

IN WHAT DIRECTION IS LITERARY THEORY EVOLVING?

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Response: Literary Theory: Object Theory or Metatheory?!

According to the normal rules of compound formation in German, the word *Literaturtheorie* (literary theory) means, first and foremost, theory about literature. Literature (with its properties, processes, structures, and so on) is the object of the theory in question, literary theory an object theory. The basic structural arrangement here corresponds to that in the traditional natural sciences and the empirical social sciences. An essential difference lies in the fact that the object of literary theory is (as a rule) linguistic in nature (which is no more than partially the case in empirical natural and social sciences); the object theory is therefore a metalinguistic theory.

The empirical sciences, though, necessarily have their own metalinguistic level too: the metatheoretical level of theoretical reflection (German *Wissenschaftstheorie*; in this case the philosophy of science),* containing the theory (or theories) about the object theories (this assumes general agreement that scientific knowledge must always be represented in linguistic form). As a metatheory, the philosophy of science is concerned with how (empirical) theories are constructed, lead to the advancement of knowledge, evolve, and so on. Thus, in the empirical sciences, the philosophy of science, as a metalinguistic metatheory, constitutes a field that is markedly set apart, one in which the structure of the object theories (the individual disciplines) is rationally reconstructed. This means that the philosophy of science (also) has a normative function; it answers questions about how an (object) theory should best be constructed, tested, and further developed. At the same time, the metatheoretical status of the philosophy of science means that it is not (consistently) bound by the (target) criteria it prescribes; the demands made of the object theories regarding empirical verifiability and validation, for example, cannot be applied to the metatheory because

* Translator's note: the German term *Wissenschaftstheorie* can be used in relation both to the natural sciences (in which case it is conventionally translated as 'philosophy of science') and to contexts that speakers of English would not normally consider scientific (the translation 'theoretical reflection' has been used in such cases here).

this would, paradoxically, make it impossible to reconstruct (normative) (target) criteria.

Now, this clear separation of levels is not present in the same way in subjects belonging to the arts and humanities. Literary theory does, it is true, concentrate as a rule on analysing literature in the mode of an object theory – it defines literariness or the literary, examines analytical topics and perspectives (image, metaphor, symbol, subject matter, motif, theme, character, action, rhythm, metre, and so on), forms categories of widely differing levels of abstraction (epic, drama, lyric, genres, periods, and so on), and considers problematic issues and fundamental questions (fictionality, autonomy, production, mediation, reception, literary value, literary criticism, and so on). At the same time, however, discussion of the elaborated object theories themselves is usually felt to be part of literary theory too, leading to the description of the various »schools« (of literary theory), their central theoretical postulates and/or analytical methods, and so on. This is the way in which literary theory has developed historically, and such an understanding of literary theory is therefore perfectly legitimate in principle. But, even so, it presents a striking and undeniable problem when we turn to considering matters in a comprehensive, systematically structured manner in terms of theoretical reflection. We have seen that the object theories in the field of literary theory are metalinguistic in nature. Consequently, the level of meta-theoretical analysis is a meta-metalinguistic one, and even here the difficulties begin: literary theory, understood as operating on the levels of object theory and metatheory, involves metalinguistic and meta-metalinguistic analytical moves, the distinction between which can be hard to preserve or can even be consciously ignored. From the – interdisciplinary – perspective of the human sciences, we are therefore forced to ask whether literary theory adequately performs one of the functions it shares with them: that of supplying analysis (of object theories) in terms of metatheory (that is, theoretical reflection).

In response to this question, let us begin by outlining in somewhat greater detail the function of theoretical reflection in the context of theory development. Rational reconstruction is the principle at the heart of analysis in theoretical reflection: there is, that is to say, a descriptive element and a prescriptive element, both of which must be combined constructively with one another in the course of the analytical process. The descriptive element of reconstruction lies in explicating, and thereby capturing more accurately, the methods and systems employed in existing theories. In this respect, theoretical reflection is always subsequent to the object theories themselves, for it deals with the extant theorizing of the individual discipline in question rather than setting it in motion. The normative element lies in the fact that the reconstruction should be rational; it should, that is, draw out a systematic procedure compatible with logic in the widest sense of the word (Popper's »logic of scientific discovery«). As is always and everywhere the case, this kind of positive explication of the principle of rational

reconstruction is unlikely to meet with general agreement. It should, though, be relatively uncontroversial to say what, against this background, cannot be the function of analysis in theoretical reflection: theoretical reflection must not be (mis)used (by overemphasizing the normative element) to restrict creativity in object theories; similarly, theoretical reflection must not be (mis)understood (as a result of overemphasizing the descriptive element) as a tool for legitimizing arbitrariness and neglect of method in object theories.

This explication of the potential dysfunctionality of analyses made in theoretical reflection can be applied to literary theory and its use of theoretical reflection. It should be clear that there is hardly any danger here of overemphasizing the normative element. The danger of overemphasizing the descriptive element, however, should not, I believe, be discounted. It is present, in my view, in both the external and the internal demarcation of theories in the study of literature.

External demarcation raises the problem of setting apart those fields that cannot be given the status of theories (belonging to the study of literature). In theory we could also ask how other theories belonging to the study of literature are set apart, but this is not a particularly constructive line of enquiry from the perspective of interdisciplinary interaction. It is all the more relevant to consider how fields that no (longer) fall into the category of scholarly theory development are set apart. Here, literary theory can and should engage in theoretical reflection by drawing on pertinent philosophical traditions in a more explicit, refined, and assertive manner than it has in the past. This is the case, say, when it comes to drawing boundaries that can cut right across certain approaches. There is, for example, no doubt that deconstruction performed an invaluable service in re-(and thus de-)constructing the historical genesis and therefore artificial character of seemingly ahistorical cultural or seemingly natural concepts. With respect to many applications of the basic deconstructionist approach in the field of interpretation, however, we should perhaps ask nonetheless whether the alleged impossibility of distinguishing language (as the object level) from metalanguage (as the theory level) can be justified meta-metalinguistically (on the level of theoretical reflection). Can we really take the contradictory and ambivalent nature of literary texts as justification for believing that the theory/interpretation that refers to them in the study of literature must also be contradictory or ambivalent – or is this not instead a classic example of a categorial error?

Nobody in the empirical social sciences would seriously suggest that a theory of neurosis should itself be neurotic. Some sections of the social sciences are certainly concerned with the cultural dimensions, products, and histories of the human race; and they consider them in part in the context of the hermeneutic tradition, which they call a qualitative paradigm (in contrast to the experimental, or quantitative, paradigm of the natural sciences). Even within the qualitative paradigm (that of the social sciences), though, there is agreement that a theory about borderline phenomena should not itself be marked by imprecise bound-

aries. It may be that other boundaries apply and can be justified in the case of literary theory, but literary theory's pursuit of theoretical reflection should involve explicating these boundaries and discussing the reasons that are put forward for them. By no means, in my view, has this been satisfactorily achieved in the past.

The same is true in principle of the internal demarcation ([metatheoretical] comparison) of the various literary theories. Literary theory merely describes the central postulates and paradigm-specific criteria adopted by the individual approaches to literary theory. This ultimately leads to a kind of anything-goes situation, a theoretical free-for-all in which the choice to subscribe (or not to subscribe) to a particular theoretical line is a matter of taste and therefore of aesthetics. This may well be seen as an advantage over certain aspects of the situation in the empirical sciences – the presence of a ruling mainstream with a hegemonic and dominant position that does all it can (by means of peer-reviewed publications, the allocation of external funding, and so on) to prevent those alternative currents that do appear from surviving. Nonetheless, the amorphous, unsystematic coexistence of so many theoretical traditions can surely not be seen as truly favourable to the advancement of knowledge either. We are left with the open question of whether a comprehensive analysis in the mode of theoretical reflection might not be required to find model criteria not specific to any particular paradigm and, by explicating them, provide ways of constructively comparing different theoretical approaches in terms of their contribution to the study of literature.

My thesis, then, is as follows: one of the functions of literary theory in the study of literature, though certainly not the main one, is metatheoretical in nature and involves helping to analyse object theories from the perspective of theoretical reflection. However, up to now it fails to perform the constructive tasks associated with theoretical reflection as well as it should; this is so with respect to both external demarcation (drawing the boundary between scholarly and non-scholarly procedures) and internal demarcation (weighing up competing theories). Thus, in future work on literary theory, importance should be attached not least to fleshing out the analytical level responsible for theoretical reflection.

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