Dirk Werle

Problem und Kontext. Zur Methodologie der literaturwissenschaftlichen Problemgeschichte (Abstract)

Taking as its starting point an example from literary history – Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's invention of hymnic poetry with free rhythms in German – this article argues that the concept of the problem should be the primary context referred to by literary historians in their reconstructions, analogously to authorial intention in the interpretation of individual texts. The task of literary history is, accordingly, to answer with regard to the particular series of texts involved in any given case the following question: what was the problem, or what were the problems, to which responses are presented in the texts involved? In choosing a particular primary context for their reconstructions, literary historians are confronted with a variety of notorious difficulties for literary historiography: the problem of relationship to the real world (*Verknüpfungsproblem*), the problem of explanation, and above all the problem of text and context: in principle, I can relate a series of texts to a great many different contexts. Choosing the history of problems as an approach provides a rule for determining relevance and thus restricting what is a potentially limitless context. In this respect, it proves helpful to consider whether identifying the problems that are seen as contexts for a given series of texts might not be an arbitrary process. It is shown that this concern cannot be adequately addressed by means of a precise explication of the problem as a concept, for the explication of the concept gives no indication of how it should be empirically materialized in actual use. The concern that the assignment of problems to texts is arbitrary can, though, be adequately addressed by arguing that ›problem‹ should be understood as a methodological category and an ideal for regulating the assignment of meaning that proves itself only in the actual argumentation in each individual case.

Nonetheless, a viable explication of the concept of the problem must consider two things. The first is the fact that the concept of the problem is based on a bipartite relation. Problems provoke responses insofar as they represent a challenge when seen against the background of a normal state. The second is that an appropriate explication of the concept must consider the fact that problems emerge from ›competing systems of understanding‹ (Matthias Löwe). The article further discusses the extent to which the concept of the problem should be seen as dialectically related to the concept of the everyday or real-life world. Only when a situation takes hold in the everyday world that cannot be dealt with routinely do we speak of a problem occurring. Where the standard of reconstruction is concerned, the history of problems aims to follow a middle way between discourse history and text-centred literary studies. From the perspective of the historian of problems, the methodological standards for relating text and context are too lax in the case of the former and too strict in certain instances of the latter. It is argued that the history of problems provides a model for literary historiography that is superior to the alternative models of intertextuality studies, social history, and the history of knowledge. In formal terms, the intertext is one of the central types of context, but it is not clear why it should be treated as the primary context in literary historiography, just as it is not clear why society and the social should be given this function, however important they may be as content-related types of context. Knowledge, finally, represents a further central type of context for literary history. Relating series identified in literary history to a history of knowledge (however we understand

it), though, runs the risk of producing a rather static picture of literary history, even if the history of knowledge is conceived of as a history of knowledge claims in the manner of Lutz Danneberg. The history of problems, by contrast, considers the dynamic component of movements in literary history. Furthermore, we see the extent to which a perspective based on the history of problems is compatible with models from intertextuality studies as well as with concepts from social history and the history of knowledge, and how it can contribute to a methodological foundation for these approaches.

Finally, it is shown why it is theoretically mistaken to operate with oppositions between suprahistorical and historically variable concepts of the problem and between intentional and non-intentional histories of problems. In both cases, the oppositions are illusory and point to a theoretical ›sterility‹ that cannot do justice to the situation on the ground in literary history. The normal case with responses to problems in literary history is neither the timeless presence of unsolved problems nor the continuous evolution of problems and responses – instead, problems and types of response appear and disappear in various forms, different kinds of problem and response coexist, and repeated attempts are made to worry away at similar problems with recurring types of response. Furthermore, ›problem‹ is a concept that has features that are shared by intentions but also ones that intentions do not have. For this reason, it is well-suited to mediating between intentional and non-intentional levels. Finally, a number of terminological suggestions are made for a nuanced language of reconstruction. It proves sensible, first, to understand problems as embedded in problematic situations; second, to assume that problems often appear within larger clusters of problems; third, to take into account the fact that the urgency of the problem can vary from case to case; and fourth, to distinguish different types of problem that are relevant with respect to literary history. The article treats the ›history of problems‹ not as a catchy phrase which would ultimately result in a new line of research, but as a perspective on literary history that is encountered in various kinds of theory that have been developed in literary studies; that thus appears to have a high degree of plausibility for theoreticians of various schools; and that therefore should be pinned down and refined further in methodological terms. Discussions about the concept of the history of problems have become increasingly lively in literary theory in recent years, and this article responds to them.

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