FROM THE POSTMODERN TO THE PRE-MODERN: MORE RECENT CHANGES IN LITERATURE, ART AND THEORY

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That literature, art and theory have changed considerably since the early and more spectacular phase of postmodernity in the nineteen-sixties and seventies is too obvious to be overlooked. These changes raise questions regarding their actual extent and quality, their presumable causes and their already discernible consequences – three aspects to which I will be directing your attention in the following remarks.

First, then, the extent and quality of the changes that can be observed in the domains of literature, art and theory: in order to let you share my observations, I will have to draw at least a rough sketch of the situation then and now: that is, of the state of play in the nineteen-sixties and seventies as against the situation obtaining from the nineteen-eighties onwards.

In retrospect, the difference between the new works of art and literature from the nineteen-sixties and those of the nineteen-fifties seems so great that it is no wonder observers soon began speaking of a 'postmodernism', in the sense that 'modernism' seemed to be over. I would like to begin with the advent of postmodernism in the domain of the visual arts because it was especially here that the phenomenon was so unmistakably visible – no

accident, then, I might add, that the very term 'postmodernism' should have entered awareness via Charles Jencks's lucubrations on contemporary architecture, an essentially visual domain. Too great was the contrast between the stylish late modernist Colour Field paintings of American Abstract Expressionism and the new presentation of banal objects of everyday use, such as Jasper Johns's "Two Beer Cans" (1960) or Andy Warhol's "Brillo Box" (1964) as well as the foregrounding of the nature of such objects as mass products of consumer culture in Warhol's famously iconic "200 Campbell Soup Cans" (1962). What soon came to be called "Pop Art" further included the integration of the sexy images of advertising, as in the paintings of Tom Wesselman, the large-scale stylized imitations of comic-book or cartoon-strip figures and objects and speech- or thought-balloons as represented by Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg's magnified plastic reproductions of icons of everyday consumable or utilitarian culture (just think of his "Two Cheeseburgers with Everything" from 1962).

At the same time, the techniques of re-presentation were largely influenced by the use

and imitation of mechanical reproduction. Warhol, for instance, used acrylic paint and oil paint to create the impression of silkscreen prints or newspaper reproductions of photographs, Rauschenberg imitated the look of TV images, Lichtenstein the raster screen appearance of comic-book frames as quotations from mass culture, but they all emphasized the distance between that culture and their art by an alienation effect that was achieved via the extreme magnification involved in their very large canvases. What nevertheless was surprising was how well the ubiquitous and banal images of mass culture were suited as *sujets* for works of art.

The literary equivalent to Pop Art was the integration and refinement of the structural patterns of popular genre literature and the wide use of the clichés of everyday speech. Much of the latter can be found, for instance, in works like Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), or Stanley Elkin's *The Dick Gibson Show* (1971), while the preferred genres ranged from science fiction (as in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and fantasy (as in Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar*, 1968) to the detective novel [eher: conspiracy thriller] (as in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, 1966) and crime fiction or 'faction' (Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*, 1966) as well as the western and the horror story (Richard Brautigan, *The Hawkline Monster*, 1974). And I should not forget to mention that the popular pattern of the horror story was used in feminist works like Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), and in combination with science fiction in, for instance, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1975) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976).

While in the domain of postmodern art and literature Pop Art seemed so spectacular in its move beyond the previous limits of aesthetic taste that it appeared as another avant-garde movement, in the domain of theory the replacement of structuralism by poststructuralist ideas and deconstruction meant a similarly radical break with the previously dominant trend. After 1977, when Jacques Derrida's *De la Grammatologie* (1967) appeared in English translation, deconstruction became the new orthodoxy. Yet even if poststructuralist thought looked like the theoretical base of postmodern literature and art, it has to be said that artists and writers had become postmodern even earlier, or at least at the same time as the theorists.

This is borne out by works from the nineteen-sixties like Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying Lot of 49* (1966), novels with a clearly anti-foundationalist stance. And as to the free play of signifiers, where could one study it better than in Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* from 1967, a novel in which arbitrariness reigns supreme? The exhibition of arbitrariness was quite obviously also one of the objectives of the artists of the time, as can be gathered from the 'combines' of Robert Rauschenberg (for instance, his "Monogram" from 1959), the 'environments' of Claes Oldenburg ("Four Environments", 1963) or the 'assemblages' of James Rosenquist ("Mixed Media", 1963), from 'Earthworks' and 'Land Art' like Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" or Walter de Maria's "Lightning Field", and, above all, from most of the works belonging to 'Concept Art' – for instance, the series of random photographs by Vito Acconci or John Dribbet.

The radical relativization of validity stressed in poststructuralist theory is also a strong

feature of earlier postmodern literature and art, where it takes the shape of irony and self-irony, parody, or travesty. I would just like to recall John Barth's parody of Ebenezer Cooke's verse satire *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1708) in his novel with the same title from 1960, or Donald Barthelme's satirical travesty *Snow White* (1967).

That a relativizing ironical stance was also shared by postmodern artists is shown by the provocative celebration of the banal and the corresponding trivialization of the lofty and dignified, as in many of the paintings of Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi and Francesco Clemente, or the treatment of important German historical myths by Anselm Kiefer.

As is well known, the integration of a self-ironical critical discourse in narrative became such a typical feature of some postmodern fiction that one soon spoke of 'metafiction' as a new subgenre. Typical specimens are John Barth's novel *Lost in the Funhouse* and many of the postmodern short stories and tales of Donald Barthelme, Gilbert Sorrentino and Robert Coover.

Metafiction was, however, only one particular kind of the mixing of discourses, styles and genre patterns that stood in absolute contrast to late modernist purism. Other examples include Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) with its combination of historical war novel and science fiction and Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968) with its blending of documentary prose and novelistic narration.

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All these reminders of earlier postmodern art and literature are meant only to help us see more clearly how much different was most of what came after.

One of the most astounding events in the domain of art was the appearance of the various "Neo"-movements from the late nineteen-seventies onwards. Starting with the neo-expressionist painting of the "Neue Wilde", there soon reappeared an abstract geometrical art under the name of "Neo-Geo", which in turn was soon followed by "Neo-Conceptualism". Such an open declaration of 'new' work as a variation and renovation of something already existing had been utterly impossible during modernism and actually been barred since absolute novelty became a decisive criterion of aesthetic quality with the eighteenth-century conception of the original genius. Suddenly the minimal difference of mere variation became not only acceptable, but – with its obvious déja-vu effect – even desirable. It is, for instance, hard, when contemplating Roni Horn's presentation of two parts of a severed beam ("Parted Mass") from 1985 to tell it apart from the works of Carl Andre in the nineteen-sixties, and frequently we also find 'quotations' of earlier styles, as when Gerhard Richter's "Strich (auf Rot)" from 1980 alludes to the *art informel* of the 1950s, or even of particular works, for instance of Edvard Munch's "The Scream" (1893) in Enzo Cucchi's "Paesaggio Barbaro" (1983).

What became visible in the nineteen-nineties was already the bewildering diversity of styles that still prevails to this day. There were some spectacular events like the covering of the Reichstag in Berlin by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in 1995, and a predilection for spatial arrangements showed also in the great variety of 'installations'. Regarding painting, new abstract art (to which even someone like Georg Baselitz contributed) competed with 'naive' realism and the various other kinds of 'realism' that could be found, for instance, in

the exhibition "Radical Realism After Picabia" that was in 2002 first shown in the Centre Pompidou and then in the Kunsthalle in Vienna.

In the domain of literature, the changes that occurred in the late nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties were just as significant. The most remarkable new development was the return of more or less 'realistic' story-telling, something observable on an inter-national scale, although I will take my examples from British and American literature. In the United States, 'mainstream American realism' never stopped flowing even during the heyday of postmodernism (as, for instance, the successful series of John Updike's "Rabbit"-novels that began in 1960 testifies). Yet with the 'minimalist', 'dirty' or 'new' realism of Raymond Carver (*What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, 1981) and Frederick Barthelme (*Moon Deluxe*, 1983), comparatively 'straight' storytelling became more widespread again.

In quite a few cases the postmodern 'crisis of representation' still left its traces insofar as the rendering of reality is made to appear doubtful by various means. In novels like Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1985–86) or E.L. Doctorow's *World's Fair* (1986), the account of the past is made to appear ostensibly imperfect. As Gerhard Hoffmann has pointed out in his recent study *From Modernism to Postmodernism* (2005), in many American novels from the eighties and nineties the reality presented is marked by sudden disruptions of continuity that take the form of a mystery. While this may seem understandable in the works of an African-American writer like Toni Morrison (for instance, in *Beloved*, 1987, and in *Paradise*, 1997) and those of a native American writer like Louise Erdrich (for instance, in *The Beet Queen*, 1986, or in *Gardens in the Dunes*, 1999), it surprises in novels like *Infinite Jest* (1996) by David Foster

Wallace, *Middlesex* (2002) by Jeffrey Eugenides, or *The Corrections* (2001) by Jonathan Franzen.

The novels of Morrison and Erdrich are specimens of the so-called "hyphenated literatures" to which belong, besides African-American and Native-American, also Hispano-American literature (for instance, the successful novel *Hunger of Memory* (1982) by Richard Rodriguez), or Asian-American literature (for instance, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, 1977).

The revival of realistic narration in the United States meant also a reintroduction of social problems and social criticism such as we find it in Franzen's *The Corrections*, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) and Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing* (2003).

The fact that in the nineties there was still room for what Hoffmann has called "Strategies of Excess", strategies at work in the 835 pages of Harold Brodkey's epic adventure in consciousness called *Runaway Soul* (1991) and in the 1079 pages of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) with their extreme multi-modality and excessive language games proves, however, how wide the range of recent writing is.

In Britain, where the postmodern excesses were never as massive as in American literature, the nineteen-eighties brought a revival of the historical novel that included works with a metahistorical stance aptly called historio-graphic metafiction. Among them were such successful novels as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), and Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), as well as Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* (1983) and Nigel Williams' *Witchcraft* (1987). And it is important to see that in the nineteen-eighties, feminist critique of society was also expressed in historiographic metafiction like Maureen

Duffy's *Illuminations: A Fable* (1991) and Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987).

The revival of the historical novel comprised, however, also a considerable amount of more traditional storytelling, which began already with J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) and continued with J.G. Ballard's *Empire of The Sun* (1984), Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) as well as Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* (1992) and *Morality Play* (1995) and Louise de Bernière's *Birds Without Wings* (2004).

More or less straight storytelling has also continued through this whole period in the novels of Ian McEwan (from *The Cement Garden*, 1978, to *Atonement*, 2001) and Martin Amis (from *The Rachel Papers*, 1974, to *Yellow Dog*, 2003). And it has to be noted that the British equivalents to the American novels belonging to the "hyphenated literatures", the very successful works of the so-called British 'diaspora' writers Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Remains of the Day*, 1989) and Hanif Kureishi (*The Buddha of Suburbia*, 1990), also rely above all on the persuasiveness of more or less realistic storytelling.

What we find not only in recent art but also in recent literature is an aesthetic of minimal and often subtle variation of well-known themes and kinds of presentation, and as such an aesthetic was the dominant one from the Renaissance of the twelfth century to the end of Neo-Classicism in the late eighteenth century – it may – of course with some reservations – be called 'pre-modern'.

In the domain of theory, the influence of Derrida remained strong, yet with Gilles Deleuze another important figure and theoretical position became very influential in the late seventies and eighties after the works he had published together with Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe: capitalisme et schizophrénie I* (1972) and *Mille Plateaux: capitalisme et schizophrénie II* (1980) appeared in English translations (*Anti-Oedipus*, 1977, and *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1980). And in the late nineteen-eighties it showed that after the heyday of a-historical deconstruction the time was ripe for a return to history not only in the novel but also in the field of theory. In Britain, with investigations of the early modern construction of the subject and the legitimizing of power as in Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy. Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (1985) the turn became quite visible, and with Jonathan Dollimore's and Alan Sinfield's critical anthology *Political Shakespeare. New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985) the new movement – which was 'néo-marxisant' – also was named. In the United States, Stephen Greenblatt with his influential study *Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare* (1980) had already a few years earlier initiated a new critical movement with similar aims, yet an even wider inclusion of cultural history, a movement that in the introduction to the periodical *Genre* form 1980 he called "New Historicism" and that showed its appeal to a great number of critics when H. Aram Veeser by the end of the decade brought out some of their essays under the same title. And though this historical turn was new regarding its particular aims and methodology, it was pre-modern in the sense that a similar tendency can neither be found in the period of modernism nor in earlier postmodernism with its slogan (adopted from Henry Ford) 'history is bunk'.

The nineteen-eighties were also the time when the earlier feminist Women's Studies were completed and replaced by Gender Studies with its basic differentiation between biological sex and cultural gender. The increased interest in the cultural construction of gender difference fitted well into the wider

frame of the most comprehensive and influential theoretical movements after the end of de-construction: cultural studies and cultural history.

For with respect to the situation generally obtaining in the humanities, there seems to be no question that the 'cultural turn' has prevailed for some time now. Already in 1994 the sociologist David Charney stated:

> In the second half of the 20th century the theme of 'culture' has dominated the human sciences. Concepts of culture have generated perspectives and methodologies that have challenged orthodoxies and attracted the energetic enthusiasm of young scholars.[1]

With the increasing sophistication of the theoretical base and the growth of practical experience, this trend has become even stronger in the meantime. English philology has turned into a kind of super-discipline by taking over, at least in part, the work of sociology, history, psychology and philosophy, not to mention media and gender studies. The range of possible objects of investigation under the label of 'culture' has become almost unlimited. For that reason it seems advisable to limit the perspective under which the various features and aspects of culture are approached. And because English Studies as an academic discipline is language-based, and language is the most elaborate sign-system we have, the expertise gained in dealing with language, language texts and literature appears to be an excellent qualification especially for a semiotic approach to culture. Such an approach, the treatment of culture as an "ensemble of texts"[2], an entanglement of sign-systems was widely disseminated in the 1970s by Clifford Geertz and the new American anthropology. Suddenly those who were experts in textual interpretation saw themselves as being particularly qualified to interpret not only literature but also culture.

As I endeavoured to show in the 2001 volume of REAL on *Literary History / Cultural History: Force-Fields and Tensions,*[3] the notions of 'culture' in recent and current research are nevertheless anything but uniform, and this is also demonstrated, for instance, by the many relevant entries in the *Metzler Lexikon Kultur der Gegenwart*[4] and in the quite recent monograph by Doris Bachmann-Medick called *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften.* There is, however, a substantial ensemble of conceptions that are widely shared despite considerable differences. Culture by now is seen as an historical formation that, despite the hegemonic power structures already pointed out by Gramsci,[5] encompasses multiple forces and positions,[6] as a site of forms of ideological and political contestation in which – to use the terms introduced by Raymond Williams – dominant, residual and emergent forces coexist.[7] This view has led to a closer investigation of how cultural formations are stabilized – and I refer to the relevant studies of Pierre Bourdieu[8], Michel de Certeau[9], Louis Althusser[10], Alan Sinfield[11], and Catherine Belsey[12] – as well as to an intensive search for possible and effective counter-measures.

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[1] *The Cultural Turn, i.*
[2] See Geertz, "Deep Play."

[3] In"Literary History and Cultural History: Relations and Difference."
[4] Ed. Ralf Schnell.
[5] Cf. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.*
[6] Cf. Greenblatt, *Shakespearian Negotiations.*
[7] Cf. *Culture and Society.*
[8] Cf. *The Logic of Practice.*
[9] Cf *The Practice of Everyday Life.*
[10] Cf. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."
[11] Cf. *Faultlines.*
[12] Cf. "Reading Cultural History."

Culture – though materially manifested and linked to institutions – comes to be investigated in a signifying approach primarily as an immaterial construct, a web of meanings. In this sense it had already been made the subject of the *histoire de mentalités*[13] with its inquiry into collective sense-making, and it is also found in Pierre Bourdieu's sociological focus on "habitus"[14] and symbolic exchange[15] as well as in Catherine Belsey's observation that "cultural history records meanings and values."[16]

This is very close to my own view that culture is above all an ensemble of values[17] which, as Bourdieu has observed,[18] form hierarchies and in this way make cultures special and differ from one another. Such hierarchies of values only become culturally significant by having been collectively accepted. It is therefore necessary to investigate a great number of documents from various fields of discourse in order to discern the recurrent validations. In this respect, the study of culture differs significantly from the study of literature, for what finally counts in the latter is the singularity of a particular work, a singularity which even allows for a distancing from the prevailing hierarchy of values.

There are several fields within the domain of the study of culture that in the past two decades have received more attention than others. That one of them is cultural memory is not surprising after Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* from 1983 and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their *The Invention of Tradition* from the same year not only pointed out the importance of this part of culture but also its being largely a construction. Cultural memory then became a favourite field of research in Germany, beginning with some groundbreaking works such as the critical anthology *Kultur und Gedächtnis* (1988), edited by Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher, *Mnemosyne: Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung* (1991), edited by Aleida Assmann and Dietrich Harth, and Jan Assmann's *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (1992). Further investigations such as those undertaken on a large scale at my own university made evident, however, that even regarding the same country at one and the same historical moment it is more appropriate to speak of cultures of memory than of a single homogeneous culture of memory. Some of the results of the pertinent research have been published in the critical anthologies *Literatur, Erinnerung, Identität (2003)*, edited by Astrid Erll, Marion Gymnich, and Ansgar Nünning, *Erinnerung, Gedächtnis, Wissen. Studien zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Gedächtnisforschung* (2005), edited by Günter Oesterle, and *Literature, Literary History, and Cultural Memory* which I myself brought out in 2005.

The strong historical interest that motivates such recent work is definitely pre-modernist, even if not pre-modern in respect to late eighteenth century modernization. The same can be said for the ethical turn that began when Hillis Miller published his deconstructionist *Ethics of Reading* (1987) and such humanist critics as Wayne C. Booth with *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988), David Parker with *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (1994) and Leona Toker with *Commitment in Rflection: Essays in Literature and Moral Philosophy*, edited in 1994, began doing what

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13 Cf. Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire.f.*
14 Cf. *The Logic of Practice.*
15 Cf. "The Market of Symbolic Goods."
16 "Reading Cultural History", 107.
17 Cf. Grabes, "Culture – Semiotic System and Myth."
18 Cf. *Outline of a Theory of Practice.*

philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre had started with his widely acclaimed study *After Virtue* (1981) and what Charles Taylor with his *Sources of the Self* (1989), Richard Rorty with *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Martha Nussbaum with *Love's Knowledge* (1990) and Zygmunt Baumann with his *Postmodern Ethics* (1993) continued. That in the nineteen-nineties the ethical turn had definitely also taken place in the domain of literary criticism and theory can be derived from the appearance of such critical anthologies as *Ethics and Aesthetics: The Moral Turn of Postmodernism* (1996) or *The Ethics of Literature* (1999) as well as Andrew Gibson's *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* (1999). Since then there have been various attempts to prove that even postmodern metafiction has an ethical dimension, and as the contributions to a conference in May 2006 at Giessen on "Ethics in Culture: The Dissemination of Values through Literature and Other Media" showed,[19] the more general discussion of the topic has by no means come to an end.

A further field not much explored during modernism, neglected in the period of earlier postmodernism, and revived in the nineteen-nineties in view of the threatening hegemony of the study of culture, is the theory of literature. In surveying theoretical endeavours to distinguish 'literature' in a narrower sense from other texts, one will find that some have focused on textual features or markers and others on the professed or assumed relation between text and the life-world. With regard to the latter, the most persuasive recent plea for what has traditionally been called fictionality has, in my view, been presented by Jacques Derrida. In an interview from 1989 that was published in 1992 in English translation under the title "This Strange Institution Called Literature," he argued that it is the "*suspended* relation to meaning and reference" that gives to literature "in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history."[20] Literary discourse thus opens up, inhabits and circumscribes a free space within culture, a space for that "free play" within the interaction between the fictive and the imaginary that Wolfgang Iser has shown to be one of the specific effects of literary texts.[21]

In 1992 Pierre Bourdieu in *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* had sought to delimit what he called "the literary field in the field of power," a field that is a "real challenge to all forms of economism" because it "presents itself as an inverted economic world: those who enter it have an interest in disinterestedness."[22] And Timothy J. Reiss, being convinced that "literature alters its role, its action, its forms of practice as the environment of which it is a part evolves," in his study *The Meaning of Literature* from the same year attempted to delineate the genesis and further development of "what we have called 'literature'" (2–3) from the Renaissance to the late nineteenth century.

Subsequently, the increasing dominance of the cultural paradigm seems to have called forth further appeals in favour of literature. In 1999 there appeared Peter Widdowson's *Literature* in the New Critical Idiom series, a work in which the author, though still using

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[19] They will soon be published under the same title with De Gruyter in Berlin.

[20] "This Strange Institution Called Literature", 48.
[21] Cf. "Interplay Between the Fictive and the Imaginary."
[22] Quoted from the English translation *The Rules of Art,* 215–16.

the term 'literature' in the title, replaces it with the label "the literary," a "working term for the kind of written discourse I believe has some irreplaceable uses in our society" (92). As the distinguishing features of literary discourse he regards "its own sense of being *of* the literary," its "making 'poetic realities'," and – quoting Althusser – its capacity to achieve "a *retreat*, an *internal distancing*"[23] from the ideology within which it is held.

To demonstrate the value of what he considers as an endangered species, J. Hillis Miller in 2002 published his *On Literature*. He holds that, owing to "the creation or discovery of a new, supplementary world, a metaworld, a hyper-reality," "all literary works can be usefully thought of as a species of magic" (20–21) – a species by which the beliefs and behaviour of readers can be changed.

Not too far away from this view is Derek Attridge's definition of "the literary" as an event in *The Singularity of Literature*, which appeared in 2004. What he considers as the distinctive feature of literary texts is a "reformulation of norms," yet it "is only when the event of this reformulation is experienced by the reader [...] *as an event*, an event which opens up new possibilities of meaning and feeling (understood as verbs), or, more accurately, the event *of such opening*, that we can speak of the literary" (59).

In contrast to such focussing on the individual impact of literary texts, Catherine Belsey in her essay on "The Possibility of Literary History" highlights their specific cultural function:

> literature confronts the outer edges of language, and thereby the limits of the culture inscribed in language. It thus marks the finitude of all culture,

and the relativity of all cultures, and in the process the finitude and relativity of the subject that is their effect, as well as pointing to a relation of difference between language and the real that resides beyond the purview of culture. (47)

What I have not found in any of these more recent attempts to differentiate literature from other discourses is the very important fact that what we encounter in literature – in contrast to philosophy and other kinds of theoretical discourse – is overwhelmingly particular and even wholly individual: specific places, moments in time, characters with personal names, idiosyncratic ways of speaking and acting, thinking and feeling. Literary discourse renders possible and motivates an imaginary experience of the particular in its outer physicality or inner concreteness rather than offering general notions to the reasoning mind. The consequence of this presentation of the particular is a confinement of the claim to validity of its statements, a validational modesty which theoretical discourse, due to the general nature of conceptual language, hardly ever possesses. And it is an even greater degree of validational modesty that differentiates literature from all narratives with a genuine truth claim, especially the otherwise similar narratives of historical discourse or the more empirical kind of sociological and psychological discourse. In this respect, literature is 'only literature', but as the "suspension of reference" renders the affirmative or negating statements in literary texts merely quasi-statements from the point of view of epistemology, literature is also far less bound by the cogency of religious, moral, juridical and other collective norms. And this is, of course, an important precondition for the ability of literature to make us aware of the limits of the culture of its origin and indirectly of the boundaries of every culture.

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[23] "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre" 204, quoted by Widdowson, *Literature,* 118.

One could also say that the cultural value of literature resides in the function of the seemingly functionless.

Instead of operating with the dichotomy "Culture or Literature," to me it makes much more sense to investigate and historically trace the interaction between the wider and the narrower sphere.[24] As I see it, the study of the one cannot adequately be pursued without taking due cognizance of the other. We cannot rightfully claim for a literary work any excellence deriving from its transcendence of the limits of culture within it was produced without having obtained a wider knowledge of that culture through the study of a variety of other discourses. Nor can we fully understand the way in which a culture, despite the many control mechanisms operating to keep it stable, may yet be changed from within without giving due attention to its literature.

Yet in spite of this important function literature possesses for the development of culture I think that Hillis Miller is right when he says that the current trend is towards the study of culture and away from the study of literature.[25] This has not least to do with the fact that literature has been studied in detail for quite a while and that it takes some ingenuity to come up with something really attractive and novel, while it looks as if in the field of the study of culture there are plenty of new research opportunities that do not demand so much intellectual effort. And precisely because of this situation I would implore you to take good care of literature. There are, after all, also other disciplines such as sociology and history in which culture is studied, while literature in the academy is entirely at our mercy: it is our spirit, resolve,

solidarity and bare-knuckled criticism and analysis (not to forget, however, the persistent energy of the writers themselves and the manipulative genius of the marketplace) that help keep its singular quality and function in collective memory.

While the topic of the relationship between culture and literature can be considered as being also pre-modern if one brackets the differences in vocabulary, what has to be admitted is that there are also quite important fields of more recent theory that are definitely not pre-modern. What I am referring to are especially the theory of gender and the theoretical reflection implied in such fast-growing research areas as Translation Studies, Media Studies and Intermediality. Yet though one is easily drawn into one of these areas, they do not fall into the frame of my present topic.

It will have been noticed, I assume, that as in the domains of art and literature, there is to be found in our time no hegemony of a particular school, method or aspect of attention in the domain of theory. We have largely given up what Lyotard has called *grands récits*, overarching stories that comprise all and everything. Instead, one operates with theories of a medium level of abstraction which are closer to the area of the phenomena to be explained and therefore probably more helpful. There is, however, one general assumption to be found in almost all current theories of culture or domains of culture, and that is that culture is a construct. For epistemological reasons I would even go one step further and say that we can consider this as a good operative principle and leave open the question whether this is 'really' so. As research practice shows, this assumption encourages the search not only for the specificity of a particular culture but also for the political and historical reasons why it is as it is.

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[24] Cf. Grabes, „Literary History and Cultural History. Relations and Difference."

[25] Cf. *On Literature,* 10.

This means that our basic stance in the domain of theory has remained postmodern – or even become more sceptical and pragmatist than the strong belief in poststructuralist ideas to be found in the earlier phase of postmodernism really implied. As in the domains of art and literature, this allows also in the domain of theory for a multitude of competing views and models, and if our age is therefore perhaps plagued by a "Neue Unübersichtlichkeit"[26], a lack of clear orientation, as a healing grace it is certainly not boring and also less compulsive than earlier ages – at least in the West. Let us try to make use of the chances offered by this situation and defend it if and wherever necessary.

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[26] Under this title Jürgen Habermas in 1985 published his attack on the postmodern abandonment of the "project of modernity."

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