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Deduktive Schlüsse in der literaturwissenschaftlichen Praxis (Abstract)

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It is sometimes suggested that deductive reasoning has no place in literary studies, particularly when it comes to the justification of literary interpretations. The thesis is that deductive arguments (almost) never occur and deductive reasoning plays no or at most a marginal role in the actual practice of interpretation. In this essay I will argue that this thesis is false. Using counterexamples, it can be shown that deductive arguments are *de facto* used in the practice of literary interpretation. Although only an exemplary and not comprehensive investigation of argumentative practices in literary studies can be made here, it can also be made plausible that deductive arguments are not exceptions, but a normal, regularly encountered and legitimate phenomenon of this practice. Furthermore, it can be shown that the thesis criticized here is based on a too narrow understanding of deductive reasoning. Finally, I will argue that (from a methodological point of view) it would be an unnecessary restriction to exclude deductions from our methodological toolbox: to abandon deductive reasoning from the practice of interpretation would be tantamount to renouncing a useful method of justifying (and refuting) interpretive hypotheses. Therefore, a fundamental methodological scepticism about deductive reasoning is unfounded.

The essay is structured as follows: First, I will present a current example of how the sceptical attitude towards deductions in literary studies is motivated (Section 1). I will show that the concept of deduction underlying this scepticism is usually based on the assumption that deductive arguments contain ›general rules‹ or ›law-like assertions‹ in their premises. Second, I will confront the concept of deduction assumed there with the understanding of deductive arguments as it is usually assumed in logic (Section 2). It will become apparent that a conception of deductive arguments based on general rules or law-like assertions is (though not false) too narrow. After a short caveat concerning the reconstruction of ›real‹ arguments in general (Section 3), I will present some examples of deductive arguments in interpretations of literary texts (Section 4). These arguments have the logical form of arguments from *modus ponens*, *modus tollens* and disjunctive syllogism. The examples not only show that deductive reasoning actually occurs in the practice of literary interpretation, but also make it plausible that deductive arguments are an unproblematic and legitimate method of justifying and/or refuting interpretations. After considering what causes may have led to the dissemination of the thesis that deductions do not occur in practice (Section 5), I conclude with a plea to accept deductive arguments as a legitimate tool of justification among many others (Section 6).

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