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„Much book, little know“ – Enzyklopädie als Lederstrumpf

Jörg Thomas Richter

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Abstract

Though James Fenimore Cooper's five Leatherstocking-Tales (1823–1841) seem unlikely candidates for an encyclopaedic poetics, they encompass frontier life in an extensive scope, integrating a wide range of sources as well as using immense descriptive detail that often enough overgrows their plot. Even more to the point is the often voiced scepticism towards academic knowledge. By taking the tales as a test case for the 'encyclopaedic novel', I explore how encyclopaedic reference shifts in the genesis of these five novels. In addition, a survey of contemporary publishing shows a similar fluidity in the various bearings that encyclopaedic forms could take on at the time. Given the double flexibility of the status and formation of encyclopaedic knowledge, both in the Leatherstocking tales and in contemporary discourse, the article suggests a less strict, more profane and popularly grounded, as well as more historically relative notion of what constitutes an encyclopaedic narrative. As to the Leatherstocking tales, I suggest that they occupy an epistemic space that was then only recently given up by academic encyclopaedic thought, and that they do so by claiming an encyclopaedic function of their own.

Keywords: [encyclopaedia](#),; [encyclopaedic narrative](#),; [profanation of knowledge](#),; [historical fiction](#).

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