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Writing the History of Children's Literature: Meta-theoretical perspectives

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## **Between Description and Interpretation. Historiography and Canonization in the Field of Children's Literature**

Translated by Regina Jaekel

I am going to treat my subject in two parts. The first part focuses on the sometimes hardly perceptible normative dangers of a historiography of children's literature which claims to be purely descriptive. The second part is concerned with the importance of historical children's literature research in the context of the canonization of children's literature and children's literature authors of the past.

### **I.**

In the 1970s the French scholar Philippe Lejeune concerned himself with the problem of historiographies of literature. Although his works refer primarily to the writing of a history of autobiography and to academic genre research in general, many of his ideas can also be applied to the historiography of children's literature. My exposition of the subject draws on the 1994 published German translation of his essay collection *Le pacte autobiographique* of 1975 and in particular on the chapter about autobiography and history of literature (Lejeune 1994, 379-416). I shall refrain, however, from repeating Lejeune's explanations in favour of immediately relating them to the historiography of children's literature.

Just as any genre research is more than a pure description and a true representation of its subject, children's literature research as well exceeds both. To a certain extent genre criticism as well as children's literature research even bring about what they claim to describe; they not only examine but partially create their object of investigation. The relevant critics and scholars contribute to consolidate the subject by strengthening its autonomy, stability and identity. They help create a horizon of expectations (in German: Erwartungshorizont) which

itself shapes and consolidates the subject-matter. In doing so, they bring about something which is essential for the working of literature as a means of societal communication, namely a certain degree of standardizing and classification. According to Lejeune the majority of the critics and audience always tend to fix and stabilise the horizon of expectations. So genre theories are an element of a societal system whose specific sluggishness is indispensable for the development of a solid continuity (ebd., 391). And he continues that genre criticism brings about a consolidation of the particular genre since it points out its firmness and autonomy and rationalises its normative system (ebd., 398). This is exactly the task or, as Lejeune says, the institutional function of any genre criticism (ebd., 388).

### *Perspective Illusions*

The subject-matter's stabilisation and consolidation through criticism is the stronger, the more its historiography is roped in for this purpose. Actually it is up to a historically working criticism to provide the subject-matter with a lasting permanence. So any history of children's literature strengthens the genre's everlasting continuance – which is a constitutive criteria of any “genre” – and thus helps to increase its recognition (ebd., 385) – not least, as I think, in academic circles. According to Lejeune the urgency to fulfil present-day needs, namely to stabilise the subject as such, results in a perceptual narrowing and a number of distortions which he describes as optical illusions (ebd., S. 381).

Many histories of children's literature are more or less based on a definition of the subject-matter which results from its present-day form. They more or less involuntarily assume that their subject-matter never changed its fundamental form and take the current understanding of children's literature as point of departure. Due to this assumption – the genre's immutability – these studies have great difficulty in working historically in a strict way (ebd.). Lejeune calls this the illusion of eternity („Illusion der Ewigkeit“) which reads, when applied to our subject-matter, as follows: children's literature has always existed, although in different manifestations and to a different extent (ebd., 382). Such histories of children's literature can not be taken as a real description of the historical literary evolution regardless of their pretensions in this regard. In fact they are nothing but a reorganisation of historical material after contemporary criteria. Lejeune calls this a reformulation, a restructuring of the past according to modern criteria (ebd., 385). The illusionary view of the subject-matter's unchangingness is, Lejeune suggests, based on a spontaneous historical operation in the

course of which we involuntarily reorganize the elements of the past according to current categories (ibd., 382).

A slightly weakened variation of the above mentioned perceptual distortion, the illusion of eternity, is the assumption of a more or less sudden birth of the related literary genre. With regard to children's literature this view reads: children's literature emerged suddenly and at one fell swoop and remained from then on essentially unchanged (ibd., 386f.). German children's literature historiographers often consider the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to be the genre's hour of birth. Lejeune calls this opinion a tempting illusion and warns: to assume a specific hour of birth leads us to neglect those factors which connect the subject-matter with the past and thereby create a bond of continuity between the times. At the same time, he continues, this view tends to overestimate the coherence of the further development of the genre (ibd., 387). Nevertheless, however, the assumption of a sudden birth of children's literature concedes that the existence of this form of literature is linked to a defined historical time span which also means that its lasting characteristics are only then insinuated when these have actually existed and functioned as significant attributes (ibd., 388).

Problematic as they are, both assumptions lead to the formation of a coherent corpus. After having chosen one "model" of children's literature, a corpus is established and rejects whatever is not compatible with the model, namely everything which is considered to be a special case and thus not part of the corpus (S. 394). Such corpora have to be understood as products, as creations of the present time; they result of a dialogue between the presence and the past (ibd., 382). Whether or not these corpora also represent historical facts is another story.

### *History of Literature as system history*

If historical genre research often is nothing but a reorganisation of literary attributes of the past after contemporary criteria, what are the attributes in question when we talk about children's literature? First, it could be the fact that a literary work is labelled appropriate reading material for children; second, possibly the circumstance that a literary work communicates certain elementary knowledge or ethic norms and directives which today are considered relevant in regard to educational matters; and third, the factor that contemporaries term a work suitable for children in the sense of being understandable and attractive for them.

All too often historiographers succumb to the danger to take the existence of a certain number of literary works – which are either considered to be appropriate reading material for children or pass on knowledge and norms relevant to educational matters – as evidence for the existence of children's literature as a specific form of literature, as a corpus of its own. This is, however, a fallacy caused by the observer's strictly contemporary perspective. Indeed, works which are regarded to be suitable for children exist long before we can talk of children's literature as a separate literary form.

Following the considerations of Lejeune we can say: Children's literature as an independent literary category results from the reorganisation and the re-evaluation of already existing attributes which were up to this moment of minor importance only, but from then on labelled important. Before the emergence of children's literature as a separate literary form, a collection of fables which was considered appropriate reading material for children continued to be part of the general fable corpus which could perfectly well address different audiences. From that moment when the classification 'being appropriate reading material for children' gains importance, a reorganisation within the field of literature takes place. That means that from now on all works, regardless to which literary category they belong, are detached from the different corpora they belonged to so far and put together to form a new separate literary corpus, namely that of children's literature. Whoever now writes fables for children no longer makes a contribution to the fable genre as such but is primarily taken as an author of children's literature which, in his specific case, has adopted the form the fable. Thus the birth of children's literature is nothing else but a restructuring of the literary system caused by the re-evaluation of already existing attributes: formerly insignificant attributes become now dominant classification criteria. Literary works which are suitable for children are no longer perceived to be examples of the different literary genres in general, but they are separated, and form from now on a separate field of literature termed children's literature.

In this context it is crucial that this restructuring process is not the result of an ex-post historiographical view but a proven historical fact. In particular histories of children's literature which just line up works and authors unwittingly assume this retrospective standpoint when they claim to deal with the history of children's literature even then, when they treat historical periods which knew only a few single works suitable for children. Such misunderstandings can only be avoided when the history of children's literature is not conceived as history of single works/authors but as study of the development of the literary

system of a period as a whole (Lejeune 1995, 381). This approach has to take into account the time-specific classifications of the literary systems and to use them for the demarcation of its own subject-matter. It has to find out if and in which way children's literature served in different epochs as classification criteria and which (generic) selections it caused. According to Lejeune it is the genuine task of any history of literature to treat literature as a system – a system which is subject to permanent changes (ibid., 407).

Getting to the end of the first part of my lecture let me mention a further aspect: There is in general no fixed and ever lasting link between a literary form or structure and a certain literary function. So children's literature as a defined literary subsystem has not automatically the function of serving as appropriate reading material for children. From the outset all literary works which written for children and put together in a separate literary corpus, had to cope with doubts about their capacity to successfully meet the experts' expectations, namely to be appropriate reading material for children. With respect to this function children's literature continuously competes with other literary subsystems. So it happens that partly traditional national folklore, selected modern national classics or so-called world literature are considered desirable children's reading, whereas works written specifically for children are declared unwanted, inferior and even harmful. Certainly, a history of children's literature cannot deal with all texts beyond genuine children's literature which in different epochs were regarded as suitable children's reading, but what has to be taken into consideration is the ongoing controversial assessment of the function of children's literature as being appropriate reading material for children.

## II.

At first sight the following second part of my discussion seems to treat an oppositional aspect, namely the canonization of children's literature. Instead of ensuring that a history of children's literature takes into account the historical variability of its subject-matter and avoids taking the present-day conception of children's literature as criteria for the past, the formation of a canon seems to aim at the opposite, namely the subject-matter's consolidation and stabilization. We can, however, avoid the risk of getting entangled in contradictions when we discuss these aspects on two separate levels.

There have always been efforts to canonize not only literature in general but also children's literature, which may or may not have been successful. In her monograph „Kinderliteratur, Kanonbildung und literarische Wertung“, published in 2003, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer has meticulously described not only the varying views of children's literature over time but also the different approaches to canonization from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Her study again emphasizes how important it is that a historiography of children's literature also deals with the different historical canonization efforts. Any history of children's literature also has to reconstruct the time-specific discourse about children's literature. In other words, it simultaneously has to be a history of children's literature criticism in the broadest sense of the word. In Germany it was Herman Leopold Köster who made with his *Geschichte der deutschen Jugendliteratur in Monographien* published in 1906 a first attempt to write such a history of children's literature criticism. But he failed to design it at the same time as a history of the literary system as such.

#### *Traditional children's literature and its advocates*

My following argument shall focus on the question whether or not children's literature research ?disposes of the necessary qualification and authorisation ?to establish a canon of children's literature. The fact that it is historical children's literature research which is of interest here, makes clear that we refer solely to children' literature of the past when we discuss this topic. German researcher use in this context the terms „Traditionskanon“ or „Bildungskanon“ (traditional or educational canon) which they oppose to a „Kanon des Gegenwärtigen“ (canon of contemporary literature) (Heydebrand 1993, 5f.). As impressive as Kümmerling-Meibauer's reconstruction of the historical estimation of children's literature may be, her own proposals and reasonings in regard to the composition of a canon of children's literature are not very convincing –and they were generally not approved.

A literary canon is a selection of works or authors which represent a positive norm and which are considered to be exemplary. In contrast with best or long sellers, literary canons are deliberate and well-reasoned concepts (vgl. Heydebrand 1993, 4f.). Canons as such depend on certain different groups: the persons responsible for the formation of canons, the guardians of canons and a larger public which accepts these canons. To a certain extent any canon has to include works/authors which are of current interest, since only then it will be generally acknowledged as a canon in the sense of an up-to-date reading canon. Literary canons which

are closely connected with educational institutions, for instance schools or universities, are a special case. In these cases the target groups are either students or undergraduates and graduates and these canons lose much of their importance outside their institutional context.

When we discuss the question whether a canon of traditional children's literature should exist and whether such a canon can work as a reading canon, the question of the target group arises. The difference between general literary reading audiences and the primary addressees of children's literature, i.e. children and young readers, is that the latter's "reading lifetime" is limited. In a biographical view children's literature serves as prior reading material of the target group only one to one and a half of a decade at most. Certainly, educational and university studies also refer only to a limited period of lifetime but here we are concerned with compulsory reading which therefore can also include a canon of traditional literature. In comparison with this the amount of time children and younger people can spend for leisure reading leaves only small scope for establishing and keeping alive a traditional literary canon. To put in another way: children and younger readers are not in a position to serve as the reading public of a historical canon although this does not mean that they completely ignore historical literature. This fact may also apply to another group, namely non-professionals - parents, relatives and other attachment figures - who, if they read children's literature at all, do so only for a limited number of years.

In fact it is the group of the professional producers and 'brokers' of children's literature which can adopt this function. Usually authors, illustrators, publishers' readers, booksellers, librarians, teachers and critics are over a longer period of time concerned with the production, judgement and placement of children's literature and thus in principle also in a position - for instance through professional training or further education structures - to acquire knowledge about the subject-matter's history. Indeed, these groups of professionals could profit highly from the grasp of a canon of traditional children's literature with regard to their daily work. So the knowledge of the historical development of the subject would enable them to correctly identify and name innovative approaches and trends. Experts in the history of children's literature are always wondering about the carelessness with which some of the producers and professionals use for example expressions like "new", "for the first time" or "innovative". So in Germany Erich Kästner is considered to be an innovator in almost every sphere - a misinterpretation which is caused by the almost complete ignorance of the history of children's literature. However, is to not the group of these professionals alone which is to

blame for the prevailing lack of historical knowledge but also, if not even for the major part, those who are in charge of working on and transferring historical knowledge. Although in German language areas research in historical children's literature has continually been intensified from the beginning of the seventies onwards, this had virtually no impact on many experts in children's literature (e.g. publishers' readers, booksellers, librarians, teachers and critics). Actually we have a situation where historical knowledge is missing to the same extent as a generally accepted canon of traditional children's literature.

### *Historical key texts and canonized works of the past*

This part of the argument focuses on the initiators of a canon of traditional children's literature and the question of whether the formation of such a canon belongs to the tasks of a historiography of literature. My answer is - at least at first - no. As I pointed out in the first part of my lecture, any expert of the history of literature has to work strictly descriptively and to analyse the works and functions within the given literary system. Nevertheless he has to make some choices - which may for instance depend on the target group he writes for (pupils, students, scholars etc.) or the institution where he teaches. He has to select works and authors which are highly representative of a certain historical stage or a certain trend of his subject-matter.

While doing so he will choose from the great number of suitable works those which represent - more or less for the first time - time-specific forms of children's literature or single literary trends and thus (can) serve as sort of guiding marks for the judgement of other books of this epoch or trend. So the two main criteria for his selection are the representative quality and the inventiveness (vgl. hierzu auch Kümmerling-Meibauer 2003, 194f., 197f.). In my eyes, however, and I consider this to be decisive, such a selection should not be called a canon of traditional works, but rather a selection of historical key works of children's literature.

I am of the opinion that in Germany a selection of historical key works of children's literature has only partly taken place, although such a corpus represents in my eyes an indispensable basic element of any teaching of the history of children's literature. I have the impression that this deplorable state of affairs is due to the fact that quite a lot of historical research in Germany is done without any regard to academic knowledge. Obviously many scholars of this field of study have no contact with academic teachings which specialise to a great degree in



the history of children's literature. Teacher training programs can usually just touch on this problem in the form of summarizing or general surveys; generally a close reading of traditional works is not provided. If there are academic training courses about specific epochs they mostly draw upon the lecturers' "private" and more or less accidental text selections since historical works are often either difficult to get or no longer available at all. As a matter of fact, in German language areas a comprehensive and productive discussion about children's literature key texts of different historical epochs [e.g. the Age of Enlightenment, romanticism or Biedermeier] has not yet taken place.

This unsatisfactory situation is probably due to the difficulty of proving the representative quality of single historical works. Such proofs require the entire reconstruction of an epoch's basic concept of children's literature, since only then we can talk of representative works. If there are no programmatic statements or writings available, any historiographer is forced to "extract" an epoch's fundamental concept of children's literature from the works that he regards to be important. He thus inevitably gets involved in a process of circular reasoning. Also, research in German language children's literature has not yet taken into account all sources which could help reconstruct the discourse on children's literature at a specific time.

What precisely is the difference now between a selection of historical literary key texts and a canon of traditional children's literature? In my view there are two fundamental differences.

First, any historiography has to choose some key texts from each epoch and each trend which are, at least to some extent, of historical importance for the development of children's literature regardless whether or not these key texts can be taken as a sort of precursor or model for the current children's literature. A corpus of historical key works has to reflect all stages of the historical evolution of the genre and therefore to include also works and authors that are of no present-day importance. In contrast to that, a canon may totally ignore entire epochs of children's literature if they are judged unimportant for current needs. It is not the task a canon of traditional literature to completely depict the history of literature.

Second, any selection of historical key texts of children's literature has also to include non-exemplary works, in other words representative examples of problematic and/or unsatisfactory titles. For instance authoritarian and repressive reading material for children from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nationalist or chauvinistic and colonial and/or racist children's literature

from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as fascist texts. Needless to say that a canon of traditional children's literature has to exclude such texts altogether and this all the more since a canon has to consider only those works which – seen from the present time - can serve as positive historical examples.

*Historical children's literature research and the cultivation of a canon of traditional literature*

Whereas it is part of the task of any historiography of children literature to put together a body of historical key texts, it falls to another discipline, namely to the interpretation of history, to establish a canon of traditional children's literature. Actually many experts of the history of literature are engaged in both fields and play two different roles simultaneously, the role of the reconstructor of the literary development and the role of the interpreter of the history of literature. Despite this practice we should, however, distinguish between the description of the historical development of literature and the interpretation of the history of literature. So the establishment of a canon of traditional children's literature is not the result of a description, but it is the conclusion of an interpretation of the history of children's literature from a present-day standpoint.

Finally, any canon represents the contemporary view of the past. Due to the fact that the criteria applied to judge works and authors are not time-specific but totally present-day oriented, the judgements themselves prove to be fundamentally unhistorical. So a canon of traditional children's literature can absolutely deviate from time-specific views and judgements of a literary work or author. What was famous and judged classical during the 19<sup>th</sup> century could be of no value as an example for today. This does not mean that such a canon automatically neglects a work's historical importance, nevertheless this aspect must remain a subordinate one. If not, the difference between the canon of traditional literature and the corpus of historical key texts would become blurred.

The establishment and cultivation of a canon of traditional children's literature presupposes the existence of advanced historical research into children's literature. If such a basis is not available, any selection called a canon can only repeat those works and authors which are already known. Thus any canon of traditional literature would get into difficulties and become dependent on prior selections and judgements which all too often lack a plausible

justification. To cultivate a canon means also to look at an epoch's total offer of children's literature in order to perhaps discover some forgotten works which nevertheless can be of interest to the contemporary reader. Any canon of traditional children's literature has to be flexible and open with regard to works and authors since only then it has a chance to be acknowledged and read. A new look at single children's literature epochs should at least lead experts to canonize also works and authors which so far were ignored.

Some time ago I stressed two works written in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which, at least in my eyes, deserve to be integrated into a canon of traditional German children's literature: first, August von Rodes (1751-1837) *Kinderschauspiele*, published 1776, and second, Christian Adolf Overbecks (1755-1821) *Frizchens Lieder*, a collection of poems for children published 1781. Both works were highly appreciated at their time but then sank nearly into oblivion. I think that both works are milestones on the way of a developing liberated children's literature to which we still today feel obliged. The same goes, in my opinion, for Paula Dehmels (1862-1918) children's tales *Singinens Geschichten*, parts of which were first published in 1903 whereas the complete book was published as late as 1921, four years after her death. The female protagonist of these tales can absolutely be taken as a sort of predecessor of Bibi or Pippi Longstocking. These few examples – to which I could easily add further ones – may show that any present-day oriented canon of traditional children's literature will have to include to a considerable extent literary rediscoveries and thus probably be subject to fierce discussions.

In my opinion not only Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer's but also earlier discussion of the establishment of a canon of children's literature lack an exact distinction between a selection of historical key texts for children and the establishment of a canon of traditional children's literature. Kümmerling-Meibauer's selection criteria lead to a problematic mixture of works which are partly historically representative and partly exemplary – in whatever regard – a fact which is unsatisfactory for both the expert in the history of literature and the one who is interested in the role of the past for the present. It is indispensable to put together a selection of works from the total system of children's literature of the past epochs - for different purposes and by taking into account different point of views. It is important that the different forms of the selection process should on no account be intermingled but clearly separated since only then can the respective specificities and functions be made visible.

This procedure could at least help the historiography of children's literature to point out its importance for the present. The establishing of a corpus of historical key texts is a major task of any expert of the history of literature but it is to a large part internal academic work. The cultivation of a canon of traditional children's literature is another story. Although this does not belong to his core business, any expert in the history of literature should not deny that he/she cares about it since it is in this – largely non-academic – sphere where his/her research findings are applied. And it is only here where an expert in the history of children's literature has the chance to persuade the non-academic experts of children's literature that research into historical literature is of advantage to the cultivation of the genre.

Admittedly current practitioners in this field – producers, librarians, booksellers, teachers etc. – have not to be familiar with the complete historical development of this form of literature, nevertheless they should at least roughly know the positive historical cornerstones. This knowledge can only be transferred by an academic expert in the history of children's literature who simultaneously cares about the cultivation of the canon. To engage in the cultivation of the canon would be easier for him the more he finds the concerns of his academic teaching reflected in the selection of historical key texts.

If we look at German-speaking language areas we notice that a canon of traditional children's literature can not taken to be a "Bildungskanon". I understand "Bildungskanon" to be a selection of works and authors the knowledge of which is regarded as an indispensable part of general literary skill. At the beginning of the 90s the Munich specialist in German studies Renate von Heydebrand proposed the establishment of, in addition to the literary Bildungskanon – which she also calls a "Kunstkanon" – a multitude of other special canons. She argues that a canon should be established in every cultural subsystem in order to create a forum where discussions about the relevant works and values can take place (Heydebrand 1996, 17). It is precisely such a special canon, that I am talking about. Von Heydebrand, however, goes even further. She suggests the integration of either one or a few examples of each special literary subsystem into the literary Bildungskanon in order to reduce the prestige gap between the diverse literary sections and the so-called high literature to which alone the Bildungskanon refers.

It would fall to the experts in history of children's literature to make such proposals. Promising candidates in this context would probably be the Brother Grimm's *die Kinder- und*

*Hausmärchen* or E.T.A. Hoffmann's phantastic novel *Nussknacker und Mausekönig*, since both works address not only children but also adult readers and are thus – on the part of the adults – possibly regarded as being integrating into a general literary educational canon. Notwithstanding this view I wouldn't consider double or multi addressing to be an indispensable premise for a work's integration into a *Bildungskanon*. Erich Kästner's child novel *Emil und die Detektive* for instance absolutely deserves – at least in my eyes – to be included in a German literary *Bildungskanon*. However, I assume that the resistance to the integration of some works of children's literature into the general literary canon are probably much more vigorous in Germany than for instance in Scandinavia, Great Britain or the Netherlands.

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