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Response

1. In What Direction is Literary Theory Evolving?

A map of the current scholarly landscape would show various paradigms gaining new ground, concepts moving from one place to another, and skirmishes shifting back and forth on the boundaries between disciplines and knowledge cultures. It would be apparent from such a map that, for several decades, literary theory has (in part unintentionally and without knowing it) been pursuing what amounts to an expansionist policy. More than anything else, this expansion is a reflection of the linguistic turn and its consequences. Since the linguistic turn, it has become common practice to consider how not just literature but knowledge in general is bound up with texts, rhetoric, written culture, and consequently mediality per se. This has led to the introduction of a whole series of additional and anything but straightforward terms that had previously appeared to be the preserve of the fine arts: ›poetics‹ and its derivatives, ›performance‹, ›evidence‹, ›representation‹, ›fiction‹, and the ›imaginary‹. All these words have a place of their own, so to speak, in the field of aesthetics in the narrower sense. They are, however, increasingly being applied to the whole range of *social aisthesis* and therefore to the social production of knowledge itself, which is gradually receiving more and more attention in the context of cultural studies.

According to received opinion, scholars of literature study the poetic invention of artificial worlds that are freed of and set apart from the harsh reality to which everyday life is subject. On closer examination, however, the two spheres are not so clearly set apart as it would seem, for social realities unfold in the context of open possibilities too, not least in so far as they relate to the future. A society's sense of future, the collective ability to imagine things feared and opportunities taken, brings into play an ability very similar to that acquired in and stimulated by engagement with literature and other arts. And we do not even own the past as an unchangeable fact – it is continually refashioned and produced afresh in collective memory. This too is a creative process, one that paradoxically affects with particular intensity the very elements of a culture that are felt to be an immutable inheritance (the key term here is the ›invention of tradition‹). Such ›invented‹ pasts themselves contribute to the self-perception of any given present, which is itself equally dependent on an element of ›invention‹, se-

lection, interpretation, and aesthetic or medial arrangement. Seen in this light, forms of poetic fashioning can be found everywhere – in fact, we could almost speak of a *poetics of society*.

One particularly successful and, so to speak, expansionist category in the study of literature is the concept of *narrative*. It entered the study of historiography via the New Historicism and thereafter found its way into the philosophy of science. A narrative turn has also been announced in the social sciences, with narratology itself playing an increasing role in the latter field. Generalizing, it can be said that crucial aspects of social meaning are produced through narration.

Narrative theory grounded in the study of literature flourished considerably in the 1960s and 1970s (Barthes, Genette, and Lotman; in the German-speaking world, Käte Hamburger, Eberhard Lämmert, and Franz Stanzel). In some respects, it has since suffered the fate of a niche interest, but it has also returned to the stage of theoretical debate thanks to a well-received introduction by Matías Martínez and Michael Scheffel and several large-scale research projects.¹ This is a paradigmatic demonstration of how misleading and unproductive it is to argue, as happens above all in German studies in Germany, about whether to move towards the broader perspective of cultural studies or lay fresh emphasis on the study of literature itself.² It is now commonplace in the study of politics, law, management theory, and not least the history of science to point out that the states of affairs under consideration are constructed through narrative. This places new demands on literary theory as the source of the concepts used, but not necessarily in such a way that the study of ›real‹ literature has to suffer as a result. On the contrary: the better the models developed in the study of literature on the basis of objects that are, so to speak, the true responsibility of that field, the greater their potential for application to other textual worlds that are, to some degree at least, subject to comparable conditions of production and reception.

¹ Martínez/Scheffel 2005.

² This dispute has tended to be pursued in an institutional context rather than in the form of proper debate. A wide range of suggested compromises can be found in Erhart 2004, which contains the proceedings from a conference sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Germany's research funding agency). See also Koschorke 2004, which argues along similar lines to this brief position statement.

2. Where Do You Think the Most Important Questions for Literary Theory Lie?

The challenges that result from what has been said above are readily apparent. In what follows, I illustrate them with respect to some key concepts of literary theory.

(1) Recent studies have given due attention to the insight that *fictions*, rather than being subsidiary and lacking in function, organize our social reality in its entirety. This reality is fictional in a profound sense: it is *based* on fictions. Without persistent concepts of character and representation whose past history stretches back into the world of rhetoric and classical theatre, there would not even be any addressable participants in the social process at all. All institutions depend on such attributions and are to this extent fictive entities, but they can still be treated as part of reality and thereby exert influence.

Similarly, we speak of scholarly fictions without meaning simply false scholarship. It follows from this that we need a new analysis of the relationship between fictionality and facticity, one more precise than those currently available. On the one hand, this is a task for epistemology; on the other hand, it brings into play issues of genre with which literary theory is well acquainted. The invented worlds of literature, after all, are a way of dealing with real problems – and they perform this function not despite but because of the fact that they assert the freedom to suspend the reality principle with its central true/false distinction.

(2) In like manner, the first everyday way of understanding the quality ›*imaginary*‹ that comes to mind is the paraphrase ›made up‹, which places it in contrast with the irrevocably factual. Yet – and this was still appreciated in the old rhetorical theory of human capacities – there is no cognitive process not subject to the faculty of the imagination and its synthesizing ability. Only in the imaginary do the parts come together as a whole, only in the imaginary can wholes be perceived and created. This is true also on the level of collective processes. Societies can come into being and organize themselves only if they make the world in which they find themselves a meaningful one. And this they do by drawing up images of themselves as wholes, developing on the basis of such images (the idea of the nation, for example) techniques of political representation that are, in the strict sense of the word, imaginary: the function of the visible representatives is to embody the invisible social whole and thereby bring it, so to speak, into the picture.

This artificial creation of wholeness has its less attractive side too – phantasms of the other, the excluded, the enemy. Even enemies, real as their actions may be, are imaginary constructs. Here at least, if not before, we reach the point at which the study of cultural mechanisms touches on pressing contemporary issues. No literary theory can refuse to attempt to provide models for the emergence of influential political myths, their dissemination in the mass media, and their exploitation in practice.

(3) Against this background, the *narrative* organization of complex social interrelationships, more generally the narrativity of knowledge itself, has a crucial role to play. Corresponding possibilities for a narratology informed by cultural theory present themselves. Such a narratology will need to clarify where specifically the cultural achievement of narration lies in relation to other ways of sequentializing data and events; where, in the manner of a field theory of cultural semiotics, narration comes to thrive; and what discourses take a liking to narrative and where, conversely, narrative taboos are dominant.

It is important here to distinguish between different levels in the organization of knowledge. Narrative can have the function of presenting knowledge, thereby adopting no more than a minor role in the wings, so to speak. But it can also reach deep into the structure of objects of knowledge, thereby becoming something like an epistemic operator. Sometimes narratives even do this in places where they are not accredited with any ›official‹ epistemological function, as in the field of modern natural science. In fact, narration is not confined to the cultural pole of the nature/culture dichotomy that first took shape in the eighteenth century. A general narrative theory of the kind outlined here should therefore be concerned with the following overarching questions: on what basis was this dichotomy itself constructed, and what, in fact, is the scope of cultural approaches in the world of modern knowledge?

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In: JLT 1/1 (2007), 208-211.

How to cite this item:

Albrecht Koschorke, Response.

In: JLTonline (20.03.2009)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-000527

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-000527>