

# Theories of Literature: A Meta-reflection and a Solution

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*Starting from a categorization by Robert Penrose, the question is asked in what sense literary theories might be called ‚scientific‘. It turns out that, seen from this vantage point, few of the extant theories deserve the name ‚scientific‘. This is all the more surprising, because the methodology for developing such scientific theories is available to anyone interested in the matter. This is illustrated positively with reference to the theory of foregrounding‘. At the same time, it is shown how feminist literary theories fall utterly short of reaching their own aims, by refraining to do empirical research.*

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## The Position of Literary Theory

Literary studies reflect on primary texts. Literary theories reflect on that reflection: a meta-reflection. This process has been going on for several decades,<sup>1</sup> so that we now live in a situation where there are literally scores of literary theories around. But are they ‘theories’? And more important still: are they *scientific* theories? This demands a further reflection upon our practices as seen from the vantage point of science.

Is there value in such an enterprise? That depends upon how we view ourselves. How, in other words, we view the goals of our discipline. Do we agree that we should ask ourselves to what extent we are engaged in constructing (more) scientific theories? Basically there are two possible answers to this question. Either we find ourselves on the side of the scientists, and we attempt to establish universal patterns. And such patterns can be subjected to empirical testing. As Stephen Hawking said: “Like any other scientific theory, it may be put forward for aesthetic or metaphysical reasons, but the real test is whether it makes predictions that agree with observations.” (*A Brief* 136)

And thus we do not distinguish in this respect between individual disciplines (though they all have their own methods), a view that is usually

designated as *naturalism* in epistemology. It is a form of *monism*: reality is one and undivided, and all our research is geared toward finding out regularities in this reality. Most scholars in the Humanities, however, adhere to the opposite view, namely that the natural and the social world are different. This view goes, not surprisingly, under the name of *anti-naturalism*. It is a form of *dualism*: reality is composed of two separate entities, the 'natural' world (studied by the natural sciences) and the 'non-natural' world, studied by the humanities and the social sciences. Often these are deemed 'hermeneutic' in nature.<sup>2</sup> The term obviously has Greek roots, and is already employed by Plato in his *Kratylos*: the verb *hermeneuein* can mean 'to interpret', 'to translate', 'to understand'. So most scholars in the Humanities are nay-sayers when it comes to the question whether the sciences and the humanities are one. Their view can broadly be traced back to the distinction made by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 – 1911) between understanding ('verstehen') and explaining ('erklären'). The first is the realm of the humanities, the latter that of the sciences. This view itself goes back to Descartes' (1596 – 1650) *Discourse on the Method* (1637). In it Descartes distinguishes between the *res extans* (the natural world) and the *res cogitans* (the 'thinking' world), both having a distinctive ontological status. This brief historical excursion shows how deep the notion of the division between sciences and humanities is inscribed in our culture.<sup>3</sup> In our times, it has been revived by C. P. Snow (1905 – 1980) in his book *The Two Cultures* (1959). Here is Snow's own introduction:

There have been plenty of days when I have spent the working hours with scientists and then gone off at night with some literary colleagues. I mean that literally. I have had, of course, intimate friends among both scientists and writers. It was through living among these groups and much more, I think, through moving regularly from one to the other and back again that I got occupied with the problem of what, long before I put it on paper, I christened to myself as the 'two cultures'. (2)

We already sense a first fundamental difference with Dilthey: Snow was an active scientist himself, and at the same time a well-established literary author. His *Corridors of Power* and *The Masters* remain worthwhile novels to be read. Just how influential *The Two Cultures* was appears from its being listed among the 100 most influential books since WW II by the *Times Literary Supplement* of 2008. The major difference with Dilthey, however, lies in the descriptive rather than normative view that it expounded. Moreover, it voiced critique on both scientists and humanists, not to be more informed about the other side. In any case, his book viewed the natural scientist and the literary as living in two different universes. But then in a postscript to

the second edition he added that there may be a way out of this dichotomy, in that an alternative way may exist. He calls this the ‘Third Culture’:

It is probably too early to speak of a third culture already in existence. But I am now convinced that this is coming. When it comes, some of the difficulties of communication will at last be softened: for such a culture has, just to do its job, to be on speaking terms with the scientific one (...). (71)

This movement toward a ‘third culture’, a symbiosis of the scientific and the humanistic traditions has found its most eloquent advocate in the work of E.O. Wilson, the Harvard zoologist. His book *Consilience* is the most vocal answer to Snow’s original dichotomy and so far the most universal (and thorough) effort to bring the Third Culture into being.

But at a more mundane level there have been scores of efforts to realize this project in literary studies too. One may think of the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature<sup>4</sup> and its journal, *Scientific Study of Literature*,<sup>5</sup> published by Benjamins. And one may think of an already impressive list of books that have been published in this enterprise over the past decades, such works as: Auracher and Van Peer (2008), Bortolussi and Dixon (2003), Claassen (2012), Emmott (2012), Gerrig (1993), Gibbs (1994), Hakemulder (2000), Lindauer (2009) Louwse and van Peer (2002), Martindale (1990), Miall (2006), Oatley (2011, 2012), Sklar (2013), Schram and Steen (2001), Steen (1994), Tsur (2012), van Peer (1996), van Peer and Chatman (2001), Zwaan (1993), Zyngier et al. (2007, 2008). The list is not exhaustive, but shows already the vitality of this new approach. So it seems that although the majority of humanists are still denying the possibility (and/or desirability) of a scientific approach to literature, there is now a somewhat impressive body of publications that can hardly be ignored. So we have now a well-established scientific outlook on the study of literature (albeit a minority one), enriching our meta-reflection, and allowing for a comparison of this outlook with the natural sciences.

## **Literary and scientific theories**

Comparing the merits of different theories in the natural sciences, the Oxford mathematician Roger Penrose, in *The Emperor’s New Mind* distinguishes between three types of theories in physics, the ‘queen’ of the sciences: superb, useful, and tentative theories. *Superb* theories are those theories the accuracy and range with which they apply is, in an appropriate sense, phenomenal. As examples of such theories he refers to Newtonian mechanics, relativity theory, quantum mechanics. Just how phenomenal

the accuracy of these theories are may become clear in such daily applications as the GPS system: since the satellite that sends you the signal with your location is in orbit around the earth and has a different speed than the earth itself, its time measurements will be infinitesimally different from the time we experience on earth. So this must corrected, according to the law of general relativity. Were the corrections not in place, any such system would go awry after a couple of months, if not weeks.

But how is it with *useful* theories? These Penrose describes as theories that possess some good empirical evidence, but their predictive power and observed accuracy fall somewhat short of the 'phenomenal' standard. As examples he refers to the standard model of particle physics and the Big Bang theory. With continuing effort these may one day approach the status of a superb theory too (or be replaced by a more superb theory). A *tentative* theory, finally, does not possess much empirical support of any significance. A lot of current theoretical physics, e.g. quantum gravity, or string theory, belong to this category. But the fact that there is no evidence yet in favor of such theories does not make them useless or uninteresting. Scientists constantly attempt to 'upgrade' them. How is this done? An example of this may be quantum gravity, about which Stephen Hawking once wrote (in *A Brief History of Time*): The trick, then, as we saw in the quotation from Stephen Hawking above, is to derive predictions from a theory (satisfying logical coherence, of course), and then to match these predictions to independently collected observations. The degree of that match then is evaluated according to methodological rules and principles.

Maybe one should not lose track of a possible fourth category of theories, next to superb, useful and tentative ones: *misguided* theories. In the sciences one is usually loth to defend such theories, as it may cost one's credibility as a scientist in the eyes of one's colleagues. In the humanities, in all probability, such care may be more relaxed (or even lax).

So a useful question can now be asked: to which of these four categories do *literary* theories belong? That is an exercise we should not shun.

## Types of literary theories

In trying to answer the above question, I believe little difference of opinion will arise when concluding that none of our present literary theories are *superb* in the definition by Penrose. Indeed the difference is so phenomenally massive that to ask the question in itself sounds silly. There is absolutely no way in which any of the existing literary theories can merely dream of such a status in descriptive accuracy and predictive power even in the long term future.

But do we possess *useful* theories? Remember that such theories contain some empirical support, though their measure of accuracy is not phenomenal. Meaning that there *is* some good empirical corroboration of its claims, but their level of predictive power falls somewhat short (while it may be increased). Are there any such literary theories around? Frankly, I know of only *one*, the theory of *foregrounding*. So let us consider it somewhat closer. The origins of the theory<sup>6</sup> lie in Viktor Shklovsky's famous essay "Art as Technique", published in 1917, in which he develops the notion of *ostraneniye*, translated usually as 'estrangement', 'de-automatization', 'de-familiarization', and the like. At the same time Roman Jakobson developed his notion of the poetic function, basically referring to parallelism, epitomized in his famous (1960) essay. When Jakobson moved west to Prague, he took these ideas with him and passed them on to western scholars. The key figure in their further development was the Prague Structuralist Jan Mukařovský, who coined the notion of 'aktualisace' in Czech, which was later rendered as 'foregrounding' in English by Garvin. Through English translations of Formalist and Structuralist work, the term ended up in the work of British stylistics in the 1960s. Especially in the writings of Geoffrey Leech (*A Linguistic*, "Linguistics") one finds a fruitful synthesis of these approaches with then current linguistic models and methods. In its current form, the notion has been lucidly defined by Paul Simpson:

*Foregrounding* refers to a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for literary-aesthetic purposes. (...) Foregrounding typically involves a stylistic distortion of some sort, either through an aspect of the text which deviates from a linguistic norm or, alternatively, where an aspect of the text is brought to the fore through repetition or parallelism. (50)

In essence, the theory is a *functional* one, operating simultaneously at three distinct levels (which can make its understanding somewhat confusing). In the first instance, the theory refers to *textual*, that is, to linguistic features of texts, be they of a deviational or parallelistic kind. But these textual features are not there for their own sake, but serve specific functions in the *reading* act. And since literary texts are part of a dynamic system that is constantly in a state of change, the theory also refers to the function of literature in a *society* through history. Thus the theory of foregrounding is a multi-level theory, comprising a *linguistic*, a *psychological* and a *cultural* component.

A good overview of recent developments can be found in the special issue of *Language and Literature* (2007).<sup>7</sup> The issue contains eight research reports that reflect new ways to probe the validity of the theory, and try to refine the measurements that had been used in previous studies. The introduction summarizes the state of the art at the time:

The validity of a theory naturally depends on the number of times it has been tested and the number of participants in such tests. Since then, the number of studies has grown to over 10, so that today the theory's claims have been tested with well over 2,000 readers, not a really low number any more, certainly not in the humanities. (99)

This is the reason why I believe we can categorize foregrounding theory as a *useful* theory, especially if researchers keep developing more fine-grained predictions.

But what of *tentative* theories, i.e., theories that have little or no empirical support whatsoever. It does not take long to conclude that this category represents the bulk of literary theories. Could one perhaps also argue that they are *misguided* theories? That would demand a separate investigation into what one would want to call 'misguided'. I personally am convinced that from a scientific point of view many (if not most) of such theories are indeed misguided. The reason is simple: it is not only that these theories lack the necessary evidence to lend them credibility, they even *refuse* to become involved in empirically testing their claims. This does not mean that what they try to convey is uninteresting or unimportant. But the defiance to ground their claims in independent data makes them untrustworthy, perhaps even suspect. This is a real pity, because some of the issues involved are real issues and deserve better treatment than mere speculation.

### **An Example: Feminist Literary Theory**

Feminist literary theory may be a case in point. In itself it is important to study gender differences if we want to know more about how the sexes think, feel, and behave.<sup>8</sup> Thus feminists of various ilk have come up with the wildest claims one can imagine about how women writers go about their trade. Luce Irigaray, one of the leading 'theoreticians' of academic feminism in the humanities, for instance, claims that "feminine language is more diffusive than its 'masculine counterpart'." (Irigaray) Apart from the question what the meaning is of 'diffusive', what evidence is there for this claim? But there are even more extreme views, such as the one by *Hélène Cixous*, another leading academic feminist, who writes: "There is always in her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (352).<sup>9</sup>

When one asks the more scientific question whether the language of female / male authors is different, one faces some methodological problems. It is difficult, of course, to get into the head of authors, and honesty commands that there are absolutely no data on how male / female authors conceive of the writing act. As a matter of fact, we do not even have a sin-

gle inkling of how writing creatively takes place, at least from a scientific point of view. But we *can* investigate the matter more thoroughly. First of all, we can draw up large corpora of texts written by male / female authors and subject these corpora to computer based analyses such as LIWC<sup>10</sup> or CoMetrix.<sup>11</sup> Such analyses would be extremely useful in clarifying the issue whether male / female authors make use of the language potentials in different ways. The astonishing thing is that in the present situation, such an investigation need not be difficult at all – nevertheless academic feminists apparently do not want to carry it out. Would one not be entitled in such a situation to speak of *misguided* theories?

But there is more. It is quite possible to investigate whether readers are able to distinguish between female and male authors. Can male readers? Can female readers? Again the astounding thing is that it is not that difficult to find out: what one needs is a double blind experiment: a text by a female author is presented without a name as one by a male author to readers and as a text by a female author to other readers. And vice versa: a text by a male author is presented anonymously, once as a text by a male and once by a female author. After reading the texts, readers are requested to identify the writer's gender. So the design of such a study looks like this:

Gender author:	male		female	
Presented as:	male	female	male	female

It is a very simple design. If one collects data from roughly 25 readers per cell, one will get insightful data, which are easy to analyze. Why is it that in the thousands of pages about gender differences in feminist literary theory, one finds not a single effort to carry out such piece of research?

My prediction concerning the investigation is that sometimes readers are successful in their identification, sometimes not. The question then becomes what the ratio between these two possibilities will be, maybe about 50/50, i.e., pure chance. Nobody prevents feminist theorists to carry out such research. As long as no such efforts are made (or even attempted) the position attracts the suspicion that we are dealing with a *misguided* theory.

Similar – and equally important – questions regard the processing of (literary) texts. Also here the assumption seems to be that there is a deep gap between the genders, but frankly – in the absence of good research – we do not know. And the good research that *is* available, throws light on the issue that may cause surprise. In her (2008) article, Odağ was able to show that the impact of textual features constituted the strongest influence on engagement during reading, biological sex was a lot less important. Her (2011) publication revealed an even more surprising result:

*Does biological sex matter for reading engagement?*

Yes, it does. Biological sex, in this study, turned out to be a significant predictor of reading engagement as well. Interestingly, it was not significant on its own. It was only in combination with the other reader traits that biological sex assumed relevance for reading engagement. When examined in combination with these other reader traits, the separate impact of biological sex appeared to be the largest of all predictors involved. It should be noted that the direction of this impact clearly contradicted the stereotype in this study: men were significantly *more* engaged during reading than women (...) (314)

These results need not completely surprise us. As the work of Janet Hyde (University of Madison-Wisconsin) makes clear, the common picture of men and women living in partly different worlds turns out to be nothing more than a folk theory. She collected all the worlds meta-analyses<sup>12</sup> on gender analyses that have been conducted. Of the 124 effect sizes 30 % had a value of *d* (a statistical measure for how far the genders are from each other) of zero and 48 % had a very small value. Against the prevailing stereotype about gender differences she proposes the *gender similarity hypothesis*, which holds that males and females are similar on most, but not all, psychological variables. That is, men and women, as well as boys and girls, are more alike than they are different. On the basis of detailed analyses of extensive collections of empirical data, it turns out that there is significantly more evidence on the side of the *gender similarity hypothesis*. Hyde also warns against the negative influence of over-inflated claims of gender differences. Her conclusion is quite clear:

Arguably, they cause harm in numerous realms, including women's opportunities in the workplace, couple conflict and communication, and analyses of self esteem problems among adolescents. Most important, these claims are not consistent with the scientific data. (590)

We must take stock: it has been shown that claims about gender differences have been speculative, and speculative only. We should acknowledge the value of speculation, but be on our guard when such speculation leads to immunization of theories, or even the refusal to carry out empirical investigations of claims. As Gillot and Kumar point out: "There is nothing to object to in speculation which is honest in its intent. Problems only begin when speculation is not recognized as such." (225)

In this article, I have drawn attention to the nature of scientific theories and attempted to differentiate between them within literary studies on the basis of the criteria proposed by Penrose. On the basis of this analysis, it is unclear whether there are any *useful* theories in literary studies; maybe only one such theory, the theory of foregrounding, may lay claim to this



status. It further turns out that only few theories in the study of literature are of the *tentative* kind. A frightening number of literary theories must be deemed *misguided*, in the sense that they present a view that is not only in refusal to accept methodological rules of research, but which, as has been shown in the case of academic feminist theories, is even flagrantly in contradiction with the best research available, without these theorists being hindered by this research in their further claims.

What lessons can be drawn from this account? Unfortunately, rather sad lessons. It has been shown that in terms of predictive power, the hallmark of what can be deemed ‘scientific’, literary studies operate at the lowest possible level. This does not mean that literary studies do not produce interesting pieces of knowledge. They certainly do. But in terms of the development of *theories* of literature, the general situation is and remains deplorable for the moment. In the wake of the explosion of ‘literary theory’ that we have seen since the 1980s, one would have expected that some progress toward more reliable theories has been made. The contrary seems to be the case. The solution, however, is simple: carry out more systematic empirical testing of tentative theories.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Not counting earlier efforts at reflection, starting with Plato and Aristotle, of course.

<sup>2</sup> Usually hermeneutics is seen as a form of anti-naturalism. This need not be the case, however, as there is also a minor but strong strand of naturalism in hermeneutics; see Bühler.

<sup>3</sup> Its ultimate source is theological in nature; see Albert, Bühler.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.psych.ualberta.ca/IGEL/>.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://benjamins.com/#catalog/journals/ssol/main>. Other journals that occasionally publish empirical work are *Language and Literature*, *The Journal of Literary Semantics*, *Poetics*, *Poetics Today*, *S.P.I.E.L.*, *Style*.

<sup>6</sup> Although in its present form the theory of foregrounding has been put forward most clearly in the twentieth century, its roots can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Poetics* (ca. 335 BCE); see especially chapter 22.

<sup>7</sup> See also Hakemulder, “Foregrounding”; van Peer and Hakemulder; van Peer, “Foregrounding”; van Peer, Zyngier and Hakemulder, “Lines”; Zyngier, van Peer and Hakemulder. The most recent statement is in Hakemulder and van Peer (in press).

<sup>8</sup> A standard work in the research on gender differences is Maccoby.

<sup>9</sup> How completely daft such claims are may become clear when one realizes that men also produce some ‘white milk’.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.liwc.net>.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://cohmetrix.memphis.edu/cohmetrixpr/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Research into psychological gender differences runs into the several thousand studies. Some of these studies register differences, others do not. A meta-analysis is a statistical technique to scrutinize the general effect found in all these different empirical studies.

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## Teorije književnosti: metarefleksija in rešitev

Ključne besede: filozofija znanosti / literarna teorija / znanstvenost / empirična literarna veda / metodologija / teorija aktualizacije

Lahko literarne teorije sploh označimo za znanstvene? Navsezadnje je to cilj vseh teorij. Na podlagi kategorizacije znanstvenih teorij, ki jo je razvil profesor matematike na oxfordski univerzi, Robert Penrose, lahko teorije razdelimo v tri kategorije: 1) odlične, 2) uporabne in 3) provizorične. Ob pregledu številnih literarnih teorij, predlaganih v zadnjih desetletjih, lahko ugotovimo, da nobena ne spada v prvo kategorijo. V drugo kategorijo naj bi spadala samo ena teorija, in sicer teorija aktualizacije (*foregrounding*). (Predstavljen je kratek pregled dokazov, ki podpirajo to teorijo.) Kaj pa »provizorične« teorije? To so teorije, ki jih ne podpira veliko empiričnih dokazov. Spadajo tudi literarne teorije v to kategorijo? Avtor je za jasnejšo razlago dodal še eno kategorijo, in sicer kategorijo zgrešenih teorij. To so teorije, ki nimajo potrebnih dokazov za to, da bi bile kredibilne, obenem pa celo »nočejo« sodelovati pri empiričnem testiranju svojih trditev. Avtor to ponazarja s tem, kako poskušajo feministične literarne teorije doseči svoje cilje. Kljub pomembnosti feminističnih tém jih je le malo predmet znanstvenih raziskav. Večina trditev na tem področju temelji le na ugibanju. To preseneča, glede na to da so metodološka orodja (npr. pri kvantitativnih analizah velikih korpusov) za preučevanje tovrstnih trditev na voljo vsakomur, ki je pripravljen vložiti vsaj malo truda v raziskovanje. Poleg tega je to tudi žalostno, saj zaradi zanikanja te možnosti področje feministične literarne teorije nima nikakršne resne vsebine. Še huje, ko postanejo te trditve predmet strogih znanstvenih postopkov – denimo v primeru dela Özena Odağa (Jakobova univerza, Bremen) ali Janet Hyde (Univerza Madison, Wisconsin) – se preprosto izkažejo za lažne. Na podlagi te analize avtor ugotavlja, da gre pri feminističnih literarnih teorijah za zgrešene teorije. Potemtakem je stanje v literarni teoriji precej skrb vzbujajoče. Kljub razpoložljivosti potrebnih metod je le malo dela usmerjenega v razvoj teorij, ki bi bile podprte z znanstvenimi dokazi. Največja kritika, ki jo lahko usmerimo na to področje, pa je, da literarni teoretiki po navadi svojih trditev preprosto nočejo prepustiti neodvisnim testiranjem. To pa zajamčeno vodi v nadaljnjo znanstveno ignoranco.

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