

JAN BRODAL

## **Raskolnikov's Dream. A Chapter of the History of the Reception of Russian Literature in Norway**

Russian literature has traditionally been more widely, and earlier, translated in Sweden and Denmark than in Norway.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, Russian literature has had its faithful adherents among the Norwegian reading public, as well as a number of ardent admirers among Norwegian intellectuals.

Interestingly enough, those admirers are rather to be found on the con-servative side, within the tradition of Norwegian spiritualism, than on the radical side, a fact which was not to any appreciable extent altered by the victory of communism in Russia. Maybe admirer is not the most apt ex-pression, however; one should perhaps rather use the term "strongly interested", as the interest in things Russian shown by these intellectuals by no means precluded severe criticism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some striking exceptions to this general rule deserve to be mentioned. Already in the 1890s the complete works of V. M. Garšin were published (in five selections) in the translation of K. Fosse (translations in other Scandinavian countries and in Finland followed only later). In the 1930s a comprehensive edition of L. N. Tolstoj's works were published by the publishing firm Nationalforlaget. The same goes for a later, even more comprehensive edition of the works of Dostoevskij, in 29 volumes, published by Solum during the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> Still, these criticisms rarely deteriorate to the kind of outright xenophobic statements which may quite often be found in utterances made by Norwegian writers taking part in the debate of the day. To give an impression of the general level, I cite from Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's anti-Polish articles, written in opposition to the school policy adopted by the Polish authorities of Austrian Galicia against the Ruthenian (Ukrainian) minority of this territory. After painting the Poles and Polish history in the darkest possible colours, Bjørnson goes on to say that all these horrors were "a consequence of one all-embracing cause, namely their own savage individualism, their vain and unbridled flair for fighting, their greedy faithlessness, their boundless moral laxity [...] Satan, Satan! [...] in order to give a proper description of their legislative assemblies, one would have to paint the devil like an enormous bat over the ceiling, or have him standing in a corner like a Harlequin, laughing so loudly as to make the whole assembly turn pale. Or one might

Prominent among the not so numerous writers taking a special interest in Russian literature was Nils Kjær (1870-1924). Today Kjær is mostly known for his excellent literary style (reflected chiefly in his "Epistler", or fictional letters) and for the play "Det lykkelige valg" ("The Happy Election"), an entertaining satire on politics and politicians, which has established itself as a classic of Norwegian drama.

Nils Kjær was active as a translator as well. A recent bibliography gives him as the translator of three Russian literary works, viz "Gutteblod" by F. M. Dostoevskij (1905), "En tvekamp" by A. P. Čechov (1915) and "Kommandantens datter" by A. S. Puškin (1917).<sup>3</sup> The bibliography does not say anything about the original titles of the translations, nor does it tell us whether Nils Kjær made his translations on the basis of the Russian originals, or whether he translated by way of a third language. Probably an intermediate language was used for the translation, as Kjær to our knowledge did not know Russian. As far as can be ascertained, the original titles of the translations are in succession: "Malen'kij geroj", "Duël" and "Kapi-tanskaja dočka".

Nils Kjær's development as a man and a writer is aptly summed up by the title of Harald Noreng's monograph on him and his literary work: "From radical to reactionary" ("Fra radikal til reaksjonær").<sup>4</sup> Departing from a radical stance, Nils Kjær in his later years became not only generally more conservative, but also gave proof of antisemitic views and sympathy for Mussolini and Italian Fascism.

Still, in 1905 Kjær was sufficiently radical to step forward in defence of Maxim Gor'kij, who at the time was in jail, imprisoned by the tsarist

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put him in their midst with a mitre on. How can anybody maintain that now their Satan is dead?" (From the article "The Poles as oppressors", cited from Aldo Keel, *Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. En biografi 1880-1910*, Oslo 1999, s. 497-498). The article was printed in, for instance, *Samtiden* 1907, *Die Zeit*, *Ukrainischer Rundschau*, and several other journals. Cf. also Rebecca Hanssen, "Et sammenstød mellem Bjørnson og Sienkiewicz", *Edda* 32, 1932, p. 423. It is worth mentioning that when Norway just at the turn of the century introduced a similar legislation to that in Hungary and Galicia, directed against the Saami and Finnish minorities of Northern Norway, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson never commented on this legislation, let alone criticized it.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Erling Sande, *Fra Igorkvadet til Ajmatov. Russisk skjønnlitteratur oversatt til norsk. Bibliografi (1883-1990)*, Trondheim 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Harald Noreng, *Nils Kjær. Fra radikal til reaksjonær*. Oslo 1949.

authorities. Before Kjær's intervention, the Board of the Union of Norwegian Writers had adopted a resolution condemning the imprisonment of Gor'kij and calling upon the Russian authorities to set him free. The somewhat choleric Nils Kjær then published an article, protesting not only against the imprisonment of his fellow writer, but against the Board's resolution as well. According to Kjær (who at the time was already one of the Union's members) it was far too weak and sappy, besides being incorrectly written!<sup>5</sup> "Does the Board intend to ingratiate themselves with the Russian government? [...] The resolution is half-hearted, false and hypo-critical [...] it tries to excuse Gor'kij, which is in itself an insolence. The Writers' Union would not risk anything by showing their true colours, by declaring their sympathy for Gor'kij and his comrades completely and unconditionally."<sup>6</sup>

Three Russian writers are the object of Nils Kjær's special attention: F. M. Dostoevskij, V. M. Garšin and L. N. Andreev.<sup>7</sup>

To Dostoevskij Kjær devotes two essays, "Raskolnikov's Dream" and "The Brothers Karamazov", as well as several passages in other essays that comment in some way or other on Dostoevskij and his writings.

The essay "Brødrene Karamasov" (on Dostoevskij's "Brat'ja Karamazovy") was — in all probability — written on the occasion of the first Norwegian edition of the novel, which appeared in 1915 and was produced by the Norwegian philologist Olaf Broch (1867-1961), professor of Slavonic philology at the University of Oslo. Kjær states that "it may be accidental, but it may also have a deeper significance that t h e literary

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<sup>5</sup> The expression Nils Kjær — not without reason, it should be added — is reacting to, is actually: "Hans deltagelse i den nylig stedfundne Bevægelse" (His participation in the recent developments).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Martin Nag, *Gorkij i Norge*, Sarpsborg 1983, pp. 28-31.

<sup>7</sup> The essays were written at different times, and have gone through several reprints. The essays on Andreev and "Brat'ja Karamazovy" can be found in Kjær's collected writings (*Samlede skrifter*, Kristiania 1922, Volume III, pp. 93-107), reprinted Oslo 1969 (*Profiler*, pp. 60-68). "Raskolnikov's Dream" can be found in the edition *Siste epistler* (printed posthumously in 1924), and later on in *Epistler*, Oslo 1949, pp. 372-378, also reprinted in *Epistler*, Oslo 1963 and 1965, pp. 237-241. The essay on Garšin appeared for the first time in book edition in the selection *Fremmede forfattere*, published by Bertrand Jensen in Kristiania in 1895. The essay on Garšin was not included in *Samlede Skrifter* in 1924, but can be found in reprint in *Profiler*, Oslo 1949, pp. 206-210.

event of the year is a translation. But probably this is not the ideal translation of a Dostoevskij novel. Such a translation could only be provided by an artist who at the same time mastered the Russian language, and where do we find in this country a man who is equally acquainted with Dostoevskij's language as with his mother tongue?"

We here arrive at a rather typical feature of Kjær's style as a critic. His level of precision is not especially high, and he is rather careless with factual information and concrete details. In the essay on "Brat'ja Karamazovy" cited above, he criticizes the translation for being "not ideal", and consequently describes the translator as not quite up to his task. Still, Kjær does not mention either the name of the translator, or which edition he bases his essay on. In fact Kjær, himself a translator, at least whenever writing on Russian literature, never mentions the names of the translators on the basis of whose works he writes his essays.

In this connection, this is by no means a purely academic question, as Kjær quite often discusses the quality of the translations, and even, as we shall see, utters some quite sensible opinions on translatory activities. Still, Nils Kjær has an obvious handicap here; not being able to analyze the original text, he was not able to say much about the faithfulness of the Norwegian edition in relation to the original version. Thus his judgement on Olaf Broch's translation could be set aside as pure guesswork. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Kjær, being an accomplished literary craftsman, was able to express himself authoritatively. Judgement is made difficult by the fact that Kjær here, as elsewhere, does not provide any concrete examples. The present writer has therefore taken the opportunity of checking some selected passages of Broch's translation with the original text, and is forced to conclude that the translation is fairly good, both when it comes to faithfulness to the original and to the quality of the Norwegian rendition. For instance, Broch's rendition of the syntactical patterns of the original into Norwegian is quite accurate and good — this is a field where many Norwegian translators have admittedly betrayed the authors' original syntactic style by over-simplifying it in the Norwegian version — a problem which Nils Kjær, interestingly enough, is fully aware of. (Cf. his comments, in the essay on V. M. Garšin, to be cited later.)

Having dismissed the translator in this way, Nils Kjær goes on to comment on the novel, which he characterizes as "the most outstanding

work of Russian literature", and as "an extremely realistic family- and detective novel [...] a work of enormous dimensions, and in terms of content more weighty than any other work of modern literature, because it — in all its breadth and long-windedness — still does not contain a single triviality, not a single superfluous person, not a single off-hand or insignificant word."

Most likely Kjær was not aware of Dostoevskij's peculiar mode of production, which involved writing monthly instalments for literary journals, a method of publication which made it impossible for him to foresee exactly the ending of a given novel when he started on the first chapter. Dostoevskij's way of writing always involved a strong element of improvisation, which to a great extent precluded the precision and elaborateness which Kjær stresses is typical of him. It is, rather, the other way round: a typical feature of Dostoevskij's literary style is precisely its exuberant character, its frequently heavily loaded and over-long sentences, quite often studded with lots of insertions of different kinds which are by no means always indispensable to the sense of the utterance. Kjær's statement tells us that he is very much impressed by Dostoevskij's text, and thus bears witness to the literary ability of the Russian master, but it can hardly be said to be a particularly good description of the distinctive character of Dostoevskij's style.

Kjær sums up the novel by characterizing Dmitrij as displaying "the Karamazovian passion as naive and careless unruliness", Ivan as having "the very same Karamazovian passion developed as thought, as logical ruthlessness", and finally Aleša as being "also passionate, but his passion expresses itself in a burning belief in God, and an ecstatic need for submission."

It is all true, although the view is not particularly original. But Kjær undoubtedly has a keen feeling for the dramatic essence of Dostoevskij's art when he calls it "drama embedded in epic layers", and stresses that "as ever so often in Dostoevskij, the situation is aggravated for the hero by an outright total lack of money. No other writer has shown greater virtuosity in understanding this most banal of human humiliations."

It is evident that Kjær does not have very profound knowledge of Dostoevskij's life and his literary work as a whole, but still one gets the impression that he has quite a good intuitive understanding of him and his

works. He also gives evidence of knowledge of other Russian writers, for instance, when comparing Dmitrij Karamazov to the heroes of Lermontov: "[...] full of exuberant vitality, ruthless, proud and quick-tempered, boundless in all his reactions, but with a mind possessing a deep and dark enthusiasm, even during, or perhaps just because of, his desperation [...] none of the novel's personages strikes us as so spontaneously manly, and humanely engaging as Mitja". Sometimes Kjær's flair for paradox makes itself felt: "Aleša is rather the hero of the author than the hero of the novel."

"Raskolnikov's dream", the other essay on Dostojevskij was evidently written under the impression of revolution and civil war in his homeland. Kjær at once goes *in medias res*, giving us what he sees as the real force behind the October Revolution and other revolutions: "Nobody knows how long a powerful people like the Russians will consent to bow under the yoke of the Jews, and let themselves be subjugated by a communist syndrium. Defeated and harassed Hungary has already managed to shake off Bela Cohn's (*sic!*) despotism [...]."

Whereas in "Brødrene Karamasov" it is Dostoevskij, the great literary master, we meet, in "Raskolnikov's dream" Nils Kjær introduces us to the great prophet Dostoevskij. Practically speaking, "Raskolnikov's dream" is a political pamphlet, where Kjær tries to show that a series of phenomena linked to the victory of communism in Russia (prominent among them anticlericalism and persecution of Christian believers) have been foreseen by Dostoevskij.

Likewise, Kjær's own style here raises itself to prophetic heights and abounds with purple patches. Having given widespread illiteracy as one of the main reasons why communism still prevails in Russia, he exclaims that: "As long as it appears to the people as a new and astonishing portent that lightning does not strike down the blasphemers, and as long as it is considered a wonder that the Mother of God with equanimity tolerates being robbed of her pearls, the Soviets have a nice time, and the church policy of the Bolsheviks will be triumphant. But out of the insolent desert in the collective soul of the tortured people a cry will eventually arise, and abysses will open up, full of prayers, wailing and wrath. But God's mill grinds slowly."

In the last part of the essay, Kjær finishes his political tracts and looks more closely at "Prestuplenie i nakazanie", or rather at the character and

behaviour of Rodion Raskolnikov. He states: "Rodion Raskolnikov, this robber and murderer, is not in any way persecuted by painful and humiliating thoughts, not a single one. Neither by pangs of conscience of any kind [...] nor by any form of moral shock based in Christian morality, as this would have been depicted by Dickens or in the charming little stories of other writers."

Maybe this is somewhat exaggerated, Rodion Raskolnikov certainly experiences both pain and humiliation, as can easily be documented on the basis of the novel's text.

But Kjær points to an important fact, namely that Raskolnikov's conversion is not so much a conscious one, based on insight into the evil nature of his behaviour, as a wonder, brought about exclusively by the grace of God, which is manifested not least by Sonja's altruistic behaviour towards both him and others.<sup>8</sup>

The dream about which Nils Kjær writes includes the dreams and visions of Raskolnikov in connection with the illness which befalls him in the novel's epilogue. Together these visions conjure up a future apocalyptic reality. Kjær parallels his apocalyptic visions with the situation in revolutionary Russia: "In this godless chaos all the demons of darkness triumph [...]. In 1866 Dostoevskij conjured up a global catastrophe made possible by the general anarchy of which Raskolnikov has a vague notion in his 'rambling dream'. Time is in the process of developing a new phase in its series of everchanging sceneries: up from the abysmal depths ascend animals with iron claws, animals demanding discipline, unconditional obedience, and self-denial, in order to create conditions that can force human beings to persist in their miserable existence. And this gospel wins enthusiastic submission. It is not possible to describe the history of day and time more aptly than by the words in the Apocalypse of St. John."

Nils Kjær's essay on Garšin stems from the collection "Fremmede forfattere", published in Kristiania in 1895 (dated 1893), and is consequently of a much earlier date than "Raskolnikov's dream", from a time when Kjær looked with greater approbation on leftish opposition than after the October Revolution. V. M. Garšin (1855-1883) was one of the writers

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. F. M. Dostoevskij, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v tridcati tomach*, T. 6, Leningrad 1973, pp. 410-421.

who were en vogue in the 1890s, and whose works were in the course of a few years published in their entirety in Norwegian (translated by Karl Olaf Fosse). This makes him the first Russian writer to be published in his entirety in Norway.

Here, as elsewhere, Kjær supplies his essay with a quite lengthy introduction. This time he concerns himself with translations, and provides some quite intelligent comments on this topic, comments which may be said to be ahead of his time. At the same time, he does not bother to mention the translator of the stories by V. M. Garšin which are the object of his essay, Nils Kjær was rarely especially consistent. But let us cite some of his views on translation, provoked by his reading of Russian literature in translation. Kjær draws attention in particular to something which is no less important in Norwegian translation today, namely the tendency to subject a foreign text to an adaptation based on demands that are incompatible with the inherent logic of the text to be translated. (An apt example is the wish to reduce a more complicated foreign text with, e.g. hypotactical structures, to what in Norway is generally called "easy, contemporary Norwegian", an undertaking which not infrequently results in, e.g. Gogol, Dostoevskij and Turgenev emerging from the process of translation with almost identical syntactic patterns): "Even in the case of first hand translations of the first rank much is ultimately lost: Pace, rhythm, colour, and above all individuality. I wonder if that uniform style which we can observe in all Russian novels may be caused by consciously biassed — though probably well-intended — translations, rather than it being due to an overwhelming uniformity or common character in Russians by and large, and in Russian writers in particular. At any rate, it is certain that most of us will have difficulties judging by the style of an translation whether a given page has been written by Tolstoj or Gogol, notwithstanding the fact that those writers are said to be as mutually different as Bjørnson and J. P. Jakobsen [...] That is why [...] a lot of t h e a r t i s t escapes us."

Nils Kjær's picture of Garšin does not differ too much from that offered by Michajlovskij and other populist critics in Russia at the time. In short stories like "To, čego ne bylo", "Ljaguška-putešestvennica", "Attalea Princeps", "Krasnyj cvetok", "Chudožniki", "Vstreča", and others, the still young and radical Kjær stresses Garšin's critical tendency against the Rus-



sian establishment of his time, and interprets quite a lot of these stories allegorically, above all "Krasnyj cvetok" and "Attalea Princeps", which he likens to "official Russia", envisaged as "a greenhouse where the brick walls and iron-barred glass roof hamper and stifle the growth of freedom", and as "a madhouse with guards and inmates".

Kjær also comments on "Nadežda Nikolaevna", but interestingly enough does not interpret it as a "story à thèse" directed against society's toleration of prostitution; the stress is here rather put on individual psychology, and the emotional relations between men and women.

Summing up, Kjær compares Garšin to Dostoevskij, the only writer "to which he may be said to be related, and by whom he — maybe — is influenced." Kjær maintains that Garšin's relation to human suffering is parallell to that of Dostoevskij: "To him, as to Dostoevskij, human suffering is not a phenomenon which one may bow to, or just bypass. Suffering is something more; something which calls upon one to bare one's head and lower one's voice; it is something inexorable, something mysterious, before which one experiences a thrill, before which one feels veneration, and by some peculiar paradox is almost persuaded to love. Suffering becomes Religion, and compassion some mystical kind of pleasure." Thus Kjær infers from the works of Garšin a cult of suffering of the same kind that some interpreters have claimed to find in Dostoevskij — an assertion which, in the present writer's opinion, is hardly tenable.

Leonid Andreev (1871-1919) was a widely read writer both within and beyond the borders of Russia at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Inspired by the horrors of the Russo-Japanese war, he wrote the expressionistic story "Krasnyj smeč" ("Red laughter"), which was translated in Scandinavia and provoked a parody called "Den bløde latter" ("Soft laughter", inspired by the Norwegian translation "Den røde latter"). The parody was published (in instalments) by the daily *Morgenbladet*, its author was Carl Joachim Hambro, translator, critic and politician, later to become one of the champions of Norwegian parliamentarianism.

Nils Kjær, always avidly on the lookout for new trends on the current literary scene, also caught sight of Leonid Andreev and his writings, and has given to posterity a testimony of contemporaneous engagement in a writer who is not widely read today.

Kjær's discussion of Leonid Andreev begins with a saying which, because of its general implications, has been quite frequently cited ever since: "This will perhaps be called a sad book by people who never feel sadness, because so many books are written without any talent. Others will rejoice at the fact, that after Čechov and Korolenko, and alongside the over-rated Maksim Gor'kij, another important writer has appeared in Russia".

But which book or work does he have in mind? The essay has the subtitle "I Taagen" (In the fog), and, as we know, Andreev has written a well-known short story by that name ("V tumane", 1888). But the strange thing about this is that this short story is not mentioned at all in the text. After a rather lengthy introduction, so typical of Kjær, where also "Povest' o semi povešennykh" and "Gubernator" are favourably mentioned in passing, Kjær goes on to discuss "Mysl'" (The Thought), another well known Andreev story, but as far as the present writer ascertain, never published in Norway.<sup>9</sup>

What brought Kjær to write about just this Andreev short story is evidently its similarity — in some respects — to Dostojevskij's "Prestuplenie i nakazanie" (and in fact Dostoevskij's famous "Crime and Punishment" is as prominent in Kjær's essay on Andreev as Andreev's story). Like Rodion Raskol'nikov in the novel, the protagonist of Andreev's story, Dr. Keržencev, seems to regard murder as a sort of experiment, showing that he stands above humanity. The story is Dr. Keržencev's own account of his act (in the form of several letters) and the theoretical background for it. Thus we find here the same kind of scrutinizing self-analysis to be found in Rodion Raskolnikov; indeed, Andreev's protagonist seems even more systematic and thorough in his analysis than Dostojevskij's. The text appears as a sort of monologue addressed to the psychiatric experts employed by the law court before which he is appearing.

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<sup>9</sup> According to Erling Sande's bibliography no edition of the works of Andreev by the title "I Taagen" is at hand in Norway at that time. In the Danish National Bibliography, *Dansk Bogfortegnelse*, however, I have been able to trace the following entry: Andrejef, Leonid, *I Taagen og andre Noveller*. Aut.[oriseret] dansk-norsk Udg.[ave]. Ved Laur. Swendsen (234 s.), E. Jespersen, København 1909. In all probability this edition was the point of vantage for Kjær when he wrote his essay.

Like Raskolnikov, Keržencev seems to kill his victim because he finds him to be inferior to himself, belonging to a category of people who are useless to the world, who are lice, as Raskolnikov characterizes the old pawnbroker woman whom he kills. Keržencev maintains that his victim, a lawyer by education, and an old acquaintance from their school days, is unable to rise above the level of mediocrity: "Ko vsemu krupnomu on nespoboben: krasivy i nictožny byli ego proizvedenija, krasiv i nictožen byl i on sam."

The story shocked many of Andreev's readers, but Nils Kjær does not interpret it exclusively in a negative manner. He even uses the story to illustrate the thesis, that "Russian literature is the first literature where the individual is redeemed [...]. By having discovered the infinity of Man, and not, like Western Europe, being satisfied to discover merely the infinity of the universe, Russian psychology has proven its greatness."

To support his point, Kjær provides a lengthy citation. The reader is led to understand that the citation is taken from "Mysl", but the present writer had great difficulties retracing it. Kjær, as usual, does not give any particulars as to the source. When the citation was at last found, it turned out why it had been so difficult to retrace it. Kjær (or the translator) had removed it from its context, and presented it as a new and independent paragraph.<sup>10</sup>

In a sense, this is typical of Kjær's activity as a critic. His essays and articles are as a rule very subjective, and it seems only fitting that one of his essays on Dostoevskij finds its vantage point in a dream. It does not seem to have much difficulty with excluding elements which do not fit into his subjective vision (cf. Andreev's "V tumane", which is to be found in the title, but of which there is no trace in the text).

Hence his literary style is what in Norwegian usage is usually called "impresjonistisk" (impressionistic), somewhat dogmatic, not too analytical, based on the critic's immediate and subjective experience.

In Norwegian literary tradition, the position of Nils Kjær is truly legendary. Unlimited praise has been heaped upon him by his contemporary fellow writers, characterizing him with the most exuberant epithets.

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<sup>10</sup> The translation abounds with inaccuracies. To find the citation in its Russian original, see Leonid Nikolaevič Andreev, *Sobranie sočinenij v šesti tomach*, T. 1, Moskva 1990, pp. 416-417.

He has been republished numerous times, and three years before his death in 1924 an edition of his collected works appeared (in 5 volumes) — both occurrences utterly rare in Norway for a writer working mainly within those literary categories which were Kjær's main field of activity. However a more thorough scrutiny of those of his essays which deal with Russian literature does not entirely support this panegyric. True enough, his essays are well written, informative, to a certain extent quite interesting, but they are by no means outstanding. Many of his utterances fall within the field of comfortable clichés: Russia as the great enigma, the Russian people as the sleeping giant who has not yet awoken, and so on. Kjær shows many of the weaknesses of his own time and his generation, whose writers and critics liked to express themselves with complete and categorical assuredness on matters which they ultimately did not know so thoroughly at all.

Thus, Nils Kjær and his literary criticism are in many ways a typical generational phenomenon, of the kind which sheds interesting light on the views and reactions of a given epoch, but which will probably not be found especially rewarding if one is looking for enduring knowledge and insight.

*E-mail: jan.brodal@ub.uit.no*