

C.M. Taisbak (Marinus), græsk matematikhistoriker og ven – på hans 80-års fødselsdag.*

af Sabetai Unguru

Hvad er det der er specielt ved Marinus Taisbak? Enhver der kender hans arbejde ved, at han er en førsteklasses filolog og en af de mest indsigtfulde læsere af græske matematiske tekster. Det er jo bare hvad man forventer, og sådan skal det være. Det der er ekstra, er at hans bidrag udstråler en fin, raffineret, menneskelig sans for humor, der er sjælden. Og det er det, der gør læsning af hans værker til en fornøjelse, ud over det man lærer af dem. Det er, tror jeg, ret let at identificere ham som forfatter af et stykke tekst, selvom forfatternavnet ikke står der.

Hvis vi ser på hans første bidrag på dette felt, disputatsen *Division and Logos: A Theory of Equivalent Couples and Sets of Integers* (Odense University Press, 1971), som han skrev under Olaf Schmidts vejledning, så kan vi allerede i dette tidlige værk se hvordan stilens skaber manden, der har skabt stilten:

There is no light at the foot of the lighthouse. Reading Euclid over and over again, I cannot avoid a feeling of loneliness: none of my own, considering the queue of understanders and interpreters of Euclid to which I am joining on,-- but the loneliness of that ancient Greek who is thinking thoughts not to be understood for millennia (op. cit., p. 7).

Jeg tror ikke at en sætning af denne art kan genfindes andetsteds i moderne, videnskabelig litteratur om græsk matematik, ikke engang i Danmark. Der kommer flere eksempler senere. Men lad det nu ligge, og lad os gå fra stil til indhold, hvor spørgsmålet straks melder sig, om det nu også er rigtigt, at Euklid blev misforstået i årtusinder, flertallet må vel angive mindst to. Altså, at indtil det 18. århundrede, og måske senere, var der ingen

(*) På dansk ved Adam Bülow-Jacobsen

der forstod Euklids geometri. Dette lyder mærkeligt og ikke helt rigtigt, og det er det da heller ikke. Men hvis ‘forstå’ betyder forstå ligesom Schimdt, hvem Taisbak fulgte præcist på dette tidspunkt, så er udtalelsen rigtig: “Olaf Schmidt gave me the tools of modern algebra and taught me how to apply them to Euclid with a never-failing respect for Euclid’s own concepts and terminology” (*ibid.*).

Dette sidste citat, vil jeg hævde, viser i en nøddeskal en umulig *historisk* metode, der kræver respekt, både for teksten og for dens oversættelse til moderne algebraisk terminologi, som grækerne jo ikke kendte.

Når dette er sagt, skal det tilføjes at bogen er en perle fuld af matematisk forståelse, og noget af det, men langt fra alt, har historiske paralleller. Bogen er bestemt værd at læse, på trods af dens tilgang og mangfoldige anakronismmer.

Taisbak har udviklet sig meget siden *Division and Logos*. Han har bevaret opmærksomheden på det matematiske kompas, som giver **nøglen** til forståelse af teksten, men han tænker mere og dybere på historisk analyse og på at undgå anakronismmer, som hans lærermester lærte ham det, og hans arbejde efter disputatsen er således helt overbevisende, selv for en purist som mig.

For at tage et par eksempler: *Coloured Quadrangles: A Guide to the Tenth Book of Euclid's Elements* (København, 1982) og hans sidste bog *ΔΕΔΟΜΕΝΑ: Euclid's Data or The Importance of Being Given* (København, 2003). Alene bogens titel vidner om hans humoristiske sans. Her er nogle flere eksempler på Taisbaks vid. Først hans bedømmelse af 10. bog i *Coloured Triangles*:

Apart from the fun one can have (and some Greek surely had) from manipulating such objects, we shall not hesitate to maintain that the game, bar very few details, has no mathematical importance; the X'th book of the Elements [sic] may well be called a *cul-de-sac* in mathematics, even though it did inspire Kepler to his *Harmonice Mundi*. All the same, it is a fascinating, nay haunting, piece of literature, and its composition reminds one of epic or dramatic poetry, with its long sequences of uniform statements apt to be learned by heart and transmitted orally. ...

As a petty contribution to Peace on Earth we shall refrain from polemizing [sic] against some current interpretations that we find – misleading. But we will be hard to convince that the X'th book of Euclid's Elements is not fairly

interpreted by our coloured quadrangles (p. 27).

Han har følgende at sige imod den aritmetiske fortolkning af bogen:

Authorized or not, an arithmetical version is, at best, unsatisfactory; the theme is likely to barter its fascinating geometric charm and clearness against some uninteresting absurdities if it be conceived, not to say: “proved” as arithmetic. ...

We are tempted to adopt Plato’s inscription on his door:

ΑΓΕΩΜΕΤΡΗΤΟΣ ΜΗΔΕΙΣ ΕΙΣΙΤΩ

which is normally rendered “let no one enter who does not know geometry.”

But who can tell that he did not mean to say

Arithmeticians Keep Out (p. 69)

Endelig er der bogens sidste paragraf:

If you have got the impression that the subject of the X’th book is a very limited one, that the reasonings are simple and straightforward manipulations with quadrangles in the idiom of commensurability, and that any association with theories of equations is *ex post facto* modernism (though not surprising, seeing that quadrangles are mathematical objects prone to measuring) – well, then we share an impression of that fine piece of literature. We had rather leave it at that (p. 77).

Man kan ikke andet end anerkende den vittige, økonomiske, vindende og idiosynkratiske stil i Taisbaks værker. Det er en stil der er helt hans egen. Selv når han skriver om betydningsfulde tekniske materier vælger han at være *l’homme qui rit*. Dette bringer os til ΔΕΔΟΜΕΝΑ bogen, som er den bedste moderne, og den mest sympatiske, kommentar til Euklids *Data*, jeg kender.

There is no doubt that ‘given’ means what it means (pace Marinus

Neapolitanus...). That an object is given to us means that it is, in some relevant sense and scope, put at our disposal. In mathematics, however, the term given is used in an idiomatic way about conditions at the outset of a problem. Often the Given is, ... thrust upon you, not to get rid of, so that you must use that object and obey that relation and no others. If we let ourselves be guided by what we expect to be the mathematician's meaning of 'given', some word like 'known' comes to our mind: What is wrong, then, with the word 'known'? Nothing, of course (and the mathematicians of medieval Islam used it in their analyses consistently), but Euclid for some reason or other did not use it.⁹ [Footnote #9 says: "Your guess is as good as mine. Perhaps because Plato(nism) had problematized 'knowledge'; but rather, I think, because vital (numerical) properties of the items are *not* known even if the item is constructed, e.g. length and area."] (op. cit., p. 18).

Og:

It may be appropriate to introduce *The Helping Hand*, a well-known factotum in Greek geometry, who takes care that lines are drawn, points are taken, circles described, perpendiculars dropped, etc. The perfect imperative passive is its verbal mask: 'Let a circle have been described with centre A and radius AB'; 'let it lie given' κείσθω δεδόμενον. No one who has done the *Elements* in Greek will have missed it; never is there any of the commands or exhortations so familiar from our own class-rooms: 'Draw the median from vertex A' or 'If we cut the circle by that secant' or 'Let us add those squares together'. Always *The Helping Hand* is there first to see that things are done, and to keep the operations free from contamination by our mortal fingers.

There is no magic involved, though; *the Helping Hand* can do only such work as is warranted by postulates or propositions. Thus it can let circles be described by postulate 3 of Book I; by proposition I.1 it can let equilateral triangles be designed on given line segments; angles can be bisected thanks to I.10, whereas you cannot expect it to trisect an angle for you. ... Its main effect and interest is to keep *you* out of the doings. Greek geometry is not

about ‘what you can do’ but about ‘what can be done’ (*ibid.*, pp. 28-29).

Dette er ganske enkelt pragtfuldt! Taisbaks stil er enestående. Et sidste eksempel på Taisbaks usædvanligt vittige stil er taget fra hans anmeldelse fra 1999 af Reviel Netz’ *The Shaping of Deduction in Greek Mathematics: A Study in Cognitive History*, in MAA Reviews (*The MAA Mathematical Sciences Digital Library*):

RN may be right [mathematics] is difficult, but not to all of us as difficult as some *Studies in Cognitive History*. I bet (though my wife forbids me to bet on the Net) that most readers of this review would rather read Euclid, Archimedes and Apollonius than familiarize themselves with the concepts and methods so dexterously handled by Reviel Netz. One (myself) who was once forced to put his feet into computational linguistics and managed to extricate them again before disappearing again in the quicksands loops of Gödel, Escher, Bach, read this book ‘dakryoen gelasas’, smiling through tears (*Iliad* 6.484). It’s a nice demonstration of Plato’s theory of anamnesis: I knew most of this in advance but did not know that I knew it. After my first reading of his book, I feel that I enjoyed it. I will try to find out why. It is bound to be uphill biking.

Der er næppe nogen, tror jeg, der vil vove at nægte at dette er en prægtig, pragtfuld, underdrevet, ironisk skarp stil. Men denne stil er hæmmet af, ja underordnet, en teknisk matematisk tilgang til de gamle teksters verden. Det der åbner disse tekster for Taisbaks forskning er altid den matematiske nøgle. Heri er han stadig Olaf Schmidts tro discipel. Men dette følges, ja kontrolleres næsten som en eftertanke af den historiske metodes begrænsninger. Det er rigtigt og kun en mild overdrivelse at sige at matematik er nøglen, mens historien er det sekundære lys, ‘ved foden af fyrtårnet’. Når der er skaffet adgang til den gamle tekst med den matematiske generalnøgle, og først da, tjener historiens lys til at finde og fjerne forkerte fortolkninger. Det eneste eksempel, jeg vil komme med, efter de mange og nødvendige eksempler ovenfor (man kunne kalde det vores nødvendige *helping hand*) er taget fra Taisbaks seneste publikation, en kort artikel trykt i *Historia Mathematica*, ‘Cube Roots of Integers. A Conjecture about Heron’s Method in Metrika III.20.’ Efter at have formuleret problemet, siger Taisbak i enighed med Heath: ‘... Heron’s

formula for the approximated cube root was $a + [(a+1)d_1] / [(a+1)d_1 + ad_2]$ But how did Heron arrive at this expression? I venture a conjecture based on sequences of differences.' Hvad dernæst følger er ren matematisk diskussion og manipulation ved hjælp af første-, anden- og trediegrads differenstabeller, lejlighedsvis understreget med historiske bemærkninger. Konklusionen på denne brillante tre-siders rekonstruktion er følgende iagttagelse, dog først efter at have forkastet Eneströms og Heaths fortolknig som uhistorisk: '...Heron did not need any other corroboration than the fact that the method works, and that the separate results are easily confirmed by multiplication' Dette fører Taisbak frem til følgende slutning:

Envoi:

Speaking of history: is this conjecture historically acceptable? Now, as Benno Artmann used to console me, there are many paths through the mathematical jungle. And this one is passable, as I hope to have shown. Little is known about the Ancients' interest in sequences of differences, read:

I know less than nothing about that.

Q.E.D.

Lad os opsummere: Tro mod Olaf Schmidts evangelium knækker Taisbak først teksten matematisk, hvorefter han kontrollerer resultatet af sin forståelse i historiens skarpe lys. Resultatet er typisk brilliant, overbevisende og vittigt. Stilen er manden der har skabt stilen.