

Creative milieus and cities

The discipline of ambition – norms and trajectories in the literary life of 18th century Copenhagen.

MA Jakob Ingemann Parby

Copenhagen City Museum

jip.kbm@kff.kk.dk

Introduction

The present paper addresses the frames and conditions of creativity in a specific context, e.g. the production of literature in the metropolis of Denmark-Norway in the second half of the 18th century. This subject-space-time matrix is of interest to this session primarily from a comparative perspective, since obviously it allows us to study in detail the figuration and reconfiguration of a creative milieu in an 18th century urban context and compare it to other historical attempts to create essentially innovative milieus. Before I proceed with my case study I would, however, like to share some remarks on the study of creative milieus and cities in general. The importance and fertility of this field of study lie not so much in the obvious notion, that creative work throughout history has been focused in cities, which probably has connections to the fact that the density of population, institutions of knowledge and art and so forth were always greater in cities than elsewhere. Rather, by studying creative milieus in cities one can reduce the scale of observation to an extent that makes it possible for the individual historian or sociologist to carry out a systematic survey of an intellectual, artistic or literary field as suggested by Bourdieu and others, instead of simply studying the life and work of individual artists or scientists as has been common in the recently revived biographical tradition. Biographical studies have a lot of advantages, the least not being their narrative qualities and their accessibility to the common reader. But the lenses of biography tend to distort the image of the milieu that the biographed person is part of in favour of the biographed person herself, rendering less intelligible for the reader the conditions and context of their subject.

Studying creative milieus or – to use a Bourdieuan term - fields gives us a chance to overcome some of the problems of biography and see the milieus in their totality instead.¹ Further, choosing a milieu within an urban framework open up possibilities of analysing the importance of spatial proximity for the creative process and the interaction between the particular artistic milieu or field and the urban environment in general. This – in my opinion – is perhaps the most important quality of the “milieu”-concept for analytical purposes.

The frames of creativity

What separated the frames of creativity in the 18th century from past examples of creative milieus was primarily the concerted effort of rationalisation and institutionalisation that in most European countries was led by the growing state-administrations and their populace of officers and civil servants sharing a belief in organisation and state-initiative as the vehicles of progress and enlightenment. Inspired by the academies and scientific societies founded in Louis XIV's France in the 17th century most monarchies in Northern Europe instigated similar initiatives and founded art academies, scientific societies, societies to the improvement of agriculture, industry, art and – literature. This organisational drive was not limited to the official initiatives of the administration alone, but the administrators and the higher civil servants themselves used their spare-time to try to live up to the Enlightenment-ideal of the useful citizen putting his skills and talents in the service of the common good at all hours of the day. Thus, within the literary field alone, they founded private or semi-public reading societies, clubs and other *fora*, wrote articles on their favourite subjects of learning as well as literary criticism and essays, and functioned as counsellors for prospective writers, who often themselves had a background within the administration or the church. This kind of lifestyle was clearly tied to a general European cosmopolitan community and firmly rooted in the urban space as a place for meetings and exchange of ideas, manuscripts, books etc.ⁱⁱ Of course the learned republic of university professors and antiquarians also participated in this process of scientific institutionalisation, but it is remarkable how much - compared to earlier periods, when the university-population had lived a life of its own, more or less secluded from city life – they now shared the same values and beliefs as the officials in the administration.

Another particular aspect of life in the capital was the flourishing of languages and nationalities. Both German and French were preferred at court and used in the army, while Danish remained only the administrative language of the navy. One peculiar side-effect of this was that the earliest initiatives to promote a native Danish literature comparable to modern European standards came from a circle of German- and French-speaking immigrated *literati* promoted by the powerful Foreign Minister, J. H. E. Bernstorff. Bernstorff had started his career as an envoy in the cultural capital of the age - Paris - and was appalled by the low standard of literary life in Copenhagen upon his return. He therefore invited a number of *literati* to his palace in Bredgade, employed them in his department of the administration and asked them to write reports and articles containing suggestions to improve this state of affair. This meant that the reform or rebirth of a Danish-language literature became essentially founded on a common European basis adapting the ideas of among others the German critic and dramatist Johan Fr. Gotsched to the context of Copenhagen.

The construction of the Royal Theatre in 1748 signified a breakthrough for Bernstorff's initiatives, because it represented the prime institutional frame for the production and development of a Danish literature and the main window of its reception. It is noteworthy,

in this context, that the establishment of an institutional framework of literary production to a large extent preceded the actual literary achievements, as is revealed in the constant complaints by the officials administering the theatre to the lack of original plays in Danish of any quality. These early days of the theatre were consequently dominated by translations and adaptations of the works of celebrated European writers like Moliere, Goldoni, Gessner and others. Another significant obstacle to the theatres existence was the lack of a sufficient crowd of spectators. Since the shut-down of Ludvig Holbergs theatre in 1728 no public theatre had existed in the capital and the new genres presented at stage after 1748 apparently did not carry the same popular appeal as Holbergs plays. Consequently the theatre struggled economically from its earliest days and, in 1754, was put under special administration by royal officers. For the actors – and even for the writers – this meant a new sort of control, dominated by values and norms imported from the daily life of the state administration. Cleanliness, meticulousness, respectability and sound morals, where among the ideals now preached to both groups and enforced with heavy fines, if not expulsion, since good actors were hard to replace. These ideals even spilled over into the original plays written for the stage, where morality and education became prime objectives. A contemporary member of the elite characteristically remarked, that it was better if hilarity was missing from a play, than it existed at the expense of virtue!ⁱⁱⁱ Needless to say, such viewpoints hardly worked to enlarge the audience...

The administration and the writers

The absolutist court was the absolute centre of life in the metropolis around 1750. Not only was the court by far the greatest individual consumer and thus the foundation of the exceptional economic growth of the capital in the 18th century. Its permanent presence in the city was the cause of demographic, architectural and commercial expansion as well. Compared to the earlier forms of absolutism, however, the dominant role of the court in the 18th century to an increasing degree meant the dominant role of the administration. Neither Frederik V nor his son, Christian VII had the character to realise a personal rule in the fashion of their predecessors. Simultaneously the functions of the state increased steadily throughout the century leading among other things to an expansion of bureaucracy and of formal bureaucratic education. Around mid-century this development had created a situation, where almost all initiatives for the promotion of art and science came from a rather closed circle of officials and state administrators, whose control of artists and writers derived not least from their control of the public means of funding of writers and their access to provide employment within the administration for their favourites.

These men were characterised by meticulousness, caution and a well-developed sense of detail, all traits that were almost inherent to their profession. They did also – for the most part – circumscribe the 17th and 18th century ideal of a polyhistoric or even encyclopaedic interest in the world. These traits influenced heavily on their approach

to the development of a native literature and on the whole figuration of the literary system at the time, as we will have a chance to see in the following. In this francophile age of academies and societies as the preferred vehicles of reform, one is hardly surprised to find the foundation of a number of societies as the main tool in the administrators plan for scientific and artistic progress in the kingdom. The establishment of the Royal Society of Science in 1742, the Society to the Improvement of Nordic History and Language in 1745 and the first Danish Academy of Arts in 1754, was - almost inevitably - followed in 1759 by the establishment of Selskabet til de skønne og nyttige Videnskabers Forbedrelse (eg: *The Society to the Improvement of the Fine and useful Sciences*, the term used for imaginative literature before that term was fashioned), whose members and founders where all occupying important positions within the administration, the university or the academy in Sorø, all sharing a similar education and political outlook, and although the foundation of the society were formally a private initiative, it was quickly given royal subsidies due to the position of its founders. The Society was the forerunner of the Danish Academy and primarily worked to develop native imaginative literature by offering prizes for the best contributions within all the genres of classicism hoping thus to fulfil the declared goal: to invigorate masterpieces in Danish similar to those already written in main languages like French, German and English.

Almost from the very beginning the journal of the society acquired special status. Though other journals did publish poetry among the news and ads of the day, having a text printed in the journal of the Society was regarded as a sort of poetic accolade, facilitating not only royal patronage or appointment to office, but even access to having plays staged at the Royal Theatre - a significant source of status and income.¹

The status acquired by the Society among prospective writers, however, did not mean that engaging with it was an uncomplicated process. Though most of them derived from a circle of students and minor civil servants and thus had intimate knowledge of the culture of the men heading the society, the huge advising and correcting effort that the members of the society invested in most writers interacting with the society, strained the relationship between the literary counsellors and the writers.

The disciplined writer

A case in question was the Norwegian Hans Bull, who after finishing his theological degree wrote several poems for the journal of the Society with some reward. Bull's motives for entering into the contest were not simply born by poetic fervour. Rather he hoped that his contact with the members of the society could help promote his chances to receive an office after some years of idleness and his appointment as priest to the parish of Klæbu,

¹ Beside the occasional fee upon delivering the manuscripts, a writer was guaranteed all box office taking from the third performance. If the play was favourably received he could also hope to increase his earnings through publication of the play.

close to his native town Trondheim in 1769, proved him right. His appointment, however, did not end his poetic vein. Rather it seems from his correspondence with a leading member of the Society, Adolph Gotthard Carstens, that he felt obliged to remain productive as a sort of gesture to the administrators for securing him the office. The correspondence is particularly interesting, because it reveals the peculiar relationship that existed between the members of the society and their proselytes. While in his first letter Bull praises the expertise of his mentor Carstens and mainly seems to regret his departure from Copenhagen - the literary centre of the kingdom - the following letters express a growing weariness of Carsten's continual attempts to improve and reorganise the poems he has send the Society combined with a simultaneously developed enthusiasm for the simple, overwhelming beauty of his homeland. When reading the letters it comes as no surprise that Bull after 1774 ultimately gave up his ambitions of literary success and concentrated on his work in the parish instead. The reason for Bull's despair can be found in his remaining manuscripts in the Royal Library, containing not only Bull's own ideas, but also Carstens' extensive suggestions for improvement.

From it we can resume how the corrective effort of Carstens weren't limited to the poetry alone, in one case suggesting alternations in almost every line of a poem of over 700 lines and afterwards rereading and almost rewriting whole passages of it several times. He even invested his impressive knowledge of contemporary European thought in developing Bull's original ideas. Commenting on a didactic poem by Bull on the maltreatment of animals - a subject hotly debated around Europe at the time – he directed Bull's attention to the writings of the German Hermann Reimarus' "Über die Triebe der Thiere", to a protest against Haller's experiments on living animals in the English journal *Monthly Review*, to the Swiss biologist Charles Bonnet's comment, that man should rule over animals like a monarch, not a tyrant and even to the familiar copperplates of William Hogarth, whose "The Four Stages of Cruelty" were eventually integrated into Bull's poem. Bull felt obliged to adhere to Carstens' suggestions, but in a letter cautiously commented: "A constrained poet is rarely happy..."

A similar attitude can be detected among other of the poets brought under the wings of the Society. For some of them the struggle against the obsessive correction of the members of the Society took a different and more dramatic turn.

The writer in suspense

As the Danish literary historian, Thomas Bredsdorff, has noted the members of the society transferred the norms of their daily routines in the administration to their interactions with the prospective writers answering the price subjects.^{iv} Among the most important norms where the unanimity among equals and the obeisance of subordinates. The protocol of the society clearly reveals the predominance of these norms in the society's praxis. Though we know from private letters that rifts naturally did occur during the evaluation of submitted works, this is hardly ever revealed in the official protocol. Even more significant was the

obedience demanded of the writers. We saw how Bull felt obliged to continually rework his poems along the lines suggested by his advisor. The protocol of the Society is filled with similar demands to other writers and of appraisals of their will to adapt to them.

Even one of the most ground-breaking and innovative poets of the age, Johannes Ewald, started out as an obedient client of the Society. From the protocol we learn how his first work – the allegorical tale “The Tempel of Happiness” – was printed only after “due and subservient” revisions of the writer. Son of a priest, Ewald was well versed in the importance of obedience towards the members of the administration, but some years later he nonetheless began to deviate significantly from this rationally calculated behaviour. Inspired by the German poet Klopstock – at the time receiving financial support from the Danish Court – he initiated a more passionate and self-centred poetic style that fitted badly into the classisistic scheme laid out by the Society. Even worse his personal life was increasingly marked by alcoholism and debauchery, while he refused to follow the path into office like his fellow poets. The deterioration culminated when Ewald was put under guardianship and forcibly removed from the temptations of the city in the winter of 1770-71 and again from 1773-1777.

The period of press-freedom

In between the forced exiles Ewald experienced the short period of pressfreedom during the reign of Johan Friedrich Struensee, doctor to the insane king Christian VII. The liberty granted to the press by Struensee was mainly used by publishers to overflow the book-market with pamphlets and copperplates containing more or less hidden references to the sexual promiscuity of the court, in particular aimed at the usurper Struensee and the queen Carolina Matilde with whom he begot a child. Obviously, most of the literary elite, including the members of the Society, watched the development with disgust and some anxiety. Ewald, on the contrary, nourishing a dream to be able to live from his writing, apparently considered publishing a journal of his own under the title “The Strangers”, but aborted the attempt as Struensee fell from power in 1772 and was beheaded at the plains outside Copenhagen. Struensee’s reign was ill reputed in the years to come, but it did work to accelerate the process of reform within the state that had been underway since mid-century within areas as diverse as agriculture, science, industry – and media. Though Ewald’s journal remained unpublished, he and other writers began to make use of the growing literary public and the market, to free themselves from some of the normative pressure exerted by the administrators who had dominated the scientific and artistic societies in the preceding decades. He also commenced writing occasional poems for the commercial bourgeoisie and the lower civil servants, winning him some renown among these groups. Though his guardians exiled him again in the end of 1773, he had by then build a reputation great enough to allow him to continually indulge in new poetic experiments beyond the taste of the Society. His known admirers generally belonged to the younger generation of students and civil servants and some of them express concern that Ewald also continues to drink and surround him-self with dubious company, but it is

hard not to assume that beyond these concerns even Ewald's immoral lifestyle contributed to his growing renown. There was something attractive about a poet living on the verges of a society increasingly dominated by morality and bourgeois norms. This assumption is strengthened both by Ewald's own self-representation in the preface to his collected works published from 1780 onwards and by the letters he received from new admirers during his years of "exile".

Revolting writers and the transformation of the literary system

Traditionally, the alcoholism and immoral behaviour of an Ewald and other of his colleagues has been seen as a response to the tension created by the figuration of the literary system on those writers like Ewald and his contemporary Johan Hermann Wessel, who refused to put themselves under the control of the administrators dominating the literary institutions and instead attempted to position themselves as "free writers", hailing an aesthetic and existential integrity, hitherto unknown to the profession. Unlike the hags often employed by the publishers and book-printers to write all kinds of things (controlled by the market), and the civil servant writer (like Hans Bull) obeying the demands of the literary institutions to promote his professional career, Ewald – according to this tradition – was an inspired, and socially unfit, genius who could not bear to bend continually to the taste and demands of the literary elite. Herein lied the root of his immorality and suffering and when at the brink of death from rheumatism and alcoholism he finally won acclaim even from the literary institutions, this can be accorded to their discovery of his genius and not to anything Ewald himself had done. So far, the traditional view of Ewald's faith. In contrast with this view I will offer here another interpretation of Ewald and the (role of the) author-genius that will also allow me to utter something more generally on the configuration and reconfiguration of creative milieus.

Theoretical reflection

One of the central notions in the writings of the German sociologist Norbert Elias was the the endeavour to break-up the traditional dichotomy between individual and society, e.g. the conception of the individual as a distinct, integrated entity containing an unbreakable essence and acting within a structural impersonal framework called society. Instead, Elias wanted to focus on the processual nature of both the individual and society placing at the centre of his attention the study of collective norms and their constant reconfiguration through their internalisation and transformation among individuals. Collective norms, in Elias' view, are never static, but always challenged and modified during the process of their internalisation by newcomers to the collective. To all newcomers or outsiders this internalising process is never uncomplicated, but creates tension and interpretations of the norms that can in turn work to change the norms themselves.^v

Seen in this optic Ewald's behaviour may be perceived as a reaction to the growing discrepancy between the normative-collective notion of the writer celebrated by the literary institutions and his own evolving self-image. In a way that was probably not fully conscious he gradually reinterpreted the existing norms in order to make them fit with his own changing and increasingly megalomaniac image of himself as a gifted writer. To do this he made use of the urban space and the growing literary market in several ways, but never lost his original motivation of ultimately gaining the recognition of the literary elite. When ultimately he got the recognition from the Society, this was a result of his major publicity work within the urban space and not simply a matter of the elite finally recognising his talent. George Turnovsky in a recent article on the relationship between French writers and the literary market argues that the growth of the literary market in the 18th century did not make the writers producers in a capitalist economy overnight. Rather the writers made use of the market and even affected the market in multiple fashions; also to achieve traditional aims of merit and elite recognition.^{vi} This description fits perfectly with the case of Johannes Ewald, as in the last years of his short life he achieved the recognition from the administrative elite and simultaneously gained the benefits of the literary market, as his plays became hits and he negotiated a favourable contract for the publication of his collected works.

Ewald's struggle in turn helped to gradually reconfigure the literary system. Among other things the renown and power of the Society were significantly damaged in public debate during the 1780s, when political changes and the new regimes' nationalist rhetoric, heroised Ewald as the first true Danish poet and disclaimed the Society for failing to support him. Instead the more informal clubs and writer-societies along with new journals like *Minerva* edited by the civil servant writers K. L. Rahbek and C. Pram took over as the primary normative and evaluative forces in literary life. Yet many traits from the former institution spilled over into these early writer-societies.

The comprehensive collection of provisions in each society, the belief in the improvement of literature as a collective project and the continuance of the prize offering policy of the Society all indicates the unabated importance of administrative culture and discourse for the figuration of literary life in the metropolis.

Conclusion

The case presented here hopefully contributes to the overall study of creative milieus, their generation and transformation and suggests the importance of cultural and discursive context for the analysis of these issues. The milieu studied here was characterised by a particular discourse of reform and utility, by certain values and behavioural norms rooted in the culture of the royal administration and by a firm belief among the dominant men in society that reform could best be brought about through (their) concerted and institutionalised action. In time this institution-based system was challenged by an

increasingly self-conscious group of writers; a self-consciousness that sprang from the re-appreciation of the role and status of the writer in society originally brought about by the very institutions the writers were now challenging, but also from the possibilities offered by the growing literary market and the expanding economy of the capital in general. However, in their reactions to the institutional system from around 1775 the writers were unable to break out of the discursive space that had generated them, and so repeated the patterns of institutionalisation and formalisation by establishing writer societies that only slightly deviated from the institutions they were a reaction to. It should last well into the 19th century before a fully developed, more diversified and multifaceted literary system took shape.

In ending it seems to me, that two general conclusions stands out from the case presented here: One is the fundamentally processual nature of any creative milieu, that is never static in form and meaning, but resembles a multiplied version of the cardgame image of Norbert Elias. Secondly, the processes generating or reconfiguring creative milieus are long-termed, lasting decades or half centuries rather than years or months. And so, the construction and evaluation of new creative milieus, like the science cities or technopolis mentioned elsewhere, calls for a patience unbecoming to our age, to be of measure.

ⁱ Though obviously this sort of "Annales"-inspired wish to study history in its totality has its own problems and fallacies, see among others Burke, P.: "Overture: the New History, its Past and its Future" in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 1-23.

ⁱⁱ On the dominant role of the administration in the Enlightenment culture of Germany and Scandinavia and the lack of a political subversive Grub Street writer-phenomenon like the one identified in France by Robert Darnton, see: James Van Horn Melton: *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, Cambridge 2001, p. 134-5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Trondhiemske Samlinger, udg. af Philaletho (P. F. Suhm), I, p. 238, Copenhagen 1762.

^{iv} Thomas Bredsdorff: *Digternes Natur*, Copenhagen 1975, p. 135-6

^v See Norbert Elias: *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, Basel 1939; *ibid.*: *The Society of Individuals*, London 1991. Gregory Brown has offered some stimulating articles on the use of Elias' theories in the study of 18th century literary life: Gregory Brown: "Social Encounters and Selfimage in the Age of Enlightenment: Norbert Elias in Eighteenth Century French Cultural Historiography" in *Early Modern History*, I, 2001, p. 24-51 and "The Self-Fashionings of Olympe des Gouges, 1784-89" in *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 34, 2001, p. 383-402.

^{vi} George Turnovsky: "The Enlightenment Literary Market: Rousseau, Authorship, and the Book Trade" in *Eighteenth Century Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2003), p. 387-410.