

The Systems-Theoretical Perspective in Literary Studies: Arguments for a Problem-Oriented Approach

In this volume three major variants of systems-theoretical approaches and their application to literary studies have been discussed: the formalist and structuralist tradition represented by Itamar Even-Zohar, the sociological approach of Pierre Bourdieu, as recorded by Alain Viala, and the constructivist variant explained by Siegfried J. Schmidt.

All three try to be comprehensive, incorporating other research traditions in their carefully phrased, but still in many respects tentative frameworks. Most ambitious is Siegfried Schmidt, who tries to combine cognitive constructivism with sociology, and media studies with literary scholarship; his work is characterized by a protracted polemic with the even more ambitious Niklas Luhmann. Bourdieu has always been less systematic than Luhmann or Schmidt, but Viala's critical observations polish his conceptualizations to a more acceptable level. Even-Zohar presents an approach which remains close to the familiar tradition of Russian Formalism, notably Jakobson and Tynjanov. There are flaws and inconsistencies in each of the three paradigms. At least I do not feel myself completely at ease with any of the three approaches and I will try to show why. On the other hand, I wish to emphasize that the systems-theoretical approach should not be abandoned. It has a long history in the study of literature, going back to Russian Formalism and other early explorations — for instance by the Comparatist Claudio Guillén (1957; 1971) — and it certainly has a future. It can serve a crucial heuristic role, but one of the problems is that its heuristic value is very different in different research contexts.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE WORLD

By simply positing "that systems exist" ("daß es Systeme gibt" [30]) Luhmann has avoided a question which cannot be discarded that easily. Of course, there are reasons to consider, for instance, the human body as a system, or the ecological environment (the eco-system), or the constellation of solar planets (the planetary system). We are also used to talking about the linguistic system and the literary system. The point, however, is what exactly do we mean when we

are using the word "system" in these different cases. Thinking in terms of systems is more than "relational thinking" (Even-Zohar), for it distinguishes between system and environment, i.e., between various systems, which are differently organized with different degrees of rigidity. That things are connected is a widely accepted view. Systems theory does not need to tell us that. What it should tell us is 1) how to distinguish a particular system from its environment; 2) how to investigate the functions of a system with respect to adjacent systems; and 3) how to study the constitutive elements of a system, including their mutual relations. The answers to these questions may provide a framework for solving particular problems, both of a scientific and of a sociocultural nature.

The first question which is to be considered then is: What are the distinguishing features of a literary system? Moreover, if literary systems differ from culture to culture — as both Even-Zohar and Schmidt argue — what are the distinguishing features of these various literary systems?

Even-Zohar avoids both questions by procrastinating them: his study of the mechanisms of cultural and social life — "of which textual production is only one restricted facet" — will in the end tell us about the mechanisms of literature as well. I doubt very much whether this will happen since it may well be that the subsystem "literary communication" distinguishes itself in more than one way from the larger system of cultural communication and social behavior. There is not necessarily an identity (Viala) or homology (Bourdieu) between the literary subsystem and the social and cultural system.

Even-Zohar and Bourdieu are heavily influenced by the socio-economic metaphor of the market, including a market dominated by "une économie à l'envers" (Bourdieu 121). Of course, they will discover competition, struggle for power and institutional authority in literary life as well as elsewhere in society, but this reductionist view does not say anything about the distinguishing features of the literary system. To conceive of the literary system as a market is a poor man's philosophy.

One may object that Bourdieu's idea of a homology — an identity with reversed values — between the literary system and the social system does refer to a distinguishing feature of the former; but, as Viala has shown, there are exceptions to the notion of homology as a bipolar reversal of social structures. Moreover, why should literary behavior be either identical with or a reversal of socio-economic behavior? Are other models excluded? Finally, from an epistemological point of view, the concept of the homology as well as of the identity of structures appears extremely difficult to handle. However, neither Viala or Bourdieu, nor Even-Zohar dwell long on the epistemological basis of their concepts and observations and Luhmann seems to explicitly ignore epistemological questions.

Siegfried J. Schmidt makes up for this lack of interest in epistemology and takes ample time to develop his notion of cognitive constructivism. In principle,

I admit, the constructivists are right. Human beings construct the world as far as they can see it and do this in ways which are made possible by the limited capacities of their own biological system. Their notion of time, for instance, assumably differs from that of a fly or an elephant. The reality they perceive is a constructed one. Schmidt presents the world as a creation of humankind. There is a tendency towards universalism in his thinking. All that he says must be applicable under all circumstances, which prevents him from commenting on specific cultural phenomena since cultural activities cannot be discussed in terms of universals. The only exceptions to this rule, I assume, may be provided by propositions about the psychological motivation of cultural activities and their neurobiological basis.

Fortunately, in recent publications Schmidt hardly emphasizes the epithet "radical" which appeared in the title of a book he edited in 1987, *Der Diskurs des Radikalen Konstruktivismus*. Indeed, human beings do not construct the world in an absolute sense. In advancing their constructions they are confronted with the hard materiality of their environment as well as with the mental constructions of their fellow human beings. Constructivists like Schmidt are bound to conclude that human beings are able to communicate because they have similar experiences which their cognitive systems interpret in similar ways. In their terminology communication is possible, not because it refers to a reality which is somewhere out there, but because people apparently refer to similar experiences (synreferentiality). The constructivists reject the hypothesis that there is a reality independent of human perception. Unfortunately, however, they pay little attention to the fact that the social construction of reality, at least in certain aspects, may extend to views which are shared by all of humankind. This enables us to conclude that it is warranted to speak of a social reality, which admittedly is different from the reality constructed by flies or elephants but which nevertheless may serve as a parameter in the communication between human beings.

In order to maintain a universalistic perspective, Schmidt paradoxically assumes that all our observations are relative. From a philosophical point of view that position can be defended, but it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do empirical research on that basis. Empirical research can be undertaken only under conditions where human beings basically have similar notions of material and social reality. In view of the quantity of successful sociological and economic research, these conditions apparently are more widespread than Schmidt seems to believe. The way towards empirical research in the humanities is wide open, although such research usually will be restricted to a particular cultural region or a restricted population.

THE LITERARY SYSTEM

Assuming that the concept of system may serve as a heuristic device for discovering the workings of literature, let us look more in detail into the distinctive features of literary systems.

Luhmann has not expressed himself on the specificity of literary communication. In *Soziale Systeme*, the lemma "literature" does not occur in the extensive subject index, the concept "art" is mentioned only once. This means that the contours of the literary system must be extrapolated from his description of systems in general. Henk de Berg, an avid reader and admirer of Luhmann, suggests that social systems can be differentiated on the basis of their different functions. Hence there is a political system, an economic system, a science system and an art system. Each system has its own set of "programs," a set of norms which regulates behavior within a system ("Ein Programm ist ein Komplex von Bedingungen der Richtigkeit [und das heisst: der sozialen Abnehmbarkeit] des Verhaltens" [Luhmann 432]). But the question what the programs of the literary system consist of remains unanswered. Henk de Berg equates the programs of the literary system with "poetics or poetological views" and in doing so he has reached the point where our questioning begins.

However, Luhmann's conceptualizations are useful where he stipulates that systems have a network of internal relations between their elements, that systems are to be distinguished from their environment, and that they have a distinctive function *vis-à-vis* other systems (which belong to that environment).

In Luhmann's view — and Schmidt would certainly agree — systems are constructions which may vary in accordance with our particular interest or perspective: "Everything belongs *always at the same time* to a system or several systems and to *the environment of other systems*" (243; my translation, my emphases). Thus, literary communication belongs to the literary system and at the same time to the environment of the system of journalism, or that of politics etc. Or, a particular activity belongs both to the literary system and to that of journalism, and at the same time to the environment of the system of politics. My conclusion is that *if* we wish to talk about the literary system at a particular juncture of, for instance, West European history, we must make explicit what our specific interest or perspective is.

When Schmidt wrote *Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* (1989) he was primarily interested in the internal differentiation of the category of truth ("Ausdifferenzierung der Wahrheitskategorie") and the emergence of the aesthetic convention. Schmidt has variously defined the aesthetic convention (1982, 51–52; 1989, 430–31). It is easier to explain what the aesthetic convention is not than to say what it is. In my understanding, the aesthetic convention relies on shared knowledge among particular populations that, if texts are intended to be read as literature or for other reasons elicit a literary response, the text processing is *not* to be geared towards a testing of

factual truth or towards immediate practical application, but rather towards the cognitive and emotive assimilation of general beliefs or models of behavior.

It appears to me that the aesthetic convention is a distinctive feature of any modern literary system. The aesthetic convention can be considered part of the "program" (Luhmann) of the West European literary system since the eighteenth century. If one disagrees with this view other ways must be found to characterize the current European literary system, but we cannot do without a characterization, if only a tentative one, of the literary system(s) we wish to discuss. For how should we know what we are looking for if we would not have some vague idea of it first? This is why hypotheses are necessary in any research.

In his contribution to this volume Schmidt announces that his "definition of the boundary of literary systems by means of macro-conventions has to be revised." The macro-conventions he has worked with earlier, the aesthetic convention and the polyvalence convention, have received some criticism, especially the polyvalence convention. In fact, I have always viewed the polyvalence convention as following from the aesthetic convention. I consider the latter the central convention of literary production and consumption.

Schmidt writes: "Whereas in Luhmann's model the definition of a system's boundary is a purely definitional problem, it is an empirical one in my model" (Schmidt in this volume). There is a problem here. If Schmidt cannot explain what a literary system makes into a literary system, how can he distinguish its boundaries and particular function? At least one of the so-called macro-conventions must be maintained. I would suggest: the aesthetic convention.

The criticism of the polyvalence convention has been pertinent. Schmidt's recent definition of the polyvalence convention runs as follows: "The polyvalence convention means that actors in the literary system have the freedom to treat texts considered to be literary in ways which are most satisfactory in view of their own needs, capacities, motivations and intentions" (1989, 431; my translation). This freedom of interpretation and use follows from the general significance which in accordance with the aesthetic convention is attributed to literary texts. The polyvalence convention does not apply under all circumstances and can be considered part of a process. Riffaterre has described the emergence of a literary text as coinciding with its *decontextualization*. He argues that "a text can be said to be literary when it survives the extinction of the issues, the vanishing of the causes, and the memory of the circumstances to which that text responded" (70). He considers the fact that texts originally written without literary intention, for instance historiographical or religious texts, can become incorporated in the body of texts which a specific population considers literary. The original referential meaning of a text may get lost and/or give way to a symbolic or metaphorical significance which it may also have or which can be read into it.

As an elaboration of Riffaterre's views I propose to distinguish three stages of reading: 1) the historicist attempt at contextualization; 2) the attribution of symbolic significance which coincides with decontextualization: general beliefs and models of behavior are distilled from the text; and 3) the presentist attempt at recontextualization, i.e., a connection of the general beliefs and models of behavior with the reader's own lifeworld: general beliefs are turned into specific beliefs, models of behavior into concrete action (see also Fokkema).

The first stage may be called a historical or sociological (or other kind of historicizing) reading. There is not much interpretive freedom here. In the second and third stages, however, there is more leeway for the readers. They have some freedom to construct their general models of understanding life or the world, but in the third stage this freedom often tends to narrow down to the coexistence of various monovalent interpretations. Therefore, the polyvalence convention applies rather to the second stage, and can be considered to apply to the third stage only if one takes the varying interpretations and applications of different readers (or successive readings by one individual) into account.

The various stages of reading sketched above draw our attention to the historical moment in literary production and consumption. Luhmann has emphasized the continuum of communication. Fredric Jameson and others indebted to the Marxist tradition have equally stressed the necessity of historicizing. Schmidt did not ignore this aspect, notably in his book, *Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert*. Yet, our explorations into the literary system should not be carried away by the flux of the moment, by the continuum of exchanges. The psychological condition of human beings is of such nature that it enables us to work with certain conceptual constants, abstract concepts which we use to orient ourselves in the confusing and fast developing world around us. No historicization is possible without concepts such as conventions, whether aesthetic or otherwise.

I cannot fully elaborate the distinctive features of the literary system here. However, in view of the three stages of reading, we must assume that the aesthetic convention characterizes predominantly the central activities within the literary system, not the periphery, such as the distribution or selling of literary works or their political use. In the periphery the boundaries between systems are fuzzy: the literary system overlaps with the economic system, the political system, and other systems. Systems theory does not end these hybrid situations.

A PROBLEM-ORIENTED APPROACH

The construction of systems can be seen as an answer to a very general and abstract question, such as: how are all literary activities linked with each other? Only very rarely someone asks that question. Usually our questions are more concrete, both in scholarly research and in daily life.

Yet general questions about the constitution and function of literary systems

can shed light on the specificity of literary communication. The convention to read texts considered to be literary in a way that does not primarily ask for factual correctness or immediate applicability and yet attributes significance to those texts not only distinguishes the literary system from that of journalism or politics, but also invests the literary system with a particular function within the cluster of systems relying on verbal communication. Apparently it is the emphasis on formal features that detracts from the usual attention to referentiality and applicability. The effect of the reader's focusing not only on the semantic contents but also on the formal features of the message implies a slackening of the reader's attention to the precise referential meaning of that message. This leads to what we called decontextualization, which allows for symbolic and metaphorical transpositions and gives rise to a situation where, in an off-guarded way, readers may accept a story or a view which they never would have taken the trouble to absorb if the message were a straight informative one. It is probably this hybrid nature of texts considered literary — high literature rather than popular literature, new interpretations of those texts rather than canonized ones — that makes them more likely to dismantle ideological fixities than expository texts can do. It is this *social* function of literature which may explain the persistence of literary communication in a society flooded with texts of all kinds. If this view is not accepted, then another explanation should be found to elucidate the current practice of seeing the literary system as different from other systems built on verbal communication. A primary research goal indeed is to find and make explicit the function of the literary system *vis-à-vis* other systems.

Another vital research goal is to acquire more clarity about the elements of literary systems, their mutual relations, and the channels of communication they use. Here we see striking differences between Luhmann and Schmidt. Luhmann, as paraphrased by de Berg, avoids "conceptualizing society as the aggregate of the behavior of socialized individuals. By viewing society not in terms of acting subjects but in terms of contingent communications Luhmann as it were excommunicates the individuals from social systems." Schmidt, however, sees definite roles for individuals in social systems, including the literary system. Both views are possible and may be fruitful, but "excommunication" of the other view seems wrong. Autopoiesis and self-referentiality in social systems have their limits. In a system built on communications one cannot ignore either the interference by individuals nor, in a system built on action roles, the conditions and conventions of communication. Rather than trying to combine Luhmann's and Schmidt's conceptions it seems advisable to accept that they are complementary and that, with some modifications, each of these conceptions is valid and can be successful depending on the problem that one wishes to investigate.

The difference between Luhmann's and Schmidt's conceptions of systems built on verbal communication can be further analyzed in more specific terms.

It seems profitable to envisage the elements of the literary system in combination with their channels of communication. In Schmidt's conception the elements are agents (action roles of individuals) who communicate by means of what I would call "soft and hard media" which serve as channels of communication. Soft media are conventions (in Siegfried Schmidt's and David Lewis's sense) or "selektive Akkordierungen" (Luhmann 153, 192). Hard media are oral, written or printed texts, including the equipment to relay them. The invention of new means of transmission may influence the composition of texts and also the communicative conventions, just as in architecture the invention of new technological means has influenced the architectural products — the buildings — including their interpretation and appreciation.

However, if one would wish to study, for instance, the system of literary genres, Luhmann's conception may offer a point of departure. In this view, the elements of the system are models or prototypes of genres, which together cover the field of literary production. These elements are interrelated through the efforts of individuals who have knowledge of these models on the basis of their reading and who apply them in their literary production. Here, individuals can be considered the channels of communication between the text-based elements.

Another example of a text-based approach is the examination of discourse as proposed by de Geest. However, in the final instance he, too, cannot ignore the role of individual agents outside of discursive representation. There is no way to determine that the communication-oriented approach (Luhmann) or the agent-oriented approach (Schmidt) is better — more fruitful or productive — than the other. There is no absolute hierarchy between systems, only a relative ranking depending on the problem that serves as a point of departure. Or, as Herwig-Lempp phrased it: "The aim of the observer is not to understand the system, but to envisage his or her research object in a way that allows to find answers to specific questions or problems" (Herwig-Lempp 6; my translation). Schmidt joined this point of view (1989, 30). When he discussed the question of whether one should speak of one literary system or of several ones, he could quickly discard that problem. Since, in principle, almost every component of a system can itself be conceptualized as a system, it depends on the research problem one wishes to investigate whether it is advisable to envisage one or several literary systems (Schmidt 1989, 437).

That scientific research usually takes its cue from specific problems is something systems-theoreticians tend to overlook. They are so much enamored with the idea of building a system or with the technique of how to conceive of a system that they forget what the purpose of these efforts is. If we wish to elaborate systems theory in literary studies it is advisable to try to connect the systems-theoretical approach with specific questions, for instance, questions about the emergence of the literary system (which Schmidt has studied in *Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* and Bourdieu

in *Les Règles de l'art*), or about the decay of the literary system as a result of the impact of new media (film, television). Or, to mention just one more of the many questions that can be elucidated by using systems theory: to what extent is poetry still alive in the electronic age? And, if it still is a vital means of communication, how can we explain this?

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