

The qualities of literatures

A concept of literary evaluation in pluralistic societies

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In this article we outline our conception of literary evaluation in pluralistic societies building on recent theories of values and the canon and on the results of empirical research, especially in social psychology and the psychology of cognition. We argue that the evaluation of literature has to be considered in social terms, not merely as an individual act. Our model is designed to facilitate the analysis of evaluation. Its advantage, in our view, lies in abandoning the notion of literary quality as a property intrinsic to the text, without denying that there have to be textual properties corresponding to the value expectations which people bring to literature. It also provides a basis for a pluralistic evaluation of literature, going beyond the convention of aesthetic autonomy and taking into account the entire spectrum of social functions associated with literature.

The situation is one with which we are all familiar. A neighbour asks us, as an 'expert', to recommend a 'good' book. Should we really suggest one of the texts we love and continually re-read – Shakespeare's sonnets, *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Elective Affinities* or Kleist's *Marquise von O.*, or indeed Proust's *Recherche*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kafka's *The Trial*, Beckett's *Endgame*? Or perhaps something contemporary, by Herta Müller or García Marquez? If we follow our own preferences, we know that the book is likely to go unread. Our professional reputation as judges of literature may remain intact, but for the person soliciting our opinion, the text is still not 'good'.

The example, as far as it goes, merely shows that readers' preferences differ – a very basic empirical fact, yet one that still continues to exercise literary scholars. This has been apparent in the often tumultuous debate on the literary 'canon' at the end of the twentieth century. On the one hand, there have been repeated calls by cultural conservatives to restore the (Western) canon as a corpus of privileged texts which define a universal standard of literary quality. On the other, this position has been fiercely contested by a range of critics, including Leslie A. Fiedler (1981), Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988), John Guillory (1993) and the exponents of deconstruction (Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man), who have marshalled strong

arguments against the very notion of a single canon of texts or legitimate ways of reading. In a more overtly radical vein, the notorious charge has been brought – by among others, feminists, practitioners of Colonial Studies and the initiators of the Western Culture debate at Stanford University – that the canon is limited to “dead white middle-class males”.¹

The idea, based on the canons of scripture, of a restricted category of authors and literary works that have a binding exemplary status and serve as a general measure of quality, corresponds to a hierarchically stratified society which is now firmly consigned to the past: a society whose upper echelons defined a stable order of values that was cemented by institutions and supposedly endorsed by the entire community (see Hahn 1987). We, however, are living in a pluralistic society, differentiated by function instead of rank, which has few values in common. The values associated with literature are not part of this limited consensus. It is time that the academic study of literary evaluation accepted this fundamental reality and began to take it seriously.

In our study of literary evaluation, completed some years ago, von Heydebrand & Winko (1996), henceforth H/W, we tried to explore some of the implications of this insight.² Our conclusions are summarized in the following essay. Our aim was to model and analyze the processes of literary evaluation in such a way as to facilitate historical and empirical studies on the foundations of literary quality in the various areas of our culture. These analyses were necessary in order to address two problems which have not been satisfactorily resolved in the recent debates on the canon. Using our model of literary evaluation it is possible, on the one hand, to reconstruct the conditions of justification for the controversial ‘Western’ canon,³ and on the other, to give proper academic consideration to the alternative canons proposed by those who, for varying reasons, are foreign or hostile to the writings of ‘dead white middle-class males’.

1. See, from a general perspective, Renate von Heydebrand and Simone Winko, “Geschlechterdifferenz und literarischer Kanon. Historische Beobachtungen und systematische Überlegungen”, *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 19(2) (1994), pp. 96–172, especially pp. 145–157.

2. Since then very few substantial studies on the processes of literary evaluation have been published; an outstanding exception is the excellent work of Friederike Worthmann 2004.

3. In his impassioned yet poorly argued defence of the ‘Western’ canon, Harold Bloom attempts but signally fails to deliver such an analysis; see Bloom 1994.

1. A model of literary evaluation

A starting point for our model was an observation generally ignored by theories of literary evaluation. ‘Literary evaluation’ is by no means limited to professional judgements on literary texts, since evaluations play an important part in all areas of the ‘literary system’,⁴ in a wide variety of guises, and in professional and non-professional contexts alike. A few examples may help to clarify this.

In the *production* of literary texts, evaluations can influence the act of writing either beforehand – for example, in the choice of subject-matter or the conception of certain characters – or during the writing process – e.g. in the use of particular stylistic devices, such as emphasising the significance of a piece of information by metaphor or repetition or by putting the information in a position where the reader is bound to notice it. Evaluations are also made by literary *mediators*, such as publishers and editors, who decide on the appearance and presentation of literary texts; by television and radio producers, who supervise the adaptation of texts for other media; and literary critics, scholars and teachers, who interpret texts and make them accessible to a wider audience. As well as making explicit value judgements, all these individuals evaluate literature implicitly by selecting particular texts considered worthy of attention. The same applies to the two types of literary *reception*: on the one hand, reading, and on the other, the various forms of secondary reception by interpretation, translation, screen adaptation, rewriting, criticism, etc.⁵ Both types of reception offer instances of evaluation via selection. In the primary sphere, for example, a reader chooses a certain text from the multitude of new publications. In the secondary sphere, the critic or interpreter decides to give the text more or less space; other works whose value has already been defined are used as points of comparison; special efforts are made, or not, to recruit a good translator, and so forth.

As this brief sketch already indicates, literary evaluation takes two distinct forms: on the one hand, explicit linguistic utterances, well known; and on the other, frequently overlooked, non-linguistic acts of selection whose evaluative significance may not be apparent to the actor. Our model of evaluation takes account of both these aspects.

4. The concept refers to the literature-related system of action which in Germany can be seen to constitute itself at the beginning of the nineteenth century as an ‘autonomous’ social subsystem; see Pfau and Schönert (1988). For important critical remarks, see Günter 2005.

5. A wide variety of meanings have been attached to these terms in literary studies. S. J. Schmidt (1980:274–92), for example, defines ‘reception’ purely as the ‘understanding’ of a text, and uses the term ‘processing’ (*Verarbeitung*) for all the remaining operations carried out on texts, including interpretation and criticism.

1.1 Basic concepts

In view of the variety of areas involved, and the range of guises which literary evaluation can take, we have to choose an axiological framework theory which is broad enough to accommodate the social and individual aspects of evaluation, to deal with evaluation as an act of selection and also to consider it as a linguistic act. Such a theory has to offer scope for combining the perspectives of three different disciplines – sociology, psychology and linguistics. It therefore has to move beyond the bounds of specifically literary theory, and to eschew the essentialism of traditional theories of value. In our case, the necessary framework was found in the theory of value proposed by analytical philosophy.⁶

Since the concepts used in the debate on evaluation are neither adequately defined nor used at all consistently, we carried out a number of explications⁷ with a view to establishing clarity. In this paper, a certain insistence on terminological precision is therefore essential; see H/W, pp. 37–48 for a comprehensive definition. The concept of 'evaluation', as used by us, denotes a complex social act by which a subject attributes value to an object, in a concrete situation and on the basis of certain *standards of value* and certain *categorizing assumptions* (see below). The attribution can be carried out by verbal means, or it can take the form of a non-linguistic act.

The *subject*, i.e. the instance which carries out the evaluation, can be an individual, a group or an institution. The *object* can be a literary text or a mental representation thereof, but the range of possible objects of evaluation also includes the impact of a text or part of a text, the author as an individual, a concrete object (e.g. a book), or an event, institution or constellation of factors in literary life or even in society as a whole. The model needs to be capable of accommodating all *literature-related* acts of evaluation, since the latter are closely connected with the evaluation of the actual *texts*.

One of the reasons why so much substantive and conceptual confusion arises in discussions of literary evaluation is that the concept of 'value' can be understood as pertaining to a criterion or standard on which an evaluation is based, and also to a characteristic of the object itself. We therefore consider it necessary to distinguish between *standards of value* in the subjective realm and *attributive values* in the domain of the object. Subjective standards of value cause an object or a property thereof to seem valuable or worthless; their validity is context-dependent

6. Our theoretical and terminological starting point here is Zdislaw Najder's *Values and Evaluations*, Oxford 1975, which gives a systematic and lucid exposition of the discussion on these issues in linguistic philosophy; see H/W, pp. 38f.

7. An 'explication' analyzes the actual uses of a concept but also includes suggestions as to how it may be used more clearly; see Pawlowski (1980, Chapters I and V).

and historically variable. This means that an object is not *intrinsically* valuable or worthless, regardless of context; instead, it only acquires an (attributive) value in relation to a standard of value. The impression that objects have an intrinsic value depends entirely on the stability of standards and contexts.

But how does a person making an evaluation come to relate the properties of an object – which in themselves are neutral – to a standard of value, and thereby to judge them valuable or worthless? In our model, this act of relating properties to standards is explained in pragmatic terms; specifically, on the basis of what we have called the *categorizing assumptions* involved in evaluation. This term refers to a phenomenon which has been overlooked in previous models of literary evaluation, i.e., the fact that two people with a common standard of value can still have differing opinions about how an object has to be constituted for that standard to be applied to it. The term therefore denotes the conditions which have to be met, in the view of an evaluator, in order that properties may be related to values. Categorizing assumptions of this type include, for example, assumptions founded in poetics about the properties a text must display in order to count as 'beautiful', or assumptions based on genre theory about the characteristics that distinguish a 'good' sonnet from an inferior one. Like criteria of value, these assumptions are partly conventionalized, and their validity is a matter of social or group-specific agreement, but they are also partly influenced by individual factors. While the social element of evaluation lies in group consensus, individual deviation from the assumptional norm is a main reason for the frequent controversies in the evaluation of literature.

1.2 Types of evaluative action

The connection between verbal and non-verbal evaluation, as distinguished above, consists in the fact that, for both aspects, reference to a standard of value is constitutive, though such reference is generally no more than implicit. *Linguistic* evaluations require a standard of value – as well as certain categorizing assumptions – in order to progress from the description of a text to its evaluation; these criteria therefore form the basis for justifying linguistic evaluations. The type of literary evaluation associated with this is the *judgement*. In *acts* of evaluation, values represent the basis of motivation, which is why we also call these values 'motivational'. They manifest themselves in various types of *selection*.

If we look at motivational evaluations, standards of value correspond to the 'value orientations' in theories of social psychology. Value orientations are acquired through the process of social learning, and assume a central position in the personality structure of an individual, to the extent that they influence his perceptions of reality and of his own self. They are actualized in situations requiring some form of decision, and give rise to actions or influence the way in which ac-

tions are carried out. From this, their relevance to selection is obvious, not only with regard to non-verbal acts of choice, such as a decision whether or not to buy, or to review, a certain book, but also where these acts of choice are the subject of retrospective verbal comment – for example, when a literary historian explains why he has decided to exclude a particular set of texts from his narrative. Value orientations can also influence a further type of action – the act of ‘preconscious selection’ – which plays a significant but not always clearly definable role in our encounters with literature. This type of preference action has a particular importance for reading, or ‘text processing’ (i.e., recognition and understanding). It exemplifies the point that value-governed selections can steer our dealings with literature in a particular direction long before any reasoned evaluation has been formulated, a point well made by Worthmann (1998, especially p. 29).

Referring to a model of *text processing* which is now broadly accepted, we regard the understanding of a text as an interaction between processes which originate in both text and reader, leading eventually to a certain representation of the text in the reader’s mind.⁸ Crucial to our concept of literary evaluation is the idea that value orientations can influence – via the schemata of text processing – the perception and understanding of texts.⁹ Textual schemata are generally seen as having two functions. First, they are used by readers to create textual coherence, by filling the gaps in the text and creatively supplementing the ‘blank spaces’. Second, they have a selective effect, in so far as they ensure that a reader can only realize a part of the wide range of possible meanings in any given text passage. Schemata provide the interface at which value orientations can impact on text processing, since although they are consensual (i.e., determined by group conventions) they also depend on individual factors – namely on what the reader knows, on his emotions, intentions and motivations, and therefore on his value orientations. This can manifest itself in various ways in the business of reading and understanding. If, for example, an author reading a poem by another writer fills the ‘blank spaces’ with meanings that depend on his personal theory of poetic form, then his understanding of the text will be influenced by the values that apply to ‘good’ poetry in the context of that theory. Another example: the value orientations of a reader may colour his perceptions of the text to such an extent that he completely, albeit unwittingly, ignores certain of its properties. One could cite many everyday instances of this; a historical example is to be found in the reception of Charlotte Perkins

8. See, on this issue, Kintsch & van Dijk (1978) and Rumelhart, (1980). See also the concise survey by Viehoff (1988).

9. See also Mary Crawford and Roger Chaffin, “The Reader’s Construction of Meaning: Cognitive Research on Gender and Comprehension”, in Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (eds.), *Gender and Reading*, Baltimore 1986: 3–30.

Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), a novel dealing with the incarceration and madness of its central female character. Today, it is evident that this text can be read according to the genre schema defined by Edgar Allan Poe, and if the publishers of the 1890s had seen it in this light, they would have been bound to find it interesting. However, since it was written by a woman known for her authorship of ‘women’s books’, the Poe schema was not used, and various significant features of the text went unnoticed.¹⁰

For the concept of ‘literary evaluation’ in the narrower sense of passing explicit linguistic judgements on literary texts, the above considerations mean that the very basis of evaluation, the literary text-object as a mental representation, can be shaped by previous evaluations; in other words, that the text has already been evaluated prior to the ‘real’, linguistically manifest act of evaluation (see Worthmann 2004: 91–101).

These linguistically manifest evaluations in the form of judgements are the type of evaluation that has been investigated most often; see, for example, Smith (1988, Note 1), Kienecker (1989), Furbank (1995) and Piecha (2002).

In our model, it represents the third type of evaluation as a social act, after preconscious and conscious selection. Value judgements have the form of statements¹¹ with which an attributive value is ascribed to an object on the basis of a criterion of value. The bindingness or validity of such a judgement can vary: a speaker may use exactly the same form of words when giving an informal opinion or passing a carefully considered judgement. The crucial factors here are, on the one hand, the institutional conditions of the context of utterance, and on the other, the speaker’s intentions. When expressing a general opinion, for example, he will underpin his verdict by reference to his own feelings, or to what others supposedly feel, whereas a formal judgement has to be backed by explicit reasons which are open to inter-subjective scrutiny. However, value judgements of this kind can only be justified by reference to a context, i.e. in relation to a situation of utterance and a value system in which the validity of standards and the appropriateness of categorizing assumptions are firmly established.

1.3 Collective dimensions of evaluation

As we have already indicated, the evaluation of literature has to be considered in *social* terms, not merely as an individual act. The value orientations in which standards of value criteria and categorizing assumptions are anchored, are acquired

10. This intriguing case is dealt with in more detail by Kolodny (1980, especially 455–460.)

11. Instead of being articulated as explicit judgements, most verbal evaluations are implicit; see H/W, pp. 60–73.

through a social learning process; indeed, socially mediated schemata play a part in determining the most basic perception of texts, let alone the way in which they are understood. And, as a rule, the contexts of utterance in which evaluation takes place can also be identified as areas of social, literature-related action. In our description of this collective dimension of evaluation we have used the sociological concepts of 'norm' and 'role' (H/W, p. 89–105)

Norms are generally based on values and regulate the actions of individuals in standard situations; they are accepted by society as a whole or by certain groups, and their observance or non-observance is subject to positive or negative sanction. The *validity of norms* in a society or group can be assessed in two ways: either by statistical description of the regularities of actions – in this case, the 'norm' is the 'normal' action, that which is most often observed – or by reference to prescriptive, programmatic statements – in which case the 'norm' is a model or paragon, a goal that will not always be achieved. In the first case, a literary scholar would derive the norms of literary quality from best-seller lists; in the second case, the norms would be taken from the canon of world literature and its accompanying 'master discourse'. Norms are also distinguished by the *strength of the relevant sanctions*. Compliance with 'consensual' norms is voluntary and positively sanctioned within their field of application (e.g. the 'normal' opposition of avant-garde literature to the 'classical' canon¹²). 'Conventionalized' norms, of which the actors are scarcely aware, are also subject to weak sanctions only (an example of this would be a breach of the convention, adopted by the literary 'social system', that didactic literature must be viewed as inferior). However, 'imperative' norms, which are not necessarily accepted by those concerned, are enforced with a degree of rigour by the sanctioning mechanisms such as state censorship or the educational system (for example, in the condemnation of literature that is considered offensive on religious, moral or political grounds).

The assessment of literary quality is governed by norms from two main social spheres – the economic and the cultural. These are the norms of, on the one hand, 'economic capital', which relate supply (by authors and publishers) to demand (from potential readers), and of the 'symbolic' or 'cultural capital'¹³ which in each case regulates the possible gains in terms of knowledge, action orientation, gratification, prestige, etc. Among these norms of 'cultural capital', the ones which dominate the awareness of literary scholars are those associated with the conven-

12. See Schulz-Buschhaus (1988, especially pp. 46ff).

13. The distinction between 'economic' and 'symbolic' or 'cultural capital' is drawn by Pierre Bourdieu (1984).

tion of aesthetic autonomy¹⁴ which emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century. According to this convention, the task of literature is neither to instruct nor merely to entertain, and it should not be read with expectations of these kinds. Texts which resist 'autonomous' reception are subject to negative sanction; readers who try to interpret such literature in referential terms and relate it directly to their own experience are marked down as naive. However, in other areas where literature is produced and/or consumed, such as the entertainment industry or the 'therapy' milieu, these norms find very little support.

Roles, to the sociologist, are institutionalized cultural schemata: their function is to ensure that people's scope for action in a group or society remains sufficiently restricted to be manageable. They are linked even more closely than norms to social situations and functions. Thus an individual can assume a variety of roles in different situations and in respect of different literary functions, and can therefore also evaluate texts in different ways; the resultant potential role conflict was illustrated above by the example of the university teacher asked to make literary recommendations for the lay reader.

The most important roles in the literary social system were cited in our enumeration of the areas in which literature-related acts of evaluation occur: the roles of the professional mediator and processor, and those of the 'normal' reader and the author. *Mediators* evaluate partly under the influence of economic norms, and partly also on the basis of norms of social prestige and political relevance. Non-orthodox evaluation, applying the wrong norms, can incur strict sanctions and cost the mediator his job. The interpretative and evaluative actions of the *processors* are similarly conditioned by the profiles and the internal – cultural and economic – norms of the institutions in which they are employed. Here, too, certain sanctions exist, mainly affecting the individual's position in the hierarchy. The weakest set of norms is that associated with the acts of reading and evaluation performed by the 'normal', *non-professional* reader. However, the decision to read and evaluate purely on the basis of personal preference – the most common form of this is 'identificatory' reading, in which readers empathize with the characters and problems portrayed in the text – means a loss of prestige within the literary 'social system' and is therefore subject to negative sanction. The action of *authors*, creating literature as the material basis for evaluation by others, can also be seen as a form of role-governed evaluation, a response to literature-related norms in the field of shifting tensions between economic and symbolic capital, and to norms of writing which have established themselves in literary tradition such as 'deviance'

14. A 'convention', in the established sense, is identical with a 'norm' in the sense employed by us.

or 'originality'. Sanctions have a very direct impact in terms of success or failure, though their eventual effect may change considerably with the passing of time.

The quality of literature, therefore, is invariably defined in relation to the collective normative spheres in which the judgement applies and the selection is to be accepted. In each case the task then remains of analyzing how a particular evaluation actually takes place, in the context of interaction between collective and individual norms and values and, where applicable, of the conflict between different roles.

2. Advantages of the model

Our model is designed to facilitate the analysis of evaluation. Its most important advantage, in our view, consists in abandoning the notion of literary quality as a property intrinsic to the text. For this reason, the model is particularly well suited to investigate the questions of why and how even 'canonic' texts can be subjected to widely differing evaluations – in the course of history, or at one and the same time in different spheres of communication about literature. It also provides a basis for a pluralistic evaluation of literature, going beyond the convention of aesthetic autonomy and taking into account the entire spectrum of social functions associated with literature.

However, equal importance must be accorded to the realization that there have to be textual properties corresponding to the value expectations which people bring to literature, and that these properties can be tailored to match the relevant expectations more or less exactly. This applies to all the normative areas in which literature is evaluated – not only to the literary system, but also to all the less prestigious literary sub-systems which have a direct relationship to everyday concerns and a practical function in supplying entertainment, religious, ethical or political guidance, therapeutic solace, and so forth. For 'aesthetic' literature, the nature of these properties has still not been sufficiently investigated, and in other areas the question has hardly been studied at all.

For this reason, the second part of our book is devoted to historical examples of evaluation and changes in evaluation. Various explanations are offered, in the light of the model, for the existence of a literary canon. In the third section, we try to sketch a framework for the evaluation of literature from all functional areas, and to identify, on the basis of exemplary evaluations, some of the textual properties which currently appear to confer particular value on two specific types of literature: the 'literary' text and the crime novel.

2.1 Model-based analyses of historical examples

Using historical examples, we have attempted to show how the factors in our model of evaluation have influenced acts of evaluation in the past. This affords a number of insights into the history of literary taste, although for reasons of space, the conclusions are limited to Germany.

In the first example, dealing with attitudes to Baroque literature (H/W, pp. 134–62), we analyze what is probably the most dramatic single shift in the history of evaluation, leading almost inexorably to the emergence of the literary system and the theory of aesthetic autonomy. Here, it also becomes apparent for the first time how prevailing notions of poetic form can influence the evaluation of literature by acting as perceptual schemata and 'categorizing assumptions'; thus, writings which are highly prized when literature is dominated by rhetoric are dismissed as empty bombast by the proponents of aesthetic autonomy. The second example (H/W 163–85) discusses this historic shift, occurring around the year 1770, in the context of the transition from oral to written culture, with the rise of reading as a new mode of reception which transformed the character of evaluation; at the same time, the example of the *Volkslied*, as a genre burdened with ideological meanings, is used to elucidate the significance of literary genres as schemata in the process of evaluation. In the third example, we employ evaluations of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (H/W 186–221) to illustrate in some depth the connection between reading and evaluation in various literature-related roles. This work was used by the literary luminaries of Weimar and Jena to school themselves in the 'aesthetic' approach to literature, thereby elaborating the distinction between professional, 'autonomous' evaluation and the 'heteronomous' judgement of the lay reader. It is also shown that the evaluations of writers are generally shaped – as one might expect – by the theories that inform their own literary production. The fourth example focuses on the significance of mediating institutions as factors in evaluation and especially in the process of canon-formation. The material for this section is supplied by the comprehensively documented history of the reception of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, (H/W 222–50) a writer whose sex and regional orientation have continually served as – highly reductive – schemata for the perception and evaluation of her literary achievements. Example number five, which is a contribution in its own right to the history of literary theory, shows how, in the main academic theories of literature and literary value after 1945, evaluation depends largely on the critic's own theory of literature (H/W 251–306). Looking at the objects of evaluation, the methods, criteria of value and categorizing assumptions, and bearing in mind the involvement of other theoretical and historical contexts, we systematically compare the following theories and theorists:

- traditional hermeneutic evaluation, of the purely phenomenological type practised by Wolfgang Kayser, and in the form as extended by Friedrich Sengle and Walter Müller-Seidel to include elements of intellectual history;
- hermeneutic evaluation combined with elements of Marxism (Theodor W. Adorno and the various manifestations of *Ideologiekritik*);
- evaluation on the basis of semiotic theory in structuralism (Mukarovsky) and reception theory (Hans Robert Jauss);
- the questioning of evaluation in post-structuralism and deconstruction (Roland Barthes, Paul de Man);
- and finally, evaluation in feminist literary studies (drawing on deconstruction and the critique of ideology).

By extending the enquiry, in this section of the study, to the theoretical and historical context of the ideas concerned, we have also tried to grasp the development and selection of conceptions of evaluation in 'motivational' terms, against the background of political and social factors and in relation also to the institutional pressures of the academy.

2.2 Canon formation: Perspectives of explanation and normative considerations

Our model focuses attention on those individual and collective factors on the 'subject' side which are necessary in order to convert specific properties on the 'object' side – the literary work – into 'values'. An approach of this kind inevitably faces the charge of relativism. But surely, some critics will say, there is a durable, if variable, corpus of texts, the so-called canon of world literature, in which literary 'quality' is objectively embodied and which can and must be a basis for analyzing these 'objective' values? We address this question in a final sketch of the history of evaluation, going beyond the examples previously cited and exploring several different perspectives for explaining the relative stability of a canon of world literature (H/W 311–21). According to the first perspective, the canonic works embody eternal aesthetic values which elicit a consistent response from an aesthetic sensibility which is part of a fixed human nature, outside time and space. Disagreement among evaluators and changes in the canon can therefore only arise from a lack of evaluative competence and the application of inappropriate criteria. However, this argument already implies that literary quality is in some measure connected with the evaluator's normative socialization. The second perspective, based on a philosophy of history, accepts from the outset that canon-formation is shaped by philosophical and aesthetic assumptions and their historical evolution. In their interpretive

history, or 'interpretive canon',¹⁵ canonical works can be seen to exemplify the historical decay of metaphysics. The durability of the works, according to this view, is explained by the ease with which their formal aspects can be used as a convenient peg on which to hang the central discourses of beauty, goodness and truth. For this, textual properties such as complexity and polyvalence are necessary but not sufficient conditions. With the third, (macro-)sociological perspective, the evolving interests of groups or entire societies are considered in their significance for literary canon-formation and canonic change. John Guillory (1993, especially The Preface and Part I) sees the previous canons as an instrument, in the first place, of social differentiation. We agree with the argument of Joachim Küpper (1997, especially pp. 57 ff.), and also of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), that the canonic stability of a small number of literary works cannot be explained primarily by their intrinsic properties; instead, one must look at their long-term usefulness for the historically evolving models by which social elites define their relationship to the world. However, polyvalence and complexity tend to enhance this kind of usefulness, although these qualities themselves do not suffice to establish canonicity. Thus the dominance of the 'subject' side persists in all three perspectives.

The criteria of quality derived from the canon of world literature – i.e. 'representing the history of metaphysics' or 'usefulness to social elites' – also signal that the canon in question is one that lays a comprehensive, though perennially controversial, claim to validity. But this does not exclude proposing a variety of discrete canons, with differing ranges, for the various functions of literature and contexts of utterance (H/W 326–40). Even in the relatively distant past there were already several, partly conflicting canons: a 'canonic' example is furnished by Mikhail Bakhtin's opposition between literature and carnival. Bourdieu's model of cultural stratification is a further, contemporary, instance. Looking at the present, pluralistic societies specifically assume the coexistence of a large number of cultural and literary canons, each having its own internal criteria, and its own patterns of context-dependent behaviour and interpretation. What remains is the task of re-evaluating these differences and investigating them more closely. Our model, which relates literary value to subjects and contexts, establishes the basis for this; however, the fine detail of the superstructure has yet to be worked out.¹⁶

15. This concept, now firmly established, takes account of the fact that, although a canon is made up of 'material' works (or, in many cases, a series of authors' names used metonymically), the values on which the claim to canonicity is based are defined only via interpretations of the works in question. See the initial discussion of this problem in von Heydebrand (1991, especially p. 5f.)

16. Our specimen evaluations of modern texts from the spheres of 'literature' and the crime novel (H/W 341–376) offer only a few very general hints as to how this task could be approached.

Deciding on a hierarchy between the canons of 'elite' and 'popular' culture, or even between different genres within these cultural fields, would be a matter for meta-evaluation. How, under today's conditions, is a cultural elite to establish its legitimacy and justify its canon vis-à-vis its popular or ethnically different competitors? And does a novel, for example, have a greater a priori value than an aphorism? Is a poem with a 'message' automatically better than one which relies on the free play of language? These questions are probably couched in the wrong terms: democratic pluralism inherently challenges us to accept functional differentiation and to withhold approval from all hierarchies, whether social or genre-related. Yet as individuals, we still have to make decisions, in situations such as that of a university teacher who can only deal with a limited number of literary texts. Here, too, our model can offer a framework for identifying an individual point of view and reflecting, within a social perspective, on one's personal standards of value, as well as those of others.

3. Issues for further study

Our conception of literary evaluation in pluralistic societies incorporates, on the one hand, theories and questions from the debates on values and the canon, and on the other, the results of empirical research, especially in social psychology and the psychology of cognition. The last section of our essay summarizes these points of connection with empirical literary studies and points to some of the issues that require further investigation.

Some of our assumptions have the status of hypotheses which could be verified by empirical research:

- (1) Our own experience, as empirically minded literary historians and in our dealings with students, has taught us how useful it is to apply the concept of 'categorizing assumptions' and to look at the function of such assumptions in the evaluation of literature. In our model, this concept offers a basis for explaining situations where differences in evaluation arise even though the criteria of value remain the same. Further empirical work would be necessary to specify ways of identifying these assumptions and reconstructing their impact on the process of evaluation, and to assess the relative significance of individual and collective factors.
- (2) In theory, the approach of professional readers should be less subjective, but in practice their perceptions of texts are selective and evaluative. What, then, is the role of 'intrinsic' textual properties in evaluation, and to what extent can such properties 'resist' the evaluator's selective reading? A meaningful answer to these questions would require careful empirical study of the behaviour of

professional readers, exploring how they read, interpret and evaluate texts in their various roles (see Andringa 1994).

- (3) According to our model, texts which are themselves value-laden tend, to a greater extent than texts of a more neutral, descriptive type, to increase the impact of value orientations on the constitution of meaning, since texts of this kind either have a suggestive effect and invite the reader to accept the evaluations exemplified in the text, or they activate the reader's own values and encourage him to think about them. These hypotheses are based purely on our own experience, and would have to be tested systematically.

However, more important than testing these assumptions would be the empirical investigation of evaluative acts and processes of canon formation in a range of contemporary literature-related areas. Here, there is a major research gap waiting to be filled. Among the many issues that spring to mind are two specific problems which urgently require analysis.

The first such problem concerns group-specific ways of perceiving 'canonic' texts. This arises, for example, in connection with the fact that many students find themselves completely 'turned off' by texts from the canons of academia and traditional middle-class culture. It is necessary to clarify whether canonized texts (a) have common or similar properties, to which (b) certain groups of readers react more positively than others. One could then ask whether the problem in fact has anything to do with the texts themselves, or, instead, with value orientations which determine the perception of the texts. Some hypotheses have already been formulated here,¹⁷ but they need to be tested. In doing so, it would be essential to break down the sample according to the readers' level of education and previous acquaintance with literature, and also by factors such as political and moral convictions. In our experience, to cite one example, the textual properties seen by feminists seem to differ from those identified by other readers, male or female.

The second problem concerns the influence of literary media on the formation of standards of value. A current example which would repay closer study is that of hyperfiction, as a new type of text. Here, two distinct approaches would seem necessary. From a descriptive point of view, one could analyze actual evaluations in respect of the standards of value underpinning them. It would be necessary to enquire whether, or how, the standards of value are affected by the fact that the texts are no longer sequentially structured, the plot being variable so that readers can generate their own stories. One would have to consider the mechanisms that organize the text and also the various modes of reception, in order to explain the differences in value judgements, which apparently correspond, at least

17. See, for example, Küpper (1997, especially pp. 57-61).

in part, to different strategies of reading and patterns of expectation.¹⁸ However, adopting a normative approach, one would also need to investigate the extent to which the characteristics and conditions of the new medium *must* be considered in developing appropriate criteria by which to evaluate the texts (see Simanowski 2002: 23–26).

The dual functionality of our model, as described above, qualifies it as a theoretical basis for both these research perspectives. On the one hand, it offers points of connection for descriptive analysis or reconstruction in empirical and historical studies, and on the other, it provides a conceptual framework for normative projects such as the development or justification of criteria.

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18. It is interesting to compare, for example, the various reactions to Michael Joyce's *Afternoon. A Story*; see Foltz (1996) and Wingert (1996).