Fundamentals of Literary Theory

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Preface

This volume is addressed to everyone who engages with literature as an object of knowledge. Primarily, this category consists of students and scholars of all literary disciplines from comparative literature to the individual national philologies, but the circle of intended readers also includes those active in any field in which the proper handling of past and present texts plays an essential role. This holds, for example, for linguistics with an interest in phenomena beyond the sentence level; for theater studies, where the relationship between dramatic text and performance is still of crucial importance; for art studies, where the question is increasingly being asked whether or not its artifacts 'speak' in a manner akin to texts composed in natural languages; for the philosophy of language, where the theories of fiction and interpretation constitute key areas of study; and, last but not least, for historical scholarship. Even in disciplines such as theology and jurisprudence, where the status and function of texts are radically different, the question arises as to the conditions of possibility for interpreting them in full accordance with their respective historical specificity.

Yet if the study of literature is to provide inter- and trans-disciplinary impulses, it must itself possess a disciplinary core. In the following, I am therefore concerned with fundamental questions of literary theory which represent this nucleus and hence form the basis on which inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches can be developed in the first place.

It seems to be a matter of broad consensus that any engagement with literature—whatever the epistemic impetus may be—makes it necessary to clarify the preconditions of adequate 'interpretation'. In Chap. 1, I

undertake such a clarification by formulating seven theses and five inter-pretative maxims.

Of similar importance for literary theory is the relationship between literature and fiction. As I demonstrate in Chap. 2, while conceptualizations of 'fiction(ality)' originating from other disciplines cannot simply be transferred to literary studies, it is nonetheless possible and necessary to pick up crucial terminological differentiations developed in the neighboring fields.

Given that performance studies are now firmly established as an autonomous discipline chiefly concerned with the concrete mise-en-scène, it falls to literary scholarship to examine the written dramatic text, whose peculiarity lies in the fact that it must always already be read as intended to be performed. Chapter 3 therefore investigates the question of how far a more precise understanding of 'performativity' (as distinct from 'performance') can serve as a criterion of differentiation for certain groups of texts.

Chapter 4, meanwhile, proposes a return to a more restricted conception of intertextuality which eschews the *a priori* equation of 'text' and 'culture' while making it possible to distinguish relations between individual texts from interdiscursive and intermedial ones, thereby enabling the systematic differentiation of 'intertextuality' and 'intermediality'.

Drawing a distinction between groups of texts by means of the concept of 'genre' (Chap. 5) has been part and parcel of poetological reflection since its very beginning and is thus an indispensable part of the scholarly engagement with literary texts, notwithstanding the fact that numerous attempts were made following Croce to dismiss 'genres' as normative 'pseudo concepts'.

The utility of period concepts for literary studies is another contentious issue. As I will show in Chap. 6, chronological organization is indispensable. Therefore, what is at stake is not the 'if' but rather the 'how' of periodization: epochs of literary history cannot be derived from totalizing periodizations of history *tout court*.

Pursuing the specific profile of literary studies does not mean that genuinely literary theory cannot or should not draw on insights garnered in other academic disciplines. On the contrary: as my deliberations in this volume show, the study of literature benefits greatly from concepts, hypotheses, and theories developed in fields as diverse as linguistics, epistemology, cognitive psychology, analytical philosophy, and the philosophy of language. However, this is not tantamount to a dissolution of literary studies in generalized cultural studies whose 'turns' seem to follow in ever quicker succession.

Of course, the study of literature is cultural scholarship, in the sense that it deals with a cultural phenomenon—'literature'—which is itself based on separating a certain set of texts from the entirety of culturally produced writings according to historically variable conditions and criteria. But this is not the same thing as the repeatedly proclaimed reorientations in the field of cultural studies, which not only have failed to bring about *the* cultural turn, but have led to a multiplicity of 'swerves' that are not only widely divergent, but often mutually exclusive. One example of this is the 'interpretative turn': conceiving of culture in general as *text*, it stands in marked opposition to the 'performative turn', which operates on the thesis of culture as *performance* while confusing the latter with performativity. If the individual 'cultural turns' cannot be derived from one another, then it follows that they cannot determine which 'turn' literary theory is to follow. The exact opposite is the case: the question of which insights produced by the reorientation(s) in cultural studies are applicable to literary studies can only be answered from the vantage point of the discipline's specific theory design. It goes without saying that disciplinary orders, too, can be subject to radical processes of transformation—but instead of being brought about by mere 'trend-hopping', these processes are driven by fundamental changes in epistemology and the philosophy of science. Among the latter, I count the supersession of essentialist notions of 'reality' by constructivist conceptions of varying radicality, as well as Popper's very early postulation of the theory-dependence of all scholarly observation (1934), which, in the wake of Thomas S. Kuhn's history of science approach, was taken up again especially in the field of laboratory studies.

It is against this backdrop that I seek to conceptualize the disciplinary core of literature studies as an academic field of research engaging with a variable group of texts based on historically variable criteria. In so doing, I do not presuppose an *a priori* definition of 'text' and/or 'literary text'; rather, I begin by employing the term 'text' as "an intuitively accessible concept in the sense of a sequence of sentences or other linguistic utterances that are considered to form a unit" (Horstmann 2003), before then proceeding to construct this intuitive concept 'performatively' via six individual sub-theories.

My choice of this approach neither means that I want to restrict literary theory to these six key aspects, nor that the theoretical fields in question cannot be divided further. However, given that such a sub-categorization would have far exceeded the scope of this volume, I have opted to confine myself to general questions pertaining to, for instance, the usage of period and genre concepts.

If I am here reformulating the key concerns of literary studies under recourse to trans-disciplinary findings (as opposed to dissolving the discipline under the all-encompassing rubric of cultural studies), then the crucial desideratum is a systematic synthesis of theory and history, that is, theoretical reflection must be tied to concrete historical conditions. To that end, I combine my earlier research, which I have partly modified and expanded, with completely new aspects, especially in the chapters on the theory of fiction(ality) and periodization. Here, but also in the remaining chapters, I clarify earlier positions or present a revised argument that incorporates recent scholarship. The result of this approach is a strong systematic interconnectedness between the individual chapters, which I have tried to highlight with a substantial number of explicit cross references. In cases where I unreservedly maintain my earlier stance, I have either integrated it into my argument or referred to the original place of publication. In future discussions, it is my wish to be measured against the positions taken here; moreover, I very much hope that a 'charitable reader' does not operate on the assumption that *everything* must be new in order for *anything* to be new—I would consider this to be the exact opposite of scholarship, namely magic.

From the moment this book appeared in the original German in 2018, my publisher began exploring the possibility of an English edition—here, too, the goal was to achieve a fruitful conjunction, a transnational and transcultural synthesis of strands of scholarship that have far too often remained unconnected. Striking the right balance between readability and terminological faithfulness was a delicate task, especially given that a significant part of the cited German-language research had never been translated. An initial draft prepared by Steven Rendall proved instrumental in getting the project off the ground. In its present form, the English translation is the product of a collaboration between Martin Bleisteiner and myself. For the sake of brevity, quotations from the German are provided in English only—if needed, the originals are readily available in the German edition. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are our own.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

Interpretation

1.1   The Inevitability of 'Interpretation'

The understanding of 'interpretation' I shall discuss first is certainly not uppermost in the minds of literary theorists when they employ the term. However, it reveals the widest possible scope of meaning that the concept has acquired in the context of the 'interpretation philosophy' developed above all by Lenk and Abel. As Abel explains in an early article, 'interpretation' appears in the compound *Interpretationsphilosophie* as

> shorthand for the entirety and the fundamental character of those processes through which we discriminate, identify, and re-identify a given thing *as* a certain phenomenal Something, apply predicates and attributes, construct correlations, classify into categories, and, through the world formed in this way, have opinions, convictions, and even justified knowledge. (Abel 1988: 51)

'Interpretation' thus designates an epistemological *habitus* that conceives of 'reality' not as in any sense objectively given, but rather as the product of a process of interpretation. Abel puts this most succinctly in his book *Zeichen der Wirklichkeit* published in 2004:

> Talking about 'signs of reality' implies that under critical auspices, reality is always only reality *in* signs and interpretations, and can never be absolute, completely non-epistemic, wholly sign- and interpretation-*free*. (Abel 2004: 15)

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Both Lenk and Abel explicitly subsume the exegesis of texts under this epistemic concept of interpretation:

> The traditional interpretation of texts—that is, the understanding or exegesis of a given text (or, in a somewhat broader sense: of a certain configuration of signs)—then represents a particular instance of this general concept of interpretation. (Lenk 1993: 252f.)

Although Lenk emphasizes that "an interpretation of texts […] that is committed to the reading paradigm is informed in advance by a structured and schematized form of the Something to be interpreted", he holds that, on a fundamental level, "the interpretation of texts is merely a special case of interpretive-schematizing activities" (Lenk 1993: 253).

Abel, who essentially advances a similar argument, reduces Lenk's[1] six levels of interpretation to three.[2] The designation of the third level, to which text interpretation belongs, as "appropriating readings" is both the most likely to intrigue literary scholars[3] and absolutely consistent with the overarching framework of Abel's model: after all, he is not concerned with "the *theory* of interpretation (as it is to be found in literary studies), but rather with the *philosophy* of the sign and of interpretation" (Abel 2004: 24), that is, with the basic epistemological question of our conception of 'reality'. Abel's key objective—like Lenk's—is "to assume a position

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[1] See Lenk (1993: 255–264) and the accompanying diagram (ibid.: 259).

[2] For a summary, see Abel (1988: 51f.) or Abel (1995: 14f.): "Heuristically, one can distinguish at least three levels and three aspects of the concept of interpretation, as it is used in interpretationism and in the present book. So far as the levels are concerned, the original productive construct-forming components that are manifested in the categorizing sign functions themselves, and that are already presupposed and employed in every organization of experience, can be called 'interpretation$_1$'. In contrast, the paradigms of uniformity that have been established by custom and have become habitual are referred to as 'interpretation$_2$'. And the appropriating elements, e.g., the procedures of describing, theory-building, explaining, substantiating, or justifying, will hereafter be called 'interpretation$_3$'".

[3] Lenk (1993: 259) divides this level into three *Interpretationsstufen* ('levels of interpretation', IS), namely IS$_4$: "Applying, appropriating, *consciously* formed *categorizing interpretation* (classification, subsumption, description, formation and ordering of categories; deliberate concept-building)"; IS$_5$: "explanatory, (in the narrower sense of the term) 'understanding', justifying, *(theoretically) substantiating interpretation*"; and IS$_6$: "the epistemological (methodological) *meta-interpretation* of the interpretation-construct method". Literary interpretation would thus be located on levels 4 and 5.

beyond the dichotomy of passive mirroring and mere construction, and, at the same time, beyond essentialism and relativism" (Abel 2004: 13).[4]

For the most part, Abel pursues this goal by critically engaging with various epistemological positions within analytical philosophy. Notably absent, however, appears to be the 'dialectical constructivism' pioneered by Piaget based on his work in the field of developmental psychology.[5] Starting with the publication of *La construction du réel chez l'enfant* (1937), Piaget's research provided an empirical basis for the assumption of the 'prestructuredness' of any experience and underwent a comprehensive epistemological and theoretical synthesis in his *Logique et connaissance scientifique* (1967).[6] The common goal of both interpretation philosophy— it is not for nothing that Lenk calls it 'interpretation-*construct* philosophy' ('Interpretations*konstrukt*philosophie')—and Piaget's dialectical constructivism[7] is to overcome the epistemological dichotomy between essentialism and relativism. Whereas Abel resorts to the metaphor of the revolving door,[8] Piaget describes the process of construction as an "indissociable interaction between the contributions of the subject and those of the object".[9] I am quite aware that interpretation(-construct) philosophy would reject this rather traditionally formulated view of the subject-object relation on the grounds that the 'object' is, as a matter of principle, pervaded by signs and interpretations. But neither is the underlying conundrum solved by the charming image of the revolving door: as apposite as the metaphor may seem, it implicitly assumes an 'in front' and a

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[4] See also Lenk (1993: 264–272).

[5] Lenk makes passing references to Piaget's research on the gradual emergence of operational thinking in children (see Lenk 1993: 196, 199, 260).

[6] On Piaget's importance for the development of a 'constructivist paradigm', and the quite heterogeneous epistemological assumptions of constructivism which have been diverging since the 1960s, see the outstanding overview in Schaefer (2013: 19–60).

[7] See Piaget (ed.) (1967: 118–132) (a concise summary of genetic epistemology) as well as Piaget (1970).

[8] See, for example, Abel (2004: 13): "The genitive in the phrase 'sign of reality' gestures towards a fundamentally *adualistic* conception of the relation between reality and signs, between reality and the human mind. It signals revolving-door-like relationships: Every individualized and specific reality is always already constituted by signs and conditioned by interpretations; every substantial and non-erroneous experience is always already an experience of reality".

[9] Piaget (ed.) (1967: 1243f.). For Piaget, it is precisely this "interaction" that emblematizes the dialectical nature of his constructivism. Thus, the adjective 'dialectic' has nothing in common with the Marxist conception of the term, except that something is being 'mediated'. For further details, see Sect. 5.2, pp. 245–247.

'behind' (i.e., an inside and an outside) of such a door,[10] which is the very problem that the various kinds of constructivism seek to address.[11] Since I have no desire to dabble in philosophy, I cannot offer any general 'solution'; I shall, however, draw on the example of the interpretation of literary texts in an attempt to outline my idea of how this problem could be dealt with from the point of view of literary studies.

Against the background of the epistemological impasse sketched out here, theoretical approaches that attempt to skirt the issue are anything but persuasive. In the wake of Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* (1966), many scholars believed that they could come to grips with the vexed problem of literary interpretation by abolishing it altogether; this includes Wolfgang Iser in his *Appellstruktur der Texte* (1970), a seminal study in the field of reception aesthetics which explicitly draws on Sontag's work.[12] Yet if we examine the proffered arguments more closely, we find that they are not directed against 'interpretation' as such, but rather against various preconceived notions of what the practice involves, notions which in turn associate 'interpretation' with specific procedures, goals, questions, etc. Thus, Sontag mistakenly equates 'interpretation' with 'content analysis', and counters it with a pronounced focus on formal aspects.[13] Iser, meanwhile, inveighs against "the art of interpretation", in whose eyes the literary text is allegedly nothing more than "the illustration of a meaning given to it in advance" (Iser 1970: 7)—a bold assertion that is clearly at odds even with the epoch-making article to which Iser alludes, namely Emil Staiger's "Kunst der Interpretation" (1951). With a touch of irony, one might instead say that Staiger's interpretive goal—"to grasp what grasps us" (Staiger 1951/2008: 31)—is precisely *not* geared toward

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[10] It is no coincidence that both Lenk and Abel distinguish between "heuristically" (Abel 1995: 14) different levels. For Lenk, the 'deepest' level (IS₁) is constituted by "*practically immutable* patterns of interpretation [...] inherent in our biological predisposition, to which we are bound, so to speak, and which we cannot give up, shed, or change", patterns he consequently refers to as "*primary or ur-interpretations*" (Lenk 1993: 256). It would appear, then, that something ineluctable is behind the 'revolving door' after all. In 1983, Ian Hacking argued against fundamental interpretationism by drawing on examples from the domain of physics such as Faraday's lines of force, which could be 'interpreted' either as a theoretical fiction or as a real phenomenon (Hacking 1983: 33–35).

[11] On this, see again Schaefer (2013, esp. pp. 28–32), and Sect. 5.2, pp. 243–247, where I discuss the matter in more detail.

[12] See Iser (1970: 5). The following argument was first presented in Hempfer (2009: 21–24).

[13] See Sontag (1966: 3–16), esp. p. 10: "Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art".

'the meaning of literary texts', but rather their emotional 'appeal struc-ture', with the latter resulting from the "individual style of the poem", which is "not the form and not the content, not the idea and not the motif. Instead, it is all this wrapped into one" (Staiger 1951/2008: 40).[14]

Not only do Sontag's and Iser's attempts to break away from '(the art of) interpretation' fail to convince on a theoretical level, but they them-selves continued to interpret texts, films, and so on—all, of course, while relying on other methodologies and 'self-evident presuppositions'. When Iser, for instance, wants to "name important formal conditions that engen-der indeterminacy *in the text itself*" (Iser 1970: 14, my italics), he has no choice but to analyze the text and its structure, and hence to interpret it.

As the programmatic title for a 1979 article that also appeared as a chapter in his *Grundriß der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft* (1980), Siegfried J. Schmidt chose a quotation from Hans Magnus Enzensberger: "Fight the ugly vice of interpretation! Fight the even more ugly vice of the correct interpretation!"[15] Tom O. Kindt and Tilmann A. Köppe character-ize this type of literary theory as follows:

> Its object is not works of literature, but the actions that contribute to the production, reception, communication, and processing of literary texts. And its task consists not in the interpretive determination of the meaning of texts, but rather in the empirical study of the social domains that are consti-tuted by actions related to literature. (Kindt/Köppe (ed.) 2008: 191)

Kindt and Köppe's summary is apt and allows us to cease concerning our-selves with a literary theory that believes it can marginalize what consti-tutes literature 'empirically' in the first place: a text that is materially present in the form of a specific syntactic/semantic/pragmatic structure, which in turn is the very prerequisite for the 'production' of what Schmidt referred to as "*L-Kommunikate*".[16] It is precisely this question—namely, how recipients arrive at their "reception results", that is, how they

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[14] Staiger's concept of interpretation is not nearly as 'immanentist' as is frequently claimed. For a more accurate assessment, see the editors' introductory remarks to the reprint of this article in Kindt/Köppe (ed.) (2008: 27–29); see also Staiger's article itself (ibid.: 30–52).

[15] See Schmidt's own statement in Schmidt (1979/2008: 194, n.2): "A large part of the ideas presented here [i.e., in the article] appear in this book as Chap. 5, Sect. 5.4".

[16] Schmidt uses the term in reference to the individual "reception results" that "a recipient assigns to a text" (Schmidt 1991: 324), results that are accessible only to 'empirical' analysis. "L" stands for *Literatur* ('literature'), "S" for *Sprache* ('speech' or 'language'); see below.

understand and interpret texts—that Schmidt excludes from 'empirical literary theory'. Against the background of a tradition of exegesis that goes back thousands of years—one that may be problematic in a multitude of ways, but proves *historically* the *empirical* fact of the inevitability of interpretation for understanding a text, no matter how it is constituted—this is a daring move indeed. It also reveals a complete lack of knowledge of recent developments in analytical philosophy, whose standards Schmidt otherwise so emphatically invokes[17]: from Davidson's *Radical Interpretation* (first published in 1973) to Brandom's *Making It Explicit* (1994), the discipline has devised theories of meaning that (should) explain why and how we do not understand linguistic utterances arbitrarily, and to what extent even ordinary communication is already based on interpretation.[18] Given that Schmidt relegates the issue around which a significant part of the analytical philosophy of language revolves to the 'black box' of *S*- and *L-Kommunikate* that is impervious to further scrutiny, his 'empirical literary theory' offers no points of connection even to theories of interpretation that are receptive to analytical precision.[19]

Interpretation is also explicitly rejected in a completely different theoretical context, namely that of deconstruction—yet here, in contrast to 'empirical literary theory', it is not simply to be abolished, but rather to be replaced by the concept of the 'reading'. Titles such as David E. Wellbery's "Interpretation versus Lesen" (1996) are paradigmatic of this approach. If we take as our point of departure the meaning of the two lexemes in ordinary language, the relationship between 'interpreting' and 'reading' is not one of opposition, but of presupposition: what we have not read or what has not been communicated to us in another medium, we cannot interpret, even if in practice we do so all the time. (In which case we act as if we

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[17] See the introductory chapter, "Zur Begründung, Konzeption und Entwicklung einer empirischen Theorie der Literatur (ETL)", in Schmidt (1991: 17–35). How an empirical conception of literary interpretation can be developed on an analytical basis is demonstrated by Titzmann (2013).

[18] See, for instance, the paradigmatic section in Brandom (1994: 510–513) entitled "Four Linguistic Phenomena That Involve Interpretation". On the narrower meaning of the concept of interpretation in Wittgenstein, see ibid.: 20–23 and 508–510.

[19] In essence, Schmidt's fundamental rejection of interpretation *in general* is based on the rejection of one interpretation *in particular* (which is taken from Conrady 1974). While Schmidt's criticism of Conrady's reading is largely valid, the insufficiency of *one* interpretation does not allow us to logically infer the impossibility of *any* interpretation (here, the problem of induction rears its head; see Stegmüller 1975). For a recent discussion of the fundamental inevitability of interpretation, see Hiebel (2017: 23–29).

had read something; the relation of presupposition is preserved, if only in pretense.) In deconstructive theory, meanwhile, 'reading' acquires certain connotations that render the concept ambiguous[20] and turn it into a metaphor for a specific form of interpretation. Aleida Assmann draws the following distinction:

> Interpretations produce exegeses that one can hold onto; readings are possible forms of experience one does or does not engage with. The fundamentalization of reading destroys the illusion of an objectively valid, ideal, transferable interpretation. In this context, Geoffrey Hartman also speaks of a 'hermeneutics of undecidability'. (Assmann 1996: 19)[21]

These assertions invite contradiction. For one thing, 'readings', too, must be specified in order to be communicated in scholarly works such as Assmann's own edited collection *Texte und Lektüren* (1996). More serious is the privatistic arbitrariness that is assigned to reading when it produces "forms of experience" that "one does or does not engage with". Obviously, everyone is free to read how they please, but if their 'readings' are to be fed into the discourse of an academic discipline, certain standards exist that are not met by the notion that the "continuous […] re-evaluation of critical discourse" (Assmann 1996: 19) is merely a contingent process.[22] Finally, it must be said that here, too, 'interpretation' is set up as a bogeyman that has precious little to do with the reality of literary scholarship. There is a fundamental difference between approaches that start from the assumption that texts have a semantic range that is, in principle, determinable (i.e., not arbitrary, but, as the case may be, very probably plural) and those that claim to have found the one 'true' meaning. The latter is hubris, which may exist in practice, but violates the basic principle of academic research, viz., that each and every insight is open to refutation. Surprisingly, it is precisely the post-structuralist theorists who, on the basis of their theory of the text, have arrived at an unambivalent attribution of meaning and thereby fallen into a performative self-contradiction: while they deny the constitution of meaning on a primary level, they simultaneously ascribe

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[20] On the polysemy of the terms 'reading' and 'interpretation', see Winko (2002).

[21] Assmann's reference is to Hartman (1980: 41).

[22] For an astute analysis of the "rampant fallacies of cultural studies and the humanities", see also Schlesier (2003), who notes: "We are dealing with a new, objectively weak and subjectively strong rehash of a kind of sophistry in which anyone is at liberty to interpret, or not to interpret, as he or she wishes" (ibid.: 47).

meaning on the meta-level by reading any text as being about the procedures of textualization, as evidence of a *productivité* that must not be reduced to a *produit*.[23] If, for example, Ricardou's reading turns Claude Simon's novel *La Bataille de Pharsale* into a "bataille de la phrase",[24] then he not only assigns meaning, but at the same time radically restricts the text's semantic potential.[25] Post-structural readings are thus 'work-immanent' interpretations, and this holds true not only for European, and especially French, post-structuralism, but for Paul de Man and the American version of deconstruction as well.[26] What distinguishes these schools of thought from the older immanentism (i.e., from the New Criticism and what is referred to as *Werkimmanenz* in German academic discourse) is not the replacement of 'interpretation' by 'reading', but rather the different questions that are addressed to the text: instead of asking about unity, harmony, and coherence, they emphasize discrepancies and contrary forces; instead of closure, openness; instead of the human condition, the materiality of the textual, etc. On the one hand, this mindset enabled new approaches beyond deconstructionist orthodoxy, which were not based on the supersession of 'interpretation' by 'reading', but rather on the integration of innovative research questions into a systematic concept of interpretation.[27] On the other hand, it also produced, through the connotative loading of 'reading' as methodologically 'liberal' and of 'interpretation' as 'authoritarian'—paradigmatic of this tendency is once again Assmann 1996, following Hartman 1980—a reduction of

[23] For a detailed discussion of Kristeva's terminology as well as post-structural text theory and the accompanying conception of reading, see Hempfer (1976: 13–65).

[24] This is the title of the chapter from Ricardou (1971: 118–158) in which he interprets Simon's novel.

[25] For a fundamentally different interpretation of Simon's novel that nonetheless makes allowance for the thematization of procedures of textualization and the materiality of the text, see Hempfer (1976: 130–168).

[26] On the immanentism of Paul de Man's conception of reading, see Spoerhase (2007: 83f.).

[27] I myself have sought to re-think the concept of deconstruction "non-deconstructively" (Hempfer 1989). On intertextuality, see Chap. 4.

rationality that allowed statements about literary texts to slip into the arbitrariness of individual associations.[28]

Contrary to these positions, Andreas Kablitz based his "theory of literature" on literary scholars' "ways of dealing with the individual literary text", arguing that their practices involved "implicit theoretical assumptions regarding the specific characteristics of literature", which, as Kablitz put it, "prove to be considerably more persistent and in some respects far more pertinent for dealing with the literary text than many of the paradigms that are explicitly grounded in theory" (Kablitz 2013: 12). This 'praxeological turn'[29] in literary theory seems to me productive, but it does not render obsolete the question of how we can distinguish between 'good' and 'not so good' interpretive practices.[30] My first thesis therefore is:

Thesis 1 Interpretation is fundamentally inevitable. Crucially, however, a distinction can be drawn between 'good' and 'less good' interpretations.

In what follows, I discuss the problem of interpretation only with regard to literary texts. Naturally, the question of how to distinguish a 'good' interpretation from a 'less good' one is posed differently in literary studies than it is in theology or jurisprudence, for example, insofar as neither divine revelation nor legislative intent can be appealed to as a

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[28] Vinken (2009) is paradigmatic of this tendency (for a critical perspective, see Hempfer 2012). Following a brilliant pastiche of deconstructive interpretive procedures, Klaus Weimar notes that it is "an active insult to almost any audience when, by presenting it with an interpretation like mine [referring to his pastiche], one ascribes to it such low standards of plausibility" (Weimar 2005: 135). Weimar does not explicitly designate his persiflage as 'deconstructivist', but its imitative character is unmistakable. For a similarly critical but explicit position regarding deconstructive interpretive practices, see Schlesier (2003: 42): "If Derrida, for instance, instead of following in Heidegger's footsteps by deliriously burrowing into individual words and concepts, were to go to the trouble of analyzing the syntax of a text, his intellectual edifice would collapse like a house of cards". Schlesier is here referring to Bollack's criticism of Derrida's alleged ignorance of Greek syntactic procedures (Bollack 2000: 82). More recently, see Descher (2017: 45–104).

[29] On the 'praxeological turn' in other academic disciplines, see Schatzki et al. (ed.) (2001) and Volbers (2011); in literary studies in particular, Martus/Spoerhase (2009) and Martus (2015).

[30] I deliberately do not use the terms 'right' and 'wrong', let alone 'true' and 'false' in the sense of logical truth values—such designations cannot be assigned to interpretations, but at most to individual sentences. Why this is so will be explained in the following.

normative authority.[31] The fact that a theory of literary interpretation must nevertheless draw on the work of neighboring disciplines—above all, hermeneutics and the philosophy of language—will become evident over the further course of this chapter.

1.2   LITERARY INTERPRETATION AS 'KNOWING HOW'

In my opinion, literary interpretation is based on a specific form of rationality that can be made explicit through a certain type of knowledge, insofar as a 'knowing how' or 'being able' to do something can be distinguished from a 'knowing that'. In turn, the very fact that it has been termed an 'art'—with or without an ironic undertone—would seem to indicate that 'interpretation' is not a propositional 'knowing *that*', but rather a performative 'knowing *how*'.

The distinction between these two types of knowledge goes back to Gilbert Ryle.[32] Central to Ryle's differentiation is the idea that 'knowing how' does not involve the explicit 'spelling out' of one's knowledge of or about something, but rather the carrying out of an act:

> When a person knows how to do things of a certain sort (e.g., make good jokes, conduct battles or behave at funerals), his knowledge is actualised or exercised in what he does.
>
> It is not exercised (save *per accidens*) in the propounding of propositions or in saying 'Yes' to those propounded by others. His intelligence is exhibited by deeds, not by internal or external dicta. (Ryle 1945/1946: 8)

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[31] On the various disciplinary hermeneutics, see Gadamer (²2004: 306–336). However, by emphasizing the "exemplary significance of legal hermeneutics" (ibid.: 321) and by seeking to turn the latter's specific situationality into the foundation of hermeneutics in the humanities in general, Gadamer incurs precisely the problems that will be discussed in Sect. 1.4, esp. pp. 26–31. In contrast, Olsen (2004) distinguishes between different "modes of interpretation", but his notion of how literary scholars engage with texts is romanticizing and anachronistic: "The literary interpretation constitutes a way in which the poem is experienced and not merely understood" (Olsen 2004: 146). The problem of 'empathetic' interpretations is discussed in W. K. Wimsatt's article "The Affective Fallacy" (1949), reprinted in Wimsatt (1954/1970: 21–39). For a differentiation of interpretive goals, see also Bühler (2003).

[32] See Ryle (1945/1946) and Chap. 2 in Ryle (1949/1966). The following remarks are based on Hempfer/Traninger (2007: 9–12).

Here, Ryle implicitly acknowledges the performative character of 'knowing how', which sets it apart from propositional 'knowing that'—provided, of course, that one does not limit the ambit of the performative to the prototype of the performative utterance.[33] 'Knowing how' is neither a simple 'doing' nor a 'talking about': doing something simultaneously shows that one *can* do something, or, to put it differently, it manifests in an act that simultaneously constitutes an indexical sign for the ability to perform it.[34] Of course, one can try to formulate *a priori* or *a posteriori* the rules that underlie said act, but such a formulation is precisely *not* identical with carrying out the act itself. Ryle conceptualizes this relationship as follows:

> In short, the propositional acknowledgement of rules, reasons or principles is not the parent of the intelligent application of them; it is a step-child of that application. (Ryle 1945/1946: 9)

What Ryle is driving at here can be illustrated by a simple example: most native speakers of natural languages are capable of producing 'correct' utterances, even though they are usually incapable of specifying the underlying principles;[35] were this otherwise, linguists would be out of their jobs. It would appear, then, that mastering—*knowing*—a language differs fundamentally from being able to explicate its rules, even if such mastery is itself based on rules. If that is the case, then the "intellectualist legend" according to which 'knowing how' can always be traced back to 'knowing that'—a view Ryle argues against, whereas Snowdon (2004)

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[33] For details, see Sect. 3.1.2.

[34] The difference to the prototype of the performative utterance is that this is not a case of a semiotic act generating a simultaneous, non-semiotic one, but rather of the reverse: the act is simultaneously a sign for the ability to perform it. 'Knowing how' thus converges to a certain extent with another prototype of the performative, namely the theater model's concept of 'staging'. See Sect. 3.1.3.

[35] For a convincing critique of the widespread notion that linguistic competence is a matter of 'knowing that', see Devitt (2011).

tries to revive it[36]—is indeed obsolete: although 'knowing how' can, fundamentally, be reformulated as a certain number of 'knowing that' propositions, these reformulations are not identical with the act *as such*; a cookbook doesn't cook, and a speaker of English doesn't utter English grammar.

That 'interpreting' is not a matter of 'knowing that' but of 'knowing how' like cooking or playing the piano is obvious from the way the term can be combined with epistemic predicates in ordinary language. Both in English and in German, I can say: 'He can interpret' or 'he knows/understands how to interpret', which designates a person's general ability to perform the activity called 'interpreting'. In contrast, 'he knows that he is interpreting' refers to something fundamentally different, namely the awareness that a certain activity is being performed, with no implications whatsoever as to the adequacy of that performance. To give another example: if I say about someone that he knows all that is necessary about the history of the sonnet, this in no way implies that he can produce a 'good' interpretation of a concrete specimen of that poetic form.

Another indicator that interpretation involves a 'knowing how', that is, a performative ability, and not a 'knowing that', that is, a propositional knowledge, is the fact that the term collocates with the adjectives 'good' and 'bad' as opposed to 'true' and 'false'—as a rule, I say: 'A's interpretation is good/bad', but not 'A's interpretation is true/false'. As Ryle noted, one cannot assign truth values to 'knowing how' as one can to propositions; instead, it is subject to the principle of "validity" (Ryle 1945/1946:

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[36] See Ryle (1945/1946: 8), quotation ibid. On the current state of Snowdon's argument, see Snowdon (2011) as well as the riposte against it in Hornsby (2011). Whereas the fundamental distinction between the two forms of knowledge seems to be undisputed, the question of whether a 'knowing how' can always ultimately be converted into a 'knowing that' is still a point of contention. For a comprehensive overview of the controversy between 'intellectualists' and 'anti-intellectualists', see Bengson/Moffett (2011), as well as the contributions in Bengson/Moffett (ed.) (2011). Independently of this discussion, Collins (2001) defines 'tacit knowledge' as largely analogous to 'knowing how', and 'explicit knowledge' to 'knowing that', as becomes clear from statements like the following: "[Tacit knowledge] covers those things we know how to do but are unable to explain to someone else" (Collins 2001: 108). Collins, moreover, insists that *tacit knowledge* cannot fully be converted into *explicit knowledge*: "It may be, then, that while one can make more and more aspects of traditional knowledge explicit, explicit knowledge, however much of it there is, must always rest on unarticulated knowledge" (ibid.: 114). Collins is a sociologist, but it is nonetheless astounding that the debate about 'knowing how' and 'knowing that' appears to have eluded him entirely.

12). It is only the products of this ability—individual interpretive statements—that can be true or false, insofar as they are formulated, or can be reformulated, as propositions.[37] This, then, is not a question, as Freundlieb thinks, of assigning to interpretive utterances the status of 'recommendations' and grounding them in an "ethics of communication",[38] but rather of distinguishing between the ability to interpret as a precondition for the potential validity of interpretations, and the results of this ability, the concrete interpretations. While interpretive hypotheses represent propositions that can be verified by referring to the text, the 'knowing how' of the interpreter who formulated these propositions cannot be reduced, at least not completely, to a propositional knowledge. The understanding of 'interpretation' as 'knowing how' that I am suggesting here resembles that of Donald Davidson, who does not employ this specific term in his theory of interpretation, but who stresses the necessity of "intuition, luck, and skill" and the particular importance of "taste and sympathy".[39]

This brings me to my second thesis:

Thesis 2 Interpretation as a performative 'knowing how' cannot be reduced, at least not completely, to a propositional 'knowing that'. As a rule, interpreters are capable of more and other things than can be made explicit in rules of interpretation. In turn, the irreducibility of a performative process to a propositional act means that the extent to which interpretations can be theorized is necessarily limited.

Even if, on a fundamental level, interpretive ability cannot (fully) be grasped through explicit knowledge of rules of interpretation, this does not mean that we must forego altogether the criterion of the reasonableness and pertinence of interpretations—rather, what is at stake is the question of how 'good' interpretive practice can be distinguished from a 'less good' one. In attempting to answer this question, we can draw on Aristotle's *Topics* and Brandom's 'semantic inferentialism'.

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[37] The assignment of truth values to propositions is, of course, itself a theory-dependent process whose results are falsifiable. See Titzmann (2013) and Sect. 1.3, p. 15, and Sect. 1.4, p. 29.

[38] Freundlieb (1980: 429). On this issue, see already Hempfer (1983/2002: 11f.).

[39] Davidson (1984/2001: 279). I first advocated the idea of interpreting as 'knowing how' in Hempfer (2009). With explicit reference to Ryle, Martus, too, asks whether we should not assume "that we are capable of more than we know" (2015: 37).

1.3   INTERPRETATION AS TOPICAL ARGUMENTATION
AND AS MAKING THE IMPLICIT EXPLICIT

At the beginning of his *Topics*, Aristotle draws a central distinction by differentiating demonstration or deduction in the strict sense from dialectical deduction.

Whereas the former is based on "true and primary premises", that is, premises "that are not made convincing through other [premises], but are convincing in themselves (100b18)",[40] the latter infers from established opinions, *endoxa*, which are "those that are considered right either by all, or by the majority, or by the most notable and illustrious" (100b20). Of course, 'dialectic' in Aristotle does not mean the same as it does in Hegel and post-Hegelian thought: Aristotle employs the term in reference to a philosophical conversation structured in accordance with certain rules of debate in which an attacker asks questions that the defender must answer. Rainer Hegselmann reduced the distinction between logic and topics to a succinct formula: For Aristotle, the *Analytics* are about "rational deduction", that is, logic as a theory of consistency, while the *Topics*, like the *Sophistical Refutations*, are concerned with "rational disputation" (Hegselmann 1992: 66f.). Whereas Hegselmann sees in Aristotle's *Topics* a possible starting point for the development of a formal dialectic (Hegselmann 1992: 67–72), I merely postulate that we can recur to the *Topics* as a theory of rational disputation in order to clarify what constitutes the reasonableness—or unreasonableness—of literary interpretations. Here, two conditions of topical argumentation are of crucial importance: first, that the argumentation be understood as a dialogue between proponent(s) and opponent(s), and second, that the premises from which conclusions are drawn be regarded not as primary, self-evident truths, but as *endoxa*, that is, as more or less widely accepted opinions. Interpretations are obviously not dialogues in the sense that Plato's dialogues are dialogues; but every interpreter of a text has his opponents in the already available interpretations, and must establish his interpretation in contradistinction to other interpreters or interpretations. Even in the rare cases where no other interpretations are available, or the interpreter

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[40] Aristotle (1985: 167, translation modified). On my recourse to the *Topics*, see already Hempfer (2009: 27–32).

deliberately tries to ignore them, opponents in the form of interpretive alternatives are imagined only to be rejected by the proponent. Thus, interpretation is not a kind of argumentative play in the narrow sense, but rather an argumentative *agon* in which each interpretation seeks to establish itself as better—and this holds true even if the interpreter explicitly denies that there could ever be such thing as a better interpretation, or argues in favor of the absolute plurality of interpretations. It follows, then, that interpretations are not deductions, but rather disputations whose rationality can be determined via the form of the argument.

As we have seen, it is a core characteristic of topical argumentation—or more precisely, of dialectical conclusions—that their premises are 'merely' established opinions, *endoxa*, and not primary, true propositions that are convincing in and of themselves; and the fact that Aristotle's 'established opinions' include not only those that "are considered right either by all, or by the majority"—the 'commonsensical' ones, so to speak—but also those that are "considered right by experts, and among the latter either by all, or by the majority, or by the most notable and illustrious" allows us to conclude that 'being established' is a relative attribute that can only be assigned in reference to a specific group.[41] In a nutshell, the rationality of a disputation essentially depends on which *endoxa* one accepts—and this brings us directly to the problem of literary interpretation.

Before we proceed, it must be acknowledged that the maxim that observation is always observation in the light of theories was already established by Karl Popper.[42] Studies in the theory and hermeneutics of reception (particularly in the fields referred to as *Rezeptionsästhetik* and *wirkungsgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* in German) have emphasized the inevitable pre-judgmental structure of our understanding,[43] and Stegmüller has argued that the hermeneutic circle is in no way specific to the

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[41] See the introduction to Wagner and Rapp's German translation (Aristotle 2004: 21).

[42] See Popper (1934/⁴1971, esp. p. 60–76): "*Es gibt keine reinen* Beobachtungen: sie sind von Theorien durchsetzt und werden von Problemen und von Theorien gleitet." (p.76) ["There are no pure observations: they are permeated by theories and guided by problems and theories"].

[43] See Gadamer (²2004), esp. pp. 278–306.

humanities, but results from a problem common to all academic disciplines, namely the theory-laden nature of observations.[44]

Yet I am concerned here not with the fundamental theoretical and epistemological problems as such, but rather with a particular aspect that is inextricably linked to them: every interpretation incorporates a certain number, large or small, of implicit or explicit assumptions that function as premises for the argument, and the degree to which they are 'established' can vary greatly.

To give a simple example: if, when interpreting a Petrarchan sonnet, I start from the premise that a poem is the individual expression of a spontaneous, genuine feeling—whatever this may mean—then I will either keep belaboring my text until I can pass off its structural characteristics as the consequence of that premise, or, if I am somewhat more sophisticated, I will advance the argument that the poem is steeped in literary conventions and intertextual relationships that render preposterous any notion of spontaneity and emotional sincerity. Thus, Carlo Dionisotti, one of the leading Italianists of the past century, described the introductory poem in Bembo's *Canzoniere* as an "extremely weak sonnet" ("debolissimo sonetto")[45] that was nothing more than a "mosaic of Petrarchan set pieces" ("mosaico di tessere petrarchesche")—a picture-perfect example of how an at least partly sound observation can lead to a completely mistaken evaluation if one applies an unquestioned, presupposed concept of

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[44] For details, see Stegmüller 1979 (first presented as a lecture at the *Philosophenkongress* of 1972). Göttner (1973), a doctoral dissertation supervised by Stegmüller, draws on the example of a concrete interpretation to demonstrate the extent to which literary interpretations are based on the procedure of producing and testing hypotheses explicated by the analytical philosophy of science. For some time now, there has been talk of the "hypothetical-deductive method of literary interpretation" (Føllesdal et al. 1977/2008: 70–78), which has given rise to the mistaken impression that this is *one* method among others (see, e.g., Descher et al. 2015: 43–45)—what Stegmüller, Göttner, and Føllesdal actually wanted to show was that literary interpretation, *too*, is based on "normal scientific activity" (as Mantzavinos 2014: 47 characterizes the so-called HD method), and that hermeneutic circles are best avoided. However, the fundamental problematization of "normal scientific activity" by Kuhn (1962) and the subsequent discussion (for details, see Stegmüller 1973) means that a simple recourse to Popper's falsificationism, which is the foundation of the 'HD method', is no longer possible from an epistemological point of view (for a discussion of this issue with a special focus on literary theories, see Göttner/Jacobs (1978), a text that has received very little attention, probably because of its considerable degree of formalization). I am trying to approach the problem of the potential arbitrariness (and thus of the 'scientific' irrelevance) of interpretations in a different theoretical framework.

[45] See the commentary in Bembo (²1966/1978: 507, n.1).

literary originality and individuality. The positive re-evaluation of Petrarchist lyric poetry in recent decades is based precisely on the fact that the presupposition of the universal validity of a historical—namely, Romantic—understanding of poetry was abandoned; once this historically variable concept had lost its status as *endoxon*, it no longer qualified as an 'established opinion' that could serve as the premise for concrete interpretations, at least not if the latter sought to represent the scholarly state of the art. What this example also shows is the 'group-specific' relativity of the *endoxa* under discussion here: whereas the average educated reader probably still believes in the universality of the Romantic conception of literature they picked up in school and will read texts accordingly, this selfsame conception has lost its status as established opinion in expert circles—in effect, different types of readers can be differentiated according to what notion of literature they count as 'established'.[46]

A further example of an established opinion that was long highly esteemed in various circles (the 'bourgeoisie' included) is the Marxist theory of reflection, according to which the cultural superstructure is, more or less monocausally, determined by the economic base.[47] The pull of this 'opinion' can still be discerned in Adorno's "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft" ("On Lyric Poetry and Society"), where he—paradoxically—argues that the social dimension of the lyric consists in its non-social character.[48] The return to immanence that came with the advent of deconstruction was opposed by the New Historicism, which vied with gender, queer, postcolonial, and other cultural studies for recognition as the established opinion. The numerical explosion of approaches that all wanted to be established opinions caused an implosion of literary studies: the field disintegrated into a multitude of individual schools of thought, each of which postulated as established an opinion that was anything but; and as dialectical argumentation no longer rested on an established basis, but only on an opinion postulated as such, interpretation became something of an aleatory business.

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[46] This, of course, amounts to a relativization of the concept of 'established opinion' that Aristotle is unlikely to have envisaged—see also the editors' comments in Aristotle (2004: 22).

[47] For a systematic presentation and criticism of this 'theory', see Karbusický 1973 (the original Czech edition published in 1969 was confiscated and destroyed), as well as Eibl (1976: 16–20), Göttner/Jacobs (1978: 149–207), and Kablitz (2013: 46–57).

[48] See Adorno (2019: 59–73), esp. p. 64: "I am not trying to deduce lyric poetry from society; its *social substance* is precisely what is spontaneous in it, what does not simply follow from the existing conditions at the time" (my italics).

So, what am I getting at here? I shall try to summarize my position in four further theses:

Thesis 3 From the perspective of argumentation theory, literary interpretation can be conceptualized as topical in the sense of Aristotle's *Topics*.

Thesis 4 Dialectical deduction presupposes that the premise(s) is (are) not arbitrary, but reflect an established opinion; arbitrary premises can only lead to arbitrary conclusions.

Thesis 5 Having an established opinion is clearly a weaker concept than having a theory. That 'genres' are in some way communicatively relevant probably constitutes an established opinion; what a theory of genre should look like, however, is still largely a matter of debate. The same holds true for a theory of fiction.

Thesis 6 If literary interpretation indeed represents a 'knowing how', then this knowledge is, by definition, impossible to grasp by means of a systematic theory—we can only formulate the rules of the game that make the individual moves possible without predetermining them. Such rules must exist, because otherwise no one would know what game was being played. This, then, is not a matter of 'anything goes', as that would destroy the game's distinctive character—instead, rules apply that designate concrete moves as appropriate. If, moreover, it is correct that 'knowing how' allows interpretation to be conceptualized as topical argumentation with regard to a key aspect, namely the relationship between background knowledge and singular hypotheses, then one of the rules of the game is, naturally, that an explanation is (or can be) given as to why an opinion qualifies as established, or, vice versa, why established opinions are only arbitrary postulations.

This, of course, is not to say that literary interpretations can be reconstructed *in toto* as topical argumentations that are based on syllogisms in which the major premise is formed by endoxal background knowledge; as a rule, this knowledge is not spelled out explicitly but merely implied, so