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Is Literature Experiencing an Identity Crisis
and Can Cultural History Help?
A Semi-Conservative Approach from a German
Studies Perspective

What actually constitutes literature? If we consider recent research done with a cultural-historical orientation, it is virtually impossible to answer this question. Literature is treated as one cultural product among many – specifically, one that is failing to evoke more than mild interest from its present-day audience and is increasingly losing its earlier formative cultural relevance to other products. From the standpoint of cultural history, literature provides information about the cultural knowledge and cultural practices of a particular time. It contains collective symbols and encodes gender-specific constructions. Hence it performs the same functions as many other cultural and, in particular, artistic products. It is not possible to ascertain the identity of literature here. Literature's loss of prestige has contributed to a disciplinary reorientation towards cultural history. This is now apparently being followed by an identity crisis caused by the subject conception and the methods of precisely this culture-related field of study. I certainly do not need to point out that this identity crisis has also hit the field of literary history.¹

My essay discusses the relationship between literary history and cultural history in a particular sense. I am concerned with the question of how literary-historical research is distinct from cultural-historical research, and what distinguishes it in its *literary*-historical nature. The context of my thoughts is a disagreement within the field of German studies that can also be seen in the most recent publications.² Should literary studies be absorbed by an all-encompassing, interdisciplinary field called 'cultural studies,' or should it retain its autonomy? Put more pragmatically, how can the discipline of literary studies preserve its identity without disregarding demands on the part of the scientific community for an expansion towards cultural history? Of course, the precise understanding of this expansion is the subject of

1 On this topic, see Jörg Schönert, "Warum Literaturwissenschaft heute nicht nur Literatur-Wissenschaft sein soll."

2 See, for example, several articles in *Mitteilungen des Germanistenverbandes* 46.4 (1999), special issue on "Germanistik als Kulturwissenschaft."

debate, and the question of how it can be conceptualised theoretically and methodologically is a controversial issue as well. It is a well-known fact, however, that the popularity of the label 'culture' has consequences both at the institutional level and for practical research. Professorial chairs are being redesignated, institutes renamed and post-graduate programmes established.³ Literary topics are now being examined from a cultural-historical perspective instead of from a sociological one. Appropriate anthologies containing theoretical outlines are all the rage. Yet in the following I do not intend to delve into these facts with their tangible financial conditions, but rather into 'internal' academic aspects of the topic.

When someone from a German studies perspective asks specifically about the situation of literary-historical research in the context of cultural history, this means first of all that he must run the risk of appearing to be a latecomer. For the German-language branch of German studies did not begin to get involved in the discussion of the status, scope and definition of cultural studies until cultural-historical publications were already booming on the book market and facts had been established in other disciplines. As early as 1993, the American-studies scholar Klaus P. Hansen heralded the "silent paradigm shift in the humanities." Comparable projects by German-studies scholars followed, starting in 1996,⁴ with some descriptive and many fundamental articles.⁵ What has long been pursued in the Anglo-Saxon countries and in other disciplines is just starting to be discussed here. But the latecomer also has unique opportunities. He can observe the current situation and draw his conclusions from it. His thoughts no longer need to be restricted to visions and utopias. Unfortunately, however, there is far too little stocktaking being done in the German-language discussion. Neither has sufficient research been carried out into the historical origin of the terms and their usage up to the 1920s⁶ nor an investigation been launched to determine the types of texts that are written *today* under the designations 'literary history' and 'cultural history' and how they differ from one another.

3 See Hartmut Böhme, Peter Matussek and Lothar Müller, *Orientierung Kulturwissenschaft*, ch. 5.

4 In spite of the fact that Wolfgang Frühwald et al., *Geisteswissenschaften heute* (10 and 71-72), were already arguing for an orientation towards cultural history in 1991.

5 For example, *Literaturwissenschaft - Kulturwissenschaft*, eds. Renate Glaser & Matthias Luserke; *Literatur und Kulturwissenschaften*, eds. Hartmut Böhme & Klaus Scherpe; more recently, *Orientierung Kulturwissenschaft*, eds. Hartmut Böhme, Peter Matussek & Lothar Müller, and *Kulturwissenschaften*, eds. Johannes Anderegg & Edith Anna Kunz.

6 An article like Jens Flemming's "Kulturgeschichte als Integrations- und Leitwissenschaft?" is an exception; see, more recently, Fotis Jannidis, "Literarisches Wissen und Cultural Studies."

What I am interested in is this last type of examination. It is true that some enquiries have been made into the identity of literary history in times of cultural-historical expansion.⁷ Yet this question seems to me to be productive only if it is not answered solely by neat theoretical reflection or by invoking established competencies, but also with reference to existing cultural-historical oriented research. I shall attempt to do just that. I have chosen as an example the analysis of emotions, since it represents a typical cultural-historical topic and it has been rediscovered by literary scholars who are working from a cultural-historical perspective. On the basis of this example, I intend to demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of current literary-historical research, specifically from the point of view of a literary historian who is interested in advancing the knowledge of her subject. My theses are: (1) In cultural-historical studies, an exceptionally diverse text corpus is made accessible, but it is mainly one type of cultural knowledge that is reconstructed: propositional knowledge. (2) At the same time, other types of information remain consistently unconsidered in practice, even if they are programmatically called for. (3) It is this information that belongs to the specifics of literature, and the analysis of this information that distinguishes literary-historical research.

Before I consider the historical research on emotions under the rubrics just listed, I think it is necessary to offer a brief and pragmatic clarification of the concepts of cultural history and literary history upon which my views are based.

I Preliminary Remarks on Terminology

I conceive of literary studies as one cultural discipline among others. Hence I use the term 'cultural studies' not as a disciplinary designation, but, rather, as an unspecific generic term for a number of individual disciplines that are to be delimited from each other by subject, method and terminology.

I understand 'cultural history' to be a type of historiography that deals with artifacts, social and mental schemata.⁸ According to Peter Burke, "the *raison d'être* of a cultural historian is surely to reveal connections between different activities."⁹ A cultural historian is to proceed in an interdiscipli-

7 For example, Winfried Fluck, "American Studies" 13; for the German-studies debate, see Wilfried Barner, "Kommt der Literaturwissenschaft ihr Gegenstand abhanden?" and several responses on this topic in the two subsequent volumes of the *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft*; also Walter Haug, "Literaturwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft?" 80 and 92-93.

8 See Roland Posner, "Kultur als Zeichensystem" 42-55.

9 Burke, "Unity" 201.

nary manner and to demonstrate associations between the actions, symbols and codes of various cultural areas, each of which would otherwise fall into the research domain of a specific discipline. Hence cultural history relies on cooperation with these disciplines.

'Literary history' is not to be understood here as 'literature historiography,' but, rather, further interpreted as the historical, reconstructive treatment of literary texts. The remarks that follow are equally applicable if one views 'literary history' in the traditional diachronic sense or in the synchronous sense of the New Historicism.¹⁰ These remarks are also compatible with both a narrow and a broad conception of literature. What is important, though, are the distinctions between text and context, fictional and non-fictional texts, and the aim of describing and explaining literary phenomena and developments.

My concept of *cultural-historically oriented literary history* approximates Ansgar Nünning's arguments in his integrative sketch of an "Anglicist cultural science." There he states programmatically that culture is to be understood as a "total complex of ideas, forms of thought, ways of feeling, values and meanings that materialises itself in symbolic systems."¹¹ On the one hand, literature is conceived of as "one of the material forms or textual media in which the mental program 'culture' finds expression."¹² On the other, "the specifically literary" features of the texts should also be considered – in other words, their "genre- and text-specific forms of expression."¹³ Increased complexity with regard to historical situations should not lead to decreased complexity with regard to literary texts.¹⁴ But how do these two conceptions relate to each other? Can they be reconciled?

II *Emotions as a Subject of Cultural and Literary History*

Emotions are part of the symbolic system that goes to make up a culture, and they are among the subjects of cultural-historical research. Even one of the early cultural historians, Johan Huizinga, defined culture as "figures, motifs, themes, symbols, concepts, ideals, styles and sentiments."¹⁵ In addition, the co-founder of English cultural history and one of the initiators of

10 See, for example, Louis A. Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance" 17.

11 Nünning, "Literatur" 179.

12 Nünning, "Literatur" 181.

13 Nünning, "Literatur" 185, 188.

14 A similar argument can be found in Moritz Baßler, "Stichwort Text" 472–73.

15 Huizinga, "The Task" 65.

cultural studies, Raymond Williams, considers an analysis of the "structures of feeling" to be essential to the adequate description of a culture.¹⁶

During the last few years, literary historians in the field of German studies have increasingly turned to the topic of emotions. They have done so from a sociohistorical perspective,¹⁷ and most recently from a cultural-historical perspective.¹⁸ The methods (in the broad sense) are oriented toward discourse history and the New Historicism; the differences between the two are fluid. In particular, the second half of the eighteenth century, with its sentimentalism, has been examined from an emotional-historical point of view. Other studies have been done on the Middle Ages and occasionally on the period around 1900. The concentration on sentimentalism is not surprising. After all, speech about emotions can be as easily demonstrated in poetological programmes, philosophical or moral treatises, and anthropological texts as in literary texts. Here the interface between cultural history and literary history becomes particularly clear: the semantics of the emotional vocabulary changed around 1800, thereby verifying a cultural change. This semantics can be reconstructed on the basis of both literary texts and texts of other discourses from that time. It is of relevance to literary history in order to explain literary patterns, such as the use of 'touching' scenes in contemporary plays. And it is important for cultural history in order to illustrate a change in the symbolic repertoire as well as in behavioural codes of that time. Among the sources analysed by cultural historians are also literary texts; and among those that literary historians examine, also non-literary ones. This may seem a trivial point. Not quite so trivial, however, are two follow-up questions that concern the status of the results obtained and the procedure adopted.

(1) What is the historical significance of findings about emotions that are extracted from the analysis of literary texts? In his plea for a history of emotions, even Lucien Febvre recommends consulting literary texts as an historical source, albeit with a degree of caution.¹⁹ The problematical issues here are the fictional nature of most literary texts and the question of the extent to which, and sense in which, they can be read mimetically. The common metaphor of 'culture as text' encourages a levelling-out of differences. Yet literary texts must be understood differently from non-literary texts, and both are in turn different from cultural practices. They are different

16 See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 128–35.

17 For example, Gunter Saße, *Liebe und Ehe*.

18 Only three examples of many are Nikolaus Wegmann, *Diskurse der Empfindsamkeit*, Matthias Luserke, *Die Bändigung der wilden Seele*, and Alexander Košenina, *Anthropologie und Schauspielkunst*.

19 See Lucien Febvre, "Sensibilität und Geschichte" 328.

even if the only information that is available about these practices is recorded in texts, be they literary or non-literary. It is true that the medium under analysis is the same in all three cases. However, a text about a cultural practice or an historical event refers to a reality outside of itself.²⁰ Even if a literary historian cannot reconcile such a reference with his *Weltanschauung* or with a constructivist epistemology, he must accept the intention of the text – or its author – and include it as a distinguishing feature if he wants to work historically. The same holds true for the fictional nature of a literary text. If an author adheres to the fictional conventions of his time, this has an effect on the meaningful content of his text. The reconstruction of Emilia Galotti's despair has still not provided us with conclusive knowledge regarding the emotional reaction of a middle-class woman caught in a situation of moral conflict in the mid-eighteenth century. In order to decide the extent to which the fictional message can be generalised, textual structures must be examined and intertextual correlations with other texts must be sought out. Their 'added value' of information is not fully tapped into by means of this comparative method, however.

More crucial within the framework of my argument is the second question:

(2) How does one gain access to the textual data that provide information about emotions, their explication and their functions? In this case, the spectrum is really quite a bit broader than it would appear to be after looking at the more recent literary-historical papers written from a cultural-historical approach. Most of them examine

(a) the *thematic treatment* of emotions. They select texts that are explicitly about one or more emotions, and they ask what messages these texts contain with regard to the perception, expression, explication and functions of emotions. In the process, they synthesise various text types in order to arrive at a thematic discourse: namely, the 'discourse of emotions.' The newly released volume *Representations of Emotions*, edited by Jürgen Schlaeger and Gesa Stedman, in addition to most of the more recent articles on emotions in German literature, are 'representative' of this approach. Here, the thematic treatment of emotions is analysed in three different ways.

(i) In the articles, literary texts, essays, and philosophical, moral and medical treatises are examined in order to determine what message they *explicitly* convey about the understanding of emotions at a particular time. In addition, they discuss the relationship of texts that thematically treat emotions to the metaphysical and scientific theories of the time.²¹ While poetological, philosophical and natural-science texts are still predominantly

20 For further considerations on this controversial topic, see Jan-Dirk Müller, "Überlegungen zu einer mediävistischen Kulturwissenschaft" 579ff. and Carsten Lenk, "Kultur als Text: Überlegungen zu einer Interpretationsfigur."

21 As does Marion Müller, "Emotion Matters in Early Modern England."

consulted as sources, other types of texts are increasingly coming into play: everyday documents, anatomical treatises, conversational doctrines – in other words, documents containing all sorts of anthropological information.²² Furthermore, well-known texts are being (re-)evaluated using newly formulated research questions. The best-known of these new foci is the study of text passages and formulations in which bodily processes are described or alluded to.²³

(ii) Texts that *document cultural practices*, such as descriptions of ritualised acts or records of ritualised linguistic communication, are occasionally examined.²⁴

(iii) Somewhat more frequently, studies can be found that analyse the *imagery* used for speaking about emotions. Metaphors and metonyms are examined primarily with a view to their relationship to what is explicitly said, whether they confirm or contradict this speech, and whether they perhaps unfold meaning 'behind the back' of the speaker. Such culturally formative metaphors²⁵ are not only to be found in literary texts. Cultural and literary history can equally profit from examination of them.

These three techniques offer important insights into the knowledge about emotions that is current at various times – knowledge that up to now has been noted only occasionally by the field of literary history and that is being expanded and differentiated. Yet the *type* of cultural knowledge that such analyses set their sights on is the same knowledge being aimed at by scholars of the history of ideas and by social historians: the type of declarative emotional knowledge of a culture that can be stored and retrieved in the form of propositions. The same holds true for the analysis of imagery. As a rule, imagery is looked at to determine whether it confirms or contradicts the 'messages' of the text. Such self-restriction²⁶ is surprising. After all, nei-

22 See, for example, most of the essays in *Die Affekte und ihre Repräsentation in der deutschen Literatur der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Jean-Daniel Krebs, and in *Liebe, Lust und Leid*, eds. Hartmut Scheuer & Michael Grisko, as well as the articles by Helga Meise and Barbara Korte in *Emotionalität*, eds. Claudia Benthien, Anne Fleig & Ingrid Kasten, 119–40 and 141–55 respectively.

23 On this topic see, for example, Jürgen Schlaeger, "The Politics of Taste" and Alexander Košenina, *Anthropologie und Schauspielkunst*.

24 See Helga Kotthoff's analysis of Georgian mourning rituals in Jürgen Schlaeger & Gesa Stedman, eds. *Representations of Emotions*, 149–72.

25 With regard to contemporary American culture, see George Lakoff & Zoltán Kövecses, "The Cognitive Model of Anger Inherent in American English."

26 This self-restriction is not typical of the analysis of documentations of cultural practices. But analyses of this kind are so rare in emotional-historical research that they can be ignored here. Nevertheless, it is an interesting question why cultural-historically oriented literary historians still prefer theoretical texts as sources and are still analyzing their propositional content.

ther a cultural history based on emotions nor literary history can be completely satisfied with possessing the propositional knowledge of a time. Other forms of knowledge – the episodic and the procedural – are also culturally relevant.²⁷ These types of knowledge are only partly ‘conserved’ and conveyed as propositions. Literary history has unique access to such knowledge offered by studying the styles of literary texts. The point is *how* encoding takes place, the literary traditions of ‘showing,’ and linguistic and formal strategies for presenting emotions. And this leads to the second technique for gaining information about emotions that are encoded in a text:

(b) the *presentation* of emotions. By ‘presentation’ I mean the verbal encoding of emotions, which by itself is not a proposition (although it can be part of one) and which in most cases is articulated implicitly or indirectly.²⁸ In order to be able to reconstruct the presentation of emotions, we must consider the *linguistic and formal means* with which emotions are encoded and conveyed in literary texts. To name just a few: emotions can be presented and intensified by a text’s plot and character development; by narrative strategies, such as the selection of mode (most importantly, focalisation) and voice; by rhetorical means of varying complexity, not just metaphors and metonyms; and by numerous syntactic devices, by meter, rhythm and rhyme, by word-choice. That is, by virtually all linguistic and formal techniques that are used in the creation of literature. Surely at least some measure of this variety must be reflected in the research. Yet if we look at the emotional-historical papers mentioned above, this is not the case. The presentation of emotions in literature is to a large extent being ignored.²⁹ Why?

On the one hand, there are some general reasons for this abstinence. They are related not only to the discrediting of rhetoric in the context of ‘genius aesthetics,’ but also to scientific standards upheld by the discipline. Up to and into the 1960s, statements about the ‘emotional content’ of literature appeared undiminished in German-language literary studies. As a rule, these statements were formulated on the basis of a combination of the interpreter’s feeling for language, historical knowledge, and sensitivity. As the academic standards of the discipline were tightened, such statements were rightfully criticised. When I say ‘rightfully,’ I refer only to the methodolog-

27 See Klaus Foppa, “Wie muß man was wissen, um sprechen (und verstehen) zu können?” 95 and Theo Herrmann and Siegfried Hoppe-Graff, “Textproduktion” 287.

28 I prefer the term ‘presentation’ of emotions to ‘expression’ to avoid obvious connotations: emotions presented in texts should not automatically be identified with the speaker’s emotions.

29 Hartmut Böhme, for example, conceives of the specifically aesthetic encoding of literature as its “Thematisierungs- oder Perspektivierungsstrategie”; Böhme, “Zur Gegenstandsfrage der Germanistik und Kulturwissenschaft” 480.

ically unsecured status, not to the subject of these statements. The emotions ‘given’ or encoded in a text are among the most significant and genuine topics one can deal with in literature. Unfortunately, the renewed esteem accorded the rhetorical analysis of emotional text strategies during the poststructuralist period did not exactly help initiate a new academic upswing.³⁰

On the other hand, there are reasons – specific to the field of cultural-historically oriented literary history – why the presentation of emotions is hardly examined. After all, it is striking that programmatic texts should underscore the need *not* to disregard the ‘specifically literary’ features of texts in a cultural-historical analysis;³¹ and yet, in practice, it is precisely those features which are characteristic of literary texts that are most often ignored. Generalising from the example of emotional history, three explanations suggest themselves.

(i) Strategic explanation: the will to disassociate oneself from text-centred interpretations makes certain immanent operations appear anachronistic. The analysis of literary forms is one of them.

(ii) Explanation with reference to the disciplinary tradition: the tradition of intellectual history, history of ideas and social history is so strong that programmatic demands cannot oppose it. Specifically, it is the tradition of selecting propositional knowledge as the preferred context for literature and of spending more time with these contexts than with the texts. The sources from which such knowledge can be obtained have been further increased thanks to the offices of cultural history.

(iii) Explanation with reference to the formation of theory: when reconstructing the mental schemata of a period, it would be methodologically more obvious to apply the thematic treatment of cultural units such as ideas, values and emotions, than to return to formal and linguistic modes of expression in literary texts. If common thematic treatments of ideas, values or emotions can be demonstrated in texts from different discourses, then the inference of common cultural schemata seems so plausible as to no longer need to be called into question. On the other hand, the question of how to conceive of the correlation between mental schemata and formal text characteristics, and of how to arrive at the one from the other, is theoretically obscure and unrealised in practice.

The consequence of this failure to make statements about the emotional content of texts is that the *specifically literary possibilities* for encoding emo-

30 Instead, these works focus on the search for concepts presupposed by their own theories, especially for the concept of ‘desire,’ and on the analysis of the metaphoric and metonymic structures of literary texts; see Paul de Man, “Tropes (Rilke),” and Evelyn Keitel, *Von den Gefühlen beim Lesen*.

31 Ansgar Nünning, “Literatur, Mentalität und kulturelles Gedächtnis” 185.

tions are no longer being examined in recent research, at least not systematically. Yet it is precisely this analysis of linguistic and formal strategies in the expression of emotions that is one important and specific purpose of literary-historical research. In tasks such as this, which focus on the composition of literary texts, literary history pursues very different questions and uses a very different apparatus from cultural history. This aspect of literary-historical research should be revitalised. It can help reconstruct an expanded knowledge of emotions that is not only stored as propositions and that is encoded by literature in accordance with an autonomous tradition and in a singular manner.

If we look more closely at how the presentation of emotions can be analysed, we can detect a way in which the interplay between cultural and literary history can function. Different types of contextual knowledge must be incorporated in order to be able to describe and explain the linguistic and formal strategies with which texts encode emotions. First, we need literary- and genre-historical knowledge. Second, we need linguistic-historical knowledge, or knowledge that has been reconstructed using the methods of historical semantics. And, finally, we need to make contextualisations that allow us, at the very least, to discern that an expression or an image is emotionally connoted. The information required for this contextualisation can only be obtained by taking an interdisciplinary approach. Here, cultural history can have a synthesising impact, providing information about the codes of emotions – thematic treatments *and* patterns of presentation – that were in effect in the everyday culture of a certain time and that constitute an arsenal of possible emotional codes, for literature as well. Literary history is interested in discovering whether and how these patterns are realised, modified or renewed in literary texts.

III Conclusion

The example of the history of emotions is symptomatic. It demonstrates that literary-historical research risks losing sight of the unique qualities of its subject. My plea for once again opening micro-analytical perspectives on the makeup of literature to a greater extent than has been the case in recent cultural-historical oriented research should, however, not be misunderstood as a call to go 'back to the philological roots.' Instead, it should be understood as a semi-conservative plea for an important and distinctive supplement to a primarily discourse-oriented practice. Yet, as I have suggested, it is not enough in this regard to integrate formal questions into the cultural-historical research. Theoretical and methodological problems must be clarified. True, it may be easier for cultural history to model the notoriously

problematical connection between the cultural macro-level and the textual micro-level than it was for social history to connect social structure with text. Nevertheless, the devil still lies in the methodological detail. The fact that mental schemata manifest themselves in individual pictorial, linguistic and phonetic forms is undisputed. What is by no means clear is how this happens and how we can infer the schemata from the forms without proceeding in too arbitrary a fashion.

From a literary-historical point of view, the discourse-analytical method applied in cultural-historical research is unsatisfactory. It uses literary texts first and foremost as a 'link' in order to be able to 'jump' into other types of texts that more clearly state what the researchers are interested in. Literary texts are not merely indicators for the cultural knowledge of a period – knowledge that, regardless of its presentation, can be demonstrated in other cultural products. Literary texts can incorporate and modify such knowledge, but they also contain knowledge that is specifically literary. It is precisely in their formal strategies that literary texts encode various types of cultural knowledge, and these types of knowledge elude an approach that is solely propositional. In order to help literature *and* literary history get out of their 'identity crises,' it is imperative that the perspective be widened.³²

³² I would like, in conclusion, to thank Paula Maier for her translation.

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