

***The SYSTEMIC and EMPIRICAL APPROACH
to LITERATURE and CULTURE
as THEORY and APPLICATION***

EDITED BY
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**Research Institute for Comparative Literature and Cross-Cultural Studies
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and
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Introduction:

Text in Context *alias* The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture

When I submitted my most recent book — a collection of applications in the systemic and empirical approach to various aspects of theory, genres, periods, selected primary texts, aspects of media and culture, translation theory, social discourse, etc. — for publication by an American academic publisher, one reader wrote that the main reason he/she did not like the book was that I am "proselytising." Regardless of the fact that the main title of the book, most tellingly, is *Legitimizing the Study of Literature*, and thus my trying to "sell" the theoretical and methodological approach I have applied in a specific context is legitimate twice over, I did some soul searching. In the end, I came to the conclusion that this reader must be a scholar who, unfortunately, did not understand either my work or the problems the Study of Literature is facing these days and I decided that there is nothing wrong with an attempt at proselytising.

My basic premise is that in the current situation — where the Study of Literature is digging its own grave everywhere both intellectually and institutionally and is in a process of total marginalization — an approach that promises innovation where not only the approach but more importantly the results of study may have a chance to persuade the taxpayer, the politician, indeed, the general public, not speak of university administration, to recognize the importance of the Study of Literature as a socially constructive and necessary educational and life force, is worth "proselytising." It is in this context of an "attitude" and scholarly argumentation that I the present volume to our readers. I am doing this because I hope that the Text in Context *alias* The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture — if and when the *methodological* precision that is *basically* common to the frameworks at hand, albeit to different degrees, is understood and recognized, may eventually innovate the Study of Literature. And I indeed hope that perhaps first signs toward innovation — or signs of an impending paradigm shift? — are already "in the air," as William H. Thornton (Professor of English, National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan) wrote to me in a recent e-letter:

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I think that there is a growing awareness that the absence of objectivity has had a deleterious effect on literary scholarship, contributing to what you somewhere call its "self-deconstruction" so far as social significance is concerned. I would simply mention two theorists, from opposite political poles, who are calling for a return to objectivity: Searle, on the right, and Michael Sprinker, on the left. I hope I'm correct in sensing that this objectivity is in the air. ... My present concern, since I've been reading your stuff and Featherstone's concurrently has been the relationship of ESL-type [ESL = Empirical Study of Literature] systems theory with Wallerstein-type world-systems thinking. Superficially, the two would seem to be worlds apart. Knee-jerk critics of your orientation might even argue that the systems you refer to are analogous to the "core" in Wallerstein's core/periphery model. But as you point out in that same footnote, the systemic approach simply brings critical attention to a system which is "obviously there." It doesn't create that system, or endorses the "coreness" of it. On the contrary, it could well serve as a subversive instrument against the hegemony of that system. ... At the very least we have a mutual interest in laying the foundation for a new objectivity in literary and cultural studies. (e-letter from thornton@mail.ncku.edu.tw, 24 February 1997)

I can only hope that Thornton is gauging the current landscape of literary theory right. And he may be right, indeed, if we consider the fact that in the last two decades or so several frameworks and methodologies emerged whose impact has begun to be felt in literary studies. These frameworks, whom I circumscribe by the rather wide umbrella designation *Text in Context* — here and with the present volume mainly aimed at English-speaking North American scholarship — I mean Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of the Literary Field (*champ littéraire*), Jacques Dubois's Theory of the Literary Institution (*l'institution littéraire*), Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory, Niklas Luhmann's Systems Theory when applied to literature, and Siegfried J. Schmidt's Empirical Study of Literature (*Empirische Literaturwissenschaft*). Based on their conceptual affinities and similarities, I designated these approaches in English, since 1993, as *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture*. While the former, *ad hoc* designation of Text in Context is useful but much too wide, the latter designation is *faute de mieux*.

The way I see it, the main concept that interconnects the five approaches is the notion of "system." Both the term and the concept are difficult when it comes to the Study of Literature. On both sides of the Atlantic, the notions of "system" and "empirical" — the latter particularly so — but also, to a much lesser degree, "institution" and "field," evoke the criticism of neo-positivism, the accusation of "number crunching," the criticism of disregard for the primary properties of a literary text, the straight-jacket application of the "system" to literature the study of which scholars traditionally and most self-referentially regard — entrenched in hermeneutics — as a narrative and metaphorical exercise, etc. The argumentation that all these and other criticisms — mostly knee-jerk criticisms as Thornton suggested above — are based on misunderstandings, or, more often than not, on a superficial and/or dismissive reading of the theoretical and meta-

theoretical texts, has been presented often and loudly enough and instead of reiterating this argumentation, I invite our colleagues who are suspicious of these approaches to familiarize themselves in a "close-text" and "hermeneutic" reading of the frameworks....

The most basic differentiation between the Text in Context approach as defined here and the varied North American "contextual" approaches is that while the former approaches collectively have developed a varying and a more or less precise methodology and taxonomy, the latter lack such to a remarkable extent. However, if we observe internal differentiations among the five approaches, it is evident that there is a marked dividing line between three groupings: Bourdieu and Luhmann are careful not to argue too strongly against the hermeneutic tradition in literary scholarship, Even-Zohar attempts to place his framework in a mediating position, and while Dubois is largely unconcerned with the "text" immediately and focuses on the "institution" of literature, Schmidt's is the single framework that forcefully advocates a break with the hermeneutic tradition and employs both systems theory and the concept of the empirical. While I personally prefer and work with Schmidt's framework, at the same time I understand and recognize that all five frameworks have, in essence, much in common and that together they all are to various degrees delineations from the hermeneutic tradition. They all approach literature (and culture) as Text in Context.

For the sake of a simplified argumentation and to follow my suggestion that the common concept of all five approaches is the notion of "system" — albeit I am aware that the term is not used in all five approaches — I will briefly point to a few areas through which the notion can be easily understood. To take perhaps the most mediating and basic definition of system, which applies to both the straight-forward meaning of "system" as well as to "field" or "institution," Even-Zohar writes that "if by 'system' one is prepared to understand both the idea of a closed set-of-relations, in which the members receive their values through their respective oppositions, and the idea of an open structure consisting of several such concurrent nets-of-relations, then the term 'system' is appropriate and quite adequate" (*Polysystem Studies, Poetics Today* 11.1 [1990]: 12) and thus the notion of system is applicable to literature as "the network of relations that is hypothesized to obtain between a number of activities called 'literary,' and consequently these activities themselves are observed via that network" (ibid., 28). Further definitions of "system" — social, cultural, or literary — and definitions of the *champ littéraire* or the *institution littéraire* — are available in a good number of works both in the original frameworks and in works following the premises and postulates of these approaches (please select from the Bibliography at the end of the present volume).

The general Text in Context approach, thus comprising the five approaches as proposed, unavoidably links with the "empirical," what Thornton calls "obje-

ctivity," for instance. However, while it can be argued that the notion of "system" may be a common concept to all five approaches, the postulate of the "empirical" is not. The notion is explicit only in Schmidt's framework and all others shy away from it or outright reject it. But here again, there are many elements and assumptions in the other four frameworks where the *notion* of the empirical is evident. It should also be noted that the notion of the "empirical" has been embraced by a critical mass of North American and European applied psychologists, media and communication scholars, cognitive psychologists, and scholars studying reading and reading processes. These scholars have developed sophisticated theoretical and methodological frameworks and presented outstanding examples of applications of such to literary texts. In the present volume there are a good number of articles by such empirical-oriented scholars who work in the area of reading and reading processes. While these studies are not necessarily "systemic," they represent nevertheless another important aspect of the Text in Context approach.

Whether in European or North American literary scholarship, the focus on the singular text is predominant. While this *explication de texte* is legitimate in many instances, it is of limited value *unless* it is performed in Context and with precise methodology and taxonomy and with clearly stated hypotheses and postulates. And as to the "how" of literary scholarship, the predominant mode of essayistic and metaphorical writing is of questionable value in literary scholarship. In other words, literary scholars may leave *writing* to authors of fiction or to critics assessing new works as well as reserving this mode for texts which are of a popularizing-of-scholarship nature. Instead, we ought to produce scholarship resulting in Context and Objectivity (as difficult, shifting, and questionable the latter notion may be or may appear to be). In sum, I argue that the five approaches figuring in the present volume respond, to varying degrees, to these basic and yet innovative premises.

With reference to the source of the articles in this volume, in the history of the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature it is by now obvious that the originally "core" group of scholars who work with Siegfried J. Schmidt's Empirical Study of Literature has expanded itself by developments of new aspects of the approach as well as toward attention to similar or analogue approaches and that the Society by now has many members who either work exclusively with analogue approaches or "merge" many aspects of these analogue approaches. In the articles of the present volume this is obvious and one only needs to look at the Index in which the names of the "progenitors" of the five approaches are frequent to the point of interchangeability.

As president of IGEL, the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature (Internationale Gesellschaft für Empirische Literaturwissenschaft) for the period of 1994 to 1996, it was my task to organize the Society's Vth Biannual conference which was held under the aegis of the University of Alberta

at the Nakoda Lodge Conference Centre near Banff at Morley, Alberta, in August 1996. Articles in this volume are selected papers from that Conference.

In the construction of the volume, I aimed at a thematic cohesion of the articles. The volume consists of a substantial theoretical and meta-theoretical section followed by applied studies. The latter section is then divided into two thematically cohesive sections, one on "literature, culture, and media" and another on "literature and reading." The last section of the volume is a selected bibliography focussing on the last decade of works in the systemic, empirical, and field approaches to literature and culture. To the selected papers from the Conference and the bibliography, I added the following articles I recently edited because they complement the present volume advantageously: Rita Ghesquiere's and Jean Perrot's articles from a special issue of *Reader: Essays in Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy* (35-36 [1996]: 21-38 and 39-54) and Gebhard Rusch's, Steven Tötösy's, and Reinhold Viehoff's articles from the thematic section *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature: Theory and Application / Théorie systémique et empirique. Théorie et réalisations* in Margarida L. Losa, Isménia de Sousa, and Gonçalo Vilas-Boas, eds., *Literatura Comparada: Os Novos Paradigmas* (Porto: Afrontamento, 1996. 295-308, 309-15, and 369-75). I would like to thank the editor of *Reader*, Elizabeth A. Flynn, and the editors of the Porto volume for their permission to republish these articles in the present volume.

I would like to thank the readers of the Conference papers for their critical comments. Further, I would like to thank the University of Alberta Research Institute for Comparative Literature and Cross-Cultural Studies for approving the book for publication as the seventh volume in its publishing program. Last but not least, I would like to thank Péter and Ilona Tötösy, who, owing to IGEL's scarcity of funds, offered to print it in their printing firm, Zepetnek Nyomda, at Balatonvilágos in Hungary for a much reduced rate of cost. I and our Society are indebted to them for their support.

Finally, I would like to express my pleasure about the fact that the articles of the volume represent the work of scholars hailing from several continents and many countries thus indicating that the work of IGEL scholars is truly international and global. Following my "proselytising," I hope that the volume will be useful not only to scholars interested in in-depth studies in the mode(s) of Text in Context *alias* The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture but also to scholars who would use the volume as a textbook, for both undergraduate and graduate teaching and I also hope that students of literature in general will pay close attention to the work of IGEL scholars.

University of Alberta