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The Craft of Building Theories. On Hermeneutics and Philology

This article analyses the reasons for the near complete absence of standards in evaluating research in literary studies. It points out two shortcomings: First, literary studies employ an unclear distinction between concepts and phenomena. Concepts become independent and are being analyzed instead of phenomena. Debates about concepts cannot be decided in the light of concrete findings, and therefore scientific competition does not aim at providing proofs and findings, but is restricted to formulating ›arguments‹ that remain inside of language. The phenomena, which could be translated into clear cut questions about objects in the world, move out of focus. Literary studies have to be enabled to formulate questions. At the moment, literary scholars do not even debate which questions would be worthwhile, but make do without questions, and thus without an orientation towards phenomena in research.

Second, literary scholars notoriously keep confusing theories and methods. Theories, which provide no guidelines on how to read a text or about questions of general rhetoric, are declared to be methods, although they do not yield concrete practices for testing results. This is how Kleist can be read ›with‹ Freud, or Joyce can be read ›with‹ Latour, without it being clarified what it is that such ›theory driven‹ readings do. The article shows that all phenomena that literary scholars are interested in circle around an understanding of understanding.

This holds true for questions that point towards general (›generic‹) forms (like narratology), as well as for those that address unique, special (›idiosyncratic‹) forms (like when reading an unruly, ambitious text). Understanding the understanding is concerned with the analysis of rhetoric characteristics as well as with interpretation. This research interest, which is here called ›hermeneutical‹, has only been pursued marginally, despite attempts in philosophical hermeneutics, analytical philosophy, sociological communications theory and post-structuralism. It is suggested to develop a theory of literary studies in answering hermeneutical questions, which is outlined here as a pragmatic hermeneutics (*gebrauchsbasierte Hermeneutik*). However, it can be shown that such a theory would not lead to concrete practices with which to evaluate the analytic content of its results and thereby describe binding standards. Only the methods as crafts remain: processes that describe the concrete and detailed handling of texts, which can be termed ›philology‹.

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