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Fragile closeness

Intimate communication in German Romanticism

My current research is on codes of intimacy in German Romanticism. I am drawing on Niklas Luhmann's findings that 'Romantic Love' is a code developed around 1800 in order to facilitate an otherwise improbable 'personal communication' (höchstpersönliche Kommunikation). Why did communication become problematic? Luhmann explains this as a result of a process of individualisation which reached a peak around 1800. In the course of this process, it is not only the social subject which is individualised, but also their reference to the world. Personal and general world views are separated. Communication now implies that each individual demands from their counterpart to affirm their personal worldview. The closer the social relationship is, the greater this imposition will be, thus threatening the success of the communication process.

In my research, I suggest to expand Luhmann's concept of intimacy. Luhmann limits himself to love relationships. However, other Romantic writings involving friends or family members show the close attention with which each slight detuning, each signal of misunderstanding was registered and made a subject of discussion. Letters in particular reveal that the discourse is often accompanied by a kind of metadiscourse constantly commenting on language or comprehension issues. There seems to exist a code other than love whose function it is, if not to take down barriers of communication, then at least to make them visible. My research aims to describe this Romantic code of intimacy.

Now, instead of remaining on a merely theoretical level, I would like to present a document to you, a letter which I find remarkable in several respects. This letter was not part of an intimate relationship. Rather, its author intended to establish such a relationship in the first place. And this task was anything but easy. It is Dorothea Veit's first letter to the brother of Friedrich Schlegel, who was living with her in an illegitimate relationship, and to his sister-in-law. At the time of writing, Dorothea Veit, née Brendel Mendelssohn, was a married, separated Jewess and eight years older than Schlegel. The scepticism that August Wilhelm and Caroline had about their union with Friedrich Schlegel was not to be taken lightly. It took Dorothea Veit one and a half years before she dared to write the letter:

„O, endlich habe ich es doch gewagt, selber zu schreiben“

“O, at last I have dared to write myself”

First of all, I would like to draw your attention to the strange opening of the letter which begins in such a mediated manner. Its function is probably to overcome the difficulty of an absolute beginning by linking it to a letter by August Wilhelm Schlegel. The actual occasion of the letter seems minor. It concerns the question of accommodation for the Jena guests during their visit to Berlin. But Dorothea Veit gives the matter such weight that it gives the impression that the decision involves a judgement on her person.

Dorothea Veit's effort to persuade the addressees to make friendly concessions and the degree of caution she exercises in her formulations can hardly be increased. With regard to the meta-discourse mentioned above, which reflects on and explicitly addresses her own writing, it is extremely remarkable in the case of this letter how Dorothea Veit deals with the unusual and indeed for her very delicate situation. The strategy she chooses is unconditional openness:

“Und nun hören Sie gleich Alles!”

“And now you are about to hear everything!”

„Laßen Sie mich auf alles antworten, wo Ihnen Zweifel bleiben, fragen Sie mich alles – Erlauben Sie mirs dann, daß ich Ihnen offen über alles spreche“

“Let me answer everything where doubts remain, ask me everything – then allow me to speak openly to you about everything”.

But this openness is not only reflected, it is even specifically justified. As she writes, Friedrich Schlegel had openly sent the letters that were to go to Jena to Dorothea Veit so that her sister Henriette Mendelssohn could add hers. From these letters, from Friedrich Schlegel's perspective, she also learned of Caroline Schlegel's doubts and objections:

“Wie hätte ich sie nicht lesen sollen? Aber nicht wahr liebe Caroline! er hätte sie lieber nicht offen schicken sollen?”

“How could I not have read them? But not true dear Caroline! he had rather not send them openly?”

But now that this has happened, she must be allowed to speak openly about everything. Dorothea Veit's cleverness is shown once again at the end of the letter, where she asks the addressees to mock her directness:

“Leben Sie wohl theure liebe Freunde und lachen Sie mich immer aus daß ich so gar nichts zu sagen im Stande bin, als die Sache grade zu; aber seyen Sie mir nicht böse darüber”

“Farewell, dear friends, and always laugh at me for not being able to say anything but the matter in hand; but do not be angry with me for it”.

It can remain undecided here whether this deftness is due to a strategic consciousness or intuition. However, Dorothea Veit will undoubtedly have known that it is precisely through this directness, and even more so through her admission, that she binds the addressees to herself. Those who present their nakedness to others make themselves unassailable.

Perhaps the tense prehistory of this letter and the gravity of the situation in which it was written can even be read from the typeface. What is striking is that it violates all the conventions of topology that were common at the time. There is no space in this letter - apart from the last page, which is only half written - one would almost like to add: to breathe. The writing is tight and crowded to the edges. Pages two and three of the manuscript - an opened double page - almost without a paragraph. If there were not a

difference in the colour of the inks indicating an interruption in the writing, one would be inclined to assume that the letter was written in one go. But even if this was not the case, the letter presents itself as a massive block of text sealed on all sides. This protection of the letter-writer stands in the greatest possible contrast to the openness expressed in the letter.