

present

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HOW SOCIOLOGY of LITERATURE MIGHT SHARPEN the HISTORIAN'S EYE

Some Observations from Early Medieval Hagiography

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ABSTRACT

It is an established yet still rather fresh issue of literary studies to think about the ways literature is embedded in its social context. Its origins can be traced back to the founding of sociology, but it only rose to greater prominence in the 1960s, and has since influenced or even initiated various fields of literary criticism and theory such as narratology or reader-response criticism. The epistemological essence of a sociological approach to literature is the representational gap between literature and life-world. Even if the Marxist-inspired idea of literature as a mirror of society in its totality no longer holds currency, a work of literature is still more than (just) an aesthetic negation of a social context as Theodor W. Adorno saw it. This is by no means a novelty, but it still poses major methodological problems to both literary scholars and historians, particularly those interested in periods with textual evidence that is, to a large extent, provided by what could be called (in modern terms) a literary culture. This is the case, for example, with the Early Middle Ages and its hagiographical traditions.

In this paper, it is suggested that if literary texts (such as Martyr Passions) are used as historical evidence, the historian (like the literary scholar) has to see the character of literature as both an autonomous aesthetic system and a social fact. It is an invitation to enlarge the historian's

methodological repertoire, and thus, in a sense, a joint venture with literary theory. This will enable us to fully realise literature's social relevance, which early medieval literary figures like Gregory of Tours already considered of the highest importance.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Gordon Blennemann is assistant professor in Medieval History at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, currently working as a research fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the German Historical Institute of Paris and the École des hautes études en sciences sociales as a guest to Prof Jean-Claude Schmitt. He became interested in early medieval hagiography at an early stage of his PHD research about the social history of religious women in the High and Late Middle Ages which led to a first book about three Benedictine nunneries in the city of Metz. Even if he is still interested in the history of medieval religious women (especially in the function of monastic hagiography as a narrative of norm) he decided to turn his attention to the history of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages for his second book which will be a monograph about the meaning of martyrdom in hagiography, homiletics and liturgy in early medieval Burgundy. His paper reflects upon the methodological approach of this research which is linked to several larger research projects.