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# *Literary Studies in Reconstruction*

An Introduction to Literature



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## Preface

This volume takes its place alongside the efforts of others that—swimming against the currents of *passe-partout* theory and cultural studies—still wish to preserve the field of literary studies, although not in its established form, but through a fundamental reconstruction comprising both its “internal” conceptual or methodological rearrangement and “external” response to postmodern social, political, and economic realities. My aims are: *first*, an attempt at conceptual reconstruction that takes into account recent deconstructions of literary criticism’s key notions and critically embraces them in a revised set of hypotheses, not forgetting the constructedness of all knowledge (including that of literature); and, *second*, to justify contemporary meanings, relevance, and functions of knowledge about literature. Both aims imply a critical redistribution of scholarly topics, methods, and competences that literary criticism has to deal with if it wishes to survive in the present context of disciplinary redivisions and cross-disciplinary methods (in linguistics, the social sciences, cultural history, psychology, cognitive science, etc.). Only by coming to terms with the global redistribution and commodification of knowledge as well as with relocation of scholarly competences can literary criticism still claim greater general validity and broader social relevance for its insights. This book, which could be entitled “Site under Construction,” is an introduction to these problems and is divided into two parts. In the first part, I comment on the prospects of two main branches of literary studies: literary theory and literary history, both “national” and comparative. In the second part, I try to reconstruct and revise some basic critical concepts that are used for modeling literary texts and their temporal or spatial contexts.

In postmodernity, literary theory has become pluralistic, perspectivized, and—in parallel with the weakened autonomy of belletristic writing and the deconstruction of the concept “literature”—intertwined with the transdisciplinary, eclectic, and critical discourse of “Theory,” which is directed towards cultural studies rather than towards explorations of the artistic field. Hermeneutic and

neo-pragmatist self-reflection has made literary theory aware of its own contingency and of being merely one among several (discursive) practices. As one of the “sciences of the subject,” it has also come to realize that knowledge is subject-dependent and that the field of research (i.e., literature) changes together with and under the influence of its scholarly observation. The answer of literary theory to these challenges proposed here is its disciplinary reconstruction into a theory of literary discourse. Such a theory accounts for the fact that literary texts are part of historical becoming and cultural changes in human life-worlds. This is why it must choose new objectives: first, with its ability for apt descriptions of literary devices (i.e., as a descriptive poetics), it may also contribute to a better critical understanding of the rhetorical powers of other discourses and language in general. Second, it may provide strong arguments to legitimize the indispensable anthropological values of the literary—including and primarily in the present time, marked by the triumph of the new media and globalized economization of all knowledge.

Literary historiography, the second main branch of traditional literary studies, has synthesized its particular research results mainly in the complex and prominent form of literary histories. National and supranational literary histories, as known from the nineteenth century on, are in fact a narrative and/or encyclopedic nonfiction genre that has been fashioned through inter-systemic interaction of the academic field with its own “object” of study: literature. With its comprehensive synthesis, literary history as a “great” genre has gained authority over the shaping of public past, national and broader cultural identities, and the literary canon. The postmodern historic turn in the humanities and social sciences makes new demands upon this genre: it must provide an explanation for the constructionist and semi-fictionalized character of all representations of the past; it must be aware of the assertive power of its speech-acts, which take part in sociopolitical negotiations about history; traditional omniscient narrative should be dismissed and supplanted by the polyvocality of interpretations and by collages of telling fragments; the ties between the literary work and its historical background should be reassessed in terms of semiosis, which transgresses the text-context boundary; and, above all, it seems that literary history can preserve its own genre identity (i.e., the *literary* of literary history) only through historical and anthropological analysis of literature as a discourse and social system. One possible reconstruction of the great genre of literary history is also offered by electronic hypertext archives, because these make possible an open-ended, revisable, multi-layered, highly contextualized, and polyfocal representation of literary processes.

Chapter 3 is a rethinking of the notion of world literature. Recently, the original Goethean idea of world literature as analogous to the capitalist world system has become relevant to transnational comparative literary studies: “world literature” presupposes concepts, practices, media, and institutions of cultural transfer, as well as local intertextual absorption of global cultural repertoires, and self-

conscious production for international audiences. Goethe, feeling disadvantaged in comparison to writers from the French or British metropolises, was among the first to experience *Weltliteratur* as a growing circulation of literary works across linguistic and national borders. Cultural exchange between nations, continents, and civilizations appeared to him in the guise of the modern capitalist market going global. On the other hand, he considered critical, imaginative, and intertextual responses to global cultural repertoires essential both to the viability of any national literature and to the cosmopolitan idea of the “generally human.” Ever since Goethe’s time, world literature, conceived either as a network of cultural transfer or a category of ethical, political, and aesthetic discourses, has been shaped by multifaceted experiences of cultural otherness (colonialism, translations, global news, archeological discoveries, tourism, etc.). It is important to stress that, from the times of its origin, *Weltliteratur* has been intertwined with the ideologeme of “national literature.” Inclusion of the national in the world, the presence of the world in the national, and nationality as a pre-condition for the appearance of world literature are symptoms of the interlocking ideologies of the post-Enlightenment cultural nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and the aesthetic understanding of art practices. In literature, national identity has been established internationally and within the global cultural market. Marx and Engels, following Goethe’s economic metaphors, connected the planetary expansion of capitalism to the beginnings of world literature. Indeed, the world system of capitalist economy, with its cores and peripheries (Wallerstein 2004), shows striking analogies with the modern “world republic of letters” (Casanova 1999) or “the world literary system” (Moretti 2000), in which the established and emerging literary fields interact from asymmetrical positions. World literature seems to be reserved for the diffusion of literary texts that, after having been produced or recognized by some global metropolis, exceed the original linguistic boundaries and become actively present in major languages or cultures (Damrosch 2003). However, the strong literatures that function as centers of the world literary system today used to be peripheral during their emergence (Even-Zohar 1990); without the interference of peripheral productivity, even central literary systems would stagnate. Centrality and peripherality are thus variables that depend on historical dynamics and system evolution. Moreover, ever since the cultural nationalism of the nineteenth century, the theoretical or poetic consciousness of world literature, its intertextual coherence, and its material networks have been “glocalized.” The world literary system is plural and accessible only through the archives of local cultural memories, particular cognitive perspectives, and singular acts of critical or creative self-reflection.

The second part of this book begins with the elucidation of recent developments in textual criticism and critical editions of literary texts; in doing this, Chapter 4 raises the question of how the materiality of media products, such as literary manuscripts or books, influences the production and comprehension of