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**On the History of the Practice of Fictionality – and the Recurring Problems in its Investigation  
(Abstract)**

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In recent decades, research into the history of fictionality has seen a significant upturn in interest. One promising theoretical foundation for such investigations appears to be the approach commonly known as the »institutional theory of fictionality«. This is based on the premise that fictionality is a rule-based practice determined by conventions which are variable (both synchronically and diachronically), conventions to which authors and readers alike feel committed. The main advantage of this particular theory of fictionality, as far as an analytical approach to the history of fictionality is concerned, is the following: The institutional theory of fictionality is suitable for taking into adequate account the historical variability of terms, concepts and practices by providing a theoretical framework that may be filled with a wide variety of different (kinds of) content. In this way, one may sidestep the danger of examining the history of fictionality in an anachronistic manner, imposing on past times and practices the expectations of a modern perspective.

Still, committing to an institutional theory of fictionality avoids only some of the problems all research on the history of fictionality faces. The aim of this article, therefore, is to point out those difficulties which cannot be avoided in such investigations even in the arguably best theoretical conditions of an institutional account of fictionality. To this end, instead of providing an overview of previous research or addressing specific methodological, conceptual or logical problems related, the present essay focuses on recurring and widespread difficulties inherent in both the object of investigation and the various methods of investigating it.

The essay is divided into three sections. In the first, a number of problems are addressed that exist regardless of the specific method of investigation chosen. Most epistemological problems result from the fact that written documents must be consulted to make inferences regarding the conventions and practices of the past. In this context, it is not only the sparse tradition that becomes an issue (especially for more remote historical periods) but also the fact that no analysis of written materials can provide direct insight into past practices. Since any social practice, moreover, is in itself a highly complex matter that can hardly be broken down and understood in *all* of its many aspects – even from an interdisciplinary perspective, which anyway implies its own difficulties such as a frequent lack of uniform terms, et cetera –, such research will only be able, as a matter of principle, to approach past practices *more or less closely*.

Following these general reflections, the article critically examines the two most prominent methods used by those investigating the history of fictionality as an »institution«. These are the analysis of literary texts, on the one hand, and that of poetological texts, on the other. When trying to draw conclusions from literary texts about past practices of fictionality, the focus of much recent research has been on the search for »signposts of fictionality«. The problem with this method is not only that such studies are often at risk of presupposing a positive test result – after all, signposts of fictionality only make sense if a practice of fictionality has already been established – but also that signposts of fictionality are historically variable. For this reason, one

cannot simply postulate the validity of present-day signposts of fictionality for historical texts, and conversely, one must also reckon with the fact that other, corresponding signals unknown to us will remain beyond our knowledge. In addition, there is also the more general question of just how different two different practices may reasonably be said to be in order for them to come under the common rubric of a shared »practice of fictionality«.

One advantage the analysis of poetological texts appears to have over conclusions drawn from literary texts is that insofar as poetological texts are already meta-textual in nature – as they are *texts about literature* –, the aforementioned »detour« via an analysis of signposts of fictionality is no longer required. Even such studies, however, are faced with several problems: To begin with, poetological texts are predominantly conceived of as instances of programmatic – and thus as normative, not descriptive – writing. It therefore immediately suggests itself that they should articulate practices desired or demanded rather than depict existing usage. Secondly, poetological texts are written artefacts that, for a very long time, were circulating within a predominantly oral culture. It is therefore arguable whether and to what extent that predominantly oral practice is reflected in poetological texts. Thirdly, poetological texts do not discuss the concept of »fictionality« but, first and foremost, that of »poetry«. The fact that a strongly evaluative component – namely, debates over the value of poetry – is often at the centre of such texts allows the conclusion that what is being negotiated there, rather than an earlier notion of »fictionality«, is an equivalent of the modern concept of literature. By contrast, it seems indisputable that various ways of differentiating between types of texts were, in fact, developed from the earliest times. Fourthly, and considering the fact that in those contexts, debates mainly revolved around such categories as the »truth« and »probability« of a given story or the »inventedness« (i.e., the fictitiousness) of its contents, the question arises, once again, whether these are indeed practices of *fictionality* we are looking at. This article makes a case for delineating historical terms and practices as accurately and in as much detail as possible, rather than presenting them rashly and reductively, perhaps, as early forms of the institution of fictionality

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