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Rien T. Segers

DYNAMICS AND PROGRESS IN LITERARY STUDIES?

Some Notes on a Neglected Topic in Literary Scholarship
With Special Reference to Reception Research

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DYNAMICS AND PROGRESS IN LITERARY STUDIES?

Some Notes on a Neglected Topic in Literary Scholarship With Special Reference to Reception Research

Rien T. Segers, Department of Comparative Literature, University of Groningen,
P.O.Box 716, NL-9700 AS Groningen, The Netherlands, Fax: 31-50-635886

Summary

The question whether we can speak of 'dynamics' and 'progress' in literary studies has hardly been asked. This study attempts to give at least a partial answer to that question.

In section 2 the basic points of departure for this study are given. In reviewing Thomas S. Kuhn's ideas on paradigms and revolutions in the history of science, it appears that his ideas are mechanistic and somewhat too simplistic. The basic concept being used in this study is not 'paradigm' but 'research tradition'. A certain discipline (e.g. the study of literature) is considered to consist of many research traditions. The assessment whether we can speak of dynamics and progress in a discipline should first of all be based on an evaluation of the several research traditions which that discipline incorporates.

The research tradition to be selected in this paper is reception research. The development of this research tradition will be described during the period from about 1970 until 1993. In section 2 the concepts of dynamics and progress will be explained. In the third section the focus will be on a comparison between the early phase (reception esthetics) of reception research with the contemporary situation, dominated by the empirical study of literature. This comparison is undertaken in order to assess the dynamics of reception research. After this comparison in section 4 the question will be answered whether we can speak of any progress during those more than 20 years of reception research, and if so what the characteristics of that progress are. In the fifth and final section the conclusions of this study will be critically reviewed. Also an outlook will be given regarding the future of reception research.

Zusammenfassung

Die Frage, inwieweit wir in der Literaturwissenschaft von Dynamik und Fortschritt sprechen können, ist bislang kaum gestellt worden. Diese LUMIS-Schrift versucht, die Frage zumindest teilweise zu beantworten.

Im zweiten Abschnitt werden wesentliche Aspekte der Ausgangslage dieses Artikels vorgestellt. In einer Neubewertung der Ideen Thomas S. Kuhns über Paradigmen und Revolutionen in der Wissenschaftsgeschichte zeigt sich, daß seine Ideen zu mechanistisch und in gewisser Weise zu simplifizierend angelegt sind. Deshalb wird in diesem Artikel nicht das Konzept des 'Paradigmas', sondern das der 'Forschungstradition' verwendet. Eine bestimmte Disziplin (in diesem Fall die Literaturwissenschaft), so die Annahme, weist viele Forschungs-

traditionen auf. Die Einschätzung, ob wir einer Disziplin 'Dynamik' und 'Fortschritt' zugestehen wollen, sollte also zuerst auf einer Evaluation dieser Forschungstraditionen basieren, die diese Disziplin ausgebildet hat.

In dieser Studie wird exemplarisch die Rezeptionsforschung als eine von mehreren Forschungstraditionen ausgewählt. Die Entwicklung dieser Forschungstradition wird für den Zeitraum von 1970 bis 1993 beschrieben. Im zweiten Abschnitt werden die Konzepte 'Dynamik' und 'Fortschritt' vorgestellt. Der dritte Abschnitt konzentriert sich auf einen Vergleich der frühen Phase (Rezeptionsästhetik) der Rezeptionsforschung mit der gegenwärtigen Situation, welche durch die empirische Literaturwissenschaft dominiert wird. Dieser Vergleich wird unternommen mit der Absicht, die Dynamik der Rezeptionsforschung zu analysieren. Nach diesem Vergleich soll im vierten Abschnitt die Frage beantwortet werden, ob wir mit Blick auf diese mehr als zwanzig Jahre Rezeptionsforschung von irgendeinem 'Fortschritt' sprechen können - und wenn ja, was diesen Prozeß charakterisiert. Im fünften und abschließenden Abschnitt sollen die Schlußfolgerungen des Artikels kritisch überprüft werden. Darüber hinaus wird ein Ausblick auf die Zukunft der Rezeptionsforschung gegeben.

Samenvatting

De vraag in hoeverre we van 'dynamiek' en 'voortgang' in de literatuurwetenschap kunnen spreken, is tot nu toe niet vaak gesteld. Deze publicatie probeert tenminste een gedeeltelijk antwoord op die vraag te geven.

In het tweede hoofdstuk worden de vertrekpunten van dit opstel uiteengezet. Wanneer men nu, na zoveel jaren, Kuhns ideeën over paradigma's en revoluties in de wetenschapsgeschiedenis nog eens goed beschouwt, dan blijken ze mechanistisch en enigszins simplistisch te zijn. Het begrip dat ten grondslag ligt aan deze studie is dan ook niet 'paradigma', maar 'onderzoekstraditie'. Verondersteld wordt dat een bepaalde discipline (bijvoorbeeld de literatuurwetenschap) uit veel verschillende onderzoekstradities bestaat. De vaststelling of we in een bepaalde discipline van 'dynamiek' en 'voortgang' kunnen spreken, zou in eerste instantie gebaseerd moeten zijn op een evaluatie van de diverse onderzoekstradities waaruit die discipline op een zeker moment bestaat.

De onderzoekstraditie die in deze publicatie centraal staat is het receptie-onderzoek. De ontwikkeling van deze onderzoekstraditie zal hier voor de periode van 1970 tot 1993 beschreven worden. In het tweede hoofdstuk zullen de begrippen 'dynamiek' en 'voortgang' verklaard worden. Het derde hoofdstuk concentreert zich op een vergelijking tussen de eerste fase van het receptie-onderzoek (gekenmerkt door de receptie-esthetica) en de huidige fase, die gedomineerd wordt door de empirische literatuurwetenschap. Deze vergelijking wordt opgezet ten einde de dynamiek van het receptie-onderzoek te kunnen vaststellen. Na deze vergelijking zal in hoofdstuk 4 de vraag beantwoord worden of er sprake is van (enige) voortgang gedurende meer dan 20 jaar receptie-onderzoek. Als daar inderdaad sprake van blijkt te zijn, zal die voortgang ook nader gekarakteriseerd worden. In het vijfde en laatste hoofdstuk zullen de conclusies van deze studie aan een kritische beschouwing onderworpen worden. Ook de toekomst van het receptie-onderzoek zal ter sprake komen.

1. Introduction

"A hundred years from now, future students of science may well look back at present-day disputes with the same amused tolerance with which we view similar controversies in the nineteenth century."¹

The problem of scientific dynamics and progress has occupied a central place in meta-scientific discussions since the mid 60's.² The question whether we can speak of 'dynamics' or 'progress' within literary scholarship, however, has hardly been asked. That seems to be an astonishing fact, not only because of the vast amount of publications concerning this topic within the philosophy of science, the natural and social sciences, but also because of the heterogeneous character literary studies show at this moment in their development.

Many and in some cases quite contradictory theories and tasks are practised nowadays. The study of literature has become a mosaic of theories, approaches and tasks. In this situation one would have expected that questions would have arisen concerning the evolution of a certain theory, a certain method or a certain task.

In the 20th century enormous intellectual effort has been invested in some domains of literary studies, such as the writing of literary history and literary interpretation. Based on the thousands of publications in these domains it would have been desirable to ask (and answer) questions concerning dynamics and progress in those fields.

Concerning interpretation it could imply the assessment of different interpretive movements, interpretive views of historical literary periods, or simply of interpretations of one and the same text over a certain period of time. The respective representative questions for those three categories could be phrased as follows. Does a 'deconstructive' interpretation of Hamlet represent a 'progression' vis-à-vis an interpretation of that same play based on biographical criticism?³ What is the evolution concerning the interpretation of Renaissance literature as given in the early years of the current century compared with interpretations of the same texts given now, 90 years later? Is there any progression to be seen in all the interpretations attributed to one and the same text?⁴ The general question in this area would be, whether (and if so, to what extent) the study of literature has made any progress in its task (which is regarded by many specialists as 'central') to interpret literary texts.

1 Hull 1988: 12.

2 Druwe 1985: 170.

3 Segers 1985 offers nine interpretations of one and the same short story based on nine theoretical movements (Russian Formalism, Prague Structuralism, New Criticism, Psychology of Literature, Semiotics, Reception Esthetics, Deconstruction and the Empirical Study of Literature).

4 The 112 interpretations concerning *Die Verwandlung* by Franz Kafka as gathered by Viehoff (1993) could be researched in the light of this question.

Another example could be taken from the writing of literary history. It is generally agreed upon that the 19th century positivistic way of literary historiography does no longer meet the criteria of current literary scholarship. In this respect we lack publications that systematically and on a detailed basis investigate what the dynamics is within this field of study. Merely stating differences is not altogether the same as the construction of an evolutionary line pointing at dynamics, progression, neutrality or regression. 'The Evolution in Literary Historiography' could be the title of the book we need: an interesting but difficult project.

At the end of the 20th century the study of literature finds itself entangled in a complicated network of competing and even contradictory approaches, interdisciplinary projects and scattered tasks. In the Western world the loud and tough discussion of the seventies and eighties concerning 'the right method' and 'the right task' has turned into a silent acceptance, often *nolens volens*, of *all* existing approaches and tasks. One is seemingly liberal and phlegmatic in this respect, as long as there is no immediate threat to lose one's own hobby horse.

The picture might be somewhat different for other parts of the world. Some developing countries try to imitate the omnivorous Western appetite for all sorts of theories and methods by directly importing them, sometimes based on rather arbitrary criteria. In many cases it is not realized that a particular Western theory has a profound Western character, based as it is on Western texts and reading strategies.⁵ In other countries the walls that give some protection against Western influence are somewhat higher, as is the case e.g. in Japan. This guarantees more or less a continuation of a homegrown approach to literary studies, which does not have too much in common with the contemporary Western practice.

The situation in the former East Block countries in Europe, again, is completely different. The early Marxist hardliners or quasi-hardliners have been replaced in many cases. It seems somewhat too early to generalize what sort of approach(es) most replacements incorporate; moreover, this seems to be different from country to country. But especially in the new states of the Federal Republic, the former GDR, it looks as if many new chairs within literary studies are designed for scholars with fairly traditional views.

Obviously, the picture I constructed in the above paragraphs is sketchy and necessarily full of unsophisticated generalizations. But if it conveyed the impression of a discipline with a warehouse of methods, theories and tasks, with distinctly different accents in different parts of the world, then it did its work.

One could ask oneself whether this current carnival of priorities, research traditions and methods is something unique in the study of literature. In all likelihood a similar picture could

5 The Indian comparatist Swapan Majumdar describes the influence of Western theory in developing countries as follows: "Till the other day, when the sceptres of the Western sovereigns ruled the waves of the distant seas, these theorists were accepted almost as sacrosanct and would well have been applied blindfold in evaluating the literatures of that altogether different clime - even without the least attempt at acclimatizing or adapting these theories to their own literary situations and systems. [...] It is only a very recent phenomenon that some scholars in the Third World nations have begun to question the universality of such postulates [...]." (Majumdar 1987: 94)

be drawn for many other if not all disciplines within the social sciences and humanities. Here I shall briefly deal with the situation in contemporary social science, especially sociology.

Jeffrey C. Alexander recently stated, concerning social science: "[...] the conditions of social science make consistent agreement about the precise nature of empirical knowledge - let alone agreement about explanatory covering laws - highly unlikely. [...] Far-reaching disagreement is inherent in social science, for cognitive and evaluative reasons."⁶ One of the important conditions of social science refers to the status of its research object, that bears a high degree of similarity with that of literary studies. According to Alexander, for social science the research objects are either mental states or situations in which mental states are embedded: "For this reason, the possibility for confusing mental states of the scientific observer with mental states of those observed is endemic."⁷

For Alexander this endemic confusion has led to the formation of many traditions and schools within the social science. He continues:

These solidary groupings are not simply manifestations of scientific disagreement, moreover, but bases upon which such disagreements are promoted and sustained. Indeed, rather than accepting disagreement and the distorted communication that goes along with it as necessary evils, many social science theorists [...] actually welcome interschool conflict as an indication of a healthy discipline.⁸

Alexander does not make clear why disagreement on such a large scale as is the case within social science should be welcomed as healthy rather than as a disease. Apparently, for Alexander, the pluralism of methods and scholarly discourse is beyond a value judgment. It is more a matter of fact and a matter of acceptance.

Acceptance of the *status quo* concerning this pluralism, does not imply that 'anything goes'. Every method has to gain its place in the academic world, a process during which it will be scrutinized, criticized and compared. At this moment a critical dialogue between the existing methods, especially in literary studies at least, hardly exists. But this does not imply that it is superfluous. Viable questions for this necessary dialogue could be questions concerning the dynamics and progress of a particular method over a certain period of time.

2. The concepts of dynamics and progress

In many publications concerning scientific progress one encounters the following three main elements. There is first the idea of a continuous and stepwise improvement of knowledge brought about by each generation building on the results of the preceding one, questioning, affirming, amending gradually the findings of its predecessors. Secondly, there is the conviction that this is a never-ending process. Thirdly, it is supposed that the contribution to this development, either for its own sake or for public benefit, constitutes the very aim of the true

⁶ Alexander 1988: 79-80.

⁷ Alexander 1988: 80.

⁸ Ibidem.

scientist.⁹ In this essay I would like to concentrate on the first element mentioned above. Especially the 'improvement of knowledge' will be our main focus, for which the concepts of dynamics and progress might be instrumental.

The concepts of dynamics and progress in scholarship are closely linked with other developmental terms such as 'evolution', 'paradigm' and 'revolution'. In this essay I shall use the concept of dynamics in a neutral sense referring to the development of thoughts, ideas, methods and theories in a certain discipline. Dynamics is regarded here as an equivalent to evolution. Preference, however, is given to dynamics for reasons I shall explain below. On the other hand, 'progress' will be seen here as a development which is *positively* valued by a number of scholars in a certain scientific community. In their opinion this development implies a satisfactory answer to important questions or a solution for puzzle situations which could not be given so far.

For 'paradigm' and 'revolution' we could make the evident step to Kuhn's classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*¹⁰, not to stay with it but to depart from it. As is well-known the basic argument of Kuhn's book is that scientific revolutions can be defined by a change of paradigm. In his 1969 Postscript Kuhn explains that the term 'paradigm' can be used in two different senses:

On the one hand, it stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community. On the other it denotes one sort of element in that constellation, the concrete puzzle-solutions which, employed as models or examples, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science.¹¹

In a period of 'normal science' there is only one paradigm at a time. A revolution, a switch from paradigm (a) to (b), occurs when the reigning paradigm (a) has encountered a sufficient number of problems which cannot be solved on the basis of the dominant paradigmatic method. A change in paradigm may also occur when an alternative paradigm (b) has been established which is able to provide an answer to hitherto unsolvable questions and which is also successful in handling the problems for which paradigm (a) did have a solution.

Scientific progress is defined by Kuhn along two lines. Kuhn considers the outcome of a change in paradigm, a revolution, as scientific progress. We could call this scientific progress at large. In a more restricted way Kuhn reserves progress for the result of solving a problem or puzzle within a particular paradigm.

Some classics in scholarship have the initial attraction of simplicity. This holds also for Kuhn's major thoughts: his mono-paradigmatic conception of 'normal science', his mechanistic view of 'revolutions', and his simple description of 'progress'. No wonder that his theory has been heavily criticized.¹²

⁹ These three elements may be found in Zilsel 1945; they are reformulated by Elzinga 1986: 37.

¹⁰ Kuhn 1962.

¹¹ Kuhn 1962: 175.

¹² Cf. for instance the contributions by Paul Feyerabend, Imre Lakatos, Margaret Masterman, Karl Popper and Stephen Toulmin in Lakatos and Musgrave 1970.

One of the most convincing criticisms has been formulated by Larry Laudan.¹³ Following Imre Lakatos' model for scientific research programs, Laudan's main point of criticism concerns Kuhn's mono-paradigmatic point of view: in a period of 'normal science' there exists only one paradigm to which all scientists subscribe. Laudan counters Kuhn's mono-paradigmatic conception:

Virtually every major period in the history of science is characterized both by the co-existence of numerous competing paradigms, with none exerting hegemony over the field, and by the persistent and continuous manner in which the foundational assumptions of every paradigm are debated within the scientific community.¹⁴

This means that the existence of alternative paradigms is seen as a necessary condition of scientific progress, and not as a sign of scientific weakness or even of a pre-scientific stage, as Kuhn claims.¹⁵

Laudan develops an alternative model of scientific progress that is much more in line with the history of the social sciences and humanities, where a situation in which only one 'paradigm' reigns is more the exception than the rule. Therefore, Laudan drops the notion of paradigm and replaces it by 'research tradition'. At any moment of its existence every science is characterized by a number of different research traditions. Laudan gives the following working definition of this concept: "A research tradition is a set of general assumptions about the entities and processes in a domain of study, and about the appropriate methods to be used for investigating the problems and constructing the theories in that domain."¹⁶

An important question in this essay is how dynamics and progress may be handled within the context of literary scholarship, where a 'normal' situation exists: several different research traditions existing at one particular moment in time. 'Evolution' and 'progress' are - inside and outside scholarship - still often associated with a linear development towards the 'truth'. This belief in a metaphysical goal-orientation may be traced back to the pre-Darwinian evolutionary theories (e.g. those of Chambers and Spencer and the German *Naturphilosophen*). They conceive of evolution as a goal-directed process. Every stage in a particular development was - as Kuhn describes - "a more perfect realization of a plan that had been present from the start."¹⁷ Kuhn convincingly suggests we should relinquish the metaphysical conception of evolution by means of a rhetorical question: "Does it really help to imagine that there is some full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to that ultimate goal?"¹⁸ Because of the above-mentioned connotations associated with 'evolution' I shall make use of 'dynamics', a concept that is tied to a systemic approach.

¹³ Laudan 1977.

¹⁴ Laudan 1977: 74.

¹⁵ For other severe points of criticism by Laudan see his study, 74-75.

¹⁶ Laudan 1977: 81.

¹⁷ Kuhn 1962: 172.

¹⁸ Kuhn 1962: 171.

If we abandon the idea of a metaphysical and goal-oriented evolution within scholarship, we are in need of an alternative. I see scholarship as a system divided into disciplines, which in their turn can be divided into research traditions to which individual scholars may subscribe. The assessment of dynamics and progress is a bottom-up process starting with the description of developments within the thinking of individuals.

A linear conception of scientific evolution stresses the collective and mechanistic aspects of a development. A discipline is seen as a more or less homogeneous entity which is subject to changes that appear chronologically after each other and that will lead 'the scholarly community' to an idealistic point. A systemic approach, however, regards a discipline as the construction of a number of different research traditions existing at the same time and (possibly) changing at different times. Maybe the task of an individual scholar belonging to a certain research tradition could be formulated as the attempt to maximize dynamics and progress in his research tradition.

In a systemic approach to evolution which I would like to propose here, intra- and interrelations of research traditions are stressed. The intrarelations refer to *internal* relations between competing points of view, approaches and research results within one research tradition. The interrelations point to *external* differences and similarities between two or more research traditions. This implies that internal and external methodological comparisons and evaluations are basic operations for the assessment of dynamics and progress in scholarship. Such operations should always take place within a comparative context.

The assessment of the dynamics of a research tradition is primarily seen as a descriptive operation aiming at recording the developments in that tradition. Progress, however, is an evaluative operation, where a particular development is evaluated on the basis of certain criteria.

There are two ways to evaluate the progress of a certain research discipline: a cognitive and a social way.¹⁹ Cognitive evaluation aims at assessing the internal scientific progress based on the validity and relevance of scholarly points of view. Social evaluation consists of the assessment of the external impact and influence of a certain research tradition, for instance: the number of research centers in that field, the number of research grants, the number of journals, the total number of scholars working in that field, professorships, citation indexes, etc. In this essay I explicitly have to limit myself to the cognitive side of evaluating progress. In literary scholarship we lack figures which enable us to realize an adequate social evaluation of that discipline.²⁰

The main criterion I shall use in this essay to assess scientific progress is adequacy or effectiveness. Larry Laudan regards this criterion as a function of how many significant empiri-

19 Li (1984: 2ff.) makes the same distinction.

20 For some aspects of social evaluation of English and German studies in Germany see resp.: Finkenstaedt (1986) and Weingart (1991).

cal problems can be solved and how many important anomalies are generated by a particular theory or research tradition. Laudan adds in this respect:

We simply ask whether a research tradition has solved the problems it set for itself; we ask whether, in the process, it generated any empirical anomalies or conceptual problems. We ask whether, in the course of time, it has managed to expand its domain of explained problems and to minimize the number and importance of its remaining conceptual problems and anomalies.²¹

It is important to note the *comparative* aspect which is involved in the assessment of progress. As Laudan remarks: "What matters is not, in some absolute sense, how effective or progressive a tradition or theory is, but, rather, how its effectiveness or progressiveness compares with its competitors."²²

Along this line we will be able to assess the progressiveness (or regressiveness!) of a particular research tradition. If this is being done for all the major research traditions of a certain discipline at a particular moment in time, we could construct a progressive ranking of all those research traditions. Laudan concludes this discussion concerning the assessment of scientific progress by saying:

It is possible, at least in principle and perhaps eventually in practice, to be able to compare the progressiveness of different research traditions, even if those research traditions are utterly incommensurable in terms of the substantive claims they make about the world!²³

Laudan's approach to the status of a certain discipline is that it is an empty construction of several research traditions. Psychology is simply a catchword for subdisciplines like social psychology, experimental psychology, psycholinguistics, etc. And on this level we again encounter, strictly speaking, empty concepts. What matters first of all is the research being done in the several research traditions. This implies that it has become obsolete to talk about the progress of psychology in the 20th century. One should be much more specific by discussing the progress that has or has not been made within the many psychological research traditions that have existed or still exist.

The advantage of Laudan's approach compared to that of Kuhn and others is that the former much better reflects the actual research situation in many disciplines at the end of the 20th century. There is no such thing as one dominant paradigm for a particular period in time, especially not in the humanities or social sciences. We might take a neighbouring discipline of literary studies as an example. Linguists such as Hymes, Percival and Dik have responded to Kuhn's mono-paradigmatic approach by asserting that linguistics in no phase of its development can be characterized by a period of complete paradigmatic unanimity.²⁴ As Dik states:

Rather the history of linguistics can be pictured as consisting of a series of 'waves' which, for longer or shorter periods, may have commanded the greatest amount of attention without, however, one single

21 Laudan 1977: 146.

22 Laudan 1977: 120.

23 Ibidem.

24 Hymes 1974; Percival 1976; Dik 1983.

wave completely outwaving all the others. Linguistic paradigms seem to die hard and to revive at unexpected moments!²⁵

The above description for the multi-paradigmatic situation in linguistics also seems to apply to the 20th century situation of literary studies. In this discipline a research tradition can primarily be located in a particular theory, which is based on a set of general assumptions concerning the status, task and method of literary studies. In 20th century literary scholarship a number of research traditions have been or are still prominent, such as Russian Formalism, Prague Structuralism, New Criticism, Psychology and Sociology of Literature, Semiotics, Narratology, Reception Research and Deconstruction. Some of these approaches have existed during the same period in the current century. The question even could be asked whether *all* the research traditions I just mentioned do still exist in 1993; obviously, the one stronger and more dominant than the other.

As we have seen before, if one is interested in assessing the progress literary studies may have realized in this century, one should start to formulate this question within one particular research tradition. I shall confine myself here to reception research.

3. Dynamics in reception research?

The research tradition which is called 'reception research' studies (a) the effect a text has or may have on its readers; (b) the reception of a text by its readers; (c) the relationship between texts and readers. This has been the standard description for reception research over the last 25 years or so. The description implies that a wide range of in itself sometimes contradictory theories falls under the broad heading of 'reception research'. Most of the theories are developed by individuals such as Theodor Fechner in the 70's of the 19th century or I.A. Richards in the USA in the 20's of this century, Gunnar Hansson in Sweden in the late 50's and 60's, or Wolfgang Iser in the Federal Republic in the 70's; in some cases they are the results of small groups mostly doing practical research.²⁶

In a number of cases a clustering of theories was constructed either by the theorists themselves or by outsiders. The main existing clusters are: the American reader-response criticism, the German esthetics of reception, the empirical study of literature; further one could think of some branches of literary psychology and literary sociology and research done within the context of American schools of education.²⁷

²⁵ Dik 1983: 14.

²⁶ For a survey of texts written by 19th and 20th century forerunners of current reception theory see Viehoff 1991. For practical research done by two or more specialists see e.g. Bauer et al. 1972, Heuermann et al. 1982, Leenhardt and Josza 1982, Andringa and Schram 1990.

²⁷ The construction of an American branch called 'reader-response criticism', advocated by a number of American scholars of rather diverse nature was stimulated by the publication of two books containing a selection of essays by leading American reader-oriented critics: Suleiman and Crosman (1980) and Tompkins (1980).

In answering the question whether we can speak of dynamics in reception research (and if so, what this progress embodies) I shall confine myself to a comparison of two clusters in that research tradition: esthetics of reception and the empirical study of literature. The reason to select these very two movements is that esthetics of reception was the strongest movement in the beginning years of reception research in the seventies, whereas the empirical study of literature is seen as the most influential reader-oriented approach at this moment. (Later on we shall see that one branch of the empirical approach implies more than just a reader-orientation.)

With 'esthetics of reception' I refer to the particular reception research movement which in German is known under the term 'Rezeptionsästhetik' or 'Konstanzer Schule', its main proponents being Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss. It also includes the work done by people who were strongly influenced by that movement (positively or negatively), such as the East-German counter-attacks led by Manfred Naumann, Rita Schober and Robert Weimann. Esthetics of reception had its heyday in the late 60's and in the 70's.²⁸ But also in the 80's and during the present decade research is being done based on the early principles of esthetics of reception.²⁹

By 'empirical study of literature' I understand the work done by the members of the International Association of the Empirical Study of Literature and others.³⁰ The main countries involved are: Germany, the USA and The Netherlands. Obviously, more decisive than membership of an association is the specificity of the research being done. I will come to this in a moment.

There are three important misunderstandings concerning the relationship between esthetics of reception and the empirical study of literature.

The first misunderstanding considers the two movements as two blocks opposed to each other; blocks that have closed ranks and where all noses look in the same direction. This misunderstanding could be called the *unity fallacy*. Neither esthetics of reception nor the empiri-

The clustering of approaches into an 'esthetics of reception' was facilitated by Warning (1975) for major West-German publications; the East-German version was Naumann et al. (1975). Moreover, a number of monographs has contributed to the construction of a separate branch 'esthetics of reception': Link 1976, Holub 1984, Segers 1984a.

Already in 1972 Norbert Groeben wrote a plea for an empirical approach within literary studies based on the necessity to make a distinction between the writing of interpretation and research into interpretation ("Subjekt-Objekt-Konfundierung"). This was the first step to leave the hermeneutic reader-orientation as advocated by esthetics of reception and to realize the consequence of the latter movement: research into reactions of 'real' readers. Schmidt (1980-82) formulated the basis for an independent empirical approach. The project was made visible by two German book series (*Empirische Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. by Norbert Groeben, Athenäum Verlag, and *Konzeption Empirische Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. by Arbeitsgruppe NIKOL, Vieweg). Recently a number of empirical co-productions were realized, e.g.: Andringa and Schram (1990), Ibsch et al. (1990) and Barsch et al. (1993).

For empirical research completed at American schools of education see Klemenz-Belgardt (1981).

28 For a contemporary historical view by Jauss see Segers (1979).

29 See e.g. Segers (1993a).

30 The German name is: Internationale Gesellschaft für Empirische Literaturwissenschaft, with the abbreviation IGEL.

cal approach are without essential internal differences of opinion about important scholarly issues. Viewed from inside, the approaches by Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauß are fundamentally different from each other. In the empirical study of literature, one could make a distinction between the psychology of literature as practised by Norbert Groeben and the literary communicative action theory as advocated by the group around Siegfried J. Schmidt.³¹ But despite differences from inside the similarities within each of the two branches are such that it is fully justified to speak of two relatively coherent 'sub-research traditions'.

Instead of the construction of two opposed blocks, one also finds the opposite: a second misunderstanding that sees the two approaches as one and the same because both focus on the text-reader relationship. I shall label this view as the *family fallacy*. Both approaches, however, appear to be very different from each other in a number of fundamental aspects which will be explained below.

Then there is also the *evolution fallacy* which asserts that the empirical study of literature has grown out of reception esthetics. That is only partially true. In the early 80's the empirical study of literature à la Groeben based itself on approaches from the social sciences (e.g. the work done by D.E. Berlyne) and on ideas formulated by the proponents of an esthetics of reception. S.J. Schmidt's approach was initially based on a communicative theory of action ('Kommunikative Handlungstheorie'), linguistic poetics and text theory. With most of these ideas and their implications *Rezeptionsästhetik* did not have too much affinity, to put it mildly. Already in the beginning there was a definitive gap between the *Konstanzer Schule* and empirical literary studies.

If we want to compare the esthetics of reception with the empirical study of literature in order to see whether scholarly dynamics is involved, we first have to determine the characteristics on the basis of which this comparison will be undertaken. It may be helpful here to remember Larry Laudan's remark that such a comparison should first of all be based on the specificity of the research tradition which is at stake.

Four elements seem to be characteristic of the research tradition reception research. They concern the research situation, the status that is given to the text, the formulation of the research object and, fourth, the aims of a particular approach. Let us see now whether we can speak of dynamic developments concerning those four characteristics in reception research during the last 20 years.

In literary scholarship there are two possibilities concerning the situation in which the researcher may find him- or herself. There is first of all the well-known hermeneutic situation in which the researcher is the same person as the reader. This situation clearly shows the researcher as *hermeneus*, as the interpreter of his own reception of a text. For instance: Jauß in his role as comparatist in disguise, analyzing Racine's and Goethe's *Iphigenie*. Or Iser in search for the implicit reader in a number of texts.³² Then there is what I have called the ex-

31 Achim Barsch (1992) gives a good description of these two points of view.

32 See resp. Jauß 1973 and Iser 1972.

tra-hermeneutic situation.³³ Here the researcher describes the reactions of other readers; he or she operates 'outside' the hermeneutic confrontation with the text.

The above-mentioned distinction can be traced back to a differentiation which was characteristic of the empirical approach right from the beginning: the distinction between a participant's and an observer's role.³⁴ The participant functions within the hermeneutic situation, whereas the observer belongs to the extra-hermeneutic situation. Most traditional activities of literary scholarship have a participant-character and are based on the hermeneutic situation, for instance: academic criticism, traditional writing of literary history, traditional comparative literature based on a comparison of two or more texts from two or more different cultures.

Esthetics of reception can be clearly characterized as operating within the borderlines of the hermeneutic situation. In this sense Jauß's claim for a new paradigm was not justified.³⁵ The esthetics of reception was not so consistent as to draw the consequences of its very ideas to step out of the reader = researcher equivalence.

It will be evident that the empirical study of literature belongs to the extra-hermeneutic situation. Reception esthetics was therefore heavily criticized by the empiricists for neglecting to do what it should do in their eyes: research of reactions given by real readers. Norbert Groeben was one of the first people to take the reader-researcher confusion to court.³⁶ That means we already see a fundamental difference between the two movements in the early 70's.

Also the second characteristic, the way the text is seen, shows considerable differences, and one might say here: *les extrêmes se touchent*. The German reception-estheticians, Iser, Jauß and others, initially favored the traditional model of literary reading "as a private individual, aesthetically pure act, disconnected from practical social considerations and everyday life"³⁷. From this initial, naive laboratory concept of reading, the empirical study of literature now has arrived at a position where the text is placed in its 'authentic' context by taking into consideration the cognitive, social and esthetic factors that determine the communication process.

The reception-esthetician who has been concerned most with the status of the text in the reading process is Wolfgang Iser. If one concept gives an overview of Iser's theory (which in its basic principles has remained relatively unchanged over a number of years) it is dynamic tension. Iser identifies two poles which represent the artistic (the text) and the esthetic (the reader) dimensions. Through continual interaction between these two poles a sort of convergence is created enabling the actualization of a literary text. Iser mentions in this respect:

33 Segers 1984b.

34 This distinction is elaborated in Schmidt 1980 and 1982. For a recent survey see: Ibsch 1988.

35 Jauß 1972: 5.

36 Groeben 1972.

37 Hunt 1988: 5.

The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader.³⁸

The tension between the (quasi-) freedom of the reader and the determination of the text is crucial to Iser's theory, especially as an answer to critics who argue that the uniqueness of realization would lead to anarchy in interpretation or to the impossibility of interpretation at all.

So far the conclusion seems to be justified that text and reader are assigned a role of equal importance in the communication process. It seems therefore that Iser takes a middle-ground position on the text-reader scale. But is that really the case? If one looks more closely though, Iser's theory is much more text - than reader - oriented. According to Iser the 'gaps' are given in the text: the reader is only allowed to fill them in. And even in this process the freedom of the reader is limited: the gaps should be filled in according to the (given) textual structure. This structure has an 'inherently dynamic character' and reading causes the literary text to unfold that character.³⁹

Iser's view on the status of text-interpretation clearly shows a metaphysical undertone, when he writes for instance: "With all literary texts, then, we may say that the reading process is selective, and the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations".⁴⁰

Another proof for the text-oriented perspective of reception esthetics may be offered by the active role which is attributed to the text in the reading process. Not only the reader is able to unfold activities, but also the text! This point of view can be demonstrated by Iserian expressions like 'the experience offered by the text' and 'the consequent unfolding of the text as a living event'⁴¹. Even if one is willing to see such expressions in the light of a metaphorical rhetoric (which is not so unusual in Iser's writings), then they still suggest where Iser places the real power: in the text.⁴²

The empiricists started to ask whether a text-on-its-own is able to do anything at all. In searching for an answer to this question the empirical study of literature left the naïve behavioral position of a stimulus-and-response approach (in the 70's) in order to arrive at a cognitive-constructivist approach (in the middle of the 80's). Norbert Groeben and Peter Vorderer describe this approach as follows: "Unter kognitiver Konstruktivität ist zu verstehen, daß die Textrezeption nicht (nur) ein eher passives Aufnehmen im Sinne eines Decodierens von Textinformationen darstellt, sondern vor allem und konstitutiv eine aktive Textverarbeitung."⁴³

38 Iser 1980: 50.

39 Iser 1980: 51.

40 Iser 1980: 55.

41 Iser 1980: 59; italics are mine.

42 For a more extensive analysis see Segers 1988.

43 Groeben and Vorderer 1988: 3.

Achim Barsch, Wolfram K. Köck, Peter M. Hejl, Gebhard Rusch, Siegfried J. Schmidt and others go one step further. They add the adjective 'radical' to cognitive-constructivism. This implies they consider observations (and thus also reading) to be completely subject-oriented and subject-dependent.⁴⁴ Ralf Nüse et al. describe the differences between 'radical' and 'normal' cognitive constructivism as follows:

Damit wird nicht nur wie im kognitiven Konstruktivismus behauptet, daß die 'Informationen' innerhalb des informationsverarbeitenden Subjekts 'entstehen' bzw. konstituiert werden [...], sondern es wird daraus auch die Konsequenz gezogen, daß solche 'Informationen' wegen dieser Entstehungsgeschichte und Konstituierungsgenese keinerlei (verlässliche) Beziehungen zum 'Informationsgegenstand' [...] besitzen.⁴⁵

This description of radical constructivism seems to be misleading based on a seemingly small detail: the brackets surrounding the word 'verlässlich'. The brackets should be eliminated, since radical constructivism does not state there are *no* relations between subject and object (this would amount to sheer subjectivism), but it postulates that there are no *reliable* ('verlässliche') relations.

Whatever the outcome of the debate between radical and moderate constructivism may be, it will be evident that the status given to the text by the esthetics of reception is fundamentally different from that attributed by some current leading empiricists. It is the gap between a mainly ontological conception of the text (which was not really overcome by reception esthetics despite its claims to the contrary) and a constructivist perspective.

Now, after more than 20 years, the object of the esthetics of reception (which is our third characteristic) might look fairly traditional. It was the search for the effect (*Wirkung*) of a text and its reception. The concentration on this object mainly resulted in text interpretations and in the attempt to set up a new form of literary history, based on reading experience rather than authorial production. The latter attempt, however, mainly stayed at a theoretical level. Many publications have been devoted to the question what an esthetics of reception really has to offer to the writing of literary history. This question has not been answered satisfactorily. Some literary historians have arrived at a similar conclusion as Marianne Wünsch: "The history of literature has no option but to base itself on the study of literary texts, to interpret them and construct models to order and structure them. Reception studies can only play a subordinate, secondary role in literary history."⁴⁶ If this would be, however, the result of twenty years of reception research, it would imply a disappointing development: bringing reception research back to where it started twenty years ago.

Hans Robert Jauß declared in 1980, after some 15 years of reception esthetics: "L'esthétique de la réception [...] s'est transformé de plus en plus, depuis 1966, en une théorie de la communication littéraire."⁴⁷ But generally speaking that was not the case. One of the

⁴⁴ See a.o. Schmidt 1987 with a selected bibliography, pp. 466-476.

⁴⁵ Nüse et al. 1991: 4-5.

⁴⁶ Wünsch 1990: 327.

⁴⁷ Jauß 1980: 15.

very problems of reception esthetics has been, however, that it hardly went beyond a description of the text-reader relationship and that the project was carried out, especially by the Constance School, from a rather hypothetical perspective. This complaint can also be directed at American reader-response criticism of the 70's and 80's. Therefore Carl Kaestle et al. correctly noticed: "[...] reader-response criticism has been justly criticized for ignoring class, gender, and other variables that divide society and thus shape readers' interests and predispositions."⁴⁸

The object of the empirical study of literature is really communication-oriented not only in theoretical statements but also in actual research. One recent formulation concerning its object stems from Gebhard Rusch:

Der Untersuchungsbereich der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft sollte erweitert werden auf die Gesamtheit literarischer Phänomene in einer Gesellschaft derart, daß auch mit nicht-ästhetischen schriftsprachlichen Kommunikationsmitteln in Zusammenhang stehende Phänomene mit einbezogen werden können. [...] Nach der im Grundriß <of S.J. Schmidt RTS> vorgenommenen Erweiterung vom Text zu ästhetisch-literarischen Kommunikationshandlungen geht es jetzt um die Erweiterung von ästhetisch-literarischen Kommunikationshandlungen zu Literatur im Gesellschaftssystem.⁴⁹

Another recent move concerning the object of the empirical study of literature has even more broader implications for this object than Rusch's description. It concerns a proposal by Siegfried J. Schmidt to transform literary studies into media studies which operate on an empirical basis. One of the main arguments for this transformation runs as follows:

Since the early 19th century in Europe, literature as a social system has been located in an environment which has been substantially influenced by the rise and spreading of the mass media: first the print media, then film, broadcasting, television, video, computer, and the so-called new media. As a consequence literary socialization is embedded in the more complex process of media socialization and cannot be separated from it without distortion.⁵⁰

Back to our object-comparison. Whereas the esthetics of reception had a rather traditional, limited and laboratory-like object, the empirical study of literature seems to represent the other end of the scale. Its object can be called new (for many traditional scholars too much 'avant-garde'), it is seemingly limitless and geared to study literature in its social context. It goes without saying, however, that the opinion of empiricists concerning their object is far from harmonious. Among those who favored reception esthetics there might have been a greater consensus in this respect.

A few words now about the last characteristic: the implicit and explicit aims of the two approaches. There are several interesting dynamic differences to note here; I confine myself to three significant ones.

There is first of all a difference concerning the use of a scholarly or scientific methodology. As we have seen, the esthetics of reception continued to adopt a primarily hermeneutic

48 Kaestle et al. 1991: 46.

49 Rusch 1991: 307.

50 Quotation from Schmidt 1990: 11; see also Schmidt 1991a and 1991b.

research situation. As a consequence, the methodology involved could not be very sophisticated. The aim of the empirical study of literature is to use a methodology that is as 'scientific' as possible, which, among other things, implies claims for intersubjective research strategies, the testing of hypotheses and attempts to predict reading behavior.

A second difference consists of the strategy of empirical studies to describe the complete communication process of a text including its social context, whereas reception esthetics was heavily focussed on two aspects of that process: the effect of a text and the particular reader's reaction to it. A good demonstration of this aim of the empirical study of literature is offered by Reinhold Viehoff. According to his views six categories of questions may be asked in a research situation: questions oriented at the text, at the situation, the reading process, the context, the reading results and, finally, the subject.⁵¹ This clearly shows a strong communicative interest as opposed to the interest just directed at textual effect and reader's reception.

The third difference is to be found in the way one thinks about the relevance and place of literary studies in contemporary society. At the end of the 60's and during the 70's reception esthetics did not have to worry about these two elements. At that time there were only luxurious problems of the affluent society to cope with. These luxurious 'problems' consisted, for instance, of a steadily growing number of students and, correspondingly, of an increasing number of universities. Every city that respected itself in the Western world was trying to get a university within its walls. This obviously implied a rapid growth of tenure-track teaching positions both at the senior as well as at the junior levels. In those days there was hardly any unemployment among the graduates of literature departments.

Now, a little more than twenty years later we see again all those same developments, but precisely in the reversed direction. This is true for at least the Western world. In this part of the world literary studies in general and reception research in particular have to comply with those contemporary tendencies. One of the consequences might be to give priority to those projects which besides scholarly merits have also social relevance.⁵²

Some proponents of the empirical study of literature are explicitly concerned for the relevance and place of literary studies in contemporary society. This concern represents one of the drives to look for new possibilities and alternative roads for literary scholarship. Siegfried Schmidt posits in this respect:

Nur eine professionell betriebene empirische literaturwissenschaftliche Medienforschung wird im wissenschaftlichen Konkurrenzkampf der nächsten Jahrzehnte überleben und als harter Konkurrenzkampfpartner auch der Literatur in deren Konkurrenzkampf mit immer neuen Medien wirkungsvoll beistehen können.⁵³

Based on the comparative analysis we have given here, the conclusion seems to be justified there exists a great dynamic difference between reception esthetics and empirical literary

51 Viehoff 1988: 23-25.

52 I shall briefly return to the question of social relevance at the end of the next section.

53 Schmidt 1991a: 21.

studies. This difference mainly concerns the very specificity of the research tradition. As has been explained, both approaches take an opposite position vis-à-vis four major characteristics. In summing up the comparative analysis given in this section, we distinguish resp. for reception esthetics and the empirical approach: (a) a hermeneutic against an extra-hermeneutic research situation; (b) a mainly text-ontological approach versus a cognitive-constructivist approach; (c) a search for effect and reception of the literary canon vis-à-vis the study of all activities which are performed in the communication process concerning fiction (and its relation with media studies); (d) and finally the relative independence from the social context against strong concerns regarding the future of literary studies (and that of literature!) in a multi-media and technocratic society.

To summarize: the main dynamic difference between reception esthetics and empirical literary studies may be characterized as a development from the researcher as participant to the researcher as observer. Many other dynamic differences between the two approaches can be deduced from this elementary opposition.

4. Progress in Reception Research?

In what respect is it possible to evaluate the dynamic differences explained above in terms of progress or regression? In order to answer this question I shall concentrate on the criterion of adequacy in terms of which scholarly evolution can be evaluated (see section 2).

The adequacy or effectiveness of individual theories should be based on the success with which significant scholarly problems can be solved. Reception esthetics was faced with two important problems: the construction of a convincing relationship between text and reader, and, secondly, to pay not only lip-service to research into real reader-reactions. Both problems have not been solved by the Constance School. They could not be solved due to its severe hermeneutic legacy. Despite all claims for a new 'paradigm', one could still hear voices whispering about 'the structure hidden in the text' or 'the relativity of reader responses'. As we have seen, the empirical approach could overcome these anomalies by positing the researcher outside the text-reader relation and by adopting a methodology and a meta-language with which those anomalies could be described.

This is not to say that those two significant problems have been solved satisfactorily. But at least a way is found to escape from the dead-end of hermeneutically oriented reception research. In this sense the empirical approach offers a more adequate and a more effective strategy to study what is meant by the Constance concept 'esthetics of *reception*'.

Later books by Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauß have turned away from questions concerning 'real' reception research or did not significantly change earlier positions.⁵⁴ This

⁵⁴ Already Jauß 1977 is a (hermeneutical) step backward compared to his initial project (Jauß 1970) to describe the readers' horizon of expectations and to write a literary history based on *Ereignisse* (i.e. the

might be taken as a sign that the limits of reception esthetics were reached. Obviously, the intention to write those books may have been quite different, but, whatever the reason, the Constance project to bridge the gap between hermeneutics and reception research was at its end. The bridge was constructed, but crossing it was prohibited. This meant the end of the effectiveness of the Constance School.

The adequacy or effectiveness of the empirical approach is constituted by the fact that it realized the logical consequences of ideas formulated in recent and in more distant times by scholars such as Theodor Fechner, Levin L. Schücking, Leo Löwenthal, Jan Mukarovsky, Götz Wienold, Hans Robert Jauß and Wolfgang Iser. Whereas most of those specialists advocated reader-response research in theory, the empirical approach made the decisive step towards practical research and the development of an adequate research methodology.

The ontological problem of the one and only textual structure and the anxiety for a hoard of non-scholarly reader responses was solved by positing a descriptive point of view. The structure of a text was considered to be a function of the reader's mental construction concerning that text. The research aim became to describe that constructed structure. By means of this descriptive position it became possible to leave the hermeneutic task behind and to concentrate on the realization of scientific research criteria, such as systematization, intersubjectivity and explicitness. Compared with the early projects of reception esthetics (such as the hermeneutic pinpointing of gaps or the theoretical speculations about the horizon of expectations), the empirical approach was more adequate and more effective in solving major reception problems.

How effective were the latest theories of the empirical approach in solving problems which are of crucial importance to the realization of its research aims? Let us have a look at some recent developments.

We have seen that the empirical approach can be divided into two traditions. The first tradition has as its main proponent Norbert Groeben and is heavily reception-oriented. It aims at a description of reader responses to literary texts.⁵⁵ The empirical basis is constituted by the material structure of the text (Mukarovsky's 'Artefact') and the textual meaning as attributed by readers. The material structure of the text is the criterion to 'check' the responses. Within the limited framework of author-text-reader the Groeben-tradition has been successful: a great number of publications appeared, aiming at the clarification of a particular reception problem and striving for the development of a methodology to study this problem.⁵⁶ In this sense the reception-oriented branch reached a certain degree of acceptability and opened

actual reading of texts) instead of simply on 'facts', the publication dates on which a 'traditional' literary history is based.

55 See a.o. Groeben 1972, 1977, 1981 and 1982.

56 For some representative books out of the early phase of the empirical reception branch, see for instance: Bauer et al. 1972, Faulstich 1977, Heuermann et al. 1975 and 1982.

up new perspectives. In short, it meant progress compared to the hermeneutic approach from Constance.

The problem-solving effectiveness of the reception branch of empirical literary studies stops at the borderlines of the text-reader domain. Consequently, the criticism that could be levelled here concerns the very limits and limitations of that area. Reception does not take place in a vacuum but happens in the real world. This implies that the text-reader relationship is embedded in a communication process which is much broader and in fact encompasses all communicative acts that may be performed concerning literature in a society.

Here the second empirical branch comes into play. Its object is no longer the reception of a literary text but the literary system which is based on literary activities as performed by the participants in the literary communication process. Gebhard Rusch distinguishes ten different categories of 'actors' who participate in the literary communication process and who perform specific literary activities: authors; publishers; readers for publishing houses; critics and reviewers; bookkeepers, teachers and pupils, professors and students; librarians; buyers and readers of books; representatives of several distinct organizations, such as bookclubs, associations of authors, of publishers, etc.; administrators in domains such as the 'management of culture'.⁵⁷

The approach that studies literature as a system has been stimulated by research centers in three parts of the world. Over the last ten years many scholars have invested a lot of time and energy to adapt systemist theory to the study of literature.⁵⁸

First of all the research group at the Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics at Tel Aviv University (Israel) could be mentioned.⁵⁹ Then there is a research team at the Institute for Empirical Literature and Media Research (LUMIS) at Siegen University (Germany).⁶⁰ The third country in this context is Canada, where two groups at two different places do research based - more or less explicitly - on a system-theoretical perspective. A research group at the University of Alberta (Research Institute for Comparative Literature) is concentrating on a large project 'Towards a History of the Literary Institution in Canada'.⁶¹ Another group at La-

⁵⁷ Rusch 1991: 323-336.

⁵⁸ Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (1992) gives an introduction to the systemic approaches to literature followed by an extensive bibliography.

⁵⁹ The Tel Aviv group consists of a.o.: Itamar Even-Zohar, Zohar Shavit, Gideon Toury and Shelly Yahalom. One of the major publications is Even-Zohar 1990; for an introduction and a short summary see: Dimic and Garstin 1988.

⁶⁰ The Siegen group is made up by a.o.: Achim Barsch, Helmut Hauptmeier, Peter M. Hejl, Raimund Klauser, Wolfram K. Köck, Gebhard Rusch, Siegfried J. Schmidt and Reinhold Viehoff. For introductory publications see Hejl et al. 1978, Luhmann 1984, Schmidt 1987 and Rusch 1991.

⁶¹ The Alberta group is directed by a.o. E.D. Blodgett, Milan V. Dimic, Shirley Neumann, A.G. Purdy and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. Blodgett and Purdy 1988 give a representative view of the aims of their research team.

val University in Québec focuses on problems concerning the writing of literary history in general and that of Québec literature in particular.⁶²

There are different points of departure and, consequently, different research outcomes when those three groups are compared. The Tel Aviv group bases itself on work done by the Russian Formalists, the Prague School and on more contemporary East European comparatists and semioticians such as Anton Popovic, Dioniz Durisin, Michael Bachtin and Jurij Lotman. The work done in Siegen has its foundations mainly in ideas developed by Peter Hartmann, Heinz von Foerster, Ernst von Glasersfeld, Peter M. Hejl, Niklas Luhmann and Humberto Maturana. The Canadian research team in Alberta has a broader foundation: it is inspired by ideas from reception research and systemist theory à la Tel Aviv. The Québec group is influenced by French sociology of literature. Apart from important differences between the Israeli, the German and the Canadian approaches, there is at least one similar interest. It is the attempt to describe literature as a dynamic and functional phenomenon. The way in which literature functions is in all these approaches of a key concern. Systemist theory tries to integrate all the different and distinct literary activities, which in one way or another play a role in the literary communication process. Systemist theory tries to offer a model to the study of literature, which forms the basis for the description of all literary activities concerned.

This implies that the problem-solving effectiveness of the empirical reception approach (only focussing on the text-reader relationship) was significantly broadened by the systemic orientation. Literary scholarship is now given the possibility to study its complicated object in a more sophisticated way. To mention just one example: within the empirical reception approach literary history is reduced to a great extent to a reception phenomenon. Literary history is seen from the reader's perspective; and, as a matter of fact, only from the perspective of that selected category of historical readers who speak to us through their written reactions or commentaries which are saved by the time. But a systemic empirical approach aims not only at a description of such reader-reactions, but it is also interested in the activities of the author, in selection processes by and sales-figures of publishing houses and bookkeepers, in library statistics, in literary prizes, in reviews, in the canonization process, etc.⁶³

The broad character of the systemic empirical theory of literature also implies that the focus may be directed at research items that have a greater social relevance than the object of reception esthetics. Whereas the latter approach was mainly concerned with the interpretation of the canon and the writing of literary history, a systemic empirical approach may direct its attention to every item where literary activities are being involved. It could mean research into literary education, text processing of highly complicated texts (for instance poems), TV fiction (soaps, detectives, etc.), cultural identity as far as it is expressed in literature, fiction-

62 The Québec group is organized in the Centre de Recherche en Littérature Québécoise and consists of a.o. Maurice Lemire, Joseph Melançon, Denis Saint-Jacques and Clément Moisan. For representative publications see for instance Lemire 1986, Moisan 1987, and Robert 1989.

63 This is not the place to give an extensive survey of the possibilities of systemist theory for the writing of literary history. I have done this elsewhere: Segers 1993b and 1993c, publications which are complementary.

ality in advertisements, reading as therapeutical treatment, the economic side of literary publishing, etc. These and other similarly structured objects seem to have a greater topicality than the more traditional occupations of reception esthetics. It should be stated explicitly that this does not mean these occupations, interpretation and literary history, have a lower scholarly status, it only means they might attract smaller attention from the general public at the moment.⁶⁴

This is not the place to deal extensively with the problem of the social relevance of literary studies in general and that of the empirical approach in particular.⁶⁵ I only would like to clarify here this concept and to stress the necessity of a meeting between social topicality and the (systemic) empirical approach. Helga Nowotny's description of scholarly social relevance still seems to be adequate:

Als gesellschaftlich relevant bezeichnen wir jenes wissenschaftliche Wissen, dem die Gesellschaft mit der Bereitschaft zur Aufnahme und des Umsetzens in das gesellschaftliche Handeln begegnet.⁶⁶

Much more than the narrow and static character of the esthetics of reception the open and dynamic structure of the empirical approach should be able to construct a connection between social needs and scholarly possibilities. This connection preferably should be realized by the development of an applied study of literature. Possible objects would be, for instance, the topics as described in the above paragraph. Bridging this gap is not easy, but is necessary in view of the future importance of literary studies.⁶⁷

Besides its broad character the systemic empirical approach also has the advantage of a clear scholarly status, which is also shared by the empirical reception approach. Much more than the esthetics of reception the empirical approach is able to improve the scientific status of literary studies. Methodological criteria such as intersubjectivity, explicitness, systematization, falsification and confirmation can be met to a considerable extent by empirical research. The esthetics of reception, however, due to its hermeneutic character, scores low on these criteria.

In concluding this section we could say that the empirical approach (and especially the branch based on systemist theory) has a more effective capacity to solve a number of relevant problems; moreover, it has the additional possibility to tackle new problems which may be said to be socially relevant.

64 See e.g. Schmidt 1983 and Steinmetz 1983.

65 For an extensive treatment of this topic I refer to William R. Paulson 1988.

66 Nowotny 1975: 445f.

67 The applied study of literature will definitely encounter the same difficulties as the applied side of the social sciences. As Nowotny (1975: 450) mentions concerning the social sciences: "Die Arbeitsteilung zwischen angewandter und reiner Sozialwissenschaft ist weitgehend defekt. Dazu kommt noch, daß die Naturwissenschaften in der Lage sind, 'Dinge' und 'hardware'-Anweisungen zu liefern, die Sozialwissenschaften jedoch nur Ideen und 'software' Rezepte. Anforderungen und Konkurrenz durch die laienhafte Wissenschaftsvorstellungen sind so groß, daß viele Sozialwissenschaftler dadurch praktisch immobilisiert werden: entsprechen die Ergebnisse ihrer Arbeit den Laienvorstellungen, dann haben die Sozialwissenschaften nichts Neues zu bieten: sind sie hingegen inkompatibel, so wird die Annahme und Verbreitung dieser Erkenntnisse verhindert."

For the concept 'applied study of literature' see e.g.: Arbeitsgruppe NIKOL (1986).

The problems we selected in order to prove the effectiveness of the empirical study of literature were: an adequate description of the relationship between text and reader, reader-oriented research (not the theory of it but the actual research), a focus on all activities that are connected with the literary communication-process, the drive for a greater scientific status for literary research and - finally - a possibility to study problems which have a considerable degree of social relevance.

The conclusion should be that the empirical study of literature is more effective, more adequate, than an esthetics of reception is in solving those and similarly structured research problems. This implies the study of literature has realized a certain degree of progress within one of its research traditions, reception research.

5. Concluding remarks

What is the validity of the above conclusion, formulated at the end of section 4? Needless to say, the validity is dependent on the significance attributed to the problems which were selected here to describe dynamics and progress. Someone who rejects all those problems as insignificant and instead posits the problem of the hermeneutic interpretation based on the concept of gap, will come to a different conclusion. In that case the esthetics of reception à la Iser would be more 'progressive' than the empirical study of literature.

The choice of research problems on the basis of which dynamics and progress of a research tradition can be assessed is to a certain extent arbitrary. This certainly does not mean that anything goes. On the one hand it is highly unlikely that all contemporary literary scholars would reject all research problems we have selected here. About the validity of a certain number of problems undoubtedly agreement will be reached. On the other hand, since literary studies is embedded in a social system, the latter imposes its priorities on the former. For example, if the social and political system in some Western countries would not tolerate any longer the high degree of unemployment among graduates from literature departments, it might require a reorientation of the educational curriculum. This would probably imply a reorientation of literary problems to be selected by students and professors.

In terms of the research problems we investigated, the empirical approach represents a progressive scholarly evolution compared with the esthetics of reception. But there is no need here (nor elsewhere) to downplay the merits and stress the shortcomings of an esthetics of reception. The step that was taken by this movement appeared to be very relevant for giving literary scholarship a new perspective. This reader-orientation was proposed at a time, the end of the 60's, when the study of literature found itself in a dead-lock in the Western world. It was obsessed by meaning attribution (one interpretation after the other), practised by a choking, individualistic approach.

Moreover, in our judgment about the validity and relevance of the esthetics of reception, we should also be careful not to say that its theses and ideas are hackneyed. Yes, indeed, they have become commonplace by now, but as Janusz Slawinski correctly observes:

Their commonplace nature makes it all the harder for us to realize the extent to which in only a few years they have succeeded in reorienting our notions of the tasks and object of literary history, casting doubt on the discipline's methodological model, which until not so long ago seemed worthy of unre-served confidence.⁶⁸

Finally, if one wants to assess and compare the influence of both approaches on literary scholarship at the moment, one sees the usual picture: progressiveness corresponds with resistance. As we have seen, one of the basics of the empirical approach is to consider reading and interpretation as acts of communication performed by a subject. This act should be studied empirically from 'outside'.⁶⁹ This fundamental characteristic has met with much criticism, resistance and ignorance. In general, four objections can be noticed here.⁷⁰

The first objection concerns the sometimes extremely laborious operations that have to be carried out in empirical research compared to the rather trivial results that are produced. Holub's complaint can be taken as an example in this context:

The problem with what has hitherto gone under the label of empirical reception theory is thus not so much empiricism, which cannot be avoided, as *naïve scienticism*, which has contributed nothing to literary theory and practice besides realms of printed pages.⁷¹

Then there is the criticism based on the reductive approach. It implies that in many empirical research settings the 'natural' reading situation of the respondents is being distorted. This is the case when for instance the name of the author, the historical context, the text's genre, etc. are not given or when a text has been changed or rewritten by the researcher. Another form of reduction is the difference between the theoretical framework and its operationalization in an actual research situation; there is said to be a considerable loss of theoretical substance and therefore deformation.

The empirical study of literature also goes to average and less sophisticated readers for information about texts which are not 'destined' for them, as the third objection runs. In the eyes of many non-empiricists this leads to grey and irrelevant information about literature.

A fourth objection consists of the critical question whether the obsession with the reader's reactions does not result in 'losing sight of the text'? This objection is sometimes phrased in this version: 'We are not working in the faculty of social sciences!'

Obviously, more objections could be made (and actually have been made) than the ones given above, but it is not my purpose to be more extensive in this respect, neither is this the place to counter these objections. The aim here is simply to assess and compare in rather gen-

68 Slawinski 1988: 521.

69 See Fokkema and Ibsch 1992: 123 and Viehoff 1988: 20.

70 Van Assche (1990: 27-29) has listed these objections.

71 Holub 1984: 15.

eral terms the influence of both approaches on literary scholarship at the moment. It is fair to say that the influence of reception esthetics has been much greater than that of the empirical study of literature. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the basics of reception esthetics were (and still are) much closer to mainstream hermeneutic scholarship than the empirical approach is. Therefore we could say that many of the differences between both approaches (as described in sections 3 and 4), all work in favor of the impact and positive reception of the Constance School.

The impact of reception esthetics reached a peak in the 70's. Eberhard Lämmert describes the current situation of reception esthetics in Germany as follows:

Zurückgegangen ist nach einer zunächst euphorischen Aufnahme in den siebziger Jahren die Rezeptionsforschung. Zwar hat das zunehmende Interesse an der Beobachtung von Motivübernahmen und -verwandlungen und allen sonstigen Erscheinungen der *Intertextualität* - also der innerliterarischen Reihengestaltung - die Anregungen der Rezeptionsästhetik zum Teil aufgenommen, doch hat die empirische Rezeptionsforschung an Chancen eingebüßt, seit Gruppenarbeiten während des Studiums rückläufig oder auch durch Prüfungsordnungen undifferenziert unterbunden wurden. Drittmittelprojekte haben hier nur begrenzten Ausgleich geschaffen. Dagegen muß als eine verheißungsvolle Sonderentwicklung die Empirische Literatur- und Medienforschung in Heidelberg und in Siegen angesehen werden.⁷²

The esthetics of reception now has ceased to exist as a separate movement. Its end was a natural one, since most of its important ideas are incorporated in contemporary mainstream literary scholarship.

The empirical approach, however, is alive and well as a clearly distinct movement. As we have seen, it still has a lot to gain in terms of impact and acceptance of its ideas. But it seems that it is extremely well equipped to stimulate and participate in future developments in literary studies. In this respect I see two important tendencies. First of all, the study of literature can no longer permit itself to study only books.⁷³ For a considerable period of time fictionality has not been confined to canonized books only; at the end of this century most people enjoy fictionality outside canonized books: in films, soaps, detectives, computers, etc. Secondly, there is the tendency to study the text in its historical and contemporary context, which implies a broadening of literary studies to culture studies. Wilhelm Voßkamp mentions in this respect:

Will Literaturwissenschaft ihrer Aufgabe in einer technisch orientierten Mediengesellschaft gerecht werden, wird sie sich auf diesen Kontext einlassen müssen - nicht in der Weise schlechter Anpassung, sondern in der Form kritischer Reflexion. Literaturwissenschaft sollte selbst ein kultureller Faktor sein im Sinne von Aufklärung, Erkenntnis und Vergnügen.⁷⁴

The third development concerns the growing social relevance that will be demanded from literary studies. We have dealt briefly with this phenomenon at the end of section 4.

72 Lämmert 1990: 181; it seems that in this context by 'Rezeptionsforschung' is meant 'esthetics of reception'.

73 Barner 1980: 198; Lämmert 1990: 187.

74 Voßkamp 1990: 247.

Maybe the empirical study of literature should draw some consequences from the existing gap between mainstream literary scholarship and its own approach and development. The empirical approach could learn something from the way reception esthetics has influenced the study of literature at large. The Constance School could be so successful because of its close links with the practice of contemporary scholarship in the 70's and 80's. Should the empirical study of literature not shift its interests, at least partially, somewhat more to the concerns of current literary studies, to show what can be done in more practical terms? Attention could be given, for instance, to this question: what are the consequences of the empirical approach for what still appear to be the main activities of contemporary literary scholarship: interpretation and the writing of literary history.⁷⁵ Especially in the domain of the systemic empirical study of literary communication it seems to be time to turn away from the somewhat one-sided concentration on theoretical deliberations to the application of those principles in practical research.

Obviously, this is not a plea to repudiate the principles of empirical studies as they have been described here and elsewhere. It is simply a suggestion for additional research directed at projects that are judged to be relevant by the current scholarly community. The aim would be to show that the empirical study of literature is concerned to supply answers to questions that cannot be given by literary scholarship based on hermeneutics.

Moreover, by following this suggestion also others outside the empirical activity centers would agree with the words of the psychologist Jerome Bruner:

Once we have characterized a text in terms of its structure, its historical context, its linguistic form, its genre, its multiple levels of meaning, and the rest, we may still wish to discover how and in what ways the text affects the reader and, indeed, what produces such effects on the reader as do occur. What makes great stories reverberate with such liveliness in our ordinarily mundane minds? What gives great fiction its power [...]?⁷⁶

Only if those and many other similarly structured questions are being studied on a much larger scale than is the case today, we can say that the change from an esthetics of reception to empirical literary studies cannot only be characterized in terms of progress, but also in terms of success.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Concerning the relationship between interpretation and the empirical approach see a special issue of *POETICS* 12 (1983), no. 2/3; it contains a selected bibliography on this topic; see esp. Groeben 1983, Schmidt 1983 and Steinmetz 1983. For the relationship between literary history and the empirical study of literature see a.o.: Rusch and Schmidt 1983, Schmidt 1989, Segers 1993b and 1993c.

⁷⁶ Bruner 1984: 4.

⁷⁷ I would like to thank Lutz Kramaschki for the translation of the summary into German, and Achim Barsch, Peter M. Hejl, Wolfram K. Köck, Lutz Kramaschki, Gebhard Rusch, Siegfried J. Schmidt and Reinhold Viehoff for valuable criticism and suggestions. The incorporation of all their critical remarks, however, would have implied the writing of a book on this subject ... This essay only aims to offer an opening for a fundamental discussion. I hope it may function that way.

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