Commentrary: Thoughts on the Interrelationship of Experiential Gender Research and Literature

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Tomke König's paper *Experiential Gender Research. The Body as a Source of Meaning and Change* (2024) draws upon Eugene T. Gendlin's philosophy and theory of the implicit to address theoretical and practical research on gender. The guiding thesis is that the lived and sensed body has the potential to imply something that goes beyond the categorization of the binary symbolic gender order and its language. Building on Gendlin's concept of *Felt Sense*, the concern here is the implicit meaning of gendered ways of being. The goal of experiential gender research is to reveal these aspects of gendered ways of being and to accompany people through the process of expressing the implicit, and in this way generating new meanings of gender.

While it is possible to describe the bodies of third parties on the basis of good observation, the scientific description of bodily experience (of gender) requires scientists to gain access to a specific lived experience. A central concern of this research is therefore to open a space in which the research subject is able to explore themselves and explicate their novel insights. For this to be possible requires sensitivity and empathy on the part of the researcher as well as an openness towards a variety of meanings of gendered existence beyond binary categories and patterns.

At this point, we turn to Gendlin's remarks on the explication of the implicit, which he describes as a continuous process, noting that the continuation of the implicit in and through language is possible because it has always been "there" in an incomplete and implicit way.

This understanding of the implicit finding expression in language is reminiscent of Heinrich von Kleist's essay *Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden* of 1805/1806 (Kleist 2013: 319–324, 2011), in which he advises his friend Otto Rühle von Lilienstern to talk to someone whenever he wants to know something or has trouble making progress on a specific subject. According to Kleist, it is less a matter of holding a conversation or seeking answers to specific questions that one may have, but rather, in the first place, of the mere fact of talking, of giving an account and telling someone (*das Erzählen*). As in the French saying "*l'appétit vient en mangeant*" ("the appetite comes at mealtime"), so "*l'idée vient en parlant*" ("ideas emerge in conversation") (Kleist 2011: 11, author's translation). Kleist says that he himself often has

a "dim idea" (Kleist 2011: 12) of what he wants to say, which however, when it is expressed to another person, takes on a new urgency to be pursued to completion in thought, and thus to be spoken. The result, to Kleist's astonishment, is the completion of the incomplete or unsaid thought, which now finds form and materiality in language. Kleist thus understands speech as thinking aloud (Kleist 2011: 15). In this view, speech is not a "fetter" on the wheel of the spirit but "rather like a second wheel on the same axle, that runs in parallel" (Kleist 2011: 15). Yet this often does not appear to be the case in interviews on the experiencing of gender. In that situation, language does not seem capable of adequately expressing the *Felt Sense* of gender. In experiential interviews, we see again and again how difficult the relationship between bodily experience and the language available to us can be. Language can thus be a "fetter" after all, when it comes to the articulation of experience. One reason for this is potentially the idea that scientificity emerges by means of the exact and "objective" depiction of something (which people being interviewed in a scientific context are naturally also aware of, and which can affect how they articulate their experiences). But it is precisely this idea and the contrast between subjectivity and objectivity that an experiential sociology departs from. It is specifically *not* a matter of capturing and depicting experience in language as precisely as possible, but rather the process of verbalization itself, the bringing-to-language that goes hand in hand with self-exploration. The purpose is more to speak *from* experience than *about* experience, and thus to grant space to the experiential dimension. This includes the possibility that in speech, in this case in the interview, new meanings of experience arise. In scientific research generally and in the specific moment of research (e.g. in an interview), something happens with the people – with the experiences that they are attempting to verbalize, and at the same time, *by means of* the experience that they are having in this very moment of the interview.

In his essay, Kleist pursues a very similar idea. He is convinced that just because "an idea is *expressed* unclearly, it by no means follows that its *conception* has also been unclear" (Kleist 2011: 15, emphasis added); rather it may even be "that ideas which have been expressed most unclearly have, at the same time, been thought most clearly" (ibid.). An incomplete, imprecise linguistic form need by no means be an indication of an incomplete experience or idea, but rather bears witness to the process of verbalization, which often progresses in a chaotic, irrational, and intuitive way. Kleist also addresses the use of various rhetorical tricks that arise from this, lending him time to complete his thoughts. This reminds him of the makeshift use of metaphors when people try to grasp their lived experience in words – failing in the process. Kleist is astonishingly close to Gendlin's idea of the implicit when he observes: "For it is not *we* who know, but it is primarily a certain *state* within us that knows" (Kleist 2011: 16, emphasis added). The essay appears to almost anticipate Gendlin and some of the methods of sociological research presented here.

The thesis we can clearly identify in König's experiential sociological research, and which had already been formulated broadly by Kleist in the 19th century, states that it is possible to explicate implicit meanings of something by speaking from lived experiences. For speaking itself is also a kind of lived experience, particularly in an exposed speech situation such as an interview. Language is thus not merely a means of articulation of experience (one that is, in addition, often inadequate), it is itself an experience and constitutes a process that is always in a state of searching (for words, for oneself, for memories). This correlates with specific strategies of speaking (in the search for words), which also have an aesthetic character. Kleist calls this "tricks to lengthen my speech, to gain sufficient time to produce my idea in the workshop of reason" (Kleist 2011: 12). By combining "art" (the word rendered as "tricks" in this translation is the German "*Kunstgriffe*", which includes "*Kunst*" or art; compare the English "artifice") and handwork ("workshop", the German original here is "*Werkstatt*", here translated literally) in this way, he declares aesthetics, art, and language to be a matter of craftsmanship that ultimately produces a tangible product ("produces", which is even clearer in the German original, where it is "*zur Fabrikation*" – for the fabrication): an expression of thought whose specific form reflects precisely this aesthetic process of seeking, in this case, specifically, the gaining of time for the completion of thought. At the same time, an aesthetic of the unfinished, the fragmentary, even of speechlessness is invoked, whose right to exist Kleist not only grants in his essay, but which he also regularly practiced in his literary work (with, for instance, characters starting sentences and then breaking them off, not infrequently as a result of "speechlessness", or in Kleist's famously long and convoluted sentences – a persistent challenge for his readers).

This shows that the connection between art and science is far closer than it appears at first sight. Art, and especially literature, can articulate things that cannot yet be articulated in the everyday discourse of society and which have not yet been made objects and denoted by science. König discusses this in her essay: literature, film, theatre, music, dance, and art are considered as media that combine performative, visual body images with narrative structures that are coded for gender. They not only represent various bodily, emotional, and affective dimensions of experiences but also produce these in the process of reading and reception. The specific quality that art in all its forms possesses is its ability to allow us to experience and to render visible experiential dimensions of sexuality, desire, and bodily physicality that are otherwise extremely difficult to express and articulate. In this way, bodily knowledge can be expressed aesthetically in a variety of ways by means that are not yet available in everyday language.

A famous example of this is Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando*,[1] in which the protagonist not only transcends the limits of time, allowing us to follow their biography over five centuries, but also changes sex in a fantastic transformation, turning from a man to a woman overnight. The reader follows Orlando on their journey to a new gender identity that reveals not only the constructedness of gender concepts but also gender's performativity. Yet, Orlando's transformation does not simply end in the adoption of a feminine role, but rather in a gradual dissolution of fixed identity concepts in favor of a queer, gender-fluid, and plural identity. The novel's achievement is to find language for experiences of queerness and sexual ambiguity that were unspeakable in the early 20th century, thereby making them perceptible for readers. Woolf achieves this, on the one hand, at the level of the plot, by describing Orlando's queer experiences, which encompass, for instance, cross-dressing and the adoption of various costumes, as well as queer practices of desire and sex. At the same time, the novel repeatedly attempts to give linguistic form to the openness of Orlando's gender identity and experiences, to make them graspable in language, e.g. "Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided." (Woolf 2018: 174–175) The novel's central idea, which steadily rises in intensity, is that a determination of gender "truth", a fixing of Orlando's identity is neither possible nor advisable. That is because Orlando is not just one person, but a multiplicity of Orlandos, a diversification of an "eminently pluralistic identity" (Gymnich 2000: 307, author's translation), as the following passage shows:

> Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered *their* future, did nothing whatever to alter *their* identity. *Their* faces remained, as *their* portraits prove, practically the same. His memory – but in future we must, for convention's sake, say "her" for "his", and "she" for "he" – her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. (Woolf 2018: 127, emphasis added)

Here, identity is considered to be radically independent of the body; it is constituted primarily by means of individual mental elements, memories, interactions, behavior, experiences. *One* body does not mean *one* identity. Burns calls it a "disidentification present in identity" (Burns 1994: 350). Towards the end of the novel, this pluralistic view of identity, which transcends the boundaries of gender, becomes stronger, finally dissolving the concept of an integrated, whole identity completely:

> For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not – Heaven help us – all having

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1   For a detailed consideration of the novel with a focus on its queer and theory-formative potential, see Bollschweiler (2022).

> lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit? […] [T]hese selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own, call them what you will (and for many of these things there is no name) […]. (Woolf 2018: 281)

The unnameability of specific inner and experiential aspects of identity construction is referred to explicitly in this passage ("and for many of these things there is no name") – and, remarkably, this unnameability is accepted as such. Instead of further trying to find an objective definition or name for who Orlando is, in what follows, there is an increasing focus on Orlando's own perspective and voice, which at times goes as far as to become an entirely subjective stream of consciousness:

> [F]or she was, to hear her talk, changing her selves as quickly as she drove – there was a new one at every corner – as happens when, for some accountable reason, the conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self. This is what people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all. (Woolf 2018: 282–283)

The novel thus essentially practices what Kleist and later König proclaim to be their research methods: approaching the individual experience of gendered existence by opening a space where it is possible to express the implicit meaning, to explicate it. And once more it is not about the precise modelling of reality or truth, "for this is one of the cases where the truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma – a mirage." (Woolf 2018: 177) Rather, it is about the attempt to put something into words for which a specific expression has so far not existed.

In this, *Orlando* opens up the possibility of a discourse that exceeds the boundaries of sex, sexual identity, and gender – particularly binary gender categories and desire – in life and in language. If there is something like "truth", it is not equivalent to specificity or unambiguity, but is ambiguous and does not need naming/denotation to be legitimized – yet it can still be articulated. That is why there is no final resolution of who or what Orlando is – because there simply is no *one* truth. Language and the narrative act itself are constantly shown to be a system of organization and the production of meaning that also affects gender. Language appears to be an auxiliary construct that is not at all objective, but – like the gender it denotes – carries discursive imprints. It is insufficient to reflect the complexity of human reality, and especially gendered lived experience. This insufficiency particularly concerns gender understood as a mode of existence and experience, of being in the world, that can never be fully grasped by language but only approached, circled around.

Orlando not only challenges and criticizes the prevailing gender order and its cultural production, but also the insufficiency of linguistic construction that complies with this order. Yet the novel is able to endure these gender ambivalences and polyvalences, the un-definability of humans, experience, and phenomena, and is still able to create a fulfilled subject that "makes sense". Hence, there are structural similarities between the idea of *Orlando*, Kleist, and König's experiential gender research: all insist on the processuality of subjectivity, experience, and its articulation. Woolf, Kleist, König: the common denominator is: How can experience be articulated, how can it be brought to language?

If we recognize the structural parallels between experiential gender research and its methods, on the one hand, and aesthetic and narrative subject constitution, on the other, literature can appear as an inspiration or even as an experimental ground for theoretical thought, as a medium that participates in a variety of not only aesthetic, but also social, theoretical, academic, and political discourses. As Bradway argues, narrative can be understood "as an ecology of interdependent forms – aesthetic and nonaesthetic – in contiguous torsion with one another." (Bradway 2021: 712). As this commentary has shown, experiential gender research and literature are related not only in terms of narrative structures but also in how they give room to the articulation of human experience, without limiting or reducing it to strict linguistic forms.

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