

Systems Theory: What It Is and What It Is Not: On Some Current Misunderstandings in the Reception of a Systems-Theoretical Concept of Meaning

The contributions to this issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* / *Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* of Henk de Berg and myself are closely connected. Whereas Henk de Berg gave a more global outline of a systems-theoretical concept of communication based on Niklas Luhmann's ideas, I want to deal with some critical reactions to this concept which have reached us during the last two years. Representative of these reactions are two somewhat polemical articles by Blom and Nijhuis, and by Kramaschki, to be found in our collection of essays, entitled *Differenzen. Systemtheorie zwischen Dekonstruktion und Konstruktivismus* (Blom and Nijhuis; Kramaschki. See also Werber; Schmidt 230). The issues concerned, however, are also of wider importance and concern the relationship between systems theory and literary studies in general. The three points I will discuss here are: the general objection of not answering concrete problems of pragmatic life; the objection of neglecting the reader, reception, and tradition; and finally, the objection of the reintroduction of literary criticism as an elitist interpretative institution.

SYSTEMS THEORY AND CONCRETE PROBLEMS OF PRAGMATIC LIFE

The first objection raised against systems theory that it does not offer answers to concrete problems comes from exponents of the empirical study of literature. It reflects their conception of the meaning of a literary text as a subject-dependent construction and as inaccessible to intersubjective study. From this empirical point of view, all text-oriented, interpretative activities have to be excluded from the study of literature. Instead, the subject-dependent constructions of meaning themselves are made the central topic of study. The aim of such study is to solve concrete problems concerning readers' behavior and the conditions of their constructions of meaning. Interpretations of texts as offered by different approaches of academic literary criticism do not belong to the aims empirical studies are striving for. They cannot solve any empirical problem nor can they satisfy any common need.

This is, at least, the current empirical opinion.¹ I will return to this particular point later when I will try to clarify the difference between subject-dependent/subjective constructions of meaning on the one hand and elaborated constructions of meaning by scholarly literary criticism on the other hand. At this point, I will only make a more general comment. It seems wrong to me to assume that there is no need for consensus regarding the meaning of literary texts and works of art that goes beyond the level of individual or private reception. On the contrary, I want to insist that the search for a so-called objective meaning is one of the most fundamental needs of human beings.

Let me elaborate on this. We all know that there is no objective meaning in any absolute sense. At the same time, we are — and must be — constantly dealing with objective meaning in a relative i.e., in a temporally limited and system-specific sense. Understood in this way, objective meaning is necessary for our survival. In the field of pragmatic everyday communication and scientific communication as well as in communication about literary texts, we can observe an urgent need of large groups of readers to go beyond the boundaries of their private readings and to learn about the meaning of texts. They are searching for textual intentions and for what can be said about the meaning of certain texts at the level of academic criticism. They are interested not only in history in general, but also in literary history. However, literary historiography is impossible without meaning as a phenomenon inherent in communicative text-events themselves on the one hand, and without the possibility of a reconstruction of this meaning on the other hand. In fact, the reconstruction of the meaning of historical text-events is the first condition of writing literary history. Without it, literary history as a *métier* focusing on the historical uniqueness and the specificity of texts, would not exist. Either it would lose itself in an ahistorical literalness, or it would dissolve itself by simply fitting historical communication into individual preferences and subjective opinions (de Berg and Hoozevee).

In short, it seems to me that the search for intersubjective meaning indeed offers answers to problems both within the academic community and in everyday life. Excluding it from the academic study of literature would mean taking the otherwise fruitful premises of the empirical study of literature to an unproductive extreme. To avoid any misunderstanding, this plea for interpretation is not equivalent to a plea for the old-fashioned hermeneutic version of interpretation.

READER, RECEPTION, AND TRADITION RECONSIDERED

As Henk de Berg pointed out, it is our aim to reconstruct the temporally fixed meaning of texts by means of a concept of communication in which the difference between world and system, complexity and selection, *Information* and *Mitteilung*, context and text has a central position. We have called the result of that reconstruction of meaning the unique meaning, i.e., the meaning a text has in its historical communicative situation, and once we even called it "the original meaning" ("die originäre Bedeutung") of texts. Admittedly, this expression may not have been entirely felicitous. Actually it means neither more nor less than the fact that a text must have a starting point from which it departs for its long, or mostly rather short, travel through history and that we are trying to reconstruct this starting point. Critics of our concept, however, understood, or rather misunderstood it as an attempt to eliminate the reader and the whole process of reception by fixing an unchangeable, ontological meaning of texts. In other words, our critics objected to our neglecting the entire domain of literary tradition and to our reducing the meaning of texts to a kind of monadic historical event unable to transcend its narrow historical boundaries. Had we really intended this, it would indeed have meant going back to an old-fashioned hermeneutic way of looking at texts.

However, the systems-theoretical foundations of our concept of meaning do not allow such a return. No one denies that readers exist, that these readers usually read texts in a situation different from the one in which they were produced, that these readers take an active part in the process of reception, and, therefore, that something like the transfer of culture and tradition exists. So it cannot be our aim to amputate all these things from the big body of literary communication. What we *are* doing, however, is *redefining* these concepts in order to arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of communication. What does this mean in concrete terms?

Seen from the viewpoint of reception-aesthetics the meaning of texts unfolds itself within what Hans Robert Jauss called the "continuous change of the horizon of historical experience" ("fortschreitender Horizontwandel der geschichtlichen Erfahrung," Jauss 662). Accordingly, every particular act of reception can only grasp a partial meaning of the text. But all partial meanings throughout the effective history of a text fuse into one homogeneous tradition of meaning. In a systems-theoretical approach this image of reception as a homogeneous stream of events is replaced by the principle of connected selections (*Anschlußselektionen*). So it is not just the case that every primary text constitutes its historically unique meaning by way of a differential selection; in fact, this holds for all texts, primary and secondary, for the reception of a text always results in a new "reception-text" which has its own unique meaning and so on. They all make selections from their immediate discussion-contexts, thus constituting their own meanings and creating new forms (*Mittelungsformen*) as new offers for

1 For examples of this position from the large number of studies expressing the foundations of an empirical study of literature see Schmidt and Hauptmeier; Schmidt; see also Tötösy's bibliography in on the World Wide Web <http://www.ualberta.ca/ARTS/ricl.html>.

further communication (Luhmann 191-241, (chapter "Kommunikation und Handlung").

Seeing things in this way has far-reaching consequences for the notions of text, reader, meaning, and tradition. Again, not the existence of the phenomena themselves is being questioned. What is at stake is the theoretical conceptualization of these notions. In traditional concepts of meaning the original text remains primary: the "*Wirkungsgeschichte*," the effective history, of a text is seen as the self-unfolding of the possible readings of that text through history. By contrast, according to the systems-theoretical concept of connected selections the functions of text and reader are changing constantly. A text, and that means also a reception-text, constitutes its own meaning by distinguishing itself from other communicative positions. This text, then, can in its turn become the reference point for other texts and meanings, etc. From this perspective one might even say that reception-texts do not constitute the meaning of other texts but first and foremost constitute their own meaning. For instance, the Marxist reception of Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* during the seventies did not discover any new aspects of the meaning of that novel as such, rather, it constituted its own meaning by distinguishing itself from the then dominant school of immanent interpretation.

To sum up, it can be said that the systems-theoretical concept of connected selections by no means leads to an elimination or reduction of the reader and his/her reception. It effects, on the contrary, an emancipation of reader and reception from their dependence on their reference-texts. Not the existence of history as a process is denied, but the existence of history as a continuous process. That is, the description of its structure has been changed. Whereas reception-aesthetics conceives of literary history as one broad organic stream of tradition, I would prefer to see it as having a kind of domino-structure. Of course, this metaphor should not be overstressed. But I feel that it may clarify a couple of things. First, text-communications are by no means isolated entities. Second, a text-communication acquires its historical uniqueness because it differs from synchronous contexts, not from remote contexts or from the totality of the context of the whole world. Third, every text-communication in itself can serve as a reference-point for further communication. Fourth, these kinds of connections do not lead to a homogeneous development of history, but a heterogeneous one. If one finally takes into account that the phenomenon of connected selections takes place both on the self-referential level of the literary system and on the level of other systems when they react to literary communication, the domino-structure gets as it were a third dimension. When we take all these elements into consideration, the concept of connected selections seems to be a much more differentiated instrument to describe the very complexity of the historical process than the rather monolithic conception of history as an *Überlieferungsgeschehen*.

How then, our critics ask us, can one explain the fact that the aesthetical

contents of historical communication reach us if there is no tradition? Then again, one can wonder whether the aesthetical contents of historical communications always reach us. And must they reach us at all? It seems to me that whatever the contents of historical communications may be, they predominantly get lost, that is, they do not reach us at all. Most of them disappear rather soon from current communication, and this process has been accelerating for some time now. They may remain elements of the complex horizon of possible selections of new communication, but only rarely will they actually be reactivated for new communication. After all, mankind does not permanently carry around a couple of thousand years of global communication. Not even readers in our present functionally differentiated society are carrying about with them two hundred years of modern literary communication. Literary communication never deals with selections from an infinite amount of communicative options, it just deals with a limited number of such options. One could even say that reading literature on a large scale is only possible precisely because readers do not need a complete knowledge of the literary tradition.

Of course, all this does not exclude the possibility that historical aesthetical contents do reach us. Education in schools and at the university shows us that they sometimes do. This, however, is not due to a uniform stream of tradition, but to quite specific pedagogical, scientific or political objectives, which in turn have their own specific differential contexts. To summarize, the alleged uniformity of literary tradition and the consciousness of that tradition as a condition for successful communication are illusions. From a systems-theoretical point of view, tradition (or *Überlieferungsgeschehen*) has to be conceptualized as a very heterogeneous succession of connected communications, many of which quite often simply break off.

THE REINTRODUCTION OF LITERARY CRITICISM AS AN INTERPRETATIVE INSTITUTION

This objection also comes from empirical scholars. They believe that a systems-theoretical concept aimed at the reconstruction of meaning will function as an instrument of ultimate explanation of textual meaning and that it will once more ontologize the text, while elevating the academic critic above all other, non-academic readers (see above all Kramaschki). Behind this supposition lies the idea of a complete equivalence of the private readings of ordinary recipients and the scholarly interpretations of professional readers. Both, the argument runs, are merely able to come to subjective constructions of textual meaning, not to a reconstruction of intersubjective or even objective meaning. To a certain degree, of course, we can agree with this. Scholarly models of textual reality are constructions, observations, which are in turn open to deconstruction or observation. Reconstructions of meaning developed within the system of science are but temporary results, always open to new connected communications both

from within and without the system of science.

However, this does not mean that all kinds of meaning-construction are equivalent or interchangeable. Of course, they are with regard to the general freedom and equality of all people around the world. But there are important differences with regard to the specific structures of observation involved. One cannot neglect that there are constructions which can, on the purely pragmatic grounds of function, communication and survival, be regarded as verifiable, based on consensus, connectable and therefore as "right" or "wrong," "objective" or "not objective" in a relative sense. If one does not accept this and insists instead on the equivalence of all kinds of meaning-construction, one would confuse the object-level with the meta-level of making constructions of reality, in other words, one would confuse first-order observation with second-order observation. First-order observation simply uses the difference a certain system is dealing with. Within the system of art, for instance, it is possible to react with aesthetical means to communication in other systems or to create a new work of art.

Second-order observation, by contrast, operates on a different level. It observes texts and works of art not simply as objects but as communication based on a specific difference. In short, it is observation of observation. In this way it becomes possible to observe with which differences works of art themselves observe their contexts and in doing so constitute their own meaning. Of course, such second-order observation cannot lead us to the objective meaning of texts in any absolute sense. For, as indicated above, second-order observation is inevitably constructive as well. Its results are relative to the observing system. That means they would change if one were to use the binary code of another system. And even from the perspective of the same binary code, a day may come when they will prove to be incorrect. This, however, does not situate second-order observation on the same level as the subjective constructions of reality of first-order observation. And neither is there any equivalence of our model of systems-theoretical understanding of texts on the one hand and subjective reading of texts on the other. Both of them are trying to satisfy a need for meaning in our society in different ways.²

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Notwithstanding the general observation-dependence of all our knowledge, including our knowledge of the difference between system and environment and between "*Mitteilung*" and "*Information*," not even the functionally differentiated society at the end of the twentieth century is capable of functioning without claiming truth or reality for its constructions and interpretations. No social

system can leave the decision regarding the validity of its communications "up for grabs" without putting its own existence at risk. This holds true for the theoretical, *wissenschaftliche*, study of literature as well: any kind of reception or postprocessing of pragmatic and literary texts is dependent on observation. However, this does not make textual analysis a matter of unlimited relativity or arbitrariness.

To claim that textual analysis as second-order observation of literary communications is not identical to non-academic, subjective text-reception (first-order observation) is not to discredit the latter. Both kinds of observation are legitimate, indeed indispensable, means of reducing the complexity of our world. But historical knowledge of literary texts can only be had from a second-order perspective. From this perspective every text, before its readers seize upon it, is in a sense itself a reader of its own contemporary context; and from this perspective texts can be analyzed as the difference between their form of communication and their current selection-horizon. Their chosen form may then become the starting point for other texts, and for countless readings — but these, too, can only be analyzed with a theory of communication as second-order observation.

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2 For the confusing of first-order observation and second-order observation, see Ort.

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Systems Theory and Discursivity

The scope of my contribution to this volume is both limited and perhaps unwisely ambitious. On the one hand, I would like to sketch the general outline of a theoretical and methodological framework for the study of literary phenomena which may be roughly characterized by means of key-concepts like "functionalist," "systemic," and "discursive." On the other hand, I would like to indicate succinctly how those principles, subsequently, can be applied to a symptomatic cultural situation, namely literature in Flanders during the Second World War.¹ The theoretical and historical remarks presented here are based on the results of a research project examining this specific situation which has been going on in our institute for some years now.

For brevity's sake I will mainly concentrate on the component of discursivity and its methodological implications. The very collocation of "system theory" and "discursivity" may sound sacrilegious to many adherents of a systems-theoretical approach. It is indeed common knowledge that Luhmann, Schmidt, and other scholars have repeatedly and very severely — although, in my opinion, rather hastily — rejected Foucault's way of dealing with social and historical phenomena by "transforming" them into discursive events. Yet, I strongly believe that an adequate analysis of complex cultural phenomena cannot or can hardly limit itself to the exclusive research of hard empirical data. The discursive dimension which will be entirely neglected in this perspective seems crucial to the actual functioning of culture and, more specifically, of what is commonly called "literature."

THE APORIAS OF TRADITIONAL LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP

My plea in favor of a discourse-oriented systems-theoretical approach of literature attempts to take into account a number of objections which in recent

1 This article has been realized in the context of a large-scale research project on "Literature and Literary Criticism in Flanders (Belgium) during the Second World War (1940-1945)," which is currently carried out at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Department of Literary Studies), thanks to the financial support of the Leuven Research Fund and the Fund for Scientific Research of Flanders (Belgium). I would like to thank my colleagues Eveline VanFraussen, Ilse Mesdagh, and Anneleen Masschelein for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.