Literature as a Path to Being Human Encountering Self and Fostering Community

Research Question and Background

Literature does not change the world, but it can alter our relationship to the world. Literature allows us to enter other minds and other landscapes and to adopt fresh outlooks. It is a conversation with earth, sky, and other individuals – persons dead and persons living. Literature is a remembrance of times past, while at the same time it holds a mirror to the present and provides glimpses of the future. In this way, literature encourages complex thinking; it fosters empathy and enables us to evaluate the merits of our actions through understanding how others have acted.

DThe world presented by language – be it by novels, stories, or poems – arises from the formative powers of language.

At the heart of every writing attempt lives this question as an open secret: How does idea become reality through narration? If, as readers, we shift our attention from the What to the How – to the hammer and sparks of word-smithing – "how is it done?" – then we can better comprehend this creative process.

The word, as formative power, has spiritual affinity with those creative powers from which the world has its origin – and the reader and the writer share in this formative power.

Works of world literature from the Middle Ages to the present time are used as examples to show how literature variously inspires and stimulates these creative, formative powers in the human being.

Relevance and perspective

"Creative word" is a term that today inspires scant comprehension. Language and words are used primarily to provide information, and even this model of language is being displaced by the increasing popularity of «picture language». ChatGPT and computer-generated speech threaten to subvert ideas of authorship, and the human being, as creator, becomes superfluous from this perspective.

These recent technological developments push to the forefront a question: Does the human being play an essential, creative role as shaper of language and literature? Recognition of this essentialist question is decisive for the future. Literature provides us a means to practice skills needed to recognize the essential meaning of human authorship.

Procedure and research status of the project

Based on literary studies and Rudolf Steiner›s spiritual research, we have developed a methodology that makes it possible to understand the extent to which literature has a humanizing influence. This helps to pave the way for an encounter with what is essentially human, and it ultimately enables persons to reconnect with the spiritual world.

A four-step methodology arises, based on anthroposophical pedagogy.
Step 1: Read to understand the literal meaning of the text.
Step 2: Read to comprehend the imaginal aspects of the text. This corresponds to the level of cognition that has the name Imagination in anthroposophy.
Step 3: Read to transform the imaginal content of the text through an infinitely re-iterative lemniscate of inversion and re-creation known as Inspiration.
Step 4: Read to encounter the origins of the text: the essential source-springs from which the text arises and has life. This is equivalent to Intuition, and here the reader stands as a creative equal with the author.

Of course, this methodology cannot be applied across the board equally to all texts, and we demonstrate this fact through the analysis of various texts. The individuality of the author and the individuality of the text determine how each text is to be approached. A case-by-case methodology is required.

The "significance of literature for the human being" is a topic currently under discussion in the neurosciences. This includes research domains such as salutogenesis, reading research, ethics, and philosophy. Accordingly, we also refer to such topical research. This is followed by a brief overview of the meaning of the Word from antiquity to present day, a chapter on Rudolf Steiner›s understanding of language in relation to our research question, and an analysis of various texts.

The following texts have been examined as examples:
· Goethe›s Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten (Märchen)
· Wilhelm Meister und die ineinander sich abspiegelnden Gebilde
· «Himmlische Langsamkeiten» - Heilende Rhythmen und irritierende Störungen (Adalbert Stifter)
· Franz Kafka›s Die Verwandlung
· «Hinter den Sternen bin ich». The conversation between human being and cosmos. (Christian Morgenstern)
· Return to the lost word (Rose Ausländer)
· Patrick Roth: Sunrise. The Book of Joseph

These texts are in progress:
· «It was like an eternal Sunday in my mind»
· From the Life of a Good-for-Nothing by Joseph von Eichendorff
· Parzival (Wolfram von Eschenbach)
· Novalis

The overview chapter is still a work in progress, as are analyses of texts by Hölderlin and Marica Bodrožic.

We hope to be able to complete the entire project in 2024, and we are grateful for financial support – most especially for the costs of publication.

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1   We collaborate with research into the development of a «Christ-Michael language» and with research into the understanding of "anthroposophy after the first 100 years."