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Half-Remembering and Half-Forgetting? On Turning the Past of Old Norse Studies into a Future of Old Norse Studies

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Received: 16 July 2020; Accepted: 27 August 2020; Published: 28 August 2020



Abstract: Many Humanities scholars seem to have become increasingly pessimistic due to a lack of success in their efforts to be recognized as a serious player next to their science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) colleagues. This appears to be the result of a profound uncertainty in the self-perception of individual disciplines within the Humanities regarding their role both in academia and society. This ambiguity, not least, has its roots in their own history, which often appears as an interwoven texture of conflicting opinions. Taking a stance on the current and future role of the Humanities in general, and individual disciplines in particular thus asks for increased engagement with their own past, i.e., histories of scholarship, which are contingent on societal and political contexts. This article's focus is on a case study from the field of Old Norse Studies. In the face of the rise of populism and nationalism in our days, Old Norse Studies, with their focus on a 'Germanic' past, have a special obligation to address societal challenges. The article argues for the public engagement with the histories of individual disciplines to strengthen scholarly credibility in the face of public opinion and to overcome trenches which hamper attempts at uniting Humanities experts and regaining distinct social relevance.

Keywords: Medieval Studies; Old Norse; medievalism; nationalism; populism; history of scholarship; STEAM; academia and society; public scholarship; expert opinion

1. Thus Humanities! Attempt at an Introduction

Stating that there is a gap between what today is called STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths) and the A (arts, including the Humanities) in what might thus be called STEAM is not a new thing—but not self-evident either. As a matter of fact, there are numerous projects that have proven the benefits of different STEAM disciplines working together. To give a topical example: The current COVID-19 crisis has brought together various experts at the national academy *Leopoldina* in Halle, Germany, to provide the German government with advice on how to overcome this crisis in a sustainable way (see https://www.leopoldina.org/uploads/tx_leopublication/2020_08_05_Leopoldina-Stellungnahmen_Coronavirus.pdf). The advisory board includes biologists, chemists, and physicians, as well as educationalists, historians, philosophers, sociologists, and theologians. As a whole, this ongoing project may be considered a striking example of what the Germanist Jürgen Wertheimer once called “riskante Interdisziplinarität” (Wertheimer 2003, p. 134; risky interdisciplinarity), meaning the courage to question the preeminence of one's own point of view to achieve common goals. Significantly, however, this collaboration is recognized internationally as “the exception rather than the rule” (Matthews 2020). From this (certainly limited) point of view, the continuous claim in international scholarship of a “productive convergence of Humanities with science” (Robinson et al. 2016, p. 2; cf., e.g., Schier and Schwinger 2014; Gethmann 2019; Gleason 2020) might still be considered far from daily

routine. Moreover, whereas, for example, Albrecht Classen is generally right to emphasize: “it would not make real sense to regard STEM as being opposed to or in a competition with the Humanities or social sciences” (Classen 2018, p. 54), the debate has become so proliferating and gridlocked at the same time that it seems difficult to add to it without propagating simplifications and platitudes.

The present article takes on this multifaceted challenge by focusing on a specific subfield of the Humanities, namely the field of Medieval Studies, more precisely Old Norse Studies. As addressed in detail below, this field has a problematic past with regard to German history in particular: In the face of both the ideological catastrophe in the first half of the twentieth century and the rise of populism and nationalism in our days, Old Norse Studies, with their traditionally strong focus on a ‘Germanic’ past, have a special obligation to address societal challenges. Given this direction (and the limited scope of a single paper), the article gives preference to German scholarship since World War II, though with repeated reference to the broader context, which (hopefully) allows scholars from neighboring disciplines to engage further with the topic.

With that said, let me begin with a quick sketch of what I consider the predominant mood among many German Humanities scholars in recent years. To be sure, one could easily trace the debate farther back, at least to the late nineteenth century: In 1897, in a public speech, the German philologist Hermann Paul famously claimed that any academic discipline unable to impact fruitfully both on other disciplines and society in general would be in urgent need of justification regarding its methodology and objects of study (Paul 1897). More than a century later, however, Paul’s criticism seems more topical than ever: In the year 2000, the philosopher Kurt Walter Zeidler, for example, criticized the German Humanities for their lack of effort to come to grips with their obvious lack of orientation in society (Zeidler 2000, p. 11). Slightly earlier, in 1996, Otto Gerhard Oexle, then director of the Max-Planck Institute for History in Göttingen, had already cast doubt that the famous German scholar Wilhelm Dilthey’s establishment of the term *Geisteswissenschaften* some hundred years earlier could still be a valid reference point for such an undertaking (see Oexle 1996, p. 39). Oexle’s plea for the dismissal of the term, however, did not meet with general approval, with some scholars even arguing for the renewed relevance of the concept of *Geist* (see, e.g., Detel 2011). In a 2003 volume entitled *Wozu Geisteswissenschaften?* (Keisinger et al. 2003; Why Humanities?), to give another example, the geochemist Gregor Markl, being the only non-Humanities contributor, openly criticized the book’s title for being characteristically pessimistic, stating that he would rather have wanted a book entitled ‘Thus Humanities!’ (Markl 2003); significantly, the book was later criticized for being itself “ein Symptom dieser Krise” (Schmitt 2004; a symptom of this crisis) rather than an attempt at overcoming it. The same year, Thomas Oppermann, then minister of science in Lower Saxony, Germany, attested to the Humanities “eine ausgeprägte Jammerkultur” (Keisinger et al. 2003, p. 58; a distinctly whiny culture). Taking the same line on the occasion of the Year of the Humanities in 2007, the philosopher Jürgen Mittelstraß even attributed the Humanities with an outright “Lust am Untergang” (Mittelstraß 2007; joy of doom). And in 2015, the literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, on the occasion of the German Rectors’ Conference in Kaiserslautern (an association of roughly 270 public and government-recognized universities in Germany, dealing with the role of higher education institutions in academia and society), accused the German Humanities of having been hypercritical for too long, ultimately resulting in their having become a “Sumpf [. . .] aus dem nichts als Verschwörungstheorien hervorgehen” (Gumbrecht 2015, p. 27; a swamp producing nothing but conspiracy theories). More examples could be added, but let it suffice to quote the Germanist Astrid Herbold’s pithy summary in 2019: “Der Krisendiskurs und das Nutzlos-Narrativ kleben an den Geisteswissenschaften, insbesondere an den Philologien. Die drei zählebigsten Schlagwörter passen in einen Satz: brotloser Taxifahrer aus dem Elfenbeinturm” (Herbold 2019; the discourse of crisis and the narrative of being useless stick fast to the Humanities, particularly the philologies. The three most persistent catchwords can be merged into a single sentence: breadless taxi driver from the ivory tower).

Whereas it would be easy to join in this defeatist mood, the feeling that the (German) Humanities are in a state of crisis might even serve as a welcome reminder of their civic task in a likewise increasingly

(ethically) challenged society. Aspiring to a future-proof profile is obviously not only a question of an enhanced methodology, in the sense that seemingly improved methods would enable us to come to terms with hitherto troubling issues, such as new technology allows us to conduct formerly impossible tasks. The history of the Humanities does not appear as a straight line of progress, but as a zig-zag delta of interpretations, many of which have the same scholarly value per se. Although it is not a new insight that the (construction of the) past plays a vital role in constituting various disciplines within the Humanities even today, the implementation of this insight into the self-conception of individual fields, as of yet, seems to have taken place to a very different extent. As indicated above, Old Norse Studies can be regarded as a particularly challenging subject in this respect, with relevant (German) scholarship since World War II often being strangely undecided as to how to deal with the ideological burden of National Socialism. Given the entanglement of this scholarship with society and politics in the twentieth century, on the one hand, and the misuse of Old Norse material in present nationalistic movements, on the other hand, it becomes apparent that taking a stance on the current and future role of Old Norse Studies, as one example of the Humanities in more general terms, asks for increased engagement with their troubling past.

The present article approaches this subject from two slightly different perspectives which add to each other. First, its focus is on a case study, elaborating on the research into Old Norse mythology since the 1950s, and the ambiguous stance of this medieval lore in today's Western society. Second, building on this case study, the article argues for the public engagement with the histories of individual disciplines, to both overcome long-cherished scholarly trenches in addressing transdisciplinary challenges, and to strengthen scholarly credibility and thus, ultimately, the significance and relevance of expert opinion in society.

2. Old Norse Studies after 1945: A Case Study in a History of Scholarship

Popular ideas of the Middle Ages in Western politics and society have recently been called the result of a banal medievalism somewhere in-between half-remembering and half-forgetting the past, denoting anything one wishes to be ideologically disassociated from: “seemingly banal everyday repetition can in fact mask politically sensitive, ideologically perverse or odious ideas under the guise of an ostensibly innocuous banality. [...] even the most unpleasant or extremist ideology can be rendered banal by being shrouded within medievalism”, as the media theorist Andrew Elliott put it (Elliott 2017, p. 17; Elliott's references are Arendt 1963 and Billig 1995). At the same time, the medievalism scholar Richard Utz declared: “as intellectuals, we have an ethical obligation to intervene publicly to expose ideologies that would otherwise continue unnoticed and unopposed under the guise of seductively vague invocations of the medieval past” (Utz 2017, p. 50). Many experts in the field, however, seem to be reluctant to rethink their stance in not only researching but also publicly communicating their interpretations of a past whose relevance for the present appears more ambiguous than ever.

This seems not least to be the result of the difficulty of many disciplines to position themselves in the wider field. Whereas the comprehensive notion of ‘Medieval Studies’ might suggest a homogenous field, it rather denotes a conglomeration of seemingly stand-alone disciplines which often take little notice of each other. Two most recent examples may suffice in the given context. In the 2020 volume *Making the Medieval Relevant: How Medieval Studies Contribute to Improving Our Understanding of the Present*, the editors outline the book's vision thus: “its focus is the continuing social and wider value of research into the Middle Ages themselves, that is the literary, historical, archaeological, and other scholarship that we will group here under the label ‘Medieval Studies’” (Jones et al. 2020, p. 3). They further introduce the connection to the present by referring to, among others, Marvel Studio's *Thor*, Tolkien's *Middle Earth*-saga, and Martin's *Game of Thrones*, epic tales clearly informed by Old Norse literature. Recently, Elliott made a similar claim that “in order to understand contemporary, mediated medievalisms, it is as important to focus on their references to the present as much—if not more than—any kind of medieval original” (Elliott 2017, p. 41). Whereas Elliott's provocative input regarding the limited relevance of medieval sources did not find general approval by medievalists,

the editors of the 2020 volume for their part explicitly decided to leave aside “the study of medievalism and the social phenomenon that it represents” (Jones et al. 2020, p. 3). Moreover, despite their claim that modern fantasy by Tolkien and others has “the power to convey images and ideas that shape the attitudes and beliefs of their audiences of the ‘real’ world”, they did not include a single paper by a literary scholar. Without overstating these observations, it seems clear enough that the above-mentioned trenches across the Humanities are present even when zooming in on recent contributions in the subfields of Medieval and Medievalism Studies.

Further engagement with this dissatisfying status quo first asks for a change in the self-perception of individual disciplines. With that said, the following considerations focus on the aforementioned subject of Old Norse Studies. Whereas this field as such has its roots in the nineteenth century, the argument of this article is mostly confined to the decades after 1945, a date that arguably marked a turning point in the scholarly appreciation of the Middle Ages—even if the closer examination of earlier scholarship only started in the late 1960s (see Kellner 2018). On the one hand, Old Norse Studies, in terms of university politics, often lead a somewhat neglected existence, and a number of institutes for Scandinavian Studies have recently been closed down (see van Nahl 2013). On the other hand, the field embraces a range of medieval narratives dealing with Old Norse/Germanic gods, religions, customs, and, not to forget, the Vikings. These are topics that are popular with the broad public (see recently, e.g., Helgason 2017, and Birkett and Dale 2019), but that have proven to be particularly vulnerable and at the same time powerful in maintaining dubious, even alarming ideologies (cf., e.g., Zernack 2011). Leaving aside superficial claims, such as Old Norse/Germanic mythology having been the backbone of Nazi ideology, recent studies have demonstrated that the subject is far too complex for a single paper to present an adequate overview (cf., e.g., Zernack and Schulz 2019). In turning to the recent past of Old Norse Studies, however, the almost poetical phrase of half-remembering and half-forgetting emerges as both a critical reminder and an auspicious starting point for further engagement.

Focusing on the concept of a ‘Germanic’ past, in the first half of the twentieth century the scholarly opinion prevailed that medieval Iceland of all places in Europe had been a shelter for pre-Christian discourse: With the small island being geographically remote, Germanic lore had been able to hold its ground against Christianity for centuries. Following this assumption, Old Norse texts would allow us to enter a world of Germanic ethical, religious, and cultural customs otherwise largely erased by Christian doctrine. Famously, the Swiss medievalist Andreas Heusler proposed this stance in his seminal book *Die altgermanische Dichtung* (Heusler 1941), with the term *altgermanisch* (Old-Germanic) indicating a type of narrative unaffected both by classical and Christian learning (cf. Beck 1998; Wyss 2000; and van Nahl 2015). The second edition was published in 1941, shortly after Heusler’s death, and included three extra chapters on the Old Norse Sagas of Icelanders, which, according to Heusler, demonstrate the absence of Christian ethical principles, and depict this Germanic society as driven by a “männisch-heldisches” ideal (Heusler 1941, p. 219; masculine and heroic). Problematically, the second edition was posthumously supplemented with a foreword by the National Socialist and influential scholar Hans Naumann, who obviously tried to monopolize Heusler’s scholarship for ideological purposes. Whereas Naumann’s preface was omitted in some post-war reprints, Heusler’s point of view, in many respects, set a standard for the scholarly preoccupation with a Germanic past around the middle of the twentieth century.

It is against this background, with Heusler admittedly only playing one (but important) part, that another seminal study ought to be read: In 1950, the German medievalist Walter Baetke published his book *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda*, a study in which he strove to establish the Norse god Óðinn as depicted in the Old Norse *Prose Edda*, a thirteenth-century treatise on mythology and poetics, as a sort of pagan equivalent to the Christian god (Baetke 1950). This *Prose Edda*, often ascribed to the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), is a crucial source not least insofar as it provides us with information concerning medieval Icelanders’ understanding of Eddic poetry, which partly seems to predate Christianity in Iceland indeed. While Heusler had argued for the impact of oral (thus arguably pre-Christian) traditions on medieval literature in general, Baetke was the most rigorous

proponent of the opposite perch, largely dismissing the idea of any oral lore, but emphasizing the importance of Christian learning for medieval Icelandic writing. Professional research on the *Prose Edda* reached back well into the nineteenth century, but only in the middle of the twentieth century was this crucial text drawn into doubt regarding its source value for pre-Christian worldviews. Baetke was a key figure in this shift: As of 1936, he had served as a professor for *Germanische Religionsgeschichte* (Germanic History of Religion) at the University of Leipzig, against political resistance at the time, striving to get in the way of the ideological usurpation of Old Norse sources as manifestations of pre-Christian ethos (cf. [van Nahl 2014b](#)). Acknowledging his commitment as a scholar in times of ideological crisis, Baetke received various honors after the end of the war, including an honorary doctorate in theology, and being the first German scholar to be invited for guest lectures on medieval subjects at several Scandinavian universities. As a matter of fact, Baetke remained faithful to this stance until his death; as late as 1964, then aged 80, Baetke criticized medievalists for their being reluctant to abandon the idea of approaching a ‘Germanic’ past through medieval literature: “Von der Idee der germanischen Kontinuität geleitet, verkennen sie dabei, daß das Mittelalter in einer völlig andern geistigen Welt lebte als die alten Germanen, und wollen nicht wahrhaben, daß diese Welt ihre Begriffe und ihre Werte aus der römischen Antike und dem Christentum entnahm” ([Baetke 1964](#), p. 180; governed by the idea of a Germanic continuity, they [i.e., medievalists] fail to recognize that the Middle Ages were situated in a completely different mental world than the old Teutons, and they refuse to accept that this world took its concepts and values from Roman antiquity and Christianity).

Baetke’s book on the *Prose Edda* from 1950 is to be read within this context, and it is only in this context that the study’s fundamental inconsistency becomes comprehensible. Having spent most of the book on establishing an essential relation between Óðinn and the Christian god, Baetke came to the unexpected conclusion: “Dieser ganze Glaube beruht also auf Trug und Irrwahn” ([Baetke 1950](#), p. 67; this whole (pre-Christian) belief is based on deception and mental disarray). As early as 1952, the German philologist Hans Kuhn criticized Baetke’s conclusion as the result of an unyielding ‘either or’ of the argument (see [Kuhn 1952](#)), and only recently, in 2007, the scholar Heinrich Beck renewed this criticism by highlighting Baetke’s strict dissociation of Christianity from any kind of Germanic religion (see [Beck 2007](#), p. 28). This scholarly effort on behalf of Baetke becomes explicable only if one pays attention to the political circumstances as of the 1930s.

While German Old Norse Studies, after World War II, would not fully revive until the 1980s (cf. [Beck 1986](#)), international scholars soon took notice of Baetke’s innovative interpretation, particularly in Scandinavia, not least due to his visits to the prestigious universities of Lund and Uppsala. In 1964, the Norwegian philologist Anne Holtsmark praised Baetke’s study for having been “på rett spor” ([Holtsmark 1964](#), p. 16; on the right track; cf. [van Nahl 2018](#)). Five years later, the Swedish scholar Lars Lönnroth, in his seminal paper *The Noble Heathen*, repeatedly referred to “Walter Baetke’s excellent (and too little known) book about the mythological doctrines of the Prose Edda” ([Lönnroth 1969](#), p. 5), an appraisal that he renewed as recently as in 2017, criticizing the lack of engagement with “Walter Baetke’s epokgörande och radikalt källkritiska studier” ([Lönnroth 2017](#), pp. 364–65; his epoch-making and radically source-critical studies). However, Holtsmark, in particular, advanced Baetke’s idea further. She had been well aware of the inconsistency in Baetke’s argument but found an effective way around it via her famous concept of “assosiasjon ved kontrast” ([Holtsmark 1964](#), p. 24; contrastive association). To be sure, following this concept, many elements of Old Norse religion, as depicted in the *Prose Edda*, remind the reader of Christian learning, including a striking similarity between Óðinn and the Christian god. However, these similarities ought to be understood in the sense of a fundamental contrast, marking all those stories about Old Norse mythology not as appreciating analogies, but as devilish deception and pure irony from a Christian point of view.

At the turn of the millennium, reviewing half a century of scholarship in the field, the German medievalist Klaus von See rightly emphasized that the combined studies of Baetke and Holtsmark had entailed a major shift in post-war Old Norse Studies, with particularly Holtsmark having influenced later eminent scholars, such as Lönnroth, Margaret Clunies Ross and Gerd Wolfgang Weber,

among others (see [von See 1999](#), p. 276). Holtsmark's 1964 study was indeed to become one of the most cited scholarly contributions in Old Norse Studies in the second half of the twentieth century, not least due to Weber's affirming references to it in the internationally-renowned *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* ([Weber 1986](#)). Thus, despite occasional criticism against Holtsmark's rigorous approach, her antithetical reading of this crucial medieval text (and thus Old Norse/Germanic mythology in general) remained popular for decades—and is still going strong. Only recently, the scholar of Old Norse Annette Lassen, in several publications, suggested the ongoing significance of Holtsmark's concept, once again emphasizing "stærke antikristne konnotationer" ([Lassen 2010](#), p. 228; strong anti-Christian connotations; cf. [Lassen 2011](#), p. 298) in the depiction of Óðinn in particular. Lassen's study has met both with praise and criticism and has even been accused of being heavily biased (see [Heide 2011](#)), similar to Holtsmark's study, which, back then, had been criticized for being prejudiced (see [Bandle 1969](#)). Nevertheless, Lassen's 2011 book is currently one of the most frequently cited studies on the topic, not least due to its having received an award by the Swedish Academy in the year of publication.

Aside from any content-related criticism of Holtsmark's, Weber's, and Lassen's (and others') contrastive reading of Old Norse mythology, the main point of criticism here is this scholarship's apparent lack of interest in the circumstances under which prevailing assumptions once came into existence. As demonstrated above, the idea of a fundamental contradiction between Old Norse/Germanic religions and Christianity, with particular reference to the *Prose Edda*, became popular among scholars soon after 1945, not least due to Baetke who had been fighting against the usurpation of Old Norse texts by national ideology since the 1930s. Not a single word on this crucial context is to be found in Holtsmark's thesis, however, nor in the majority of later scholarship. Weber, some twenty years later, did not scrutinize the foundation of Holtsmark's study either, and neither did, more recently, Lassen (despite a brief chapter on selected scholarship after 1900).

Whereas at first glance, one might consider this an academic debate of little interest to the public, on second thought, the above-made observations might turn out to be significant beyond these narrow borders indeed. Following everyday media, it is easy to recognize the revival of the tendency in Western society and politics to think in binary categories such as 'we' and 'the others'. Moreover, with a background in Medieval Studies, it is hard to ignore both the conscious and unwitting (mis-)use of medieval texts, notions, and figures to convey certain ideological opinions:

with the (re-)awakening of nationalistic political movements after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the re-organization of the political landscape of Eastern Europe and beyond, allusions to historical events and medieval developments have become increasingly prominent. [. . .] Absurd as their practices might seem, one can hardly ignore the fact that movements like the so-called 'Alt-Right' in the United States and beyond, use symbolism misappropriated from the medieval to create and claim a (racist) identity and to pursue identity politics. ([Jones et al. 2020](#), p. 9)

This is not the right place to retrace the many-voiced debate on Germanic Neopaganism (cf., e.g., [Saunders 2019](#)). Reviewing her decades-long engagement with the topic, the German scholar Stefanie von Schnurbein recently admitted not being able to resolve the ambivalence between "sympathy towards many of the younger a-racist Heathens, the metal fans, and the enthusiastic admirers of myth and ancient religions and rituals" and "the circulating discourse on Norse myth, with all its ideological ballast" ([von Schnurbein 2016](#), p. 353):

Scandinavian studies, Germanic studies, and Indo-European studies have all contributed to the formation of the discourse which has been fashioned into religion by Asatruers, and to which they remain attached today. [. . .] The problem remains that the discourse on Germanic myth, as I have demonstrated, has always been dependent on the idea of national, racial, or ethnic essences. ([von Schnurbein 2016](#), pp. 355 f. and 358)

Within this spectrum of conflicting attitudes, the turning away from Christianity in favor of new (semi-)religious movements can be understood as a form of protest, which in some cases can be pushed to extremes. In 2015, Mark Potok, who has been monitoring extremist activities in the United States for two decades, put it thus:

from white supremacist point of view, they embrace these neopagan religions because they see them as antithetical to Christianity and Judaism. [...] They see Christianity as a feminized, weak, self-destructive theology created by Jews and forced on white people who were by nature supposedly very different. (see [Jenkins 2015](#))

The so-called *Nordic Resistance Movement*, for example, a right-wing extremist society, claims National Socialism to be “built on age-old wisdom. It’s a worldview founded in the natural order by which our people have lived for thousands of years, long before ideologies such as nationalism and socialism were conceived, and long before the Christianization of Northern Europe” ([Lindberg 2019](#)); sadly, but unsurprisingly, they include Eddic poetry in their recommended readings on the topic.

I do not claim any direct linkage between the scholarly reading of Old Norse mythology in an antithetical way and the attempt of certain groups in present society to use such a discrepancy as a sort of vindication for abandoning Christian ethos as later usurpation. Reality is more complex than that—but it is just this complexity that today calls for experts capable and confident enough to make a difference in the face of an ideological crisis. Who, if not scholars of Old Norse, are to take on this challenge? To be sure, experts in medieval culture are once in a while called upon by someone from within their own ranks to set the public’s idea of the Middle Ages straight (cf., e.g., [Utz 2017](#); [Wollenberg 2018](#)). However, within Old Norse Studies (both in Germany and internationally), I do not see many joint efforts in taking an unambiguous stance on the menacing banalism of political medievalism. To put it somewhat boldly: At present, most scholarship in the field is hardly visible to the public at all. The reason for this lack of visibility, again, lies not least in the history of the field, with the disengagement of German Medieval Studies (Old Norse Studies in particular) and politics after World War II appearing as an attempt to create distance to a troubling recent past. At present, in the minds of many scholars, there seems to exist little if any interaction between the seemingly safe sphere of academic debate and the vast, dynamic, and potentially ominous sphere of (extreme) public opinion. However, one might argue that it was just this abandoning (or outright forgetting) of the political dimension of the field that entailed its decreasing relevance in public perception (cf. [Kellner 2018](#)).

Following the phrase of half-remembering and half-forgetting the past, a vital task and thus justification of specialists in Old Norse Studies emerges at this point: to work not only on the appreciating remembrance of the medieval texts and contexts themselves, but also on not forgetting political and societal contexts of scholarly efforts since World War II in particular. To be sure, Albrecht Classen rightly stressed that 1945 must not become an “exclusively relevant marker” ([Classen 2014](#), p. 2) when constructing a historical time frame in university education. Still, in reviewing the recent history of scholarship in Old Norse Studies, one gets the impression that this crucial date marks the center of a troubling period in both directions, with the majority of scholars being undecided how to deal (or not to deal) with scholarship in the 1930s and 1940s, on the one hand, and the first decades after 1945, on the other hand, as if every generation of researchers in the field were to come to their own conclusions without standing on the shoulders of earlier generations.

From this point of view, Classen’s recent plea for the importance of the continuous scrutinizing of “a long concatenation of ideas that all deserve to be recognized” ([Classen 2019](#), p. 149) could be adapted to scholarly literature itself: “the investigation of the historical dimensions of the Humanities forces us, ultimately, to reflect upon the meaning of our entire field, an enterprise which is not new at all, but one that certainly needs to be carried out over and over again because it constitutes the fundamental epistemology of our cultural identity as Humanities scholars” ([Classen 2019](#), p. 149). As early (or late) as 2005, the scholar of Old Norse Stefanie Gropper (then Würth) noncommittally proposed such a project with regard to Andreas Heusler’s above-mentioned opus *Die altgermanische*

Dichtung from 1941, suggesting to read this seminal study “unter dem Aspekt der Primärliteratur” (Würth 2005, p. 230; in terms of primary literature). The same year, Julia Zernack, a scholar of Old Norse as well, likewise claimed Heusler’s *œuvre* to be particularly inspiring “zur philosophischen Selbstreflexion” (Zernack 2005, p. 11; for a philosophical self-reflection) within the field. Clearly, this is a question of not only coming to terms with the recent past but also of reestablishing Old Norse Studies as an expert community that provides society with relevant insight into the entanglement of scholarship and politics. At present, however, any such joint commitment in taking on this seminal task (way beyond Heusler) still seems due (cf. van Nahl 2014a), a neglect that arguably entails that scholars from the field do not currently feature prominently among those experts that are considered capable of addressing topical challenges by the public.

3. Toward Public Scholarship: A Prospect

Admittedly, not every scholar, publication, or strand in the history of Medieval Studies will appear as challenging and ideologically charged as the above-discussed examples (cf., however, Johnston 2020). Still, as indicated, this case study can serve as the basis for further elaboration on the phrase of half-remembering and half-forgetting. The *Prose Edda* and Eddic poetry, above all, have not only been a pivot point for generations of literary scholars from the narrower field of Old Norse Studies, but have also been interpreted from the point of view of medieval history, history of religion, medieval theology and philosophy, folkloristics, and even modern psychology as well as gender studies, performance studies and media theory—a supreme battlefield for generations of scholars from various disciplines, including all kinds of personal animosities. As mentioned above, this inner-academic struggle can be productive, and scholars are not asked to abandon individual points of view. However, with the medieval past today having become a vehicle for extreme ideologies again, and Old Norse mythology, in particular, being a popular source for seemingly pre-Christian, pro-Germanic material, it seems about time to reenter the field of public perception as a serious player. At present, all too many scholars in the field still seem far from taking this task seriously, despite the fact that taking it on could be considered their most evident and most urgent justification in today’s society.

At this point, the introductory remark as to a renewed self-awareness and self-confidence of scholars in the Humanities in general, Medieval and Old Norse Studies in particular, gains in importance. As indicated above, interdisciplinary cooperation and public visibility will play a key role in such an undertaking. To be sure, it is easy to agree with Albrecht Classen’s recent claim that

there need to be a certain degree of rapprochement of the various disciplines, agreed-upon core values and concepts, so this kind of collaboration represents also a considerable effort at negotiation and compromise. [...] there always remains a shared focus on the human being, the life of the *homo sapiens*, as expressed in a myriad of physical and spiritual manifestations. (Classen 2020a, p. 1; see also Classen 2020b; Mondschein 2020)

Regarding Medieval Studies, Classen’s extensive *Handbook of Medieval Studies* (Classen 2010) indicates the potential of such an undertaking. Various branches of the recent history of Medieval Studies in their entanglement with political and societal contexts, however, still await further scrutiny (cf. van Nahl 2014a, §§ 29–35)—although the overall discussion is not new either. To extend a bridge to the introduction: In 2007, Otto Gerhard Oexle specified his earlier claim to abandon the term *Geisteswissenschaften* by suggesting an *Entdisziplinierung*, a sort of getting beyond disciplinary boundaries, with the aim of enabling representatives from different disciplines to focus jointly on transdisciplinary problems (see Oexle 2007, p. 115). He did not demand scholars to abandon their traditional territory, but rather to get to know better their distinct capabilities in united engagement. Any such engagement, says Oexle, would thus have to incorporate the act of *Disziplinierung* (Oexle 1996, p. 31), in the sense that individual disciplines become aware of their historically-grown specific achievements, and show them off while being aware of the merits of neighboring fields—the sort of risky interdisciplinarity mentioned above. Only recently, Beate Kellner reaffirmed this view with regard to German Medieval Studies in particular: “Stark wird eine

Germanistik in Zukunft sein, wenn sie ihre disziplinäre Grenze wahrt, aber sich zugleich interdisziplinär ausrichtet und in Forschung und Lehre interdisziplinär vernetzt" (Kellner 2018, p. 162; German Studies will go strong in the future if they maintain their disciplinary boundaries, but at the same time are oriented toward interdisciplinarity in research and teaching).

Showing off distinctive expertise—in the sense of participating as a self-aware discipline in risky interdisciplinarity and, eventually, public discourse—obviously requires each and every discipline to understand their foundations and developments. This holds all the more true for the field of Old Norse Studies with its problematic history of scholarship. However, while increased self-awareness among scholars can improve their skills even in dealing with societal challenges, it does not entail increased public awareness and social relevance by default (cf. Oswald and Smolarski 2016). As indicated above, scholars of Old Norse will have to bring these skills to the market. Reintroducing themselves as specialists capable of addressing urgent tasks in today's dynamic society, they are well advised to present themselves in an equally dynamic way. Criticizing academics for their having "conveniently forgotten to repay the high privilege by actively connecting our scholarship with the public", Richard Utz recently argued for the benefits of a more

adventurous and entrepreneurial kind of academic than the one we have too often attracted and rewarded over the last 130 years. It is the kind of academic who intervenes in public discussions, stands up to racist and sexist trolls on blogs, twitter, and the mainstream media, advocates for open (and even 'Robin Hood') access to scholarship, and creates an academy in which even younger scholars may safely experiment with hybrid genres of communication as part of their officially recognized professional responsibilities. (Utz 2017, p. 86 f.; see also Kaden and Kleineberg 2017)

As indicated above, currently a major problem in Old Norse Studies, and, arguably, Medieval Studies in general, seems to be how to reach a broader audience, and how to engender their confidence in expert opinion—all the more so in times of experts' having become so omnipresent that they have been turned into an enemy stereotype by some. Scholars in the field, for their part, are thus not advised to change the quality of their output but to change the way of presenting both this output and themselves to the public. As Arthur Lupia states:

many well-intentional people (such as scholars or representatives of international agencies) who seek to help target audiences tend to blame these audiences for their lack of attention [. . .]. In reality, however, the correctable part of the problem is the unrealistic expectations of the people who are providing the information. (Lupia 2011, p. 86)

To put it somewhat boldly, instead of the traditional self-image of an elitist custodian of the past, experts in Old Norse Studies have to become more tangible and thus, arguably, interesting. It is not a new observation that the Middle Ages and Old Norse mythology are going strong in public perception, whereas the specialists who make the culture, language, and mentality of this past epoch available to the present are not. This is, I claim, due to their lack of visibility in shaping and discussing this discourse. From this point of view, academic visibility—hitherto mainly a buzzword when pursuing a university career (talking about citation indices, etc.)—has to comprise public scholarship in the above-outlined sense, encouraging the breaking open of traditional ways of communicating scholarship to the public. It might be just the public demonstration of points of agreement as well as disagreement in shaping expert opinion that could increase its authenticity, credibility, and thus even relevance in public perception; Finnur Dellsén recently put it thus:

disagreement is not necessarily something that scientists should strive to mask or conceal. In so far as scientists are communicating with rational agents who are acting in good faith, the best strategy for arguing that a consensus theory should be trusted may involve openly acknowledging that the same experts who reached the consensus disagree on a number of other theories within their domain of expertise. (Dellsén 2017, p. 155)

Elsewhere, I have introduced the idea of an open-access *Living Handbook of Medieval Studies*, a dynamic resource with reading-access to the public, which would scrutinize itself continuously as part of the effective histories in the field (see [van Nahl 2020a](#) (based on a lecture in Munich in 2018); cf. also [van Nahl 2017, 2014a](#)). Again, this would not be a question of ‘either or’, in the sense of deciding whether or not to cease to publish monographs, conference volumes, and journal articles. However, such traditional publications are often appreciated as the result of an “exclusivist devotion to a *vita contemplativa*”, as Utz put it, and might thus be considered far from the necessary “foundational change in the way we conceptualize what it means to be a member of the academy” ([Utz 2017](#), p. 86). From this point of view, an open-access handbook could serve as a timely plus: A platform for disputes among scholars from different disciplines which would allow them to engage with the expertise of their colleagues almost in real-time (in the sense of adding critical questions, blunt comments, unexpected cross-references, etc.). It ought thus to be pursued in the sense of a dynamic debate that is publicly visible and thereby visualizes the processes and struggles of making decisions, of disagreeing and coming to conclusions in scholarship. Hence, the objective would not be to provide the audience with an irrevocable point of view of scholarship but to incite (and demonstrate) the continuous reevaluation of these viewpoints according to topical demands inflicted by social and political developments. Without a doubt, it would take a while to make the project known among a broader audience. However, with the (Nordic) Middle Ages obviously being a topic of general interest, and the vast majority of (German) citizens being highly critical against populist movements, this dynamic handbook could ideally turn into a manual indeed, in the sense of providing the public with a place to go for finding up-to-date facts against ideological aberration, tailored dynamically to topical contexts.

Consequently, while such a platform ought, in principle, to be open to any topic from the fields of Medieval and Medievalism Studies, it would be reasonable to focus on issues that are topical in a given situation. Considering the limited scope of the project at present (maybe the title *Living Handbook of Old Norse Studies* would currently be more appropriate), this could, for example, be an Old Norse source (such as the *Prose Edda* or the wealth of Eddic poetry) and its interpretations which have proven to be vulnerable to ideological misuse in recent history, including concepts such as nationalism or racism. Or it could be, thinking further, the utilization of a certain medieval event or series of events, such as the (even Northern) crusades, a major example of what Andrew Elliott has called ‘banal medievalism’ (see [Elliott 2017](#); cf. [van Nahl 2020b](#)). In any case, each and every scholar from each and every contributing discipline is supposed to show off their individual expertise in dealing with such topics that transcend narrow boundaries.

No doubt, numerous medievalists will already find themselves in the middle of such a public undertaking outside the ivory tower: Just think of the wealth of (small-scale) projects in social media, with well-intended projects often coming and going so quickly so that it is difficult to keep track of them, and to evaluate their possible impact on a larger community. As far as I can see, many scholars engaged in such projects belong to the group of doctoral students and so-called early-career researchers, scholars thus with a comparatively small (professional) network. Others will still consider such projects a risky or bold undertaking, seemingly incompatible with established traditions of the field. This article, however, is not the right place to elaborate on the persistent debate regarding academic precarity (which certainly has a point) (see, e.g., [Mondschein 2020](#)). However, the above-introduced idea of an open-access handbook, in the outlined sense of a publicly visible platform for scholarly inquiry into their own foundation and role in society, would ideally find its place somewhere in the intersection of these approaches. With that said, public scholarship requires a self-confident shift of mind toward a scholar who is “aware and inclusive of the desires and emotions that attract us to engaging with the past, and unafraid of the inevitable occasional conflict that regular rendezvous with non-academic audiences may offer” ([Utz 2017](#), p. 87). With the ivory walls of Medieval Studies crumbling, on the one hand, and their objects of study being turned into a vehicle for banal extremism, on the other hand, business as usual is no longer an option. Reviewing the case of Old Norse Studies since 1945, I claim that it is just now, here and today, that experts in the field can and must have an impact on society and

politics, and thereby, eventually, will prove themselves worthy of being representatives of the grand project called Humanities.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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