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The Importance of Literature: Parabasis and its Uses

- Gregory Jusdanis, *Fiction Agonistes*. In *Defense of Literature*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2010. 154 S. [Preis: EUR 15,99]. ISBN: 978-0-8047-6876-4.

Why study literature? And what is more, why fund literary studies? Most scholars react to these pressing questions with awkward silence and embarrassed shuffling of feet. This at least is the claim Gregory Jusdanis makes at the outset of his invigorating study *Fiction Agonistes: In Defense of Literature*. In a time when most critics no longer subscribe to the beliefs of literary humanism, we have failed to develop »our own ›defense of poetry‹, a set of arguments about the importance of literature to society« (1–2). According to Jusdanis, our inability to explain why literature matters results in dropping student numbers and severe budget cuts in the realm of the arts. Jusdanis sees further proof for the declining prestige of literary studies in the reluctance of university presses to publish books in this field. Fortunately, not all would willingly agree that the current state of affairs regarding the »public admission of disciplinary self-doubt« (11) is as awfully depressing as Jusdanis makes it out to be. He himself offers an impressive list of scholars who have strongly spoken out for literature’s value and one may easily extend this list with texts such as Rita Felski’s manifesto on *Uses of Literature* (2008) or Hubert Zapf’s publications on literature as cultural ecology, to name just two examples.¹ Jusdanis joins the ranks of these scholars who champion literature’s important role in society by highlighting what he terms the ›parabolic potential‹ of literature, i.e. its honing of the border between the real and the imaginary. With his highly readable and sophisticated study, Jusdanis fulfils his aim of providing a »reconceptualization of art’s place in society that takes into account our current social situation and the theoretical questioning of the last thirty years« (2).

Main Arguments and Structure

At the heart of Jusdanis’s book lies the reconciliation of what appear to be two contradictory theses: »that art is an autonomous entity and that it is a social convention« (3). His concept of parabasis, a term he adapts from Aristophanic comedy, allows him to delineate the »complex semiautonomy« (5) of literature, which marks it as »both separate, [...] yet part of society« (ibid.). In Aristophanic comedy parabasis refers to that moment when the actors take off their masks and directly address the audience as fellow citizens. This moment highlights the way literature is »a line and the breach of that line« (5). Literature allows us to enter a separate sphere of the imaginary where alternative possible worlds may be explored. This aesthetic experience does not only grant us pleasure, but by raising our awareness of the contingent nature of reality it also takes on a political dimension. By inviting us to contrast the imagined reality to actual reality, the recipient may gain insights into the world s/he lives in, which in turn may translate into the wish to transform this world. (Jusdanis does take care, however, to stress that not all literature is subversive.) In short, art has social impact as Jusdanis stresses in the preface to his book. This claim for the »real-life impact« (66) of literature is elaborated in the six chapters of *Fiction Agonistes*.

»Overture and Themes« is the heading of the opening chapter in which Jusdanis outlines the aims, methodology and central themes of his book as well as commenting on challenges raised by his broad historical outreach. One of the many virtues of this book lies in the broad range of literary examples Jusdanis knowledgeably draws on, not only in terms of genre (poems, novels, plays, short stories), but also historical scope (from classical antiquity to contemporary writing) and nationhood (e.g. German, English, French and Serbian literature). He takes care to point out that in the face of this historical outreach the changing concept of art throughout the ages has to be kept in mind. Within the context of his study, autonomous art is taken to refer to »a distinct sphere of human activity endowed with its own vocation« (7) as the result of processes of differentiation in modernity (Luhmann). This definition of autonomous art forms a basic building block in the theory of parabasis he expounds throughout his study. Another thread running through his argument is his rejection of the death-of-art thesis. The celebratory or mournful reports of arts' death refer to the loss of »an evolutionary, linear view of art history« (14) and the demise of certain forms of art due to the exhaustion of formal innovation or lack of audience. Instead of rehearsing funeral rites, Jusdanis finds it more helpful to think about literature's current situation as one of transition. In order to determine the social uses and the future of literature, one must revisit the historical development of literature as this throws light on its social embedding. The focus on beauty in the previous pages, which is at first glance slightly puzzling, is rendered comprehensible when Jusdanis emphasizes that his »conception of the parabolic is an attempt to revisit the old tug-of-war between beauty and truth« (17).

The ensuing chapter on »Art's Apology« focuses on the critique levelled against art or literature from Plato onwards, thereby placing special emphasis on the debates of the last thirty years. Jusdanis's survey of the field reveals that the modern critique of art dominantly targets art's »withdrawal from history into its own isolation« (23) rather than its »lack of truth« (ibid.). This charge of »lack of sympathy for the world« (ibid.) is linked with literature's emergence as a separate sphere of social practice in the wake of differentiation. Critics' distrust of literature arises due to its complicity with ideological power configurations (e.g. elitism, imperialism). Jusdanis points out, however, that this complicity is often portrayed in literary works themselves, e.g. in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, so that literature may draw attention to its own role in processes of social exclusion. In so doing, the parabolic capacity of literature is staged: the reader is invited to »compare the real and the imaginary, to take pleasure at the formal invention, and then to rebuke social injustice« (26). Jusdanis then goes on to critically discuss theories which claim the disintegration of art's autonomy in the wake of the aesthetization of life or rather processes of dedifferentiation. For Jusdanis such a diagnosis is not valid as »perceptible markers between art and nonart« (33) continue to exist. Moreover, he has no patience with proponents who push for a return of art to »some predifferentiated state when art was one object among other objects« (ibid.). Such a view is blind for the social function art fulfils on the basis of its autonomy.

The third chapter deals with the social and the ideological autonomy of art. For Jusdanis this distinction between two kinds of autonomy is vital for his defence of art. He emphasizes that critics who denounce art because of »its self-conscious interiority, its celebration of form, and its apparent indifference to injustice« (36) can only do so by ignoring the historical situation in which these two forms of autonomy emerged. Historically, the social differentiation of art into a separate domain was accompanied by philosophical discourses on the autonomy of art. Jusdanis briefly outlines both developments and the way they reinforced each other. The fact that the notion of aesthetic autonomy was cultivated during a time which also saw »the commodification of art and its incorporation within the modern curriculum« (45) points to aesthetic autonomy as an expression of »these very social forces that created art as a distinct

sphere« (47). The struggle for art's autonomy in the Enlightenment age was connected with the fight for greater political freedom. Critics who deride art's autonomy as an isolationist stance thus overlook »that the institutionalization of art was accompanied by politicization of the artist« (53).

In a fascinating discussion of Kant's aesthetics, Jusdanis makes clear that the »idea of autonomy and the universality of the judgement of taste« (40) reveals art to be a »communal practice« (41) and part of »a process of social exchange« (ibid.). Sharing our aesthetic judgement means entering a »dialogical process« (ibid.) within the social sphere. Jusdanis highlights the political dimension of aesthetic judgement by quoting Hanna Arendt: »Culture and politics, then, belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgement and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world.« (ibid.) Jusdanis concludes that only literature's autonomy allows it to be oppositional because a realm for imagining alternative realities is opened up.

This conclusion marks the transition to the two chapters in which he elaborates his theory of parabasis in detail and offers a variety of literary case studies. »Art as Parabasis« is the topic of chapter four, where Jusdanis »take[s] the Russian Formalist notion of defamiliarization one step further« (58). For the Formalists, literature is valuable because it disrupts habits of perception and response, i.e. renders the familiar unfamiliar, thus making the reader perceive the world in a fresh light. The social context of art, conspicuously absent in the Formalist account of literature's function, comes to the fore when linking defamiliarization and aesthetic autonomy: »Literature's capacity to prolong perception also brings light unto its own sovereignty, allowing readers to perceive both the aesthetic process and the artificiality of the represented object. [...] [B]y disrupting their identification with the real, literature *also* facilitates a distance between them and the real.« (59) The »social benefit« (63) and value of literature lies in this distancing effect from the real: »By preserving the border between an aesthetic and empirical order, it [= literature] enables us to take a distance from this reality, criticize it, and ultimately change it.« (63) As such, this insight may not strike one as radically new.² Jusdanis, however, manages to give it an interesting spin by linking it to the historical developments outlined in the previous chapters. The decisive point is that »in conditions of autonomy, literature has turned the relationship between actual world and invention into a main preoccupation« (66). The parabolic means that literature foregrounds the »difference between life and fiction, highlighting itself as a place of and for simulation« (57).

We are provided with a development of parabolic forms in chapter five (»The Line Between Living and Pretending«), where Jusdanis contrasts the staging of the parabolic in classical comedy with its modern manifestations. On the contemporary stage, parabasis often takes the form of a play within a play while narrative fiction frequently makes use of intermedial references. The literary case studies Jusdanis discusses in order to illuminate what he means by parabasis contribute to an enrichment of his argument.

In his concluding chapter on »The Future of Fiction: Or, Is There a Parabolic in the Paratactic?« Jusdanis tackles the up-dated form of the death-of-art thesis, which sees narrative on the way to being replaced by the database, i.e. the »nondiscriminating collection of information« (101). In order to reflect on the effects which the alleged disappearance of narrative has on literature, Jusdanis takes a closer look at a novel seeking to imitate the world of database: Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel* (1984). The analysis reveals that the additive or paratactic mode does not obliterate the parabolic for »the real/fake dichotomy is its [= the book's] organizing metaphor« (103). Jusdanis then moves on to critically question the »hype of the hypertext« (108). He convincingly argues that the enthusiastic embrace of hy-

pertexts is the direct result of critics confusing a reader's open choice of sequential options (the surface structure of the hypertext) with hermeneutic freedom. The final section of this chapter brings the reader back to the beginning of the book by addressing ongoing transitions in the media field. Jusdanis sees in hypertext literature the potential for further transmutations of the parabolic as it can transform »the old tension between verity and invention into a conflict between the real and the virtually real« (116). The computer does not herald the death of literature, but rather »a shift from one technology to another« (116).

Critique and Conclusion

All in all, Jusdanis's insightful study offers a thought-provoking and important contribution to the debate on why literature matters. One of the strengths of this book lies in his lucid disentanglement of various conceptions subsumed under the slogan of art's death and his subsequent knowledgeable interrogation of these in light of the parabolic. His insightful observations invite further research as a wealth of other literary examples come to mind which could also be drawn on to substantiate his theses. While there is much to praise about Jusdanis's *Defense of Literature*, I was, however, left puzzled by his usage of the term ›truth‹. Truth features prominently in his study as it is repeatedly invoked to characterize literature and to stress its importance. Some short quotes from the preface may illustrate the dominant role ›truth‹ plays in his study:

This parabolic function underscores literature's structural relationship to reality. But this link is not Platonic. *It does not ask whether literature is truthful.* [...] Rather than pursuing this mimetic line of inquiry, I wish to change the direction, away from *objective reality* to the threshold literature draws between itself and that reality.
(3–4; my emphasis)

It [= literature] is fiction that claims to be true. We lean on its truths.
(5; my emphasis)

Literature is important not only because *its depictions are truthful* but also because it enables us to reflect on that tension between a verifiable reality and its distorted reproduction.
(ibid.; my emphasis)

Within only a very short space, the movement has gone from not asking whether literature is truthful to asserting that literature's depictions are truthful. At first glance, this contradiction may be easily resolved when taking into account Jusdanis's rejection of a mimetic notion of truth. This, however, still leaves open the question in what way precisely literature is true (or, for that matter, in what way all literature claims to be true). The issue does not become any clearer with the analyses of literary examples:

This gateway signals literature's parabolic capacity to mediate between the actual Dublin and its representation in Joyce's *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*. Rather than leading to some authentic place, literature features the tension between artifice and verisimilitude. In so doing, it reminds readers that *knowing the world is a matter of interacting with truth and fiction.*
(35; my emphasis)

My hunch is that ›truth‹ is used as a synonym for the actual world in this passage, but I am not sure of this. Jusdanis's claim that by »fictionalizing reality we come to truth« (92) counters the correlation between reality and truth that I see implied in other sections of the book.³ However, even if my hunch is correct, this does not resolve the ambiguity as ›reality‹ is an equally slippery customer. Jusdanis stresses that he »does not rehash the traditional opposition between fiction and reality [...] [or] pose reality as a given empirical order we simply per-

ceive and discover« (66). Reading on, we learn that »literature's capacity to make us engage with the *dialectic between the empirical and the real* is an essential good in society. By remaining vigilant at the border of *fact and fable*, literature holds off the pressure to fold one into the other.« (ibid.; my emphasis). Thus, a further set of distinctions is introduced without further elaboration.

The above critical interjection, however, does not lessen the stimulating quality of Jusdanis's multi-faceted and erudite study. He himself emphasizes that his book is intended to provide a »partial answer« (3) to the pressing question why one should study (and fund) literature. The cognitive function of literature he foregrounds with his conception of the parabolic renders this ›partial answer‹ an inspired defence of literature and as such a rewarding read for professional and lay readers alike.

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Notes

¹ Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, Malden, MA/Oxford 2008; Hubert Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Notes Towards a Functional Theory of Imaginative Texts, with Examples from American Literature*, *REAL* 17 (2001), 85–100; Hubert Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie: Zur kulturellen Funktion imaginativer Texte an Beispielen des amerikanischen Romans*, Tübingen 2002. Further examples are Rüdiger Ahrens/Laurenz Volkman (ed.), *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature*, Heidelberg 1996; Ottmar Ette, *Über-Lebenswissen I–III*, Berlin 2004–2010; Marion Gymnich/Ansgar Nünning (ed.), *Funktionen von Literatur: Theoretische Grundlagen und Modellinterpretationen*, Trier 2005; Stella Butter, *Literatur als Medium kultureller Selbstreflexion*, Trier 2007; Anna-Margaretha Horatschek/Susanne Bach/Stefan Glomb/Stefan Horlacher (ed.), *Literatur und Lebenskunst*, Trier 2008.

² The value of literature's distancing effect from reality is repeatedly emphasized by scholars, as the following quotes may briefly illustrate: »Weil Literatur [...] mit einer Einstellung auf sich selbst operiert, kann sie im Kontrast etwa zu audiovisuellen Massenmedien als genuines Reflexionsmedium gelten. Die nämlich blenden ihre Selbstreferenz – gemeint ist: den implizit immer mitlaufenden Verweis darauf, daß ein Bild ein Bild, ein Satz ein Satz ist und nicht mit dem Abgebildeten oder Gesagten zusammenfällt – zugunsten der Realitätsillusion aus.« (Uwe C. Steiner, Können die Kulturwissenschaften eine neue moralische Funktion beanspruchen? Eine Bestandsaufnahme, *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 71:1 [1997], 5–38); »[D]as die eigene Lebensführung orientierende Potenzial der Literatur [...] [kann] nur dann aktualisiert werden [...], wenn Fiktion nicht mit Beliebigkeit gleichgesetzt, sondern das Fingieren mit Wolfgang Iser [...] als ein im Spannungsfeld von Realem und Imaginärem angesiedelter Akt verstanden wird, der sich dem anthropologisch verankerten Impuls des denkenden Transzendierens des Seienden verdankt.« (Stefan Glomb, ›When Anything Can Happen, Everything Matters‹: Ian McEwans *Saturday* und die Aktualität der Lebenskunst, in: Horatschek et al. 2008, 306 f.). See the titles listed in the first footnote for further examples.

³ Cf. the following passages: »If art has always danced with truth, alternatively embracing or snubbing it, this performance has stumbled in modernity. With art turning into itself and going its own way, philosophers and poets legitimately asked if art wanted to be true to reality or to itself.« (36; my emphasis); »This artfulness [...] brings to the fore the experience of fabrication while highlighting the *gap between truth and fable*.« (65); »When *semblance and truth* blend into one another art loses its ability to offer counterstatements.« (88; my emphasis).

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