question of realizing where its limits should be. The scholars of the field can draw up their area like a football-field. The basic idea should be as I see it: There is an essential part of real life which historians cannot catch because reliable resource material does not exist. That is the area of feelings, of psychological effects, of environment etc. That is the play ground for scholars in literature. We can analyse literature as to these factors and thus be a *complementary* discipline to history. Fiction *cannot* be used to reconstruct facts outside this area.

What I am trying to say is that the novel or the short story can be used as an illustration of reality but that it cannot be used as a historical source. Confronted with the task of describing the life, development and assimilation process of the Scandinavian minorities in America we must admit that we are certainly not blessed with too many or too good sources. Especially for the Danish minority the material has been thrown away and scattered. On the other hand quite a lot of fictive literature has been preserved. We consequently have to make interdisciplinary projects in order to put together the different dimensions of "real life."

I have mentioned that scholars in literature go too far into the historical fields. But let me end this by saying to historians that we ought to read much more literature from the periods we write about. Not that we should use the novels as sources, but that we should immerse ourselves in their inexpressible spirit of atmosphere which most of us are too poor at describing.

NOTE

1. This brief paper was given as a talk at the SIMCON Conference in Decorah, Iowa, October 30th, 1981.