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Gerhard Lauer

Introduction: Empirical Methods in Literary Studies

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Empirical methods are widely discussed in the theory of sciences but undertheorized in literary theory. The main reason why literary theory is about anything except empirical methods is its nature. Literary theory is critical theory in the broad sense of the term, connected with the social and cultural inquiry into modern societies (Bohman 2013). Not method but questioning the entitlement of sciences, and scholarship in general, is the major goal of many theories in the field. An emphasis on the individuality of the text, and the notion that the individual scholar is crucial to read literature properly, pursue the same direction of this much-travelled road. Aesthetic experiences, it is argued, are beyond words and any method. Influential scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer claim no less than a fundamental opposition between truth and method; they assign truth to scholarship and methods to the sciences (Gadamer 1960). Since literary approaches based on methods, even empirical ones, are perceived as contradicting this prevailing kind of understanding literature, articles on the subject are absent in most dictionaries of literary criticism (Winko 2000); in literary theory, ›empirical methods‹ designates little more than a theoretical idiosyncrasy, like, for instance, the empirical study of literature (Andringa 1998). Almost universally in literary theory, a skeptical perspective on empirical methods prevails.

However, the general assumption of a contradiction of literary theory and empirical methods is wrong in more than one respect. First, empirical methods are part of the long history of literary scholarship and rhetoric. Whoever identifies a hapax legomenon or looks for parallel text passages, makes use of empirical methods, developed nearly two thousand years ago by Hellenistic literary scholarship (Kennedy/Innes 1990). Textual criticism and the exegesis of texts based on literary, historical, biographical, and linguistic scholarship are systematic and methodologically verified practices which match empirical methods. And in a similar sense, empirical methods are widely used to enable discrimination, for instance, when modern narratology distinguishes between showing and telling, or when, in literary history, historical contexts such as industrialization are drawn upon to explain Victorian novels. Any such approaches obey certain rules and theoretical principles, and in that sense are sound methods. Secondly, modern sciences (as they have been described since the seventeenth century by pioneers

such as Francis Bacon) understand their underlying new principles as empirical. As Bacon put it in his *Advancement of Learning*:

The works touching books are two – first, libraries, which are as the shrines where all the relics of the ancient saints, full of true virtue, and that without delusion or imposture, are preserved and reposed; secondly, new editions of authors, with more correct impressions, more faithful translations, more profitable glosses, more diligent annotations, and the like. (Bacon 1605).

Textual criticism established its empirically based institutions and rules long before literary studies became literary criticism.

And thirdly, empirical methods, from Russian Formalism at the beginning of the twentieth century to actual quantitative and computer-based approaches, are part of modern literary studies. Albeit not a large one, they nevertheless make headway for new literary theories and have challenged and provoked more than once preconceived notions in the current comfort zones of literary theory (Ajouri/Mellmann/Rauen 2013).

Empirical methods undoubtedly have their history and assured place in literary theory, but we cannot rule out that their significance is limited; they hardly hold a central position in much theoretical thinking about literature. They are accepted at the level of textual analysis or even regarded as a kind of craftsmanship, but are not valued as theory. It takes its toll when empirical methods are more or less excluded from literary theory and discussed separately in other field of knowledge like psychology or social sciences, as it is often the case. For this simple reason the *Journal of Literary Theory* published a call for papers, hoping to receive contributions about the significance of empirical methods for literary theory. We asked in our call for papers:

Empirical methods have a humble yet continuous tradition in literary studies. It's a tradition that seems to stand in fundamental opposition to historical and hermeneutical approaches due to differences concerning the practice of validation, reliability and extensiveness of their claims. JLT is interested in publishing articles that take a theoretical and systematic perspective on the question how empirical methods – despite those differences – might fit into the research practices of literary studies. How can both approaches complement each other? How can established questions in literary studies be answered differently (or maybe even more satisfyingly) by using empirical approaches? How does literature as a subject matter change through the use of empirical approaches, such as methods from the cognitive sciences or computer based processes? Which preconditions should (still) be clarified, so that empirical methods can become part of the literary studies?

We received fabulous papers but more or less all derived from the small branch of empirical study of literature. We have preached to the choir once more. The gap

between literary theory and empirical methods is not closed and this journal issue is only a small, but still necessary step crossing the line.

*

A personal remark at the end: In 2007 the first issue of the *Journal of Literary Theory* was published. It was the result of many years of collaboration with Fotis Jannidis, Matías Martínez and Simone Winko. We had explored basic terms of literary theory, held a series of conferences, and drawn attention to studies which re-examined central tenets in the field of literary study. The first publication of our joint enquiries came out in 1999 on the »Return of the Author« (Jannidis et al. 1999). After many years I now step down from the board of editors. I will focus my scholarly work on nothing else but empirical, even experimental and computational methods to look at the aesthetic behavior of humans.

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