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THE MULTIPLE LIVES OF LIBRARY OBJECTS

On the Interdependencies between Cultural Heritage, Scientific Research and Popular Presentation

Abstract

Modern libraries and archives are much more than storages for books, manuscripts, photographs, maps or scores. The article addresses the relations between the need for professional preservation, the demands for scientific documentation and editing, and the public expectation of presenting cultural objects in Museums or virtual environments. Based on experiences with a newly established large literature museum in Vienna, mainly based on collections held by the Austrian National library, the article demonstrates different ways of giving life to objects. Besides flourishing Museums, the realm of "Digital Humanities" gives several opportunities of combining library catalogues with the outcome of editorial work or the attraction of virtual exhibitions.

Keywords: Modern Manuscript Collections, Literature Museums, Digital Humanities, Cultural Identity, National Literary Canon

SOME GENERAL REMARKS ON THE INTERCONNECTIONS OF ARCHIVE, RESEARCH AND CULTURAL MEDIATION AFTER THE “DIGITAL TURN”

Modern libraries and archives are much more than storages for books, manuscripts, photographs, maps or scores. They are located at the intersection of the collection and maintenance of cultural heritage, of research, which in our case means above all the editing and commentary of texts and images, and of various forms of presentation: apart from research volumes and catalogues, these are increasingly digital publications. In addition, there are exhibitions that are experiencing a boom in the field of libraries and archives all over the world, probably in response to the apparent end of the analogue age and the associated revaluation and auratization of the *original*. This article wants to address the opportunities and challenges in regard to these changes in the self-conception of archives and libraries: between the need for professional preservation, the demands for scientific documentation and editing, and the public expectation of presenting cultural objects in museums or virtual environments.

Archives in particular, as well as all institutions collecting historical artefacts in general, are subject to multiple pressures of legitimacy: first of all, this is connected to the loss of historical knowledge in the reality of social media and social networks. Many of us have experienced that the determinations of cultural identity have changed under media conditions. What do young people still read today? Does it make sense to work with a binding canon of literary and historical works? What do the terms *classical* or *the classics* mean today? (A volume of our publication series “Profiles” is dedicated to this topic with respect to the Austrian “classic” Franz Grillparzer. The Cover is part of an adaptation of his diaries as comic strips.)¹ A frequently asked question in regard to the Austrian literary archive, but more often in regard to a major literature museum, is: what are the criteria for your selection? One, somewhat polemic, but also serious answer is: since we can no longer assume that pupils know the classics of the 19th and 20th century (this applies to Austria, the situation in Germany and other countries is more differentiated), we can deal with this question very freely: the texts of the classics and the names of famous writers are as new to them as any other texts as well. Another question is quite pragmatic: how do we succeed in enticing the generation under the age of fifty to attend lectures, readings, exhibitions, and in encouraging them to visit archives and libraries beyond their legitimate and primary interest of just being able to prepare for their next exam in peace?

1 Bernhard Fetz, Michael Hansel, Hannes Schweiger, eds., *Franz Grillparzer. Ein Klassiker für die Gegenwart* (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2016).

Secondly, in addition to these questions of educational politics, cultural artefacts are linked to changing attributions of historical and contemporary identities. This can be shown particularly well with regard to Austrian literature: after all, the decision of what should or may be considered Austrian is closely linked to Austrian literature. Austria is a country that is proud of its cultural identity, whose self-image is to a considerable extent based on its cultural achievements, which still distinguishes itself from its much larger neighbour, Germany, through its particular linguistic and cultural characteristics, but which was prepared to sacrifice these very characteristics unconditionally during the period of National Socialism to create a larger whole – for such a country the critical public literature provides is a corrective that is almost essential for survival.

The person and the work of an author can be appropriated in the context of these identity politics. The name Peter Handke, whose manuscripts, photos and notebooks are edited to a considerable extent by the Literary Archive of the Austrian National Library, may briefly be mentioned with regard to this issue, especially in a post Yugoslavian context. Is Handke an Austrian writer, a German writer or a European writer? Handke took a stand during the Yugoslav conflict. His texts on Yugoslavia and Serbia, understood as political, are still the subject of discussions in Germany, in France and, a few years ago, in Norway, on the occasion of the Ibsen Prize being awarded to Handke. From his early engagement with the demands for a *littérature engagée*, for a realistic literature at the beginning of the 1970s (demands that Handke always rejected), to his Yugoslavia essays, Handke's deliberate border-crossing between politics and poetry provoked resistance, polemics and criticism. The question of whether a title like *Justice for Serbia* should be read as a literary search for traces or as a political statement, with a shift in responsibility, misunderstands Handke's literature policy: these essays are literary and political, which does not take away or add anything at all to the author's responsibility for what he writes. The literary ambiguity in the sense of Handke is a political point of view, which also places him in a specifically Austrian tradition of literary cultural criticism. In any case, what is meant by this is: the designation of carriers of cultural heritage to a national heritage, or to a European, or to a globally available globalized cultural asset, is more virulent today than ever before. This point is also relevant in regard to a *national* literature museum.

A third question concerns the pressure to justify the humanities and cultural sciences, and we all know that the resources for the natural sciences are incomparably higher than the resources spent on the humanities. The situation may be different in different countries, but the certainly legitimate pressure to justify why something is being preserved and to show and communicate these things is growing. Based on the experiences of establishing a major literature museum in Vienna in 2015, which is mainly based on collections held by the Austrian National Library, I want to demonstrate different ways of giving life to objects. Besides flourishing museums, the realm of *Digital Humanities* gives several opportunities of combining library catalogues with the outcome of editorial work or the attraction of virtual exhibitions. The great potential offered by the Digital Humanities lies precisely in increasing the permeability between the individual work areas and the institutions of an archive (special collection), a library (catalogue), a museum (presentation for a wider public) and of research (in cooperation with universities and researchers) with the aim of expanding the search functions, mediation formats and forms of presentation. Digital Humanities are opening up a field of cooperation between technicians, archivists and researchers. They allow much easier access, independent from time and place, to documents and their contexts, compared to expensive and complicated printed editions. In concrete terms, from my point of view this concerns:

1. At the archive and catalogue level, a step-by-step integration of research results into the catalogues; these can be links to digital editions.² In net presentations, such as the research platform *Handke Online*,³ we are working on connecting the information, facsimiles and transcriptions to the catalogue entries; to some extent it already works. At the moment we are preparing a workflow for putting online and linking the estate of Robert Musil with a Musil edition developed by the University of Klagenfurt. This also concerns the use of metadata such as those generated by editions or research work. And it concerns the increase of the proportion of freely accessible digitized manuscript objects in accordance with the principle of the freedom of rights.

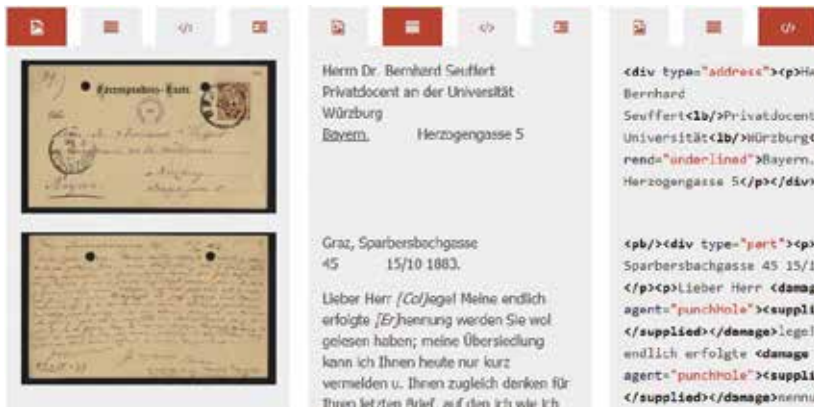
2. At the level of research infrastructure, it is a matter of setting up platforms for digital editions that include a workflow for the cooperation with other institutions or researchers, but above all support our own edition projects. In this context, I also call for an intensification of the open access policy. Genuine net editions, but also hybrid editions are based on a more open concept of edition, without necessarily a loss of philological competence.

3. This means that it is a matter of integrating the results of fundamental philological work into an environment that can also carry the characteristics of a virtual exhibition or allow direct access to the research community. In the case of the online

2 For an overview of Digital editions at the Literary archives of the Austrian National Library see <https://www.onb.ac.at/bibliothek/sammlungen/literatur/forschung/projekte/>

3 See <https://handkeonline.onb.ac.at/>

platform *August Sauer – Bernhard Seuffert*,⁴ the editorial part with facsimiles and transcriptions (the commentary will be published conventionally in book form and perhaps inserted here later) was supplemented with a timeline. Sauer and Seuffert were, by the way, as editors, professors and literary historians, important protagonists in the field of literature around 1900.



Online Platform *August Sauer-Bernhard Seuffert*, Screenshot facsimile / transcript / TEI code



Online Platform *August Sauer-Bernhard Seuffert*, Screenshot timeline

⁴ See <http://sauer-seuffert.onb.ac.at/>.

Ideally, a certain object, a certain group of objects, larger units such as an estate or a collection of photographs, can become the object of different forms of presentation – as a digitized, transcribed and annotated manuscript in the context of a digital edition project, as a meaningful original museum object in the context of an exhibition, as an image object in an accompanying virtual exhibition, as an object within an estate to be studied in the practice of the archive; archival knowledge can also be presented as a message in a bottle in the social media. In this context, I believe that the targeted use of social media, particularly blogs (on research, archives and exhibitions) makes sense.⁵

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE LITERARY CANON: A FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE REGARDING THE LITERATURE MUSEUM OF THE AUSTRIAN NATIONAL LIBRARY

The Austrian Literature Museum is situated in a historic building in Vienna's city centre. It was installed in 2013. The building was constructed in the middle of the 19th century for the Imperial and Royal Exchequer Archive (the Hofkammer-Archiv), the predecessor to today's Ministry of Finance. With its substantially intact appearance and structure, the listed building is considered a fine example of utilitarian Biedermeier architecture. Austria's most important dramatist of the 19th century, Franz Grillparzer (1791–1872), was director of the Exchequer Archive from 1832 until 1856. During his term in office, and indeed during the 'revolutionary year' of 1848, the archive was moved to the newly constructed building where Franz Grillparzer's office, as an Austrian civil servant and poet, has remained unchanged to this day. The historic Grillparzer room is integrated into the permanent exhibition, being an exhibit in itself. Since it was built, the building has continually served as the Exchequer Archive and, together with the archive facilities, forms a historical ensemble.



The dramatist Franz Grillparzer's office in the Literature Museum. Photo: Austrian National Library

5 See the research blog of the Austrian National Library <https://www.onb.ac.at/forschung/forschungsblog/>.

The central location, the architecture, the available space as well as the historical and intended use of the Exchequer Archive provide a fascinating constellation. The building offers something that cannot be artificially created: aura. The rooms' unique ambiance is in large part due to the wooden shelving. Extending to the ceiling and dividing the large rooms into long sections, the shelves were used to store the historical files. Inside, the building is somewhat reminiscent of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Carceri* or Jorge Luis Borges' *Library of Babel*.

The various target groups, the difficult subject matter of 'Literature' and the listed building presented the curators and designers not just with a major challenge but also with a considerable stimulus. They were forced to reflect on the relationship between the building and the exhibitions, as well as between old and new, object and text, cultural memory and the needs of the individual visitor, while striking a balance that enables the differences to remain clearly visible but which nevertheless preserves the overall impression.



Turning the historic archive into a Literature Museum



View of the lounge area in the second floor, example for the design of the exhibition in the historical ambience

The Literature Museum assembles exhibits from different archives, mainly from the special collections of the Austrian National Library, to form a permanent exhibition that appeals to a large audience. Visitors are introduced to the developments and continuities and to the brittle identity of Austrian literature. By means of historical examples, we also try to foster the writing and reading skills of children and young people and to contribute to intensifying the social and cultural discussion about Austrian literature. In addition to the permanent exhibition on two floors, a regular series of temporary exhibitions is staged on the third floor.

Our first special exhibition was dedicated to ten younger or less well-known authors, confronting very new material with classical objects from our collections: *Pencil, book and laptop. Ten items in writing today*. The show presented a **dynamic picture of present-day Austrian literature**. Ten writers presented their work and their approaches to writing. Insights into how a text is born, the biography of a writer and the ‘workshops’ of present-day writers were given. The objects shown in the exhibition ranged from **drawings, photographs, videos, film and theatre clips to collages and graphic work**.

Another exhibition was dedicated to *The high of writing (Im Rausch des Schreibens)*. This exhibition explored the states of euphoria and ecstasy that writing evokes. Moreover, it shifts the focus onto those literary texts that, in a variety of ways, deal with the intoxication, pleasure, trance, ecstasy and physicality of writing. Various substances stimulate literary imagination. At the same time, utmost concentration and self-discipline can be the necessary preconditions of literary work.



Gert Jonke: Manuscript as script image. Private Property

In 2018 an exhibition on three central figures of Viennese modernism was on display: Alban Berg, composer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, philosopher, and Berta Zuckerandl, journalist and legendary *Salonière* of the time.⁶ Around 1900 Vienna was

6 Bernhard Fetz, ed., *Berg, Wittgenstein, Zuckerandl. Zentralfiguren der Wiener Moderne* (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2018).

the dazzling centre of numerous intellectual and cultural movements, which have lost none of their fascination to this day. The exhibition makes the familial, artistic and social networks of Viennese Modernism visible. Images and documents, some of which have never been shown in public before, convey a vivid impression of life and thought in the “experimental station of the end of the world”, as the satirist and critic Karl Kraus termed the era.



Berg, Wittgenstein, Zuckerkandl. Central Figures of Viennese Modernism, Catalogue cover

The establishment of an ‘Austrian Literature Museum’ offered a unique opportunity: to show the ambiguities of a national literature, in our case the so-called ‘Austrian literature’ as part of the wider literature written in German and as heir to the Austro-Hungarian tradition. Attempting to put on display the precarious geographical, political and historical mental boundaries in determining Austrian Literature is a task that extends far beyond merely conveying literary history; it also makes the visitors aware of the postcolonial context of many special collections of the Austrian National Library.

To take just three examples: Does Franz Kafka and the so-called ‘Prague-German literature’ form part of Austrian literature? If you apply the encyclopaedic and biographical yardstick of birthplace and date of birth, then most German-speaking Prague authors belong to Austrian literary history. However, this literature provides an excellent example of a supra-national regional literature that forms part

of a larger, German-speaking and European literature.⁷ To give another example: the Nobel Prize laureate Elias Canetti was born in 1905 in Rustschuk, Bulgaria, and lived in London and Zurich for many years. Nevertheless, throughout his life he was influenced by Vienna and the Austrian literature of the interwar period – particularly by Karl Kraus but also by Hermann Broch and others – and therefore he can, with all due caution, be described as an Austrian writer. And the third example, which concerns the – from an Austrian point of view – hegemonic tendencies in German literary historiography: there are numerous examples in literary encyclopaedias and public statements in which the Austrian authors Ingeborg Bachmann or Peter Handke are described as ‘German’ authors. A well-known anthology, edited by the German scholar Benno von Wiese, was entitled: *Deutschland erzählt: Von Rainer Maria Rilke bis Peter Handke (Germany narrates: from Rainer Maria Rilke to Peter Handke)*.⁸ The latter definitely ought to be described as an Austrian writer – we can just see how much this area is littered with minefields.

Austrian literature from the end of the 18th century onwards provides a rich collection of material illustrating the emergence and critique of national clichés and stereotypes. Because of their multiethnic and multilingual history, the political divisions have found a particular place in this literature: ranging from Franz Grillparzer’s Bohemian plays, which caused particular consternation among the Czechs, to Thomas Bernhard’s highly critical tirades, whose literary calibre is of international standing. With the Alt-Wiener Volkstheater – the old Viennese popular theatre – the Austrian vernacular found a means of literary expression that today has developed, for example, into the polemical and critical mastery of Nobel Prize laureate Elfriede Jelinek.

Attempts to stamp Austrian literature with a specifically folkloristic or national character, to explain it with reference to the Catholic and Baroque nature of the Austrian soul or, with patriotic pride or a critical gesture, to ennoble it by linking it to the multinational and multilingual traditions of the multiethnic Habsburg state – can be justified only to the extent that it leads to stereotyped and distorted images of Austrian literature. To quote just one attempt to identify specifically ‘Austrian’ characteristics, I want to mention the far-reaching concept of the ‘Habsburg myth’ promoted by the Italian literary scholar and writer Claudio Magris.⁹

The Austrian situation is different to the German one because the main political upheavals – in 1848, 1918, 1933 (including the civil war year of 1934 and the annexation year of 1938 in Austria), 1945, 1968 and 1989 – were necessarily recorded differently in Austrian and in German literature. The reasons for the different developments in the wide sphere of German-language literature lie in the different experiences of

7 See Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *Kafka. Für eine kleine Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main, 1976).

8 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991).

9 See Claudio Magris, *Der habsburgische Mythos in der österreichischen Literatur* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1966). The book was published in several editions and languages.

nation-building, in different developments media and public criticism took – even before the collapse of 1918 – and the differently evolving contrast between provincality and urbanity with regard to the political and literary conditions. In addition there are the specific literary traditions that would legitimately justify the concept of ‘Austrian literature’: Austrian popular plays of the 18th and 19th centuries and their further development in the 20th century, literary language scepticism, the significance of the fragment and more regional literary forms.

All this can and must be put on display by the *Literature Museum*, without succumbing to the temptation of providing a purely national perspective. Due to the specific literary field, the visual appeal of Austrian literature is certainly very high, as is expressed by the diversity of its aesthetic forms or its multimedia character, with strong links to fine art and music and ranging from Adalbert Stifter and Hugo von Hofmannsthal to more recent authors such as Thomas Bernhard, Ernst Jandl and Elfriede Jelinek.

In its often pronouncedly poetic outlook, the literary critique of the (Austrian) situation should not be (mis)understood as explicit standpoints in debating the direction to be taken but as an aesthetic *and* political experimental laboratory that permeates all social, political and individual levels. The construction of reality through language, ideology and art has always been a crucial issue in this context. Many museum objects reflect this context and provide different insights into the history and content of the collections.

Manuscripts, pictures, letters and memorabilia, which can be found in large numbers in these collections of the Austrian National Library and in other important literary archives, gain a second life when presented as museum exhibits. For this reason the vitality of the presentation of literature in a museum does not diminish its vitality, especially when the previously canonised are confronted with more recent and current literature, which must be a prerequisite for an open and lively ‘Austrian Literature Museum’.



Literature Museum: Entrance area with multimedia installation



Objects on display in the Literature Museum: Heimito von Doderer, Construction sketch of his novel Die Strudlhofstiege

To conclude with Peter Handke, who once described a central aspect of Austrian literature as follows: “It is literature that in fact shapes the image of a country in that it contradicts all preconceived images with tenacity and gentle force.” The establishment of an ‘Austrian Literature Museum’ is both an Austrian and a European project. This is the best answer to the question, what the nature of Austrian literature is: It is part of German-language literature and, owing to the historical circumstances and the self-conception of its most important protagonists – including many who were forced into exile – it is genuinely a European literature.

The Museum, the Literary Archive with its modern manuscript collection, the net editions of works and letters which can be found in the archives as well as in the museum, show the many lives of library objects. There is a lot of future in them.

