

Parentesen

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I know full well that it is an act of desperation to interpose oneself between a largely Danish crowd and its feeding troughs so I shall be as brief as I can, and I hope it will be brief enough. Both the hall's columns and the "Buffet Supper" bring to mind many happy occasions in the old days at Carlsberg—they were called "Bøffelsuppe" (buffalosoup) by irreverent souls at the Institute. Which brings me to Niels Bohr's view of irreverence.

The occasion at which I heard him express it was the 25th anniversary in 1951 of *Parentesen*, the society for students of mathematics, physics, chemistry and astronomy that played a crucial role in the lives of the students and, we liked to think, of the teachers as well, particularly during the war years when outer pressures brought us all closer together. The anniversary was celebrated in the then new auditorium U at the Institute, and the entertainment was provided by us slightly older members—most of us had had our degrees for several years. It consisted in a cavalcade of events—real or fictitious—from those 25 years.

Among them were Niels Bohr's talks to *Parentesen* and we presented what pretended to be recordings of bits of two of them. They were written by Jens Lindhard, and Piet Hein was supposed to record them, for he imitated Bohr's voice very well, as in Bohr showing slides from the tour of the Far East:

"... og her har vi det pragtfulde Kejserpalads—nej, det er Hans og en Palme" (... and here we see the splendid imperial palace—no, it is Hans and a palm tree).

However, he caught a cold, or at least his feet did, so guess who had to do it. Morten Scharff provided the sound effects in the piece on "Tippetoppen" and Aage's explanation of it.

In Lindhard's other passage Bohr was reminded of one of the deep truths:

"—hvormed vi netop her paa Institutet saa ofte har trøstet os gennem Tiderne—at paa samme Maade, som der findes Emner af saa alvorlig Art, at man kun kan berøre dem i spøgefulde Vendinger, saadan er der ogsaa Ting saa morsomme, at man overhovedet kun kan tillade sig at omtale dem med den allerdybeste Alvor" (—in which we through the years so often have sought comfort precisely here at the Institute—that even as there are topics of such a serious nature that you can touch on them only in jocular terms, so there are also things so amusing that you may only allow yourself to mention them with the profoundest seriousness).

Bohr's response came later that evening in a charming speech congratulating *Parentesen*. He recalled that in former years foreign visitors—one suspects from Germany—had expressed their surprise at the latitude allowed the young students, but his response had been, he said: “at her paa Institutet tager vi end ikke Respektløsheden alvorlig” (here at the Institute we don't take even irreverence seriously).

During the meetings of the last several days people have shown remarkable restraint in the matter of telling Bohr stories. I told one as a prelude to urge you, if that be at all necessary, to engage in the delightful sport of exchanging Bohr anecdotes—whether they are historically true is, of course, irrelevant.

Once again, let Bohr have the last word. He said in the fifties:

“Ja, I unge Folk anstrænger Jer for at faa mig til at se latterlig ud, men hvor meget I end prøver, kan I dog ikke faa mig gjort latterligere, end jeg ser ud i mine egne Øjne” (you young people try to make me appear ridiculous, but however hard you try, you cannot make me look more ridiculous than I do to my own eyes).