

Preface

The study of literature – whether of a scientific, critical or aesthetically enjoyable nature – presumes the comparison of a particular literary work with another contrasting one. Frequently the comparison starts with the theme: How is a certain situation, a certain action, represented and depicted in one work compared with another? The creativity, the literary potency of an author can be measured, when one work is contrasted side by side with another one of the same thematic basis. Of course, this is not the only approach to a literary evaluation but nevertheless a very important one. It becomes even more important if we expand the question of a literary evaluation to a comparison in its narrow sense and to a culturally scientific point of view. All in all, if we consider literature as a discovery of past religious, collectively conforming and typical or even only psychologically remarkable ideas, we want to know whether that which we are reading represents something truly unique or only a specific expansion of widely disseminated ideas. In one word, one would like to know thematic parallels.

Since the thirties of the 20th century the discovery of such parallels was made easier by the six volumes of the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1932-37; last edition 1961) by the American Stith Thompson (1885 – 1976). Its predecessors were the typologies of folk narratives like those drafted by the Dane Svend Grundtvig and the Fin Antti Aarne (1910). Since then, other single indexes were written for specific literatures, among them the *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature* by Inger Maria Boborg, published in 1966 in the *Biblioteka Arnamagnaeana* (of particular importance to German scholars and medievalists) and the *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature* by Tom Peete Cross, published in Bloomington, Indiana 1952 (last publication 1989).

Inspired by such very useful works, I decided to help create a “Motif-Index of German Secular Narratives from the Beginning to 1400”. I based my decision for choosing worldly literature based on feasibility when compared with the wealth of religious writing and because I hoped – and still hope – that one day a Motif-Index for the Bible, especially for the Old Testament – will be written. The decision to include only the literature up to 1400 was more difficult and can be justified only by practical consideration. Usually medieval literature is considered to stop at 1500, although here and there this limit is being stretched – with or without justification – by the introduction of a “Middle Literature”. The Motif-Index should follow exactly the example of Stith Thompson’s and of other existing indexes, in order to be compatible with these or possible future ones concerning the decimal classification of motives. It should be in English, in order to reach the largest possible pool of interested people, and because the motif designations have already been standardized in English by Thompson and his successors. This project should be realized within the framework of the Kommission für Altgermanistik of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, where simultaneous work on the *Lexikon der altgermanischen Namen* (= *Thesaurus palaeogermanicus*) was done. After their approval both projects existed side by side for several years beginning in 1981.¹

¹ The work on the *Thesaurus palaeogermanicus* had its first completion by Hermann Reichert, *Lexikon der altgermanischen Namen*, Teil 1: Text, Vienna 1987 and Teil II: Index, compiled by Robert Nedoma and Hermann Reichert, Vienna 1990.

It was clear to all participants and, of course, to the “Fonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung”, that a project of such dimensions (I estimated at that time that the whole work would comprise one million verses, which was too low) could not be accomplished in a short time. The amount of time needed is obviously determined by the number of collaborators.

As project leader I had to try to gradually get the number of collaborators up to a seemingly optimal group of 3 to 5 and to keep it there. A large staff of 20 co-workers would have been impossible solely due to a lack of space and because we did not have enough graduates whose knowledge of Middle High German would enable them to do a precise reading and understanding of the texts. My experience taught me that among thousands of graduate German students there is one person every one or two semesters who can be trusted with such a specialized and responsible task, as was demanded here.

Furthermore, such work is not for everyone. It demands a certain renunciation to search hundreds of thousands of verses solely looking for motifs in the sense of Thompson’s work; there are other observations and discoveries which one is tempted to follow up, but one is not allowed to do so. In order to acknowledge some “discoveries”, a “Cultural-Historical Index” was later included as a kind of by-product of the search for motives. Great continuity was of prime importance; collaborators become more and more valuable through their growing expertise and the length of their work experience, just as it is with work on lexicons and dictionaries. One person was to guarantee the continuity of the evaluation of motives and as “supervisor” check the work of the others for “normative consistency”.

Whenever collaborators on long-term-projects find themselves in a situation where they are unsure of continued support by funds and so-called “third-party donors”, there is the danger that it affects their work. Should the project be stalled, they would have to find an alternative source of income and prove their scientific know-how in one way or the other. This could be to the detriment of the project, if it does not take place outside of the working time. However, scientific experience can improve qualification for the work on the project. I believe that the latter was the case with my collaborators. The diverse petitions to the “Fonds” for continued support show repeatedly their participation at conferences, lectures and publications within the project’s thematic radius and without disadvantage to the project. My crew manoeuvred thus our Motif-ship over many years and kept it afloat in spite of occasional rough winds.

At the beginning I did not intend to work on the project myself in order to be able to fulfil my teaching and research duties. The Motif-Index was not part of my own research priorities. This was always made quite clear both to the “Fonds” and to the Academy. Had I wanted to sacrifice my free time for the Motif-Index, it would have resulted in legal problems, since I hardly could have made a work contract with myself. When I finally was reproached in a somewhat hostile appraisal that I only played the role of some *Übervater* (big daddy) – an expression which seemed particularly appropriate to its user – the reproach was unjustified precisely due to the above considerations.

The appraisal of our work by the anonymous experts (whose identities I did not know at the time, but do now) were very positive, even excellent. Suddenly in 1994 the above men-

tioned negative criticism came at a time (what a coincidence!) when there was the danger for the “Fonds”, (due to the labour law) that one of the collaborators and a particularly able person would have to receive regular employment. This questionable evaluation offered a welcome excuse to the “Fonds” to use the chance offered and rid itself of a long-term project. This at a time and in a country, where diminishing means are available to the sciences which stay alive living hand to mouth. The project – by the way – was judged very positively in a general appraisal of the Academic Commission, which naturally did not mean much, because evaluations from up high are generally taken seriously only if they are negative.

After the state had spent several millions of Austrian shillings, it was for me out of the question to stop work on the project at this phase, at least from the point of view of a citizen, on the grounds of moral, scientific and – most of all – humane considerations for the collaborators who had worked four years on the project. How gratifying, then, that the Academy was willing to finance the end of the project with the support of the Philosophical-Historical Class, of course under the condition that we present an exact time-table for its conclusion and that I – as project manager – also work as much as possible on the project. Furthermore, it was unfortunately decided that the chronicles (which really should be included as part of worldly literature) should be left out (which was painful for us, for the “Emperor’s Chronicle” had already been excerpted). The same fate befell the considerable work of Heinrich the Teichner. To let go of the chronicles was at least somewhat plausible, for they form a separate class and their absence can be better justified than that of Teichner’s *bispele*-speeches. And it was inconsistent, given the fact that Stricker’s comparable work had already been included. The absence of Teichner’s œuvre is due solely to material constrictions, yet understandable because the Academy – despite its limited means – has most generously adopted the child which was abandoned by the “Fonds”. In short, we were able to keep the promises given to the Academy and on June 20th 2001 I could proudly announce to the Philosophical-Historical Class that the work was just about finished. “Just about” only because there still was work to be done on standardization, correction of typos and English wording.

During the quarter of a century of work on the Motif-Index we encountered – of course – all kinds of problems and changes. I am not speaking here of the human tensions and conflicts which are unavoidable under working conditions of limited means and lack of space: The Motif-Index came into being in one single middle-sized room which the Academy could put at our disposal, that is – under working conditions which were criticized by the above-mentioned evaluators, without offering a chance of improving the situation. I am speaking of the newer literature such as, for instance, the Moti-Index of Guerreau-Jalabert to the novels of Chrestiens de Troyes (1983), of the “inner” development of the collaborators, especially of the danger of changing the conception of Thompson’s motif in the course of time, which was avoided through supervision, but especially through the change to electronic data processing. At the beginning the motives were excerpted in thin notebooks and on file cards. In the beginning of 1989 computers arrived even for the Motif-Index, first with different programs with all their advantages and disadvantages. Dramatic computer shut-downs first meant the loss of weeks of work; yet, it has to be mentioned out of fairness that the collaborators faced the new challenge with admirable resourcefulness, in which endeavour they were supported first by the Academy’s own computer experts,

and later by the staff of *isolutions*, who created a program specifically made for the Motif-Index and which made on-line use of the work possible.

Finally it is my agreeable but difficult duty – given the *stilus humilis* I am striving for – to thank everyone. It concerns so many people and institutions that it has to be done in a polyphonic way. First – like the main melodic theme of the string section – thanks is due to the collaborators, those whose names are on the cover sheet; among them, Karin Lichtblau was the first collaborator, but Christa Tuczay worked the longest on the project and had the responsible job of supervisor. Ulrike Hirhager, a collaborator of many years, played a particular role in the destiny of the Motif-Index, as well as Rainer Sigl, whose additional – but in no way exclusive – contribution was his computer expertise. Since the early phase the following persons worked shorter or longer stretches on the project (listed here in alphabetical order): Doris Aichholzer, Ursula Breitenfelder, Carla Dauven-van Knippenberg, Geoffrey Fischer, Patrizia Harant, Susanne Obermayer, Günter Zimmermann and the project leader. In this context one cannot forget the American Maria Dobozy (Salt Lake City) and the Englishman Doug Holton, who checked all English formulations.

Although the parting with the “Fonds” was not without bitterness, one must nevertheless remember the thanks owed by the project leader, the collaborators and the future users of the work, for supporting the endeavour for 15 years. Thanks to the Austrian Academy of Sciences, its presidents, secretaries and other functionaries the project was at first kindly tolerated, then received full material support, which enabled its realization in its present form. The thanks to both these institutions form so to speak the *basso ostinato*, to keep the image of a polyphonic thank-you.

Besides the collaborators of the Academic Computer Centre, thanks are due to *isolutions* for sensitive support to computer programming. Thanks to Heiko Hartmann of de Gruyter publishers, the Motif-Index does not only exist on a virtual screen but also *materialiter* as a hefty bound book in the hand. The publisher’s sponsoring (way above the usual contributions to scientific work) made the printing of the work possible by assuming the costs of converting the internet edition to the final printed version. My thank-you symphony is enriched by some brass highlights.

I hope that the work – which outdoes other indexes in many ways – will prove to be at least as useful as they are and even set new standards for further motif-analyses. To continue with the ship-metaphor: May the motif-ship become a flagship of the Academy and of the publishing house!

Vienna, November 1st 2004

Helmut Birkhan