

# New prospects in literary research

Geoffrey Galt Harpman  
Ansgar Nünning

Koen Hilberdink (ed.)

NEW PROSPECTS IN LITERARY RESEARCH

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## Introduction

In early 2004, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences published the foresight report '*Gij letterdames en gij letterheren.*' *Nieuwe mogelijkheden voor taalkundig en letterkundig onderzoek in Nederland* [New opportunities for linguistic and literary research in the Netherlands]. One of the points raised in the report is that the object of literary research has changed. Not only does the field now concern itself with studying authors and genres that were regarded as 'peripheral' only a few decades ago, but it also explores other types of artistic expression as 'texts', whether they take the form of words, images or another medium. Literature is increasingly being regarded as only one of many different forms of representation which should be studied within the context of other cultural phenomena. In addition to contextualisation, interdisciplinary research has also become a key factor. Such research opens up new prospects for literature studies within our changing academic landscape, and challenges us to find a new place for it within the broader field of cultural studies.

The shift in the object of literary research is a global phenomenon. Recent years have witnessed a lively debate in the Anglo-Saxon world and in other countries such as Germany concerning the way the academic domain of literature studies is evolving and the implications this has for future research.

It is for this reason that the Academy's Council for the Hu-

manities has appointed Geoffrey Galt Harpham and Ansgar Nuenning, two prominent researchers from the United States and Germany respectively, to report on the debates in their own countries and describe the prospects for the future. The Council for the Humanities hopes that the publication of these lectures will stimulate discussion about the position and content of the field of literature studies.

Koen Hilberdink  
Secretary, Council for the Humanities

Geoffrey Galt Harpham

Returning to philology:  
The past and future of literary study

Just a few months ago, Edward Said crowned his illustrious career with a new book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*.<sup>1</sup> In one sense, this was not a surprise, because Said, like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Paul de Man, and undoubtedly Jacques Derrida, had clearly attained the stature of those whose demise signals an accelerated rate of scholarly productivity – at his death in September 2003, it was not uncommon to hear talk of the passing of ‘the age of Said’ – and this book was not his only posthumous publication. But the argument of the book was surprising. For the vast majority of his readers and admirers, Said had exemplified the figure of the engaged public intellectual whose work, especially since the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978, was characterized by a strong sense of political commitment, even urgency. Said was perhaps the most visible figure in the movement to expand the study of literature beyond the domain of the aesthetic and the text-obsession of high theory so that it could embrace culture, politics, and history. His often wild battles tested the limits of academic decorum and became themselves subjects of great controversy. And as he aged he seemed to become even more contentious. Indeed, in an article called ‘Thoughts on Late Style,’ published – posthumously – in 2004, he had challenged the idea that old age confers wisdom and acceptance, and argued that in certain figures such

<sup>1</sup> New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

as Beethoven, Ibsen, and Cavafy, we find instead an enduring spirit of ‘intransigence, difficulty, and contradiction.’<sup>2</sup>

In this context, it was especially striking that the central chapter of this last book is titled ‘The Return to Philology.’ Philology? If there is anything less exciting than philology, it might be the thought of returning to it. And yet this is precisely what Said urges. Criticism, he argues, has been overtaken by jargon, professional self-absorption, and facile political posturing, and can only be saved by a return to the ‘detailed, patient scrutiny of and a lifelong attentiveness to’ the text, a deep reluctance to depart from the words on the page in pursuit of ‘general or even concrete statements about vast structures of power or . . . vaguely therapeutic structures of salutary redemption’ (61). I predict that at this point many readers will check the title page to verify the author, for the immediate impression created by this passage is that Said has gone soft at the end, renouncing politics, post-colonialism, activism, even his own account of late style, in favor of the comforts of reaction.

Many of these doubts might, however, be put to rest by Said’s account of the object of philological attention, the text. For Said, a text consists of ‘the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings who exist in history’ (61). A philological reading of these words and rhetorics entails ‘first putting oneself in the position of the author, for whom writing is a series of decisions and choices expressed in words’ (62). These choices constitute aesthetic creation, which, because it constructs a counter-world, represents an ‘unreconciled opposition to the depredations of daily life’ and to the ‘identities . . . given by the flag or the national war of the moment’ (63, 80). Said’s version of philology leads, then, to an imaginative encounter with an intransigent author, a deep immersion in the historical world that author inhabited, and privileged access to a heroic resistance to the actual. The apolitical modesty of individual philologists notwithstanding, Said argues that ‘the

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, ‘Thoughts on Late Style,’ *London Review of Books* vol. 26, no. 15 (5 August 2004); available online at [http://www.edwardsaid.org/articles/LRB/v26\\_n15\\_said01.html](http://www.edwardsaid.org/articles/LRB/v26_n15_said01.html).

actuality of reading is, fundamentally, an act of perhaps modest human emancipation and enlightenment' (66). He concludes with a final gesture of disregard for his own cosmopolitan admirers by asserting that the project of a new philology has no more natural home than the pluralistic, democratic, inclusive United States of America.

By promoting philology, Said seems to be reaching back for a positivist conception of criticism; but by defining philology as he does, he seems to be reaching even farther back, beneath method itself, to a fascinated engagement with the mind of the historical author, the kind of engagement that, in fact, marked his own career, with its extended dialogues with such master-spirits as Vico, Erich Auerbach, and above all Joseph Conrad. Professors have forgotten about the productive intensity of this kind of engagement, he charges, and have produced as a consequence a desiccated discourse that reduces literature to an object safe for the undergraduate classroom only because it lacks both scholarly discipline and transformative power. Humanism in its most provocatively 'naïve' form, philology represents an attempt to reactivate or reclaim both these virtues. Hearing this, many of you might concur with Said that the natural home for this ecstatically redemptive return to traditional values is indeed the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

But the return to philology has other sponsors; indeed, it has low-country provenance. Twenty years before Said's essay was written, Paul de Man produced his own late-style endorsement of philology. One year before the end of his life, he wrote a brief article that attempted to capture the essence of the theoretical revolution he had helped to lead, and, in a disturbing coincidence, to defend it as – and here I quote the title of his essay – 'The Return to Philology.'<sup>3</sup> De Man argued that the divorce of literary study from philology and rhetoric had, like many divorces, benefited neither party. A literary study freed

<sup>3</sup> Paul de Man, 'The Return to Philology,' in *The Resistance to Theory*, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 33 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 21-27.

from the chastening discipline represented by philology had, in his view, proceeded on the belief that one could pass straight through formal or rhetorical structures of the text to 'the general context of human experience or history' (23). Untethered critics had indulged themselves in aesthetic sensations; swinging freely from the text to the world, they had made ethical or political pronouncements as though these lay within their area of expertise. One could only conclude – he concluded – that criticism without philology was merely the professional, or unprofessional, form of the pleasure principle.

De Man recognized a clean distinction he recognized between aesthetic values and linguistic structures, and insisted that this distinction dictated that scholars should devote themselves to a hard, dry, 'technical' apprehension of formal qualities and resist the temptation to make ethical or political pronouncements. Readers, he argued, must be disciplined and humble enough to admit that they are often confused or blocked in their search for meaning by rhetorical figures and tropes, which command attention all by themselves. The crisis in literary studies that many had attributed to the rise of deconstruction was in fact, he said, the work of others who had an imperfect grasp of traditional scholarship. With a sly deviousness that characterized his deepest cognitive and rhetorical habits, he insisted that the theoretical movement that seemed so anarchic, so subversive, so anti-traditional, was nothing more than philology taken seriously. 'We have had enough beauty,' he is reported to have said, 'now we need de troot.'

To say the very least, it is striking to see de Man, a leader of the high-theoretical movement of the 1970s and '80s, and Said, the leader of the cultural-studies/post-colonial movement that succeeded it, end their careers, and indeed their lives, on a point of agreement. More striking still is that this agreement concerns the value of the radically conservative and long-abandoned practice of philology, conceived as a kind of critical activity that occupied a space logically prior to the determination of meaning as such. (Actually, they share two positions on philology – that it is the most rigid, boring, sterile, pedantic, and regressive form of literary study ever seen; and that we must

return to it.) But the most striking fact of all is that they use the same word to denote such utterly different things – intimacy, resistance, emancipation, and enlightenment for Said, and, for de Man, a harshly ascetic corrective to precisely such fantasies.

What de Man and Said mutually demonstrate is not really the value of philology – a concept whose meaning has suddenly become uncertain – but the perennial appeal to literary scholars of the idea of a unified, empirical discipline, a scholarly practice that is as clear and definite as science. Critics have felt this yearning, richly informed by a sense of inadequacy, vulnerability, and exposure, since criticism split off from philology over a century ago. As Gerald Graff has detailed, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century debate within literary studies between the ‘scholars’ and the ‘critics’ was really a battle between those who thought literature should be studied from a humanistic perspective and those who insisted that all language, including literary language, should be studied by scientific methods.<sup>4</sup> Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the critics won, and relegated the scholar-philologists to a dusty corner. The philologists seemed perfectly happy, but the victorious critics were haunted by their deed, and seemed to long for the discipline they had cast off. This is the context in which we should understand, for example, T. S. Eliot’s insistence that the first requirement for a critic was ‘a highly developed sense of fact,’ which he opposed to the vaporous appreciations and opinions that dominated criticism at the time. The New Criticism of the 1940s and 50s advertised itself as a ‘new formalism’ in order to underscore its difference from mere evaluative or historical criticism; John Crowe Ransom, for example, called for a new ‘science’ of criticism, an ‘objective’ approach concentrating on ‘technical studies of poetry’ at the expense of then-fashionable ‘historical’ or ‘ethical’ approaches. Starting from a very different position, Derrida, too, urged that criticism become objective once again by focusing on a ‘layer or moment’ of philological ‘doubling commentary’ preceding interpretation proper;

<sup>4</sup> Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

his point, however, was that this relatively neutral moment of commentary did not foreclose an ethical approach, which he called ‘ethic of discussion,’ but ensured it. Lists should be inclusive, so I will note that, in *Vamps and Tramps*, even Camille Paglia, not herself a philologist, urged a return to academic sobriety in the form of ‘a general education based on hard facts and respect for scholarship.’<sup>5</sup> For some reason, sunny Stanford University seems to have become the center of a new philology: Seth Lerer has edited a volume on the subject of *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology*, and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has published *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship*.<sup>6</sup> Right now, my own institution is sponsoring a series of seminars designed to produce the next generation of leaders in the field of criticism by immersing them in a week-long experience of ‘close reading.’ The distinguished medievalist Lee Patterson, has even tempted fate (so far successfully) by publishing, in 1994, an essay with the fateful title of ‘The Return to Philology,’ in which he argued that medievalists in particular should advocate for philology ‘not despite but because of its intractable penchant for pedantry’ because therein lay the distinctiveness of medieval studies, a practice of rigor that could give some backbone to methodologically slack critics.<sup>7</sup> These are but a few

<sup>5</sup> John Crowe Ransom, ‘Criticism, Inc.’ in Vincent Leitch, et. al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 1108-18; Jacques Derrida, ‘Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion,’ in *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 111-60; Camille Paglia, *Vamps and Tramps: New Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 385.

<sup>6</sup> Seth Lerer, *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology. Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2003). A German translation of Gumbrecht’s book appeared also in 2003 with the title of *Die Macht der Philologie. Ueber einen verborgenen Impuls im wissenschaftlichen Umgang mit Texten* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag).

<sup>7</sup> Lee Patterson, ‘The Return to Philology,’ in John Van Engen, ed., *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 231-44, 241. Patterson’s immediate reference point is a volume called *On Philology*, ed., Jan Ziolkowski (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990).

of the many instances in which critics have experienced a kind of recoil from their own freedom and lack of defined methodology, and have, as a consequence, given voice to a hunger for what they have given up – objectivity, form, an emphasis on the words themselves – in other words, philology.

Philology, or the idea of philology, enjoys this status as the assured scientific core of literary studies, the very pit of authenticity, because it emerged from linguistics at a time when linguistics was beginning to make aggressive claims. In *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1861), Max Muller argued that linguistics ought to have ‘the highest place among the Physical Sciences’; de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, merely repeated Muller in this respect, announcing his intention to see linguistics crowned as ‘the Queen of the Sciences.’<sup>8</sup> At first a near synonym for linguistics, philology appropriated this confident scientism and transferred it to literary study. And nobody, it seems, not even the most daring, iconoclastic, and self-confident of scholars, has been immune from the dark allure of science, with its secure methodology, its strong consensus on goals, its public prestige, its institutional power.

At the moment, literary study seems incapable of competing, unable to articulate reasons why it ought to have formal parity with science even within the university. One sign of this incapacity comes to me directly in the form of applications for fellowships at The National Humanities Center. I have noticed that applications in literary study lack an assured collective focus, especially by comparison with those in other fields such as history. Historians are fully capable of asserting, with massive confidence, that there was a bishop, that the bishop kept records – or that there was a revolution, and that the revolution had causes – and going from there. By contrast, literary scholars seem, as a group, uncertain about method and even about goals; they do not seem to know precisely what literary study studies. Much of the revolutionary conviction has gone out of

<sup>8</sup> Max Muller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1882), I: 23; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: The Philosophical Library, Inc., 1959).

the great movements of the recent past, such as psychoanalytic criticism, Marxism, feminist criticism; what has been inherited from these is a leaden institutional remainder in the form of required courses, programs of study, and anthologies of critical or theoretical essays. And the recent deaths of Said and Derrida have deepened the sense that the profession lacks leadership in the form of a cohort of people who enjoy a discipline-wide recognition. Many younger scholars seem uncertain what counts as a fact in literary study, or how advances in knowledge might be measured. In such a context, returning to philology is an answer to the question, 'What should I be doing?'

The world of scholarly publication displays its own forms of uncertainty, and enacts its own species of return. Many of the leading journals, once known for their sharp theoretical or methodological focus, have now become more eclectic and accessible; more and more essays and books, it seems, have illustrations – perhaps reflecting the vitality of the field of 'visual culture,' or perhaps in response to George W. Bush's reported comment that one of the outstanding features of books is the pictures you sometimes find in them. This tendency to eclecticism is evident even in the case of *Studies in Philology* and *Modern Philology*, which have dismayed their loyal readers in recent years by publishing essays that are not only un-pedantic, but actually interesting!

If fewer journals in literary studies maintain a consistent tone, frame of reference, or theoretical orientation, presses have begun to specialize, attempting to corner the market in the history of science, Slavic studies, religion, and so forth. Monographs on a single author, once a staple of scholarly publication, have become rare. I was told that my book on Joseph Conrad in 1996 was the last such book the University of Chicago Press would publish (I haven't checked to see if the press has followed through on this threat). Specialist work addressed exclusively to others in the field has a difficult time getting into print, and if it does, the print runs are small and the typeface smaller.

Ambitious universities – and these days, no university can afford to be unambitious – are requiring book publication for tenure, and yet the leading presses have become reluctant to

publish anyone's first book. In response, the suggestion was recently made in all earnestness that young scholars publish their second book first!<sup>9</sup> Academic presses once devoted to scholarly originality now specialize in 'encyclopedias,' 'dictionaries,' or 'handbooks.' The distinguished presses Blackwell and Cambridge seem to have given themselves over to a new service industry: 'companions' for lonely readers – a Companion to Marxism, to Renaissance poetry, to Digital Humanities, to the Victorian novel (this one a 'Concise Companion'). Blackwell actually has a *Companion to Romance!* Other forms of companionship for readers are Readers. For a scholar, the mark of success is having a 'reader' of one's work. (When *The Emmanuel Levinas Reader* appeared, one reviewer wondered, 'Who is the Emmanuel Levinas Reader?') Reserved only for a few of this small company are 'critical readers' composed of work about one's work. Some tiny percentage of those honored in this way ascend to the super-status of a 'critical thinker,' as defined by the Routledge series (Simone de Beauvoir, Stuart Hall), or even a 'modern master,' as defined by Fontana (Freud, Heidegger, Marx, Chomsky). All these volumes are handy, but the work they do is primarily conservative, reinforcing the reputations of celebrated individuals rather than exploring new territory. The presumption behind all of them is that the important work has already been done, and now needs only to be packaged and retailed.

When you speak to individual editors, they say that they want bold, speculative, discipline-transforming work that challenges long-held assumptions, advances the project of critical inquiry, and sets the agenda for the next generation. But when you look at the books they publish, you see in many cases an almost suffocating emphasis on consolidation, as presses orient themselves towards the huge and constantly-renewed undergraduate market, and the smaller but still reliable graduate student market. Publishers pay careful attention to the performance of those rare things, lively books on pathbreaking subjects by hitherto

<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Garber, 'Why Can't Young Scholars Write Their Second Books First?' *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 October 2004, B20.

unknown authors; when they see discouraging sales figures, they send more Companions out onto the streets.

Return is not always retreat, and even retreat is not always defeat. A certain withdrawal from the presumption of grand theory was necessary and appropriate, especially in the humble discipline of literary studies. But a perennial feeling that one has strayed, and needs to return to some protected, sanctioned ground requires some other explanation. The explanation readiest to hand is that both the straying and the return are aspects or dimensions of literary study itself, that literary study does not stray away from something and then return to it, but stays in place. Perhaps we could characterize literary study in terms of a double movement or double practice, with a descriptive or empiricist moment as well as a speculative or interpretive moment. This hypothesis conforms to a certain pattern of equivocation occurring where you would least expect to find it, in the canonical definitions of philology. The Byzantinist Ihor Ševcenko observed that, 'Philology is constituting and interpreting the texts that have come down to us. It is a narrow thing, but without it nothing else is possible.'<sup>10</sup> This definition conforms to Saussure's succinct description of the mission of philology: 'to correct, interpret, and comment upon texts.' Neither Ševcenko nor Saussure seems troubled by the difference between 'constituting' and 'correcting' on one hand and 'interpreting' or 'commenting' on the other, but here is the entire problem in a nutshell: the interpretive straying occurs at the point of origin, in the very act of determining an accurate account of the object itself. As Saussure goes on to note, the studies of the early philologists 'led to an interest in literary history, customs, institutions, etc.,' with, apparently, no sense that some Rubicon was being crossed (1). Attempting the most capacious possible definition, Daniel Kinney writes that,

The word sets out with great expectations; it means 'love of *logos*,' of language, of theory, of language *par excellence*, learning in general . . . . It can signify encyclopedic reach, thorough-going common-knowledge reappraisal/review . . . or else learning for

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Ziolkowski, *op. cit.*, 6.

learning's sake, learning for show, the vainglorious 'science of signs' that Augustine once blasts as opposing and thwarting a charitable 'science of things.' There is no human discourse not part of this broader philology, and most of our favorite curricular rubrics could be taken as specialty-glosses on its main concerns.<sup>11</sup>

In this account, philology is everything, and everything is philology. And yet, the word retains its suggestion of regressive narrowness and extreme specificity. It is little wonder that so many of those seeking to return to some assured site of authenticity as the cure for whatever ails us find in philology such a site.

The complications characteristic of philology have also troubled linguistics in general, or rather, general (theoretical) linguistics. Despite the efforts of Muller, Saussure, and many others, linguistics has never fully established itself as a science, with some arguing that language is essentially a matter of grammatical form and others insisting that it must be studied as a context-dependent communicative practice.<sup>12</sup> For a better understanding of the differences between these two basic ways of understanding language, we might think of literature, in which both are amplified or intensified. On the one hand, literature possesses a high degree of formal complexity as compared to ordinary language, and so exemplifies the concept of language as code or structure, a 'mind-independent' entity that can be grasped by rational method. But, also to a greater degree than ordinary language, literary language expresses and represents – in a word, it communicates. Understanding literary language, context is all. When we read a literary text, we are, as Said reminds us, engaged with both the mind of the author and the particulars of the world that the author has created. And

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Kinney, 'Some Philologies of the Future,' online at: [http://www.people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/futurephilologies.html#N\\_6\\_](http://www.people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/futurephilologies.html#N_6_).

<sup>12</sup> See Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Language Alone: The Critical Fetish of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), ch. 1. The hopes of Muller, de Saussure, and others were pinned on the effort to determine a proper object for scientific description and analysis – 'language itself' or 'language alone'. Essentially, the debate over the scientific status of linguistics has taken the form of a debate on whether this object has been determined and delimited.

since both mind and world must be inferred or constructed by the reader from partial or indirect textual evidence, the words themselves, those objects of philological respect and attention, are porous, open, suggestive; they require supplementation in order to be understood. As Jonathan Culler paraphrases this argument, literature is what language is when it is ‘most deliberately and most ludically, most freely and most self-reflectively, being language . . . [literature is] where the structures and the functioning of language [are] most explicitly and revealingly foregrounded.’<sup>13</sup> Even here, we can see a persistent doubleness in the terms *structure* and *functioning*, the one invoking the text-in-itself, and the other the less formalizable and worldly process of meaning-making. If literary language is language at its most fully or purely linguistic, then we can see why literature seems to invite a return to philology (considered as a science specializing in questions of form), and also why it resists such a return through a persistent and ineradicable straying, a nonscientific and irreducible emphasis on function or communication.

If a return to philology will not, then, give us what we seem to crave, if it will not deliver the assurances we seem to require, if it is not precisely the answer we seek – if it might in fact be lethal – then what will do for us? What ought we really to be craving, requiring, seeking? How should literary studies respond to the challenges it faces from those who fear that only science will save us? How should we address this yearning for return?

One response would be simply to declare ourselves radically and defiantly unscientific. In his 2002 address to the Modern Language Association, Stephen Greenblatt took this approach, arguing that the point of literary study is the cultivation of a certain kind of feeling or sensation. All the kinds of work we do as professionals, he said, including formal analyses, aesthetic arguments, historical contextualizations, theoretical propositions, and even, presumably, philology, are in essence ‘ritualized

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Culler, ‘The Literary in Theory,’ in Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *What’s Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 273-92, 274.

expressions of deep pleasure.<sup>14</sup> This pleasure comes not from the satisfactions of discovering or creating knowledge, but from the experience of intimacy with the mind of the author: 'The dream of intense, directly personal contact is an essential part of the experience of reading literature . . . a silent moment, constantly renewed, in which you feel that someone – very often someone long vanished into dust, someone who could not conceivably have known your name . . . is sending you a message' (418). Greenblatt, who began *Shakespearean Negotiations* with the famous sentence, 'I began with the desire to speak with the dead' (and titled a chapter in his recent biography of Shakespeare 'Speaking with the Dead'), here defines this desire as the essence of literary singularity, the source of the difference between literature and other kinds of discourse, and thus the defining feature of literary study.<sup>15</sup> 'The possibility of language breaking out of the practical boundaries of ordinary exchange, enduring longer than the moment of its utterance, reaching unfamiliar shores is,' he says in his MLA address, 'the source of our fascination with everything that we designate by that indefinable but indispensable term 'literature'' (22).

I confess that I am troubled by Greenblatt's way, at once sensualist and slightly macabre, of putting the matter. Can we claim to be rational at all if our work takes the form of pleasure, fascination, and séances with the dead? I think that damage control here should take the form of a refinement of the too-simple term *pleasure*. The full literary experience involves not only the pleasures Greenblatt notes, but also a satisfaction that is both intellectual and affective, an Aristotelian sense of fitness or rightness that we derive from seeing human experience, which can seem so messy, shapeless, and contingent, encompassed in a formal structure that contains and even dignifies it by

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, 'Stay, Illusion – On Receiving Messages from the Dead,' *PMLA* 118.3 (2003) 417-26, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989); *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004).

conferring on it a sense of coherence and completeness. An important part of the distinctively literary pleasure we take is structured and enabled by the formal qualities of the text.

Another way of saying this is that the experience of form is, or can be, part of our self-understanding. This is the argument behind one of the more intriguing, if neglected, accounts of the literary experience in recent years, Steven Knapp's *Literary Interest*.<sup>16</sup> Knapp resists the temptation to positivism by defining literature in terms of the kind of interest we take in certain kinds of language, an interest that exceeds anything represented in the text. When we read *Macbeth*, our interest in the play cannot be reduced to any facts we might cull from it concerning the subjects of regicide, ambition, or the pathologies of marriage. Rather, we are interested in the possibility that certain elements in the play form homologies or analogies with aspects of our own experience; we are solicited by the prospect of a knowledge that is not merely factual, a kind of understanding that might affect or concern us in ways not immediately self-evident.

To abbreviate Knapp's complex argument, we could say that literature engages our capacity to be interested in formal structures of representation. Taking an interest in *Macbeth*, we evaluate the protagonist's situation, his actions, his thoughts; we implicitly entertain the question of what someone – ourselves, for instance – would do in similar circumstances. Taking this kind of interest in a literary work, placing ourselves as it were within the work, we become capable of seeing ourselves from the outside, with greater clarity than we usually have, and also from the inside, as our dispositions or responses are evoked by the text. Literary interest is thus the primary source of the silent, often tacit or unremarked – sometimes even unwilling and even unwelcome – sense of self-knowledge or self-enlargement we experience when reading. Such an experience is sometimes pleasurable, to be sure, but it is not *mere* or *simple* pleasure because it is not self-interested. The self as such is not

<sup>16</sup> Steven Knapp, *Literary Interest: The Limits of Anti-Formalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

really the point, which is, rather, our ability to imagine and to situate ourselves experimentally in a world different from the one we occupy by interesting ourselves in the formal structure of literature. This is a different kind of interest from the kind we take in other people because literary characters have an inclusiveness or generalizability, a capacity to contain and give voice to diverse energies, that real people do not. Macbeth is thane of Cawdor and Glamis, but he is also a figure, a character type with indefinite parameters that might include, perhaps, King James (a member of the original audience for Shakespeare's play who traced his ancestry to Banquo), and even perhaps us.

When we understand ourselves to be in some sense described in Shakespeare's play, we affirm a basic human capacity to live a life in some sense distinct from our actual material circumstances. But we also do much more: we implicitly assume a position of agency in which we are able freely to consider alternative courses of action. To see ourselves somehow represented in a formal structure is to be relieved of certain of our human limitations, set free in a world of possibility. By investing a text with interest, we ourselves become, for a moment, literary – fully ourselves, yet also open to other constructions, other identities. This experience is historically conditioned: it would be difficult if not impossible to have it, for example, in a culture with no tradition or understanding of the notion of a subject-agent capable of free and rational choice. Texts produced in such a culture might be in some respects indistinguishable from what we call literature, yet not have the same value or functions that they have in our own. In them, interest might be structured differently, or might not be elicited at all. In short, the phenomenon of literary interest is one marker of cultural or historical distinctness, perhaps a marker of modernity, and leads out from the text to the larger culture in which the text circulates.

Occupied with a series of technical problems about recursiveness and agency, Knapp does not develop his account of literary interest into a general program for literary study, but it is tempting to do so. If we were to begin with the circuit of exchange between reader and text rather than in the text itself,

we could immediately and without regret relinquish the somewhat perverse impulse to return to philology as if to a mythic or sanctified (albeit pedantic, boring, and sterile) ground of authenticity. Formal features would not be regarded as mind-independent objects of scientific scrutiny but as relative constants in the collective historical experience of literature. One of the challenges of criticism would be to identify these constants or regularities and to distinguish them from what is aberrant or idiosyncratic. Those features of the text that have been counted as ahistorical formal facts would be refashioned as consensual judgments occurring in particular times and places.

Scholars focusing not on literary form as a textual property, but on the formal structure of our relation to literary texts would be compelled to take into account the irreducibly imaginative and affective investment that readers make and that characterizes the literary experience. With this reorientation, a new context might emerge for one of the most promising fields of research in and around literary study today, the emotions or passions. Currently, a number of literary scholars are examining the way emotions or passions are represented or organized, but there is no general inquiry into the character of the emotional structure specific to what we call literature.<sup>17</sup> Grouping together questions of form, cognition, and affect, literary interest connects literary study with history, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and even neuroscience. Literary study organized around literary interest could, if pursued boldly and imaginatively, become an expanding rather than a dwindling enterprise. There is, in short, a project here.

One of the most appealing and essential elements of a literary study based on literary interest is that it would begin with common, rather than scholarly, experience. This is important.

<sup>17</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming, 2005). Ngai's book is a meditation on the noncathartic feelings of envy, irritation, and paranoia, and on the ideological and representational dilemmas that are flagged by them.

Scholars do not own the texts they teach or profess; they read them like anybody else, and the immense labors of scholarship are justified only by the interest that the society at large takes in literary texts. And while scholarship itself is addressed to a far more restricted audience than literature, scholars must not forget that literature belongs to all those who can read and who have access to it. Scholarship is an elitist discourse practiced only by a few, but it suffers when its audience becomes too small or too exotic in its concerns; it suffers, too, for that matter, when it becomes obsessed with forms of marginality, as it has been for the past generation. If scholarship maintained a vital connection with the process by which people in general take a specific kind of interest in a specific kind of text, it would keep itself usefully grounded in a rejuvenating respect for the ordinary.

Wolf Lepenies has described sociology as the product of a confrontation between 'between literature and science,' two disciplines that competed for recognition as the primary analysts of the new industrial society that arose during the early nineteenth century. Sociology, a hybrid third discipline that appropriated features of both literary and scientific studies, became an essentially positivist inquiry into human life patterns that nevertheless took the 'culture of the feelings' into account.<sup>18</sup> If Lepenies were to undertake a new project on literary study, he might position it between sociology and experience itself. Literary study stands at the very margins of academic inquiry as such, with an attenuated relationship to rational method compensated for by a strong connection to the flux and fibre of life. Emerging directly from the domains of mind, culture, and history, and with profound connections to dreaming, imagining, feeling, and creating, literature represents a stern but not insurmountable challenge to academic disciplinarity and scholarly method to grasp the realia of existence. Literary scholars should understand the perils, and the potential power, represented by this challenge, this task. We do not need to worry

<sup>18</sup> See Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology* (Cambridge and NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988); originally published in German as *Die Drei Kulturen*, 1985.

about straying or returning; nor do we need to apologize for what we do. We should rather do it with such conviction that philologists themselves, watching from the privileged sanctuary of their dusty corner, will feel an envious desire to 'return to criticism.'

Literary studies and – as – into cultural studies: Gauging a complex relation and suggestions for the future directions of research<sup>1</sup>

the ‘crisis’ of national philologies and literary studies and the boom in cultural studies

If one is to believe articles in the arts sections of German newspapers or in learned journals, national philologies and literary studies have been caught in an ongoing crisis for quite a while. Although it cannot be denied that these disciplines have been hard pressed to legitimate their own existence, it can be doubted whether this crisis is really as acute as it has been made to look. However, it is quite obvious that the cultural turn in the humanities and the triumphant advance of cultural studies have served to intensify the disciplines’ struggle for legitimation and reform.

In the face of this ongoing crisis, the proliferation of suggestions for reforms which involve an orientation towards cultural studies is hardly surprising. If one takes a look at the latest bibliographies on the relationship between literary and cultural studies,<sup>2</sup> it becomes obvious that there is an abundance of attempts to reform literary studies from the vantage point

<sup>1</sup> This is a translated, abridged and updated version of an article that was published in *Text & Kontext* (Nünning 2003). I should very much like to thank my assistant Dorothee Birke for the splendid job she did in translating the article on which the present essay is based.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the bibliography compiled by Manfred Engel und Uwe Spörl (2001).

of cultural studies. The question ‘literary studies and/as/into cultural studies?’ addressed by and implied in the title of the present article has proved to be exceptionally controversial. In spite of the frequently rather vague directions taken by the discussion, the two opposing points of view are fairly clearly delineated: the ‘philological traditionalists’ and the proponents of cultural studies are locked in irreconcilable and often polemical argument;<sup>3</sup> attempts to mediate between the two sides have so far been largely futile.

An invitation to a conference on perspectives and ideas for the reform of literary studies puts one into the position of having to take a stand in this debate. Three possible argumentative strategies come to mind: on the one hand, one could simply agree with the diagnosis that the philologies and especially literary studies are in serious danger of losing both their object of study and their standing. One could then describe some of the symptoms of this crisis and thus (at least implicitly) re-enforce the aforementioned feelings of insecurity. On the other hand, one could dispute the validity of this diagnosis and instead point to the supposed patient’s considerable achievements. A third option would be to offer advice for the patient’s recovery by trying to show that a comprehensive plan for reform from the vantage point of cultural studies would promise more than just cosmetic changes: it would promise a way back to the old self-confidence and high performance.

I have to admit that I was at first tempted by the third option; I toyed with the idea of adding another programmatic blueprint to the many existing concepts for a new interdisciplinary ‘master-approach’ called ‘cultural studies’. However, when reading up on the many contributions to the discussion about literary

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the debate between Gerhard von Graevenitz and Walter Haug in DVJS (Haug 1999a and b; von Graevenitz 1999) and three issues of the *Schiller Jahrbuch* (Barner 1998, 1999, 2000) on the question whether literary studies are losing ‘their’ object of study. See also the differing answers to this question given by various renowned colleagues in a special issue of *Anglia* (Seeber et al. 1996), the special issue of *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Germanistenverbandes* (von Bloh/Vollhardt 1999), Böhme/Scherpe (1996), Glaser/Luserke (1996) and Müller-Funk (1999).

and cultural studies, I realized that there are compelling reasons not to do so. I am not just referring to the complexity of the issue and the diversity of the different viewpoints, which would be impossible to cover adequately within the parameters of an essay.<sup>4</sup> The main difficulty is rather that the heated debates on the fear that literary studies are losing their object of study, as well as on the relationship between literary and cultural studies, are marred by a multitude of basic problems like sweeping generalizations and rhetorical sleights-of-hand. This contentious style of discussion is not exactly conducive to a sober and precise assessment of the current situation of the philologies.

Therefore, instead of making a (doomed) attempt at presenting a comprehensive theoretical framework, one should rather keep a low profile and begin by making more modest contributions to the subject. I am going to sketch some preliminary considerations, guiding concepts and perspectives for culturally oriented literary studies. Since this is a rather broad subject, the following thoughts on the relationship between literary and cultural studies have been couched in the very apodictic, but hopefully clear form of hypotheses or pithy propositions; however, I hope that they at least give a rough outline of culturally oriented literary studies. This programmatic sketch is supposed to serve as a plea for this orientation (not, however, for literary studies *as* cultural studies). Such programmatic contributions, as we all know, tend to claim more than they can prove and to raise more questions than they can answer. Therefore, I think it is important to state clearly right at the outset that the following thoughts and propositions are not meant to pretend to have more than a heuristic value or to serve as more than a stimulus for further discussion. They are not intended as a wonder drug that can cure patients overnight, but as contributions to a debate which (in my view) is too often dominated by sleights-of-hand, grotesque distortions of the facts and empty rhetoric.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent overview of the current debates and issues see Engel (2001).

Three issues of the literary magazine *Schiller Jahrbuch* have been dedicated to the question of whether or not literary studies are losing their subject-matter or 'object'. This debate is operating under false premises insofar as academic disciplines do not engage with 'objects' that are 'given', but with phenomena and problems they themselves define. By now the notion has been widely accepted that objects of academic study are not simply 'found' or 'given', but *constructed* by means of theoretical and terminological differentiations, according to specific aims, questions, theories and models. Although this is no revolutionary or even new realization, it is worth recalling in debates about the alleged danger of literary studies losing sight of its object, or of even losing it altogether (cf. Jahraus 1998: 410).

One feels inclined to agree with Hartmut Böhme's (1998: 478) laconic comment: 'If you lose your object of study, you've only yourself to blame.' Exactly! And to put it somewhat differently: If you leave the phrasing of questions, the development of theoretical frameworks and the construction of objects of study to others, that is also your own fault. Instead of joining in a howl of complaint about the supposed loss of their object of study, culturally oriented scholars of literature should make it their business to define the phenomena and problems they want to study, as well as their methodological approaches – and to define them in such a way that they correspond to the changing concept of 'culture' as well as the cognitive interests of cultural studies.

If one takes seriously the insight that objects of academic study are constructs, it seems obvious that both the heated debates about the relationship between literary and cultural studies and the arguments about the question of whether literary studies are losing their object are based on wrong assumptions – because neither 'Literary Studies' nor 'Cultural Studies' are

<sup>5</sup> Not literary studies as cultural studies, for this subtle, but important distinction cf. Engel (2001).

the monolithic discipline, with a capital 'L' or a capital 'C' respectively, which they are made out to be. Rather, there is quite a wide range of heterogeneous constructions constituting what is commonly seen as 'literary studies' and just as many definitions of the objects this discipline is supposed to be concerned with.

The most baffling aspect of the discussions about literary studies' supposed 'loss of (an) object' is that there appears to be a widespread (if tacit) consensus about what constitutes 'the' object of study for literary studies: literary texts, quite obviously! Furthermore, there is an implicit assumption about 'the task' of literary studies: the interpretation of literary texts, of course! Despite all attempts to reform the discipline and to instil a more theory-oriented approach, the greater part of literary scholars seem to be quite occupied with the daily business of interpreting literary texts – even if they do approach these texts from various different theoretical and methodological angles. S.J. Schmidt, one of the most scathing and eloquent opponents of the practice of interpreting without a theoretical basis, has repeatedly offered polemic, but apt, commentaries on this persistent fixation on interpretation (cf. Schmidt 2000: 324-373).

This consensus, which is quite astonishing if one considers that a controversial issue is at stake, is probably mainly due to the fact that scholars favouring non-hermeneutic conceptions of literary studies are rarely asked (and rarely volunteer) to contribute to such debates. Important contributions made by Empirical Literary Theory and other approaches which are not focused on the 'interpretation' of literary texts are usually ignored. However, if one considers the completely different constructions of the 'object of study' these approaches offer, one becomes aware that the talk about a monolithic discipline of Literary Studies with a capital 'L' and its object of study is merely a verbal fiction, which can only persist because it is common practice to disregard variant tenets. Alternative ways of constructing the object or the fields of study usually do not feature in such fundamental debates, although in practice they abound: consider, for example, biographies of individual writers, scholarly editing, literary sociology and psychology, studies on censorship and canon formation or Empirical Reception Studies, all

of which are interested in objects and activities other than the interpretation of literary texts.

The diversity of possible 'objects of study' already suggests that any attempt to define the relationship between Literary Studies and Cultural Studies as monolithic disciplines with capital letters is futile. It must be futile, because it would have to define a relationship between two heterogeneous and vague entities. If one were to undertake such a definition, one would have to allow for the diversity of positions and tenets. One would also have to indicate precisely what kind of literary or cultural studies one was talking about. For one thing, there are big differences in the ways in which literary studies are practised in the various philologies, and, one might add, in different countries. Also, there are so many different theoretical approaches, methods and models even within contemporary literary and cultural theory (cf. A. Nünning 2004 [1998]) that one should indicate as precisely as possible which kind of literary studies one is actually talking about if one intends to defend, criticize or reform them.

The same holds true for cultural studies – only that the situation there is even more vague and chaotic. Despite many attempts, the term 'cultural studies', just like the German term *Kulturwissenschaft*, which is used as a catch phrase for a wide range of different approaches and concepts (see Nünning/Nünning 2003), is notoriously hard to define, the main difficulty being that it is used to cover a multiplicity of different fields of research and tendencies in the humanities; that it functions as an umbrella term for open and interdisciplinary discussion and that the scope of its application is subject to debate. The terms 'cultural studies' and *Kulturwissenschaft* have become a catch-all, which is used in at least four different senses: a) in a very broad usage 'cultural studies' and *Kulturwissenschaft* stand for an interdisciplinary frame of reference, which is supposed to integrate the whole spectrum of the traditional disciplines in the humanities; b) 'cultural studies' and *Kulturwissenschaft* are also used as a key concept for the call for change and for an opening of the traditional philologies and literary studies. This is the sense in which these terms will be largely used here; c) in a more nar-

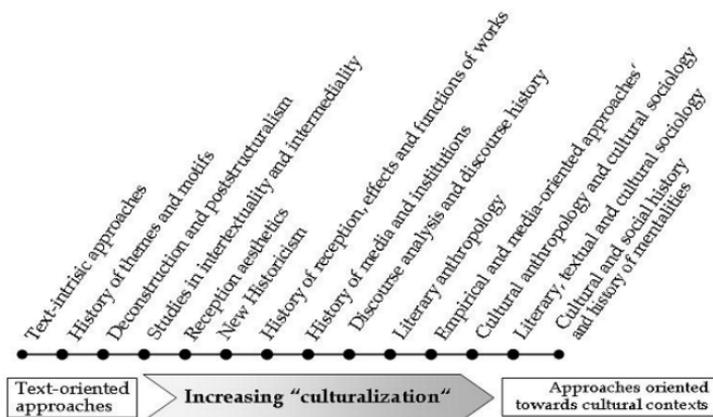


Figure 1: Scale of theoretical models and methods in literary studies, according to their degree of culturalization

row and specialized sense ‘cultural studies’ and *Kulturwissenschaft* denote a special subdiscipline within the individual philologies. If one looks closely, one realizes that this often amounts to little more than a new label for a traditional approach that is often denounced as old-fashioned: the study of the geographical, social, economical and cultural characteristics of individual countries, known as ‘*Landeskunde*’ at German universities; d) It is much to the detriment of clarity that the discipline that used to be called ‘*Volkskunde*’ or ‘*Europäische Ethnologie*’ (which could be translated as ‘European ethnic studies’) is now also sometimes referred to as ‘Cultural Studies’ (cf. Glaser/Luserke 1996). In spite of some similarities with regard to subject matter and methods, the German version of Cultural Studies (or *Kulturwissenschaft*) should also be distinguished from the special brand of Cultural Studies developed in Great Britain, which is marked by a Marxist approach, ideological objectives and a focus on contemporary popular culture.

In view of the multiplicity of competing approaches within literary studies and the lack of one clear definition of the term ‘cultural studies’, the attempt to describe (let alone determine)

the relationship between literary and cultural studies thus assumes the dimensions of a Herculean task. Renowned German scholars like Doris Bachmann-Medick, Moritz Baßler, Herbert Grabes, S.J. Schmidt, Jörg Schönert and Wilhelm Voßkamp have all – from their various different points of view – advocated an ‘opening’ of literary studies towards cultural or media studies and have proposed a whole range of more or less comprehensive models.

As a basic prerequisite for gauging the relation between literary and cultural studies and for developing an orientation of literary towards cultural studies, it is necessary to take stock of the existing approaches, methods and models within contemporary literary and cultural theory and to attempt a typological differentiation. This offers the opportunity to further develop approaches that have already been established, which seems much more sensible than starting the project of working out a new orientation for literary studies from scratch. If one scans the relevant publications, one will find that some approaches or methods are much closer to points of view within cultural studies than others. This allows for the construction of a model which features a scale with two opposite poles: text-oriented approaches and approaches oriented towards (cultural) contexts. This scale can help to determine the degree to which a certain approach is ‘culturalized’.

If one looks at the multiplicity of approaches represented in the model (which, of course, does not claim to be comprehensive), it becomes clear that for one thing, some approaches are more useful for a cultural orientation of literary studies than others. Also, we can see that even within literary studies, the approaches are so different – with regard to the object of study as well as with regard to methods – that there is almost no common ground on which to base a consensus.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the multiplicity of approaches begs the question of whether the polemic attacks against all hermeneutic or ‘con-

<sup>6</sup>For a concise typological overview of the ‘(more or less) clearly delineated outlines of culturally oriented literary studies that have so far been offered’, cf. Engel (2001: 22-31).

servative' methodologies within literary studies launched by proponents of Empirical Literary Theory are based on sweeping generalizations. Firstly, usually they do not distinguish clearly enough between the various approaches, some of which are much more closely associated with the dogmas of text-intrinsic interpretation than others.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, text models do exist which meet the metatheoretical requirements of Empirical Literary Theory (cf. Ort 1994: 110). And thirdly, empirical approaches have so far failed to show that they can be usefully applied to the area of literary and cultural history.

Another impediment to a cultural orientation of literary studies is the deadlock between, on the one hand, hermeneutic approaches, which see literature as a symbol system, and, on the other hand, Empirical Literary Theory, which regards it as a social system.<sup>8</sup> For one thing, it is often forgotten that such features as the four action roles which constitute the structure of the literary system have traditionally also been objects of study for non-empirical approaches. Also, those who rail against the 'terrible vice of interpretation' (Enzensberger) are throwing out the baby with the bathwater, as some non-hermeneutic methods of textual analysis are thus also denounced as unscholarly. Since literary texts are more or less completely disregarded by Empirical Literary Theory, one tends to agree with Claus-Michael Ort, who has criticized the 'lack of text-oriented theories' in Empirical Literary Theory. Ort (1994: 104f.) points out that, up to now, Empirical Literary Theory has failed to 'find a theoretical and empirical-historical method for dealing with the symbolic-informational level of the social system of 'literature', with its institutionalized and therefore multilayered and stored self-reflexive descriptions'.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Rusch (1992: 253), who (wrongly) lists disparate approaches under the generalized heading 'various hermeneutic approaches'.

<sup>8</sup> For useful suggestions for a compromise, however, cf. Schönert (1996; 1998), Müller-Funk (1999), Ort (1994; 1999), Scherpe (1999) and Voßkamp (1998). Recently, Schmidt (2000: 356) has also contributed conciliatory remarks.

Instead of playing off a conception of literature as a symbol system against a conception of literature as a social system, culturally oriented literary studies should therefore proceed from the basis of a complex 'multi-level model' (cf. Schmidt 2000: 339) and analyse literature both as a social and a symbol system. After all, from the perspective of cultural studies it makes good sense to see literature both as a set of texts (or symbol system) and as a field for social action (or a social system).

I would thus argue that literary scholars do not get to choose whether they want to concern themselves with texts or with actions, institutions or communications. Rather, literary scholars who are interested in historical and cultural issues are faced with the task of having to gain insights into literature as a social system with the help of sophisticated methods of textual analysis and by examining the symbol systems of individual cultures. Literary history is a particularly good example of the need to retain both perspectives, because although it is concerned with cultural issues, it is definitely in need of methods of textual analysis. Ort (1994: 114) certainly makes a valid observation when he states that a 'social system of literature, which is viewed as separate from literature as a symbol system, will be hard to investigate in a way that can be monitored empirically – because it has excluded the possibility of using literary texts as source material.'

The various attempts to define the object of study and the theoretical foundations of culturally oriented literary studies also differ with regard to their definitions and theories of 'culture'. In most cases the question is thus not *whether* literary scholars contextualize the works they are studying, but *how conscious* they are of their own tenets and methods, and whether they explicitly (and on a theoretical level) reflect and comment on their own strategies of contextualization. As the figure above illustrates, there is a wide range of predominantly culturally oriented approaches, from the history of reception, of effects and of the functions of works through New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and discourse analysis to cultural anthropology, cultural sociology, cultural and social history and history of mentalities.

The attempt to define the central concept of 'culture' shows that in the last few decades, this term has undergone a fundamental transformation, effected by the influence of various disciplines. History, anthropology, sociology and semiotics (to name only the most important influences) have all contributed to a more precise definition of the term. It is possible to discern some common denominators; among them are the conviction that cultures are made – or constructed – by humans, and the view that 'culture' should not be limited to 'highbrow culture' or the arts.

Notwithstanding the multiplicity of approaches, one concept that originates with cultural anthropology and cultural semiotics is currently especially popular: the notion of 'culture as text' (Bachmann-Medick 1996) and cultural studies as 'an approach which is interpretive, generates meaning and which analyses the social significance of styles of perception, symbolization and cognition.' (Böhme/Scherpe 1996: 16) However, the popular and influential metaphor of 'culture as text' is misleading in that it fails to highlight the role of the 'users' of texts, i.e. the mental and social aspects of culture.

A useful basis for a notion of culturally oriented literary studies is provided by a semiotic and constructivist understanding of the term 'culture', which stresses that cultures should not only be regarded as material, but also as mental and social phenomena. In the last few years, there has been a preference – cutting across the boundaries of particular disciplines – for such a view of 'culture'. According to this view, 'culture' is the sum of all conceptions, ways of thinking, ways of feeling, values and meanings that are generated by humans – a sum which materializes in symbol systems. Such a definition of 'culture' does not only include the arts and a nation's material 'cultural assets', but also the mental dispositions which enable the creation of such artefacts.<sup>9</sup>

A possible way of conceptualizing this broader definition of 'culture' is provided by S.J. Schmidt's (1992: 434) proposal to

<sup>9</sup> For a distinction between social, material and mental culture cf. Posner (1991), whose reflections constitute a landmark contribution to the analysis of culture and cultural change.

see culture as 'a software program of the discourses about a society's conception of reality.' The visual logic of this technical metaphor, which distinguishes between the program itself and its application or its different users (leaving aside for the moment the tricky question of who could be the programmer) shows that 'a society's culture cannot be equated with cultural manifestations like symbols (and their systems), works of art, rites etc.' It is through the medium of these manifestations, however, that 'culture becomes *observable*': 'Like any program, the program 'culture' materializes only in applications by actants; however, this does not imply that it is limited to these applications.' (Ibid.: 436; 437) Moreover, this model (as well as the metaphor of culture as a software program) makes clear that the various dimensions of culture can neither be reduced to a 'semiotic metaphorization of the social dimensions of culture' (as the catchphrase 'culture as text' suggests) nor by an 'inverse sociological reductionism' (Ort 1999: 542).

The broader definition of 'culture' also has consequences for the choice of methods. If 'culture' is defined as the complex mental program which governs the selection of relevant topics and modes of expression, the analysis of literary themes and forms that are typical of a particular genre or time should provide insights into the mental dispositions of the epoch in question. Studying a society's culture thus means reconstructing its mental program, which (in a condensed version) manifests itself in literary texts. This is why literary studies that are oriented towards cultural studies can make important contributions to research into particular cultures.

For a delineation of the subject-matter of culturally oriented literary studies, the definition of the term 'culture' provided above has the following consequences: Firstly, if cultural units are not seen as pre-existing real objects, but as man-made constructs, we need to ask what processes are involved in the creation of these constructs. Secondly, if literary studies that see themselves as part of cultural studies do not want to fall behind the insights of modern cultural theory, they should embrace a broad definition of 'literature' and conceive of literature as a part of media culture. And thirdly, the three dimensions of

'culture' make it necessary to consider not only literary texts themselves, but also the mental dimension of a particular culture and the literary treatment of dominant constructions of meaning, ideas and values as well as the features pertaining to literature as a social system.

Moreover, this broader definition of 'culture' offers points of connection with such central categories of a culture-sensitive approach to literary texts as 'literature', 'mentalities' and 'cultural memory', which arguably constitute the subject-matter of culturally oriented literary studies and can serve as key concepts for both theory and concrete literary analysis (cf. A. Nünning 1998 [1995]). In this context, 'literature' embodies a (central) aspect of the material dimension of culture, i.e. the forms of expression via different media which make a culture observable. In turn, 'mentality' refers to an aggregate of collective ways of thinking, emotions, convictions, ideas and forms of knowledge – the immaterial dimension of culture or the schemata we use to interpret social reality. 'Cultural memory' or 'collective memory' is concerned with the social frames of culture, the social institutions which are the prerequisites for the establishment of cultural traditions, because by selecting, storing and communicating about texts they ensure that collective knowledge is acquired and handed down.

In the context of culturally oriented literary studies, literary texts are regarded not so much as sources or transparent documents of everyday phenomena, but as forms of cultural self-perception and self-examination, without which histories of the functions of literature, histories of literature as a social system and histories of mentalities could not be written. If (from the perspective of cultural studies) one sees literary texts as one possible material form or textual medium for the mental program 'culture', one need not concern oneself with questions such as what the 'essential qualities' of literature are or whether text or context should be given priority. Instead, one can say that the discourses or mentalities that are dominant in any given culture manifest themselves in texts. Culturally oriented literary studies are thus concerned with the relationship between a society's literary texts and its discourses and knowledge, with the ways in

which literary texts process contemporary socio-cultural knowledge and the functions they can fulfil within a given society. It is no longer a secret that neither the elusive 'circulation-metaphor' nor the (often anecdotal) efforts of New Historicism offer sufficient means for a solution of the intricate text-context-problem (cf. Baßler 1998 and Glauser/Heitmann 1999).

The relationship between literary texts and both the social system as a whole and the specific discourses outside the texts can be analysed much more precisely with the help of Jürgen Link's concept of the 'interdiscourse'. Following Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and Michel Foucault's discourse theory, Link (1988: 285) introduces 'a basic distinction between elements that only occur in specific discourses and interdiscursive elements'. While special-discursive elements (according to Link) contribute to the growing functional differentiation between social sub-systems and to the development of specific modes of constructing reality, interdiscursive elements reinforce a countervailing tendency and ensure a certain degree of 'reintegration, connection' and 'cultural interlocking' with other discursive formations. Link's hypothesis concerning the distinctive quality of literature is that it 'can be correlated with such *interdiscursive dispositives*' (ibid.) and that 'on a structural-functional as well as on a generative level it is best understood as an interdiscourse which is elaborated in a specific way (or, to be more precise: an elaboration of interdiscursive elements.' (Ibid.: 286) Accordingly, literary genres can be ascribed to the level of a culture's interdiscourse.

For this reason, literature can claim a special relevance for the issues cultural studies are concerned with: due to their interdiscursive structure, literary texts potentially evoke the entire discursive universe of a given epoch. Link conceptualizes the literary text as an 'interdiscursive play with language' which 'is highly selective with regard to the various specialized discourses' (ibid.: 288-89). According to Link, literature thus performs a synthesizing function in the context of society as a whole, because 'by way of connotation, it tends to reintegrate all discourses of a culture.' (Ibid.: 293) It thus counteracts the progressing specialization of discourses.

A literary history which is oriented towards cultural studies therefore does not regard literary texts as 'documents of something else' (Ort 1994: 115), but as important cultural carriers of meaning, as especially elaborated signifying systems, as condensed forms of interdiscourse or as 'objects of cultural self-perception and self-examination' (Voßkamp 1999: 190). If we see literature and other art forms as an objectified version of the mental program we call 'culture', an analysis of literary means of expression can inform us about the cultural knowledge, the values and the concepts of reality in any given epoch.

Culturally oriented scholars of literature thus cannot be content with writing literary histories that merely record the development of literary genres or forms – although this, too, is an important and interesting mode of literary historiography. Rather, they should also be interested in the history of literature as a symbol system which is mediated by texts, and in the construction of a history of the functions (*Funktionsgeschichte*, cf. Fluck 1997) of literature. Moreover, they should be interested in the history of literature as a social system.<sup>10</sup> If literary texts are seen as forms of cultural self-perception and self-examination, it becomes clear that in order to write histories of the functions of literature (*Funktionsgeschichten*), histories of literature as a social system and histories of mentalities, one needs to pay close attention to the analysis of the texts themselves.

#### ON 'REGAINING ACADEMIC ABILITIES OF PERCEPTION'

On 'regaining academic abilities of perception' through a cultural orientation of the national philologies and on their tasks in the age of globalization: fields of study for culturally oriented literary studies.

Although this programmatic plea has been but a mere outline, it may have become clear that the kind of culturally oriented literary studies outlined above can assist us in 'regaining

<sup>10</sup> For a distinction between these three kinds of literary histories, cf. Grabes (2001).

academic *abilities of perception*' (Mittelstraß 1987: 155). This is so because they draw attention to cultural issues that have so far been disregarded since they are not limited to the traditional subjects and methods of literary, historical or social studies.

This leads me to an additional reason for proposing an 'opening' of literary studies towards cultural studies: such a move would arguably provide us with a better position for the treatment of issues that are not only of academic, but also of wider cultural and social relevance – a lot more so than all text-intrinsic forms of interpretation. I will briefly mention three such cultural issues – although of course this list could be extended almost indefinitely. To counteract the danger of fragmentation and disintegration, which must be seen as the negative side effect of an opening of literary studies towards cultural studies, it seems helpful to highlight some of these issues in order to show (at least exemplarily) what kinds of topics become prominent because of the new perspectives I have outlined.

The formation of cultural and national identities is one such area which can be explored with the help of culturally oriented literary studies. In this context, the multi-layered relationships between national identity and alterity, between the rhetoric that is based on the idea of a 'national character' and the literary staging of experiences of 'otherness' become the focus of attention.<sup>11</sup> The issue of the formation of national and cultural identities is thus an important focus for culturally oriented literary studies, whether in the classroom or as an object of research. Let me illustrate this point by presenting some projects which are currently under way.

The project of a culturally oriented literary history, which can yield important insights into our own culture as well as into other cultures, opens up a number of very important and promising fields of research. One of them is the investigation of the rhetoric which is based on the idea of a 'national character' (cf. the excellent programmatic article by Leersen 2000) and of the literary staging of patriotism and xenophobia, which can

<sup>11</sup> Cf., for example, the highly stimulating comments in Titzmann (1999).

be seen as central cultural issues in British literature of the 18th and 19th century (cf. A. Nünning 2002a). This investigation should not only include problems concerning the approach known as ‘comparative imagology’, but also questions relating to the history of the functions of literature, such as: In what ways do literary works contribute to the formation of national identity? How do they process or influence (and even determine) images of Self and Other? Thus, the literary constitution of ‘imagined communities’ (Benedict Anderson), ‘invented traditions’ (Hobsbawm/Ranger) and images of the Other becomes the focus of attention. If we see national identity as ‘*a construction of the collective within the force fields of culture and politics*’ (Giesen 1991: 13), we need to analyse the contribution of literature to the construction and imagination of national identity, not just synchronically, but also diachronically. In this context, we also need to ask what functions the various discourses and genres adopt with regard to the formation of national identity: ‘Literature and historiography no longer appear as cultural self-confirmations of a nation which already existed, but as processes which assert, describe and create the identity of a society.’ (Ibid.: 12)

A second example of an important cultural issue would be the connection between literature and collective memory (or cultures of remembrance), which so far has not been investigated systematically. For one thing, we need a theoretical model which can serve to explain the complex relationship between collective memory and literature (cf. Erll/A. Nünning 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Moreover, the assumption that literature serves as a medium of cultural memory need to be specified (e.g. from the point of view of the history of the functions of literature), and the specific functions literary texts can fulfil with regard to social processes of remembering needs to be defined more precisely (cf. Erll 2002; Gymnich/A. Nünning 2005).

A further project with a literary and cultural focus aims to trace the formation of a culture of remembrance in 19th and early 20th-century Great Britain, using literary representations

of key events and problems of the British Empire.<sup>12</sup> Using this example, the project is supposed to demonstrate how ‘memory genres’ can serve to transform historical events and protagonists into national myths and heroes and how by ‘inventing national traditions’ (Hobsbawm/Ranger) literary remembrance of the Empire created a specific imperial(ist) mentality and British identity. In order to reconstruct this process, one not only has to look at collective memory’s contents, but also at the literary techniques of appropriating history, which retrospectively served to contextualize, interpret and instrumentalize the imperial past. The project focuses on the specifics of the different modes in which the imperial culture of remembrance is presented, as well as on the various functions that literary remembrance of the Empire fulfilled with regard to the communicative, collective and cultural memory. Research is centred on the ways in which central historical events become myths (e.g. the siege of Lucknow), on the glorification of the so-called ‘empire-builders’ (such as Henry Havelock and Henry Lawrence), and on empire metaphors and their potential for making meaning (cf. A. Nünning 2002b). All these are especially significant manifestations of literature’s memory of the Empire; their analysis gives an impression of how an imperial culture of remembrance was created.

As a third and last example which demonstrates the productivity and indispensability of culturally oriented literary studies I want to sketch a research project that is concerned with ‘national style’ in English literary histories. This project engages with the question of how a national identity is formed, and promises to show what tasks national philologies are faced with in our age of globalization. By analysing styles and discourses, this project aims to throw light on nationally specific discursive practices in English literary historiography. As I have tried to show in two articles (A. Nünning 2001, A. Nünning 2002c), it is indeed possible to identify a special ‘national style’, which in the case of English literary histories (among other features) includes a

<sup>12</sup> This project is currently realized at Gießen University, in the context of the *Sonderforschungsbereich 343* ‘Cultures of remembrance’.

pronounced dislike of theoretical ‘jargon’ and abstract categories for the classification of periods and an interest in individual writers and works.

The example of these selected projects should suffice to show that culturally oriented literary studies can use philological methods to investigate broader cultural issues in a post- or transnational context, provided, however, that they are put on a sound theoretical basis. For this reason I am convinced that we would be very wrong to simply discard philological traditions. On the contrary, our task will be to adapt them to solve specific problems of literary and cultural studies and to enlarge our repertoire of methods. In turn, culturally oriented literary studies should broaden their range of objects of study and of approaches (in the way that I have tried to outline above; cf. also Engel 2001). The formation of national identities is certainly one cultural issue that should be at the centre of attention in culturally oriented literary studies. However, in the age of globalization the concern with the complex relationship between literature and national identity is surely not the only area of research that national philologies should engage in.

#### NATIONAL ACADEMIC TRADITIONS AND ‘POSTNATIONAL CHALLENGES’

Culturally oriented literary studies between national academic traditions and ‘postnational’ challenges: On the relationship between national philologies, ‘Cultural Studies’, culturally oriented literary studies and interdisciplinary ‘*Kulturwissenschaften*’

Looking back at the questions that were asked at the beginning of this article – about the fear of losing one’s ‘object of study’ and on the relationship between literary and cultural studies – we can come to the following conclusion: The current preoccupations with ‘literary studies as cultural studies’ point to a multiplicity of different conceptions that should be clearly differentiated. I am quite certain that the attempt to ‘open up’ literary studies toward cultural studies can only be successful if

one tries to indicate as precisely as possible which concepts of literary or cultural studies one is talking about. Moreover, whenever a new approach is developed, it is necessary to define its subject-matter, its theoretical key concepts and its methodological framework. Despite all gloomy predictions of a 'loss of the object of study', we are (within English Literary Studies) currently faced with an 'explosive expansion of the object of study' (Broich 1995: 131). However, it would be premature to simply celebrate these territorial acquisitions; instead, we should consider carefully how to deal with them.

In contrast to those branches of cultural studies which are predominated by the social sciences, culturally oriented literary studies are concerned with the semiotics of texts – and as such they can only make a substantial contribution to an analysis of culture(s) if they hark back to the specific competence they have acquired in analysing and interpreting texts.<sup>13</sup> 'Interdisciplinary competence is based on, and presupposes, competence acquired in a particular discipline.' (Mittelstraß 1987: 154) The special competences literary scholars can contribute to such a project are concerned with language and texts and can be defined as follows:

[...] expert skills in the interpretation of texts, which allow [literary scholars] to see meaning as an effect of form, narrative patterns, metaphors, reception-aesthetic strategies and other rhetorical and aesthetic elements and thus to complicate, substantialize and extend those forms of cultural assignments of meaning that are still the hallmark of social, anthropological and other analyses of culture. (Fluck 1991: 13; cf. also Engel 2001: 19)

A theory-conscious form of culturally oriented literary studies is thus not only faced with the task of defining and positioning itself within the force-fields of national academic traditions and

<sup>13</sup> Klaus R. Scherpe (1999: 22) puts forward a similar argument when he points out that 'literary studies which are oriented towards anthropology, geography [...] or media studies can only legitimize themselves and gain prestige if they can delineate their new fields of study from their own perspective: They have to define their own object of study, their methods and their aims.'

'postnational' projects, but also with new challenges. It does not have to fear the 'loss of an object of study', but it has to develop viable concepts for the integration of multiple new theories, fields, issues, texts and media. It may sound paradoxical, but if literary scholars want to face 'postnational' challenges, they will first have to remember the traditions of their respective national disciplines.

Let me conclude by briefly outlining the opportunities and dangers that result from a redefinition of the national philologies as philologies of foreign languages or as the study of foreign cultures. From my perspective as a German scholar of English literature, I think it would be wrong to merely adopt the paradigms of Anglo-American cultural studies without critical reflection. In my view, the biggest problem right now results from the current tendency to 'import' and imitate the American debates about race, class and gender or the revision of the Western canon, which only make sense in the context of the US' multicultural society, or those developments in British cultural studies which can must be seen against the background of Britain's class system. German, Danish or Dutch English Studies should not merely imitate American or British models. On the contrary, the strength of English (or American) Studies as they are practised in Denmark, Germany, France, the Netherlands or Spain resides precisely in the fact that they view literatures and cultures of the English language from the outside. Moreover, they can apply the differences between their own and the foreign culture(s) in a fruitful manner. Both the canon debates (and revisions) with their focus on race, class and gender and the English and American forms of cultural studies can thus themselves be seen as (highly interesting!) objects of study for culturally oriented scholars of literature.

As we have seen, then, the plea for a cultural orientation of literary studies should not be confused with a plea for the abolition of its traditional set of tasks, or (conversely) for replacing this discipline with a new form of cultural studies. Instead of agreeing with Antony Easthope, who in his book *Literary into Cultural Studies* (1991) programmatically advocates that literary studies should be assimilated by cultural studies, and of hee-

ding his clarion call, I think we should pick up the thread of traditional literary studies with regard to the definition of our subject-matter and our methods. This perspective should then be broadened with approaches adopted from cultural studies and history of mentalities.

This roughly drawn outline of the key concepts, objects of study and methods of culturally oriented literary studies is not to be understood as a definitive and binding roadmap which will solve the current crisis of the national philologies. Rather, it should be seen as a signpost that points to *one* possible direction a productive development of literary studies can take. In contrast to the view taken by Empirical Literary Theory, which for the last twenty years has claimed to provide 'the' new paradigm, the 'final and global new definition of literary studies' (Engel 2001: 14), I propose to see culturally oriented literary studies as one of several possible options. What I have in mind is neither a change of paradigm nor a wholesale reform of the philologies; instead, I advocate a broadening of perspectives, of the range of objects of study and of methods. This will seem much less spectacular than announcing a change of paradigm, but to me it appears as a far more sensible option than the 'continuous re-invention of all areas within the discipline' (ibid.: 15), which is reminiscent of attempts to re-invent the wheel.

Obviously, this programmatic outline is not meant to be the last word on these complex and controversial issues. This plea for culturally oriented literary studies has served its purpose if it makes a small contribution to the ongoing debates about the relationship between literary and cultural studies: If it helps to remind participants of these debates of the fact that concepts and outlines are always constructs; that there is a multiplicity of theories, models and methods which need to be considered; that theoretical approaches, key concepts and methods that constitute our institutional practices should be made explicit. In any case, whether a definition of new objects of study, approaches and methods for culturally oriented literary studies will prove a chance or a danger does not, or at least not solely or even primarily, depend on theoretical debates, but on the discipline's future productivity. And since this productivity is

currently very high (for current research reports, see Erll/Roggenendorf 2002; A. Nünning/Sommer 2004), I would say that it seems at least probable that before too long, a cultural approach will be 'the most vital and promising paradigm of literary studies', as the editors of the new journal *KulturPoetik* have it (cf. Engel et al. 2001: 4). In view of the 'postnational' issues that the philologies will be increasingly faced with in the future, this looks like a desirable development, as such an approach opens up a multiplicity of new perspectives, some of which have been sketched above.

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