

CONTROVERSY

FRANK KELLETER

The Polemic Animal (or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Partisan Politics)

A Reply to Karl Eibl¹

Karl Eibl has written an energetic rejoinder to my critique of neo-naturalist approaches in contemporary literary studies.² I am grateful for his willingness to discuss my paper at such great length. When I heard that the editors of *JLT* had asked him to reply to my piece, I was looking forward to an enlightening debate. Having learned so much from Eibl's *Animal Poeta*, I was expecting a penetrating assessment of my major contentions – a chance to re-view entrenched ideas from unanticipated angles in a mutually enhancing dialogue. Well, enlightenment I received, but not of the kind I had hoped for.

Eibl frames his critique of my article in a single image taken from old Western movies: he says that I treat neo-naturalist approaches as if they were Indians outside a corral. From inside the encampment, he explains, all Indians look alike and the settlers shoot at them indiscriminately, for only a dead Indian is a good Indian. As a description of my position, this would be damaging enough, but curiously, Eibl does not even object to what is being described here (two hostile groups, clashing like Huntingtonian cultures). Rather, he employs this metaphor as the organizing trope of his own argument. In his view, there really *are* self-fortifying palefaces in the humanities, afraid of contact with a variety of free-thinking tribes roaming the Great Plains outside. As a metaphor, then, the opposition of redskins and circled wagons, according to Eibl, conveys a relatively accurate image of what is going on. His real objection is not that I establish a false dualism, but that I am on the wrong side of some intellectual divide. I find it difficult to reply in a productive way to Eibl's more detailed challenges to the content of my argument, when those chal-

¹ See Karl Eibl, On the Redskins of Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons, *JLT* 1:2 (2007), 421–441; Frank Kelleter, A Tale of Two Natures: Worried Reflections on the Study of Literature and Culture in an Age of Neuroscience and Neo-Darwinism, *JLT* 1:1 (2007), 153–129.

² I was asked to shorten my reply for print publication. The full version is available at http://www.amstud.uni-goettingen.de/personal.php?mit_id=20&bereich=personal.

enges are themselves framed in such a starkly dualistic fashion. I will try nonetheless.

I think the two strongest points raised by Eibl against my article are the following: first, »A Tale of Two Natures« is »almost entirely destructive in nature« – a »defamatory tract« actually (421), because I turn neo-naturalist approaches into »zombies« and am »simply not interested in the possible increase in knowledge they could provide« (424). Second, Eibl faults me for employing an either/or-logic throughout. He says I hold that evolutionary biology or cognitive neuroscience have nothing to offer to the study of culture, because I see culture as a strictly post-natural realm of »pure intellect« (438), as »a simple crossing over into a sphere of freedom« (439). He finds in my paper a »tendency to lift humans out of nature and provide them with culture as a home instead« (438). This »double truth theory« (ibid.), Eibl claims, shows me to be an »aesthete« (*schönegeistig*, in the German version of Eibl's paper).

In the following I will comment on these charges and then reformulate my views of culture understood as a second nature, together with my evaluation of current tendencies in neo-naturalist approaches to this subject. I hope that I can clarify my position in such a way that it will be less open to misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

1.

Eibl writes: »Kelleter finds nothing ›good‹. After all, he takes the position of eliminative idealism. The things he thinks neo-naturalist work has to offer have either been known for a long time inside the circled wagons, or are trivial or uninteresting« (437).

As far as I can see, there are three related issues here: Eibl says that I refuse to grant basic distinctions between the approaches I discuss, that I refuse to consider their achievements, and that this is the case because I am an ›idealist‹. In answering these accusations, I will pass over those passages in Eibl's paper that contain what I take to be attacks of a more personal kind, such as his suggestion that, unlike him, I presume to speak authoritatively in fields I have no knowledge of (422). It is possible that my distress concerning these passages is unfounded; that they were meant as something other than they were received as; that my understanding of them is tainted by my irritation concerning Eibl's slanted portrayal of what I actually wrote. I shall also not consider a few more petty misrepresentations, such as Eibl's complaints that I have not mentioned this particular author or that particular article in the neo-naturalist field, when in fact I have (Eibl 2007, 428 f.; cf. Kelleter 2007, 173, 186, 188).

What strikes me as noteworthy, however, is that Eibl himself takes my critique of neo-naturalism quite personally. May I propose an interpretation that sees Eibl committing the very sin of which he accuses me: writing a partisan polemic? Is

it possible to make sense of the various inconsistencies in his paper (cf. full version of this reply) by saying that he is set on defending neo-naturalist approaches *as a common field of discourse* against the impertinence of *outside perspectives* by any means necessary?

For contrary to what he claims, Eibl does not take »all this sportingly« (422). Indeed, his reasonable claim that he will not »stand up for a particular position just because I have been lumped together with it« (ibid.) is belied by what he is doing in his paper: while granting that he shares my »views regarding much of what« I criticize (421), Eibl does stand up rather forcefully for positions that, if I am not mistaken, are quite removed from the variant of bio-poetics favored by himself. Thus, the specimens I address seem to have that much in common, after all: they are equally in need of defense against critique from without the field of neo-naturalist approaches. When someone criticizes them *as* neo-naturalist approaches, they need to be ganged together, their internal differences notwithstanding. In a Western movie, they would be building a corral.

»All of this« would be an occasion for sportsmanship indeed – a rhetorical combat rather than a debate – if Eibl's accusations were true, i. e., if I really did refuse to grant basic distinctions between neo-naturalist approaches, if I really did refuse to consider their achievements, and if my position really was guided by dogmatic anti-naturalist idealism. If these things were true, we simply could continue exchanging mirrored punches, each accusing the other of polemical absolutism, struggling over the question of who squats inside and who strays outside some fortified encampment.

But Eibl's accusations are false. To be honest, I did not expect them from the author of *Animal Poeta*; and I said as much in my article. Eibl asserts that I find »nothing ›good« in neo-naturalist accounts of literature; he claims that I fail to distinguish between valuable and not-so-valuable practices in this vein, and that his own work is »lumped together« with the worst members of a »close-knit ideological tribe« (421). Here is what I really said:

No one among neo-naturalists has written more instructively and more lucidly about the puzzling relationship between humankind's first and second nature than Karl Eibl. In *Animal Poeta* – a book still waiting for its English translation – he posits an orthodox Darwinist continuum from nonhuman primates to homo sapiens. Unlike many scholars in this field, however, Eibl insists that there is a ›categorical distinction‹ between nonhuman primate behavior and cultural artifacts [...] (169 f.)

The words »categorical distinction« here refer to a quote from *Animal Poeta*, which I have cited – not in a defamatory but in an approving way – as epigraph to section 4 of my article. My appreciation of Eibl's position is furthermore expressed in a quote meant to illustrate that neo-naturalism can go hand in hand with a recognition that human cultures are diverse and require specific tools of study:

By using our own, present language, we form units that are only applicable to *our own* culture. The same is true for many other universals of a higher order [...]. But even if there is no biological concept of art [...] there are universal biological dispositions that make art possible [...]. The biological foundation [...] provides dispositions, but they can be disposed of in many different cultural manners. (Eibl 2004, 278, 319)

I commented on this by saying that »the study of culture(s) cannot afford to neglect the natural conditions of possibility that allow for something like culture in the first place« (170). This point, incidentally, seems to be restated in the last sentences of Eibl's »On the Redskins of Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons«, but is now turned against me: »Kelleter says that ›humankind is the only species on earth that has proven able to actively influence its own evolution by creating a ›second‹ nature. Such a claim should not be made without studying the first one« (439). As if I claimed the opposite.

Eibl maintains that I show no interest in the potentials of any neo-naturalist approach when, in fact, I wrote that »I am interested« (170), among other things, in the following insights from Eibl's bio-poetical program:

According to *Animal Poeta*, a defining feature of humans' artificial environments is that this second nature is more complex [...] than the pleistocene first nature from which it somehow emerged. Culture constantly *overstrains* (überfordert) its members and creators. Therefore, I would add, cultures are constantly forced to make sense of themselves and to repair the damage they do, including cognitive damage. And it's probably only human – in the sense of ›human nature: employed by Darwinists – that in times of stress we are attracted to those self-descriptions of culture that reduce culture's complexities to the most harmonious and simple formulas available [...]. (170)

At various other points in my argument I employ neo-naturalist findings, and not just Eibl's, as a springboard for further reflection. Taking my departure from these thoughts, I may not land where Eibl wants to see me go; there is almost always a ›but‹ and there are attempts to think neo-naturalist theorems against the grain. But then my article is a critique and says so. It is true: I do not – and I think I need not – subscribe as a matter of professional dedication to any one neo-naturalist program, not ›even‹, as I stress on occasion, Eibl's (172). But I thought that a debate could have started exactly here: with Eibl taking critical account of my critical *interest* in his and other neo-naturalist works, arguing with me where I may have gone wrong in taking his observations into unexpected directions, or where perhaps my reading of him invites us both to reconsider.

However, having ›taken the liberty‹ of placing me among a coterie of paranoid aesthetes (and heaven knows who else is in that camp, and how they got there), he claims that I group him together with other zombies for defamatory and destructive purposes. This assertion is wrong. And it raises a question: what did the author of »On the Redskins of Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons« actually read when he read what I had to say about the author of *Animal Poeta*? What did he read when he read my repeated plea that »neo-naturalist approaches have some-

thing crucial to contribute to the study of literature and culture in the early twenty-first century« (181)? I cannot help but conclude that Eibl regards these discussions of the promises, potentials, and achievements of cognitive poetics and literary Darwinism – not as false, mistaken, or debatable – but as insincere. Let us consider why this is the case.

2.

I am the first to admit that many of my criticisms were phrased with bite, some with exasperation, but these concerned the partisan mentality and ideological polemicism of positions that otherwise pride themselves on their sober objectivity and self-evident superiority to what they make out as ›opposing‹ approaches. It does not seem to me that I labeled as redskins – or treated polemically, or as uninteresting – Karl Eibl, Mark Turner, Fotis Jannidis, Ellen Dissanayake, Eckart Voland. And as for my more contentious remarks, even here I cannot see that I picked isolated quotations out of context to make them look silly or to ›brutally tear them apart‹ (Eibl 2007, 426). In all examples quoted by Eibl, I tried to identify tendencies in neo-naturalist scholarship that I find worrisome and that, I think, should concern the more reliable strands of neo-naturalist inquiry as well. I do not expect Eibl to share this assessment or to agree with me on which ills may be harming the utility of neo-naturalist scholarship. But I do expect that he acknowledges that such an assessment is my aim. I expect that the arguments I put forth are addressed rather than written off as disingenuous.

Eibl claims that I deny my interlocutors the very principle of charitable understanding I have just demanded for myself. It is a thankless job to demonstrate that someone has distorted your words in order to make them look distorting. But the allegations are on the table, so I might as well react. A few examples shall suffice. In all of them, Eibl portrays me as hunting for haphazard nonsense rather than engaging in an earnest debate. This allows him to shelve the actual points I am making and to dismiss my readings as slanderous. Let me turn to a few of these cases before I re-address the issues.

Apparently, when it comes to polemicists, it takes one to know one. First example: Eibl quotes me as saying that »a déjà vu can hardly be avoided« when cognitive poetics identifies traditional formalist concerns such as *foregrounding* and *deviation* as central fields of inquiry. Eibl comments:

And? Why does he want to avoid it? For me at least, it is always a sign of quality when we encounter a new approach [...] if it includes familiar tried and trusted elements. Besides, no cognitivist student of literature who wants to be taken seriously will deny that his forerunners include Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukařovský. (424)

Here is what I wrote:

[When Stockwell's concerns are] [...] treated in discussions of *foregrounding* and *deviation* and other staples from the formalist lexicon, a *déjà vu* can hardly be avoided. This is not necessarily a bad thing, because if there is something sadly lacking in literary and cultural studies today it is formalist expertise. (156)

This is part of a larger argument. On the one hand, I am at this point trying to identify the second of three major contributions that neo-naturalist scholarship holds in store. My shorthand for these contributions is: »a return to method, a return to literature, and – crucially – a return to fundamental questions about the status of literature among human activities« (155). Concerning the second of these I write, still in the context of the quotation above:

Neo-naturalism promises to contribute to this work by returning us to an understanding of literature as craft, i. e. as something *made* within a regulated field of possibilities rather than something completely self-generated and self-consuming. Peter Stockwell [...] writes that with the assistance of cognitive poetics »we can engage in detailed and precise textual analysis of style and literary craft« [...]. (156)

My article unequivocally welcomes this program, maintaining that the neo-naturalist »interest in principled analysis has the potential of opening up cultural studies to unjustly forgotten fields such as rhetoric and stylistics« (181). So, to answer Eibl's question (»And? Why does he want to avoid it?«): I *do not* want to avoid it. And I said so quite explicitly.

On the other hand, I do find something amiss with Stockwell's assurance that cognitive poetics will revolutionize philology as we know it, bringing about »not simply a shift in emphasis but a radical re-evaluation of the whole process of literary activity« (Stockwell 2002, 5). So my critique does not at all concern Stockwell's trust in »familiar tried and trusted elements«, but on the contrary Stockwell's – not untypical and not inconsequential – rhetoric of fundamental innovation.³ This is the second part of my argument: taking *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* at its word, I set out to test Stockwell's claim that »[i]t is under application [...] that approaches are tested and achieve any sort of value« (ibid., 166). So I turned to the companion volume *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, and the results were such that I formulated a series of caveats about underlying assumptions and possible consequences of this kind of analytical practice. I will not repeat my reservations here but briefly summarize them in the final section of my paper. At this point, it shall suffice to say that Eibl does not address the substance of these reservations in his »conclusions [...] regarding Kelleter's position« (424). Instead he claims that I am »simply not interested in the possible increase in knowledge« cognitive poetics could supply (ibid.).

³ In more recent publications, such as his article in the first issue of *JLT*, Stockwell phrases things in a decidedly more cautious manner. I feel this serves his purpose well. As will be discussed below, my point is that »bombastic pronouncements« (Eibl 2007, 421) about one's own epistemic position are not just incidental embarrassments of style but affect intellectual practice. At the very least, they have led numerous practitioners of the field to formulate patronizing dismissals of divergent modes of research.

With such partisanship in the room, I am at a loss to see how we can even start to have a debate. Once you are labeled – especially labeled as someone whose strategy it is to label others – insisting on the genuineness of your concerns is an uphill battle. But let me ask: what if there was no dogmatically anti-naturalist corral? What if many of the qualms that neo-naturalism encounters in the humanities do not spring from intellectual self-enclosure but from dismay at a certain epistemic habitus (and, if I may add, dismay at seeing how people who beg to differ, or who are even suspected of doing such a thing, are treated as conspiratorial enemies of progress)?⁴ To turn this question around, what if my ›worried reflections‹ were just that: attempts at identifying what contributions cognitive poetics and literary Darwinism can make to the questions I am struggling with in my work, and then, on testing their use-value – from a limited perspective certainly, prejudiced as any such enterprise is prejudiced – trying to come to terms with my findings, expressing in particular my concern that something may be going wrong, not just here and there, but in a wide sample of mainstream publications from the neo-naturalist field, in their current institutionalization? What if my point really was that something threatens the utility and necessity of these approaches, and that, therefore, »if we want to make naturalist approaches productive for the study of literature and culture« (as I wrote [176]), we would do well to reconsider *how* (not *if*) this field is being developed?

Second example: Eibl takes issue with my discussion of a cognitive »science of reading« (Stockwell 2002, 2). Here, too, he distorts my view. He does so in two ways: (1) by suggesting that my questions about relevance are rhetorical (i. e., that I think the findings of a science of reading hold *no* relevance); (2) by declaring that my supposed indifference to the physiology and psychology of reading is evidence of some anti-democratic metaphysics:

Does Kelleter really believe that the individuality of his stance as a reader will be threatened if attention is given to the reading stances of the rabble? Who on earth is demanding that he reads like any old Tom, Dick, and Harry? (And how does he intend to help Tom, Dick, and Harry become ›more competent readers‹ without knowing how they actually read now? At this point, indeed, I can't help asking: Does he even know how he himself reads?) (425)

⁴ In an aside, Eibl remembers how he once heard a literary empiricist present (›within the circled wagons‹) the findings of a statistical study which showed that natural scientists have a higher level of ›emotional intelligence‹ than scholars in the humanities. Eibl recalls that this happened in a closed meeting where no one could just walk away. He seems to endorse this format, perhaps half-jokingly, as particularly appropriate for neo-naturalist education, because here you can sit your peers down and lecture them on inconvenient truths. Eibl does not consider whether the ›mood of distinct irritation‹ (424) that reportedly made itself felt on this occasion may have had something to do with exactly these assumptions: not so much with the findings presented as with the institutional conclusions drawn from them and possibly guiding their presentation. I am not speculating about motives here. The issue at stake is not rhetorical skill or personal affability, but epistemic habitus – and the way epistemic habitus interferes in a more than coincidental manner with the substance of research.

So, do I really believe that my interest in ›competent reading‹ (which I paraphrased as ›readings sensitive to textual structures and historical contexts« [165]) will be threatened if attention is given to ›the reading stances of the rabble« (Eibl's expression, not mine)? My chief point concerned a tendency in neo-naturalist scholarship – closely connected to its adventurous epistemic self-understanding – to treat its research agendas as superior competitors of approaches it otherwise declares complementary. Craig Hamilton asserts: ›we should not ask how texts do what they do but how we do what we do when we read texts« (2003, 64). As Eibl insists, we need to ask *both* questions. (This is my point exactly, now turned against me.) So, do I really believe that the question of how texts do what they do is threatened if attention is given to the reading stances of the rabble? And why do I express my indifference to ordinary readings ›in such an aggressive manner« (Eibl 2007, 425)? Here is what I wrote:

[I]f we really followed Craig Hamilton's injunction not to ask how texts do what they do, but only how we – as human bodies and minds – do what we do when we read those texts, we would probably lose sight of the historical worlds that these texts react and contribute to. As long as we still want to know how a specific culture, at a specific point in its historical development, imagined itself, how it struggled with these and other imaginations, how meaning was made where none was probable, [...] we will be reading these texts with an interest in how they do the work they do, and who their intended and actual readers *specifically* were, and what these readers knew and how *they* probably read, and what this means for our reading of these texts. Cognitive poetics contributes in important ways to these questions (especially as a check on relativistic speculation), but these questions are not destined to remain *unwissenschaftlich* or even unanswerable without cognitive poetics, nor are naturalist methodologies sufficient to answer them. (168 f.)

A footnote adds: ›I find this to be in accordance with Jannidis's ›project of a historical narratology‹, which tries to reconstruct a so-called ›model-reader‹ as ›part of an intentional narrative communication« (169). I intended no aggressiveness and still can see none. Elsewhere in my article I wrote:

[H]istorical scholarship has profited, and will continue to do so, from empirical research on readers and readings, because this kind of research provides a large framework for identifying possible and even probable interpretations. Cognitive narratology, in particular, has sharpened our awareness of different modes of fictionality and thus has rid us of limiting conceptual dichotomies [...] [there follows an example and reference]. (167)

Karl Eibl is free to disagree with my rudimentary research sketch above or with my recruitment of insights found in Jannidis and other scholars sympathetic to neo-naturalist studies of reading. I welcome his objections and doubts, qualifications and modifications, suggestions for improvement or clarification. But to pass over all these points in silence and claim that I express aggressive indifference to the study of ›real‹ readings, when my concern is how readings take place in historical reality, seems somewhat devious. And let me add that by ›historical‹ I do not mean ›in the past‹, but my point is that any kind of reading is a historical reading, any kind of reader a historical reader, and that real readings, therefore, are not accessible to

empirical description in quite the same manner as natural phenomena are accessible to empirical description. I hold that if we want to know how reading takes place in reality (Stockwell's and Eibl's interest as well), we need to ask questions – and we need to employ methodologies – that are too often denigrated, discouraged, or demoted to purely auxiliary functions in neo-naturalist scholarship (with varying degrees of explicitness; I have given examples in »A Tale of Two Natures«). I hold that historical research, in particular, cannot be replaced by psycho-physical research or be treated as a minor supplement when historicity is, in fact, an essential feature of any reading's reality.

This is not an either/or-distinction, as Eibl implies whenever I make such a statement. (He is much more understanding when neo-naturalists, including himself, try to express what is at stake here.) I am only asking: What consequences does the historical quality of readings have for a naturalist study of reading? What consequences does it have that in the natural world there exists something like human *culture*: an evolved part of nature that is capable of affecting its own evolution, capable of representing and reflecting nature and even these very acts of representation and reflection (generating what neuroscientists call ›meta-representations‹). So what does it mean for the study of literary reading that reading in itself is a cultural and historical activity, i. e., something that does not simply happen *in* human brains or simply *in* culture but something that helps constitute culture and history, and as such is always situated within, and contributes to, complex meta-representational networks *between* brains?⁵ I find this a hard and captivating question – not at all a rhetorical one. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Particularly vexing concerning Eibl's portrayal of my position in this case is how he ignores my explicit statement of interest (›these are sincere, not rhetorical, questions« [166]), preferring to cast me in the role of some quixotic leveler of subject/object-distinctions, when I openly distance myself from any such vision of fusion, be it hermeneutic, theological, or anthropological. What is also rather odd is Eibl's – may I say, aggressive – referral to »any old Tom, Dick, and Harry«. This entire business about ›the rabble‹ is odd, because my initial criticism entailed the observation that neo-naturalist accounts of reading sometimes discard questions of literary *education* (i. e., how to teach students to become more competent readers) by striking a democratic pose. According to these tactics, whoever voices concern about purely empirical approaches to reading is an enemy of the common people. Eibl reacts to this observation, not by discussing it, not by agreeing or disagreeing with it – but by insinuating that I am an anti-democratic elitist. My point exactly. This is what I was talking about.

⁵ My phrasing here echoes Wolf Singer, who defines subjectivity as a »cultural construct« that emerges »from the dialogue between brains and hence [is] not explicable through the observation of single brains« (2002, 73). Singer concludes that ›social ascriptions‹ cannot be explained within ›neurobiological systems of description‹ alone, because those systems of description are geared »exclusively toward the scientific analysis of single brains« (ibid.).

To repeat: my objection to a naturalist-scientific understanding of *Literaturwissenschaft* is not meant as plea for an either/or-decision. But I think this matter cannot be solved simply by announcing that we need both, that science and scholarship can somehow complement each other – especially when such pronouncements are still indebted to a Wilsonian vision of ›consilience‹ or ›the unity of all knowledge‹ under the rule of a scientific paradigm of *Wissenschaft*. The question, then, is *how* both modes of knowledge can be made to contribute to each other. Are there productive interferences? Are there routes back and forth from one type of knowledge to the other? In ›A Tale of Two Natures‹ I suggested that *disciplinary self-awareness* and *institutional self-reflection* might be beneficial, perhaps indispensable, first steps in this venture. Thus, it might be useful to recognize which contentions have turned those two modes of knowledge into modes of knowledge in the first place. Further, it might be useful to respect the reality and legitimacy of these contentions, rather than to tacitly subsume one paradigm under the other. More than that: in view of the fact that epistemic dualism is at the root of many of our present disputes, it might be useful to question our knee-jerk assumption that everyone who refers to such epistemic dualism is advocating an absolute alternative – and conversely, it might be useful to beware of positions that do advocate such a choice under the guise of cooperation.

Perhaps here are some productive questions to emerge from this exchange after all: *how* can we resist the logic of the circled-wagons metaphor, especially when it creeps into our own line of reasoning inadvertently? *How* can we communicate with epistemic positions that we have recognized as profitable for our own research, without demanding that one position convert to the other? At the end of the day, *Wissenschaft* is a cultural activity, too. As such, it is made possible by the existence of human brains that *inter-act* in systematic ways, with each new inter-action potentially enabling new structural intensities not only in the brains involved but also in the cultural system of knowledge at large. And it seems likely that the diachronic system of *Wissenschaft*, just like the brain itself in its higher cognitive functions, can have no center of operational congruence, no hierarchical hub of distribution. Instead, learning (i. e., new structuration) occurs through parallel processing, labor division, and often unanticipated feedback loops. If this is so, interdisciplinarity in a productive sense would require us to invite connectivity between different perspectives of *Wissenschaftlichkeit* rather than to collapse one sub-system of knowledge into the other. A Wilsonian ›unity of knowledge‹ would not be desirable even if it were feasible; it would probably cancel the very condition of possibility of cultural learning: structure-building communication between different, distinct, often conflicting but not necessarily contradictory epistemic positions.

One last example, because it serves to illustrate these points. Karl Eibl disapproves of the way I handle the following quotation by David Sloan Wilson: »if we ask what themes would most interest a nonhuman primate, those are the themes

that are most prominently featured in Shakespeare and indeed all literature« (2005, 29). My comment on this was:

This is probably true, but what have we understood about Shakespeare, what about Elizabethan culture, when we see this? Yes, grown-up people are constantly looking for sexual partners, or for tasty food, or for agreeable climates, but strictly speaking, we don't have to read Shakespeare to learn all this. (163)

Eibl remarks (after he has asserted that Wilson's statement is »of no interest whatsoever« to me):

Yet Wilson's aim is not to explain *Shakespeare*, but to explain the *universal success* of Shakespeare's plays; arguing against radical cultural relativism, he traces their popularity back to the fact that they address not only culture-specific but also universal dispositions. In the context of such an argument, Kelleter's complaint that he learns nothing about Elizabethan culture is really somewhat bizarre. (428)

I cannot see what is bizarre about this. I did not deny that Wilson's concern is with universal anthropological issues – neither did I reject his findings in that regard. My question concerned the status and function of literary practice in the analytical mode promoted by Wilson and other contributors to *The Literary Animal*. And here my point was that this analytical mode unnecessarily (and often polemically) limits itself to methods that prove insufficient for answering the questions it raises. Furthermore, I held that this self-limitation is symptomatic, not just incidental, because it rests on mistaken assumptions of universal and particular knowledge and their interrelation. Thus, I have no problem with the fact *that* Wilson concerns himself with universal knowledge but my critique concerns *how* he does so, viz. precisely by suppressing the kind of particular knowledge he needs in order to answer his universalist question.

Correct, then: Wilson is trying to explain the *universal success* of Shakespeare's plays. But surely Eibl does not want to suggest that this can be done by showing that Shakespeare's plays contain themes that are plainly and simply part of human nature. The question of the universal success of Shakespeare's plays cannot be answered in any satisfying way by identifying the evolutionary themes within those works. No doubt Shakespeare's plays would have remained unknown – if not unwritten – had they been about concerns alien to the human race. Conversely, there are plenty of other plays, from numerous cultures and times, equally (if not more) adaptable, equally (if not more) universal in their concerns, which have attained no such privileged position in cultural memory. I suggest, then, that our current, largely non-scientistic *Literaturwissenschaft* is not altogether wrong when it holds that we cannot help but engage in questions of canonization, interpretation, translation, popularization, mediation, promotion, cultural distinction, cultural politics, social politics, etc. – i. e., in historical questions – if we want to understand the universal success of Shakespeare's plays. This cannot be done without acknowledging that all these processes depend on the existence of evolved human bodies and

brains. But it does not follow that these processes can be explained by describing their physico-mental conditions of possibility.

For someone whose declared antagonists are ›the aesthetes‹, Eibl here comes strangely close to condoning a view of literature that locates literary charisma in the timeless universality or humanity of certain works of art. I do not think this is actually his position. But why does he risk such associations? I think it has something to do with this:

Kelleter has both feet planted firmly in the circled wagons, standing in the hermeneutic tradition of a ›fusion of horizons‹ (›Horizontverschmelzung‹) in which the distinction between subject and object is levelled – and as far as I'm concerned he can continue to do so, as long as he doesn't interfere with those who want to investigate how the process of reading takes place in reality. (425)

If Eibl really believes that »Of course *both* are necessary!« (427) – naturalist *and* sociological or historicist perspectives – his request that I do not »interfere« with neo-naturalist work is perplexing. And this not only because his implication is false (I explicitly do not support a theory of fusion between subject and object), but because he makes such a request at all. It seems that the passage above is a direct result of the circled-wagons metaphor. Perhaps, then, my worries about certain tendencies in neo-naturalist scholarship – and their possible effect on even the most brilliant practitioners in this field – were not just alarmist. It seems to me that the passage quoted above wishes for a splendid isolation of neo-naturalist scholarship from cultural studies (in the broad sense of the term) – at least if cultural studies presume to legitimately contribute, rather than just assent to, the neo-naturalist research program.⁶ This is an issue of institutional politics, and it illustrates that institutional politics can shape intellectual practice: critique from within one's own methodological framework is mostly expressed and received with frankness, but as soon as outside critique threatens the (institutional) success of one's field – especially if that field is still in the process of establishing itself and laying claim to a paradigm shift – such critique needs to be delegated to some distanced

⁶ »On the Redskins of Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons« at one point describes me as a petty quibbler who thinks »he has caught the naturalists capitulating in some way« when they say their work needs to address questions of cultural research (427; Eibl actually limits the acceptable supplements to »perspectives provided by the social sciences«). Not my point. What I found worthy of criticism was that such pronouncements usually do not lead beyond obvious methodological borrowings »into a dialogue with established culturalist approaches that have been dealing with exactly these issues for quite some time now, from Foucauldian discourse analysis to the New Historicism« (180). A serious engagement with these and similar interlocutors would probably start by trying to comprehend why they are even interested in the questions they are interested in, and by acknowledging their concerns for an appropriate method, rather than dismissing them as inherently misleading simply because they hail from remote intellectual habitats or speak in foreign languages. Not only is there nothing established by writing off scholarly perspectives because of their intellectual, disciplinary, or even geographical pedigree, this kind of partisanship may actually impede the learning ability of one's own perspective.

enclave and be labeled polemical, indifferent, incompetent, covertly belonging to some contaminated tradition of thought.

3.

Starting with its title, »On the Redskins of Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons« establishes a series of partisan oppositions that organize the paper's argumentational logic. Thus, when Eibl finds me defending the utility of certain assumptions and practices from the field of hermeneutics, he concludes that I must be a card-carrying hermeneutist who advocates that we practice the fusion of subject and object as the essence of literary reading. From here on, it's a downward spiral: once you are placed inside the metaphysical corral, each time you reflect on the conflicting epistemological demands of empirical and historical knowledge, you have betrayed yourself as an idealist. And once you are identified as someone who believes that the true life is lived in some ethereal realm of intellectual purity and freedom, it really does not matter what you are actually doing and thinking to come to terms with the puzzling relationship of natural and cultural existence.

No matter that Eibl himself observes that there is »a not unessential distance between a chimpanzee handling little cards to articulate the demand, ›Give me a banana‹ and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*« (2004, 17). No matter that I use exactly this insight as a reference point for my distinction between a first and second nature – not in the sense of an either/or-alternative but, using Eibl's phrase, as a continuous spectrum that ultimately, however, produces a qualitative difference. What I know of evolutionary biology suggests to me that the exact quality of this difference – of this categorical distinction – is still an unresolved question, still an occasion for research, still a puzzle. It is strange that neo-naturalists draw much of their epistemic energy from this perplexity but when they are confronted with competing approaches to the same problem they frequently behave as if the question was already solved, so that anyone pondering the relation between ›biology‹ and ›culture‹ is made to look like a retrograde campaigner for mysticism and superstition, threatening to interfere with the study of real reality.

As far as I can see, *Animal Poeta* and my own paper might have some real contentions concerning the *kinds* of tools that are useful for studying culture as a ›second nature‹. We might have contentions, too, concerning how to put these tools to work with disciplinary self-awareness. But none of this is mentioned or addressed in Eibl's rejoinder. Instead, he charges me with a »dualistic view of science« that has »ontic roots« (437), when I rely on his own model of describing culture as something that has emerged from, and remains dependent on, biological dispositions, while »allowing and forcing us to make a categorical distinction between ape and philosopher« (Eibl 2004, 17). Or, as I phrased it in my paper, trying to identify productive neo-naturalist interferences with cultural studies: »the most challenging

promise« of this entire field is »the recognition that human culture depends, in ways still to be clarified, on the prior existence of human bodies with basic biological needs and capacities« (157).

Thus, at a crucial point in my article, I quoted Eibl as saying that »there are universal biological dispositions that make art possible [...] but they can be disposed of in many different cultural manners« (2004, 278, 319). I agreed with this proposition and suggested that to study these »many different *cultural* manners« means to study how »humans have made use of their biological dispositions through *history* – and not just evolution« (170). This is how Eibl comments on my words:

Oh the perpetual either/or mentality! How are we to study the *use* of biological dispositions without studying the dispositions themselves? And how, in turn, are we meant to study biological dispositions without understanding them as a product of evolution? (426)

I think there are two ways in which this can be understood, given the fact that I affirm that the study of culture needs to respect the findings of biological anthropology. Since this is the case, Eibl either disagrees with me by claiming that the study of culture is in essence *identical* with the study of evolutionary biology, because culture simply ›disposes of‹ biological ›foundations‹ (as if biology was the genotype and culture its phenotypical expression). The study of ›cultural manners‹ could then be reduced – in a neutral sense of the term, meaning: traced back to a prior level of analysis – to the study of ›biological dispositions‹ (which would raise the question of why Eibl makes an epistemologically consequential distinction at all between ›biological‹ and ›cultural‹). Or these sentences claim that the study of culture cannot be undertaken *without* or *in contradiction to* evolutionary biology. An underlying assumption of this position would be that human culture is different from all other systems founded in biology, so that human culture – as an evolved system able to reflect on, and to actively and intentionally influence, its own evolution – requires special tools of understanding that are different from, yet cannot afford to neglect scientific modes of explanations concerned with organisms and environments that are not cultural in the above sense.

This second position is actually the one I suggested in my article – or rather, the position I thought I had extracted, in principle, from my reading of *Animal Poeta*. I still believe my reading of Eibl was largely correct in this regard, because elsewhere in his article, he repeats similar points.⁷ So why is it that whenever I say ›not only ... but also ...‹, Eibl answers this by saying ›Of course both!‹ (as if this was not my

⁷ Cf.: „Yet [the human capacity for culture] is [...] a very special part of nature, of which only hints can be found in other animals; its specific manifestations pose special problems, and the study of it requires special tools« (438). I would add that this proposition can profit from yet another distinction, namely the distinction between studying the human *capacity* for culture and studying human *culture*. It is evident that one cannot be studied without the other, but those are distinct questions.

point) or by interpreting it as either/or?⁸ It seems to me that Eibl's theoretical position in these cases is not only impressed by his research interests but also by the feared ›interference‹ of allegedly hostile positions. On this logic, a paper such as »On the Redskins of Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons« actually *needs* idealists who can be blamed for maintaining the either/or-distinction between nature and culture that neo-naturalism has successfully abandoned. Otherwise, there would be no paradigm shift. All of this might not be such a big deal – we could take it sportingly – if it did not prompt neo-naturalists to invent idealistic counter-positions where there are none, and in the process fall victim to a mirrored absolutism that does a disservice to their research.

What are these invented counter-positions? I think the story goes something like this: according to the broad definition of ›naturalism‹ suggested by Eibl at the beginning of his paper, a naturalist is someone who hypothesizes that everything in this world has natural causes (422). The antonym to ›natural‹ in this definition is ›super-natural‹, and I am happy to report that under this definition, I, too, consider myself a naturalist. But that's where the trouble starts. Because in a next step, »On the Redskins of Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons« will not let me stay a naturalist in the above sense if I do not subscribe to a more narrow definition of naturalism as well, viz. one which reduces the standards of principled research to the standards that organize the natural sciences. When I disagree, because I think that the difference between ›natural‹ and ›cultural‹ obliges us to ask distinct questions and to use distinct methods to answer these questions – and when I do so from without a neo-naturalist home-base, deploring the pathos of foundational research and the »hyperventilating rhetoric of innovation« (Metzger 2001, 92) that accompanies much scholarship in this vein – the broader distinction between ›natural‹ and ›super-natural‹ comes back with a vengeance, and all of a sudden I am said to believe that culture is a realm of the spiritual. All of a sudden, I am an idealist.

Under this term, Eibl collects a complex set of beliefs and attitudes. At their core seems to be the notion that *not* everything that can be known (and researched) in this world has natural causes. More than that: those things which are thought to have spiritual causes are marked as superior. Therefore, knowledgeable talk about those elusive objects is considered more profound than scientific knowledge. Do some neo-naturalists feel beset by arrogant colleagues with spiritualist leanings who routinely harangue scientists about how they should be doing their work (or explain to them why their work is unimportant, considering the grand scheme of things)? For Eibl at least, such haughtiness can express itself in various forms: in the philosophical stance of idealism proper (believing that the external world is funda-

⁸ At one point, possibly because he really read it that way, Eibl truncates a passage of mine to make it sound as if I meant to say that humanist knowledge is concerned »not with facts but with meaning« (437). What I meant, and also wrote, in the larger context of this quotation was: »humanist knowledge is about meaning, and not *just* facts« (154, emphasis added).

mentally dependent on an internal world of disembodied thought), in bourgeois or existentialist aestheticism (believing that art provides exclusive access to a timeless realm of sense or to some extraordinary experience of ecstatic being), in homiletic edification (believing that teaching is all about moral and spiritual improvement). In short: what is being feared is *Schöngeistigkeit*, a word that I thought had disappeared from German academic and everyday discourse until I learned that this is the intended meaning of Eibl's ›aesthetes‹ in the circled wagons.

I am sure there still are such positions in the humanities today, although I must admit I rarely encounter them in everyday academic life. More detrimental, in any case, appears to be an ever more common attitude to suspect this bugbear behind every critique of bio-centric research in the humanities, as if critics of scientism were questioning the legitimacy of science or somehow found it insulting that they descended from non-human animals. This suspicion is detrimental because it tends to deflect critical arguments into partisan politics, making it difficult for naturalist and culturalist approaches alike to confront and profit from each other. It also leads to situations as the following: Eibl quotes my reference to »the perplexing fact that human beings, alone among species, have developed and refined means and possibilities of transcending their natural limitations« (169). He immediately lunges at the phrase ›to transcend‹ and reads it as a crassly idealist fantasy of immortality:

How is this to be understood? People who go beyond their natural limitations come to grief, just like ants and amphibians who try to go beyond theirs. Anyway, let's take it as an edifying figure of speech from the same stock as ›liberation from the demands of nature‹ and ›walking erect‹ and such like, none of which one is allowed to examine in any particular detail. (438)

Of all the attacks in Eibl's reply, this was the most mystifying. Did he really believe that my talk about »developing and refining means of transcending natural limitations« referred to some esoteric out-of-body experience – rather than, say, to flying in a few hours from Frankfurt to San Francisco, or using worldwide webs of virtual communication – when a few paragraphs down I speak about »the one feature of our natural existence that will never be transcended and that we alone on earth are anxious about, no matter what artificial environments or limbs we create for ourselves: our individual mortality« (171)? Even conceding that my phrasing was unfortunate in this case, I think it should have been clear to any observer, however casual, that when I use terms such as, say, ›post-animal‹, I do not mean ›angelic‹ or the like, but the puzzle of how we get from signing chimpanzees to *Moby Dick*, and on to less ideal(istic) forms of human language use in controversies just like this one. After all, my »edifying nonsense« (Eibl 2007, 439) was followed by this sentence:

This process of culture has emerged within a comparatively short time-span, but it has created a myriad of artificial environments for human life that, while certainly not *unnatural*, can no longer be called natural either. Thus, humankind is the only species on earth that has proven able to

actively influence its own evolution by creating a ›second‹ nature in innumerable – frequently conflicting – historical and cultural variations. (Kelleter 2007, 169)

Karl Eibl probably would not put it that way, but this is no reason to suspect an idealist – perhaps even a covert creationist? – behind these words. I cannot help it, but the unlikely culturality of human life is a puzzle to me, in its existence and conflicting variety, and a great incentive to research. This is all the more so as we have no compelling reason to assume ontological discontinuities in the process of hominization (after all, that would solve the puzzle). So whenever I open a book, whenever I enter a DVD-store, whenever I attend a committee meeting or check into a hotel room, I find that what is improbable and exceptional, hence distinct, about human existence is not its biological animal nature but the self-made, post-animal part that is grafted onto biological givens. Eibl makes fun of these words, asking for the logic of ›self-made‹ and ›grafted‹, implying that I see the human capacity for culture as »something that was added [...] to nature as a mysterious other« (438). Let me simply say that with ›self-made‹ I meant nothing but the fact that books are written, not by divine hand or metaphysical inspiration, even in cases when their authors would have never written them without belief in such experiences; that cities and temples are built by human hands; that none of this seems necessary – and yet it is there, a most self-evident reality that we have created for ourselves but commonly ascribe to something other: natural beings in artificial environments and changed by them, suspended in webs of meaning woven by human hands and yet co-determining and limiting the very fact of human existence (to paraphrase Max Weber and Clifford Geertz). With ›grafted‹ I meant exactly this paradoxical artificiality: our bodies cannot fly, but we build machines that allow us to do so. While I am writing this in Göttingen, I can see on EarthCam what happens at this very moment in Times Square, New York, and there is nothing mystical about it. ›Self-made‹ and ›grafted‹: there are intentions in the process of culture, certainly, but there seems to be no intentional center of culture-building, be it divine, human, neurophysiological, or evolutionary. At a higher level of reflection we can detect self-generation and self-organization in human culture, as we do in complex biological organisms, but there are good reasons to distrust the orderliness of even the most intricate models of cultural differentiation, such as Luhmann's transfer of evolutionary biocybernetics, via Maturana, to social history.

Eibl probably finds me saying here that human beings, by using tools and inventing media, have created an autochthonous realm that has bypassed evolution. Or why else would he ask if ›self-made‹ and ›grafted‹ are not »mutually exclusive« (438)? (Even if these individual words are misleading, my syntax certainly did not invite this question.) Why else would he ascribe to me (›clearly‹) a »tendency to lift humans out of nature in some way and provide them with culture as a home instead of it« (ibid.)? It is disheartening. Eibl's argument not only ignores my plea to study »human culture as an imperfect realm of contingency, asymmetry, and untidiness«

(173), i. e., exactly *not* as a promise of home. It also fails to acknowledge that my insistence on the stressful, indeed overstraining character of humans' second nature (an insight I take from *Animal Poeta*) is closely connected with a critique of literary holism, i. e., a paradigm of ›species literature‹ that is mostly centered on beautiful texts with universal subject matter. It is precisely the not-quite-natural strangeness of the environments we have created for ourselves that makes the conditions of our first nature look like an attractive, supposedly ›lost‹ home (and be it lost from our epistemologies). There is a great consolatory power in human recourse to nature, and this power increases as the complexity of culture increases. »On the Redskins and Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons« reacts to these remarks by simply reversing my argument and – falsely – implying that I paint a holistic image of culture as ›home‹. This is lamentable.

4.

Everybody is ignorant, only on different subjects.
(Will Rogers)

Brevity is dangerous in an exchange of this kind. Yet I will try to be as brief as possible in addressing my chief points from »A Tale of Two Natures«. I believe that neo-naturalist approaches are vitally important for the study of literature and culture. Their stress on systematic scholarship can become a remedy for the self-serving apologetics of bias widespread in much recent interpretive scholarship. It appears to me that procedural self-reflection is currently more strongly developed in the natural and social sciences than in our fields. Thus, neo-naturalism can encourage literary and cultural studies to reclaim their share in methodological reason. As I wrote, I deem this promise of neo-naturalism to be the one »most urgently needed« (155).

The field of cognitive poetics in particular supplies incentives and tools for studying literature as a patterned process of meaning-production. In this respect, cognitive poetics promises not only to re-activate important formalist and structuralist insights but also to bring them in touch with advanced concerns in other disciplines. This is so because cognitive poetics, literary Darwinism, and other subsidiaries in this vein, seek to illuminate »the conditions and functions that make possible or even force into existence something like literature in the first place« (Zymner/Engel 2004, 7). I consider this a challenging, valuable, and »entirely original« (156) task because it may help connect a more particularistic, text-centered mode of study with concerns of literary anthropology. If it does so, neo-naturalism has the potential of correcting hasty variants of relativism that have marred the plausibility of some constructivist approaches to issues of cultural difference, geo-history, or gender.

Last but not least, neo-naturalist approaches in literary and cultural studies can serve as a complement to recent developments in the sciences, particularly the neurosciences, which in turn are beginning to conceptualize the human brain and its evolution in social, cultural, and historical terms (a field of inquiry often conducted on the assumption of the brain's ›plasticity‹, i. e., its structure-changing receptivity to environmental influences). Similarly, pioneering studies such as Mark Turner's *The Literary Mind* and Michael Tomasello's *Constructing a Language* hold that linguistics, especially in its ›hard‹, Chomskyan variant, needs to be enlightened by classical literary theory and praxeological insights from social studies.

I see these contributions endangered by the following tendencies of current neo-naturalist practice. And based on the sampling of work that informed my article, I add: I find these contributions to be severely endangered by these tendencies.

First, the neo-naturalist pathos of radical innovation and its self-understanding as a dangerous maverick against inveterate (e. g., ›aesthetic‹) superstitions mirrors the rhetorical practices of earlier humanist master theories such as Marxism or psychoanalysis. When I say that neo-naturalism exhibits a competitive continuity with such super-theories, the issue is not, as Eibl insinuates, ›theoretical relativism‹, but, indeed, the effect of such competitive continuity on one's own willingness to employ »the principle of critical testing« (Eibl 2007, 423). Apart from that, I do not know if the question of whether, say, psychoanalysis can claim scientific credentials or is merely a narrative construction, is really settled in such a definitive manner as Eibl asserts; conversely, I understand that the scientific nature of evolutionary psychology has been challenged by other scientific approaches. There is nothing unusual or distressing about this. To note that in both cases a rational debate is possible and real is not to have made any qualitative judgment on (or within) these debates. But it might encourage us to take a more cautious attitude towards the rhetorical and institutional practices of competing universals, especially when we have found good reasons to pursue a particular interpretation of results obtained by critical observation. The mere fact that »there are entire university faculties busy with probing, refuting, and modifying« certain explanations (ibid.) does not seem sufficient to establish the rational validity, let alone the epistemological priority, of these explanations and their modifications.

My article provided a few examples where neo-naturalist approaches, in their current form and institutionalization, display a propensity toward self-reinforcing master narratives. Among those examples was the development of an auto-referential kind of jargon, the cultivation of an internal intellectual irresistibility, and the habit of finding oneself wherever one looks (the object proves the method, rather than the method being used to illuminate the object). One might add: a more or less explicit ideology of truth as subversive, inconvenient, besieged (›lost‹, ›repressed‹,

›alienated‹, etc.) seems to connect many of these super-theories.⁹ Since the professed epistemic aim of neo-naturalist approaches is to explain *some* things rather than *everything* (Eibl 2007, 427), I think neo-naturalism should be concerned about these tendencies. Otherwise, cognitive poetics, literary Darwinism, bio-poetics, etc. run the risk of maneuvering themselves into situations where external critique and divergent approaches are habitually dismissed or preemptively classified as unskilled, hostile, and so forth. »On the Redskins of Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons« illustrates this point.

Second, I suggested that the advent of cognitive poetics and literary Darwinism has a historical-institutional dimension. It exhibits symptoms of growing humanist self-doubt in the face of a rapidly shifting balance of power between academic disciplines. (This might help to explain why contemporary scientists show a larger degree of ›emotional intelligence‹ than scholars in the humanities: a discovery that squares with my intuitions and experiences – just consider this controversy here!) When I employ the concept of ›discipline envy‹ (Marjorie Garber) in this context I do not mean to reduce cognitive poetics or literary Darwinism to culturalist explanations, nor to dissolve the substance of their findings by showing them to be really nothing but social constructions. Since rational propositions are always historically prejudiced to some degree, there is no room for special judgments here. But this is an argument for, not against, improving principled inquiry through contextualization. The dependence of knowledge on perspective is not just some informational noise that contaminates the transmission of epistemological data; hence it cannot be simply filtered out. Instead, I hold that disciplinary self-awareness and institutional self-reflection are indicated if cognitive poetics and literary Darwinism are not to fall for trivialized or misplaced notions of scientific method that risk surrendering whole areas of knowledge to a flawed understanding of interdisciplinarity. In view of its super-theoretical conduct and the scope of its ambitions, neo-naturalism has everything to gain from such historical introspection (methods are easily obtainable in the humanities).

⁹ Concerning this point, it is interesting to see how Eibl deals with the ›assimilation‹ of neo-naturalist insights by other fields of knowledge. Consistent with his distinction between redskins and circled wagons, and consistent with his request that the people within the circled wagons do not ›interfere‹ with the truly legitimate modes of research, he posits ›an aesthetic consensus‹ within the humanities ›whose immune system is highly sensitive and sure to react to any serious threat‹ either by ›rejecting‹ or by ›assimilating‹ it. Obviously, he sees me as one who rejects, while assimilation is described by Eibl in terms of ›strip[ping]‹ dangerous insights of their ›claws‹ (437). The underlying assumption seems to be that truth is subversive, and that disagreement with it (i. e., the insistence that rational debate remains possible) amounts to resistance, quite in the Freudian sense. Indeed, I cannot help being reminded of Freud's remark about the effect of psychoanalytical truths on bourgeois complacencies: ›We are bringing them the plague‹ – or a mood of distinct irritation, at least. Some neo-naturalists seem to have a similar conception of the role and function of their work. I argue that this conception can affect their work negatively, as it encourages a mindset of argumentative self-sufficiency, the practical results of which I have tried to describe in my paper.

This brings me to my third and final contention: methods and their relationship to the objects under investigation. I believe that methods are tools, not truths. Methods are not inherently valid but only in relation to a set of questions they help to answer and in interaction with specific features of some object or set of objects in the world. *Wissenschaftlichkeit*, too, is not a self-evident or self-serving activity but is dependent on rational systems of controlled description that were devised for specific purposes. However, samples from neo-naturalist research show that the prime aim of many such studies is to establish the soundness of the chosen method, while their reflections on the epistemological demands of the object are frequently deficient. It is a little bit as if they were constantly trying to prove that simply because poetry is subjective, rational investigation of poetry need not be subjective, too – a conviction whose common sense unfortunately invites fallacious models of observer, object, and their relationship (plus a questionable image of poetry). In some cases, then, the employment of neo-naturalist methods has little other function than to proclaim or ascertain the scientific legitimacy of the chosen approach. In these cases, I contend, research is not concerned with collecting appropriate knowledge about a realistically defined object, but with being scientific (›systematic‹, ›principled‹, ›methodical‹, etc.). If so, the wish for a cold, distanced, ›scientific‹ gaze produces chiefly its own fulfillment.

Two possible, and not altogether rare, results of this are: (1) That there is an imbalance between methodological effort and eventual findings; in this case the scholarly value of those findings can be questioned. The proof of the pudding really *is* in the eating. – (2) A tendency to declare as *unwissenschaftlich* those questions that cannot be answered with the chosen tools (rather than consider the validity and utility of other tools as well as other modes of answering or even formulating a methodical question). Eibl's modest claim that neo-naturalism tries to explain *some* things, not *everything*, loses much of its charm when the things neo-naturalism *cannot* explain are treated as unfit for methodical investigation or when rational explanations of a non-scientific type are dismissed as necessarily subjective or particularistic.

In this sense, I hold that neo-naturalist research, perhaps more than other approaches in the humanities, should beware of what I have called the analytical fallacy, i. e., the inclination to confuse the orderliness of one's propositions with the properties and condition of one's object. Eibl, too, upholds the need for object-attuned methodologies (428). I feel that much of the combativeness in our controversy springs from our different opinions concerning *which* tools are categorically suited for our objects of research.

On this point, there is probably a minor and a major disagreement between us. The minor disagreement may not be a disagreement at all. I have complained that neo-naturalist studies are often harmed by a misguided conception of literary and cultural activities – a category mistake, in fact. These activities, I argue, should not be conceptualized as something that essentially occurs *in* human beings, in their

bodies and brains, but as something that is an act *of* human being, for which they make use of their bodies and brains, acting on and contributing to the self-created (artificial) environment that we call culture. As I insisted, this does not preclude that social, discursive, neurophysiological, and other factors help generate, co-determine or limit the range of possibilities for such activities.

On the basis of Eibl's discussion of Bennett and Hacker (my sources for these reflections), I find it difficult to ascertain whether he thinks that such a misconception plays no consequential role in neo-naturalist scholarship or whether he thinks that it is no misconception at all. (His discussion of Bennett and Hacker concentrates on »the principle and appropriateness« of their argumentation about category mistakes in general, and there is little on the category mistake in question as it relates to my argument [432]. To my mind, the issue is not whether scientists use figurative language or not – that would be bickering; the issue is which conceptual errors are invited at the level of non-figurative language if certain metaphors remain unexamined.)¹⁰ In any case, I suspect that we differ substantially in our respective views of what it means to make a valid statement about culture as second nature. Consider the following quote by Bennett and Hacker:

[I]f we wish to know why A signed a cheque for £200, no answer in terms of brain functions is likely to satisfy us. [...] A description of neural events in A's brain could not possibly explain to us what we want to have explained. [...] Explanation of action by redescription, by citing agential reasons, or by specifying the agent's motives (and there are other forms of explanation of related kinds) are not replaceable, even in principle, by explanations in terms of neural events in the brain. (2003, 64)

If I am not mistaken, Eibl subscribes to this when he writes: »The imprecise and unreliable utterance ›I love you‹ cannot be replaced by a precise and reliable account of the speaker's overall neurophysiological status, although both relate to one and the same event« (439). However, he seems to conclude that explanations of action »by redescription, by citing agential reasons, or by specifying the agent's motives«

¹⁰ I refrain from discussing Eibl's long critique of Bennett and Hacker (450–455). Since I do not identify my position with that of Bennett and Hacker (else I would aim to become an analytic philosopher) but only employ selected insights for my purposes, I do not feel required to take sides. It seems to me that Bennett and Hacker in their debates with John Searle, Daniel Dennett, and others have formulated interesting answers to many of the objections raised by Eibl. I myself have no horse in that race, but I find the debate intriguing in its actuality and content. Persuasive from my perspective is Eibl's skepticism towards analytic philosophy's »guardian[ship] of correct terminological usage« (though again imputed to »its idealist branch« [452]). Particularly, I second his opinion that the attribution of actions to ›the person‹ rather than to single body parts begs the question of what is meant by ›person‹. My suggestion is: if we mean to formulate reliable answers to the question of who or what acts, thinks, decides, etc. when a person, rather than a brain, acts, thinks, decides, etc., we are dependent on the methodologies of social, historical, and, yes, hermeneutical research in a more than auxiliary fashion. In turn, if those methodologies are interested in doing their work properly, they are obliged to take into account the biological givens that allow for something like personhood in the first place. This is all that I am arguing.

are necessarily part of everyday language and cannot be part of a »scientific *Geistes-Wissenschaft* [...] in the sense of a distanced science of the mind« (439). If what I say is correct, Eibl's opinion of what constitutes reliable and precise accounts of culture limits the standards of *Wissenschaftlichkeit*, at least in this argumentative context, to a scientific understanding of the term. If so, my critique is not, as Eibl suggests, that neo-naturalism tries to explain everything but that it tends to treat the questions it cannot answer – even if they are pivotal for the study of culture – as if they were answerable only in an »everyday« manner.

So we seem to differ on what *type* of explanation is required and possible if we want to know why someone said, »I love you« – or why someone wrote, »All men are created equal« – and what made them say or write so, what they thought they meant by it, at the moment of utterance and perhaps later, when their propositions were amplified again in the social or cultural circuit – and if we want to know how a proposition produced meanings or prompted further propositions and actions by those who heard or read it. I argue that these are legitimate questions – *wissenschaftlich*, in fact. Does Eibl, too? Again, this is a real, not a rhetorical question. In any case, Eibl seems to agree that causal explanations in terms of physiological mechanisms or their evolution cannot answer these questions – but does this mean that *Literaturwissenschaft* and *Kulturwissenschaft* do not deserve their names unless they limit themselves to a scientific paradigm of knowledge? If some neo-naturalists sympathize with such an assessment, this might have to do with the fact that other possible accounts and their respective ways of establishing plausibility through methodological self-control, intersubjective reasoning, and the like are consistently perceived as idealist and metaphysical. (Indeed, this is Eibl's first line of attack against Bennett and Hacker, whom he finds involved in what resembles »a religious undertaking« [433]; he concludes that they have written »a lengthy polemic« [432].)

I am not certain if I have represented Eibl's position correctly in this last paragraph. It seems to me that Eibl – depending on audience and context – sometimes shifts between a conciliatory and an exacting, a more flexible and a more rigid view of *Wissenschaftlichkeit*. I think there are compelling reasons to opt for elastic conceptions of proper method when our objects of study are cultural objects. None of these reasons need to be idealistic. This is perhaps the place where a debate could come into existence. However, as the tone and tactics of this controversy seem to point to something other than the issues, I am skeptical about the likelihood of such an event. Therefore, I will restrict myself to a few closing remarks on culture understood as »a historical process of differentiation, involving intentions, non-intended determinations of intentions, misunderstandings, appropriations, and contingencies« (Kelleter 2007, 176), ready to see them end up in the metaphysical corral again.

As I have argued in »A Tale of Two Natures«, when current neo-naturalist approaches tend to underestimate the historical-cultural status of literary works and

activities, this may have something to do with a misconception about the way particularity and universality relate in human affairs. As a consequence, dualistic conceptions of subjective and objective knowledge are not as rare as one would expect in a field bent on overcoming Cartesian binaries (with inter-subjectivity sometimes conceptualized as merely a quantitative assemblage of various subjectivities). However, as Eibl maintains, the terms ›universal‹ and ›particular‹ are not antonyms (423). I would not say that they are gradable like ›warm‹ and ›cold‹, but their meaning depends on *perspective*. Mark Turner remarks about this problem in *The Literary Mind* that human beings have »always only a single view, which is always local« (1996, 116). However, Turner observes, humans are not only sensory beings but also ›imaginative beings‹, i. e., they can and habitually do »construct spaces of what [they] take to be someone else's focus and viewpoint« (ibid., 118). In other words, a basic feature of human existence is that »we constantly construct meaning designed to transcend [our sensory] singularity« (ibid., 117). (I take it that Eibl would not pounce on the term ›transcend‹ here to show that Turner is really an aesthete.)

Thus, the human proclivity to ascribe universal meaning to subjective perspectives seems grounded in basic mental operations. Turner sees this capacity for imaginative self-transcendence (or ›blending‹) as a condition of possibility for human language and human higher cognition. This capacity can even be observed in the neuronal activity of the brain, as Gerhard Lauer reminds us in his article on mirror neurons, quoted by Eibl. So we can actually see how acts of learning take place in real primate heads. Where humans are different from macaques in this regard – and where zoomorphic accounts of human existence are misleading – is in their capacity to learn not only by imitating each other but by jointly comparing and assessing their mutual imitations and ›theories of mind‹. This is what we call culture: meta-representations not only in but between brains. In humans, therefore, mirrored neuronal activity can become more than just *mirrored* neuronal activity: communication can initiate new neuronal structuration (or stronger intensities and functional changes of informational flow within already stabilized structural networks; cf. Singer 1995). Thus, we can shape and to a certain extent become the environmental factors that express our biological dispositions. In other words: the human capacity for imagining what the world looks like from the perspective of another subject is not simply imitative (or solipsistic) but creative and dynamic. It allows individual learning to be redirected and systematized through contact with other learners; it allows knowledge to be discussed, modified, organized, interpreted, and stored outside individual brains, making possible self-critique and self-correction, role play and trade, social and gender identities, imagination and performance, thought and emotion experiments, recognition of finitude. In *Animal Poeta*, Eibl addresses similar issues when he speaks of human ›self-objectification‹ and the ›cascading‹ character of human cultural activity (Eibl 2004, 236–240, 272–275). Literature offers exceptionally well developed and historically differentiated means

and examples of this unique human capacity. The question is, how can we best study – and teach – this rich cognitive reservoir, quite in the sense proposed by Eibl: as human cognition making itself the object of study, »knowledge of knowledge« (2007, 439)?

Here are three proposals in answer to this question. My first proposal is conventional and unexciting: we need to use and refine a methodical language that is distinguished from everyday language by tested and testable means of rational self-control (transparent terminology, logical coherence of propositions, plausibility of claims, consideration of already established results, etc.). Neo-naturalism provides crucial support for this currently neglected but basic task of any *Literaturwissenschaft*.

My second proposal is unoriginal as well, but perhaps somewhat more controversial: we need to recognize that in matters of human culture, methodical language cannot be separated from ordinary languages in a clear-cut fashion. Rather, cognition of a higher than merely everyday order here depends on, not only procedural methodological correctness, but on theoretical reflection concerning the involvement of methodology in everyday language and everyday cognition (including ineliminable subjective judgments and interpretations, personal interests, institutional bias, etc.). Thus, a purely fact-oriented notion of objectivity, as it is suitable for many empirical questions, can be augmented to become a methodically controlled and theoretically self-aware form of (»higher-order«) inter-subjectivity that is particularly suitable for most of our objects of study. This is not to formulate a »double truth theory« but rather to avoid a one-truth-theory where none is in order.¹¹ In some measure, I think, these considerations parallel those that prompted Ludwig Wittgenstein to abandon his project of a pure meta-language (»Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent«) for a context- and culture-sensitive praxeological theory of language. The things one cannot speak of are exactly the things constantly spoken of in cultural reality – and the simple fact that there is no objective account of their meaning does not mean that only subjective accounts are possible.

Third proposal: studying literature as a form of human cognition requires us to do justice to the cultural reality of literature. A promising way to do so is by taking account of both the cognitive and the cultural *work* done by literature, i. e., its participation in creating historically specific environments that are meaningful to their inhabitants. Literary meaning, on this view, is neither a propositional substance that can be decoded from a text nor an aesthetic experience of the extraordinary, but a

¹¹ Incidentally, this intersubjective rationality is not altogether different from what is needed in the experimental sciences when data are to be *interpreted* concerning their meaning beyond the system of description that produced them (»What do we know when we know x ?«). This is an area where scientists will continue to profit from theoretical models in the humanities and from an interdisciplinary dialogue rightly understood, if the crisis-ridden humanities do not lose themselves in their »fantasy of becoming that more complete other thing« (Garber 2001, 67) across the institutional fence.

cultural and communicative activity that makes possible, and probably fosters, intersubjective conflicts about exactly such subjective experiences and subjective decodings.

In other words: I maintain that our everyday proclivity to generalize subjective experiences can be described from a perspective that is external and yet aware of its own involvement in cultural production. The cognitive work of reading, too, can be described in an observer's language that discerns the objective impossibility of a ›fusion of horizons‹ but does not deny that the leveling of subject-object distinctions can be experienced as subjectively real and that it can have social consequences. *Neurologically* speaking, such fusions are probably a special case of very strong re-cognitions; I would guess that they are similar to those neuronal feedback loops that can make higher (associative) brain areas interpret self-generated information as coming from primary (sensory) brain areas. (I understand that this is happening in hallucinations: auto-informational input is perceived as an objective change in the external world.) *Culturally* speaking, such strong re-cognitions are part and parcel of a mostly non-linear process of communication that brings subjectively perceived universals into conflict and competition with one another at various levels of self-reflection (from simply claiming objectivity by force of authority to developing collective methods for comparing perspectives and for establishing the acceptability of such comparisons). Religious conversion narratives are a good example in this regard: as I have tried to show elsewhere, such narratives can be described as effects of intersubjective transactions whose self-control is limited to a fairly auto-referential set of comparative practices and assumptions (cf. Kelleter 2002, 242–310). The challenge is to do so without disavowing their subjective truth. A sensible manner of achieving this, it seems to me, is by an accountable reconstruction of the very practices and assumptions operational in such cases, i. e., by describing as densely as possible the specific local, historical, and communicative conditions within which such imaginings both receive and create meaning (as well as reality).

As for teaching: if education is about developing cognitive abilities – and not just about transmitting instructive content – literary education is probably well advised to tap literature's potential to provide, exemplify, and reflect unexpected perspectives on human life and human life-worlds. In my paper I have called this ›the culture shock of subjectivity‹ (171). This is why I believe that there is actually a way of reading that is cognitively superior to ›ordinary‹ readings. It is a way of reading that can and should be taught; indeed, it requires training and reinforcement to be effective. I would describe it as teaching us and our students how to read different texts differentially, i. e., to read them historically and critically, while being able to apply these historical and critical stances to our own methods of reading and underlying theoretical assumptions. Evolutionary and cognitive perspectives can be helpful for this practice by giving readers a sense of the conditionality of their own positions, by building a bridge to modes of knowledge often ignored in literary

studies, by offering enlightenment about causes other than the ones intuitively suspected, perhaps by refreshing habituated insights through a new language, and certainly (like other rational discourses of analysis) by inviting readers to take an observer's perspective rather than to rescue, affirm, or adore a literary truth. However, a cavalier attitude toward historical critique will cause any approach to find itself as hidden truth wherever it looks and whatever it reads.

So I believe that without such training in historical, critical, and self-reflective reading, readers are particularly susceptible to extract even from the most controlled or factual modes of writing, let alone from imaginary accounts, master narratives without being able or willing to recognize how their re-cognitions actually operate on such occasions.¹² Hence I feel it is no polemic against the reading stances of ›the rabble‹ when I advocate a literary education that makes cultural and intersubjective differences readable in such a way that we discover in them more than our own cultural or subjective universals. (Anyone who ever learned a foreign language or lived in a foreign culture can know the difference between such readability and mere translation or conversion.) Not only does this seem a sensible way of keeping our individual brains ›plastic‹ – of allowing re-cognition to turn into recognition, so to speak – but also to develop cultural abilities particularly needful for our reasonable survival in, and the reasonable survival of, our increasingly demanding life-worlds.

I will stop here, not conclude. I have little confidence that these remarks will be taken in any way other than as indication of a ›double truth theory‹ or, at best, as an »attempt to assimilate the biological perspective into the aesthetic one« (Eibl 437, n. 17). Try as I may, this is a view of things that I cannot make myself comprehend. I can picture what Eibl's circled wagons are meant to look like, even why one would want to imagine them at all, but to realistically recognize me acting within this dualistic camp is an intellectual task I have yet to accomplish. I am certain that there are good evolutionary explanations for all of this (no irony intended). The psychology of territoriality probably plays a role. But if there is no simple biological determinism in human affairs, as Eibl affirms, there may yet be a chance for us to transcend our respective polemic animal. I feel there is nothing idealistic about this. In any case, for a genuine debate to commence, for learning and unexpected insight to be-

¹² To tell the truth, I was not particularly surprised by the results of the dissertation that Eibl mentions (423 f.): why would we even expect a positive correlation between ›emotional intelligence‹ and the reading of books? Is this not a rather, well, idealistic hypothesis to begin with? The sheer fact that someone has read many books does not tell us anything about *how* these books were read. It has always seemed more likely to me that those who read many books tend to re-cognize a similar set of narratives and meanings in them – in a way, continually reading the same book (cf. Kelleter 1997, 154). Who knows if something just like this may not be at work in neo-naturalist interpretations of such data?

come possible, both of us probably need more of what Eibl himself has called hermeneutic charity. And what does this tell us?

Frank Kelleter
Seminar für Englische Philologie
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

References

- M. R. Bennett/P. M. S. Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, London 2003.
- Karl Eibl, *Animal Poeta: Bausteine der biologischen Kultur- und Literaturtheorie*, Paderborn 2004.
- , On the Redskins of Scientism and the Aesthetes in the Circled Wagons, *JLT* 1:2 (2007), 421–441.
- Marjorie Garber, *Academic Instincts*, Princeton 2001.
- Joanna Gavins/Gerard Steen (eds.), *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, London 2003.
- Craig Hamilton, A Cognitive Grammar of »Hospital Barge« by Wilfred Owen, in: Gavins/Steen 2003, 55–65.
- Frank Kelleter, *Die Moderne und der Tod*, Frankfurt a.M. 1997.
- , *Amerikanische Aufklärung: Sprachen der Rationalität im Zeitalter der Revolution*, Paderborn 2002.
- , A Tale of Two Natures: Worried Reflections on the Study of Literature and Culture in an Age of Neuroscience and Neo-Darwinism, *JLT* 1:1 (2007), 151–187.
- Gerhard Lauer, Spiegelneuronen: Über den Grund des Wohlgefallens an der Wahrnehmung, in: Karl Eibl/Katja Mellmann/Rüdiger Zymner (eds.), *Im Rücken der Kulturen*, Paderborn 2007, 137–163.
- Stefan Metzger, Bio-Culture – biologistische Diskursstrategien im Feuilleton 2000, in: Bernhard Kleeberg/Stefan Metzger/Wolfgang Rapp/Tilmann Walter (eds.), *Die List der Gene: Strategeme eines neuen Menschen*, Tübingen 2001, 73–113.
- Wolf Singer, Development and Plasticity of Cortical Processing Architectures, *Science* 270 (1995), 758–764.
- , *Der Beobachter im Gehirn: Essays zur Hirnforschung*, Frankfurt a.M. 2002.
- Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*, London 2002.
- Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*, New York 1996.
- David Sloan Wilson, Evolutionary Social Constructivism, in: Jonathan Gottschall/David Sloan Wilson (eds.), *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, Evanston 2005, 20–37.
- Rüdiger Zymner/Manfred Engel, Nichtkunst und Dichtkunst: Einige vorausseilende Bemerkungen, in: R. Z./M. E. (eds.), *Anthropologie der Literatur: Poetogene Strukturen und ästhetisch-soziale Handlungsfelder*, Paderborn 2004, 7–10.

I wish to thank Regina Bendix, Christy Hosefelder, Fotis Jannidis, Bernadette Kalkert, Philipp Schweighauser, Stephanie Sommerfeld, Daniel Stein, and Simone Winko for assistance and critique.

In: JLT 2/1 (2008), 129-156.

How to cite this item:

Frank Kelleter, The Polemic Animal (or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Partisan Politics). A Reply to Karl Eibl.

In: JLTonline (05.03.2009)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-000246

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-000246>