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Narrowing Circles: Questions on Autopoiesis and Literary Interpretation after Dietrich Schwanitz

Florian Lippert¹

The essay deals with possibilities of relating Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, especially his notion of *autopoiesis*, to the interpretation of literary texts. Beyond the common description of literature as a social (sub)system, it discusses ideas regarding a specific representativity of literature pertaining to autopoiesis as an epistemic figure, as developed by Dietrich Schwanitz and others since the late 1980s. Examples include literary demonstrations of systemic features such as self-referentiality or the self-maintenance of meaning. Furthermore, literature can also be seen as an exceptional case of multiple systemic coupling – regarding the levels of concrete communication (language), distribution (text), and of generalized communication media (art). However, the fact that systems theory cannot provide a coherent media-specific approach to the modes of connection indicates the further necessity of cross-disciplinary coupling with literary theory.

Keywords: Literature, Systems Theory. Mediality, Self-production, Self-referentiality, Self-maintenance, Disciplinary Coupling

Introduction

In general, the use of the term *autopoiesis* within literary theory can be seen against the background of two different developments: the continuation and enhancement of Maturana's and Varela's biological and cognitive models of systemic operation and structural coupling; and the term's diffusion within the humanities initiated by Niklas Luhmann's systems theory (who, for his part, had borrowed the term from biology). Thus, the respective theoretical frameworks can be classified into biological versus non-biological oriented approaches to literature; the former can again be divided into different streams such as cognitive poetics, biopoetics, or evolutionary aesthetics, while the latter combine sociologically oriented perspectives on literature as a social system, and interpretive approaches which treat literary texts at different levels as expressions, manifestations or demonstrations of autopoiesis.²

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 2. For a specific categorization of diachronic research fields, see David Roberts' differentiation between a sociological paradigm in literature [as represented by Siegfried J. Schmidt's works on the German literary system in the 18th century] and the evolution of literary forms through the centuries [which plays an important role in Dietrich Schwanitz' approach, see below] (Roberts, 1999, p. 27). Concerning systems theory's specific connections to narrative literature, see Bruce Clarke's differentiation between "the level of systems and the level of forms" (Clarke, 2008, p. 62). In comparison to these approaches, my contribution deals with rather synchronic connections to all forms of literature.

In the following, I focus on the last subcategory and discuss concrete factors which connect autopoiesis – as a transdisciplinary pattern, episteme or figure, from its biological origin to its use in systems theory – to the interpretation of literary texts. Luhmann’s sociological conception, as well as the usual way it has been imported into German literary theory since the late 1980s, was not meant to “provide help with judging or producing artworks” (Luhmann, 1995, p. 9; my translation), but, generally speaking, discussed and described art and literature as social phenomena. However, there are various aspects – concerning Luhmann’s adoption of Maturana’s autopoiesis concept, as well as his elaborations on language, text, and art – which encourage the belief that literature does not just “prove” systems theory as a specified social subsystem, but that, at different levels of mediality, it has unique qualities in exemplifying autopoiesis as a figure of knowledge and that, vice versa, autopoiesis may play a major role in the concrete interpretation of literary texts.

The first to bring together systemic communication theory and some firm features of literary interpretation in this sense is the German literary theorist Dietrich Schwanitz. In several essays (1987, 1990a, 1996) and especially in his book *Systemtheorie und Literatur* (1990), he presents numerous connection points between Luhmannian terminology and literary texts, particularly concerning the genres of drama and narrative. However, his elaborations lack a generalizable methodology, and in some cases the transitions between different aspects of systemicity are blurred, as well as the ones between different levels of literariness and the theoretical basis on which both areas are connected. Concerning these problems, Schwanitz’ contributions can be regarded as exemplary for a couple of subsequent approaches.

In the following, I recapitulate and concretize these basic problems of systems-theoretically oriented interpretation by posing three fundamental questions which interpretive approaches have to deal with. Thus, I am aiming at a general methodological problematization in the form of (rather big) questions; instead of definite answers, my contribution provides only selective examples. Since, according to my argumentation below, the literary contextualization of self-reference, self-reflection, and self-problematization towards postmodernity can be described as a narrowing of circles or loops, my methodological approach can be paraphrased by means of a similar figure: It is aiming at encircling some problematic areas within the complex intersections of theories. Besides my own references, I refer to examples from Schwanitz’ rich syntheses and integrate them into the structure of my argumentation.

1. Aspects of *Autopoiesis* as an Ensemble Term: The Distinction of Self-labels

Humberto Maturana introduced the term *autopoiesis* in order “to provide a complete characterization of the organization that makes living systems self-contained autonomous unities” (Maturana, 1980, p. 45), referring to circular cognitive processes as basic qualities of living creatures. The scientific discussion on these processes has led to a couple of conceptual specifications, such as by John Mingers, who

differentiates between *self-influencing*, *self-regulating*, *self-sustaining*, *self-producing*, *self-referential* and *self-conscious* systems (Mingers, 1995, pp. 83ff.). Mingers, like many others, uses the term *autopoiesis* exclusively as a synonym for self-production, according to the literal translation from the Greek words *autos* and *poiein*. In Maturana's and Varela's own elaborations, however, things are less simple.

First, no top-down definition of *autopoiesis* is given; instead, bottom-up descriptions of autopoietic systems and checklists to verify their features are provided, which fill the term's semantic frame without closing it.

Secondly, in Maturana's and Varela's description of the body, self-production is only a part of its autopoieticity, albeit an important one. It characterizes the cell metabolism of living creatures as being different from any other set of molecular processes insofar as it consists of a dynamic network of transformations, which creates its own components. Therefore, accumulations of cells are defined as first order autopoietic systems; meta-systems such as human beings, which contain and coordinate those first-order systems, are called second-order autopoietic systems (see e.g., Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 78ff; Maturana, 1987, p. 51ff).

A second feature of these systems is self-referentiality, which is based on the operational closure of their organization. The first effect of an external stimulus is a perturbation on the system's surface. Inside the system, a sequence of events is initiated (by the brain's neurons, for instance) which, according to the authors, is not to be seen as transmission of external information, but as a realization of internally determined rules. The results of these internal events cannot be predicted (Maturana, 1987, p. 100ff.). In the case of sensory perception, this means that – as radical constructivism has exemplified extensively – what our brains tell us that we see, hear, or feel, has not necessarily much to do with a reality outside our bodies, but is a product of inside predisposition and condition.

A third principle is self-maintenance. It indicates that the system has to preserve those characteristics that make it self-productive and self-referential in order to keep its identity (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 96ff.). Thus, self-maintenance is an effect of, and, at the same time, a predisposition for self-production and self-referentiality. Similar correlations and overlappings can be described for (and between) the other "self"-labels. Nevertheless, at a methodological level, their differentiation is important. It may not lead to a definite abstraction of *autopoiesis* as a term, but it enables a more accurate verbalization of any concrete case of autopoietic systemicity. Thus, already in its original theoretical context, *autopoiesis* denotes an "ensemble" of characteristics which are to be concretized in the examination of particular systems. To a certain extent, the term itself appears to be as contingent as the processes it denominates. This also applies to many of the transfers it has gone through, and especially to Niklas Luhmann's usage of it. Luhmann describes social and psychic systems and subsystems as being established by the use of certain codes and operations and their closure towards other systems. He refers to them using the basic *autopoiesis* characteristics of Maturana's and Varela's biological theory; amongst others, self-production, self-referentiality, and self-maintenance. A psychic system

basically consists of thoughts which produce new thoughts and refer to former ones, observing them as imagination; a social system consists of communications, which produce new communications and refer to former ones as actions. Both types of systems are self-maintaining as they are operating with specific media such as meaning that guarantee self-production and self-referentiality.

These features also apply to literature if it is regarded as a social system (or, as Luhmann tends to see it, a subsystem of art—see next section). Therefore, if a concrete literary text is interpreted by means of autopoiesis theory, it is possible to treat it as a part of the system it belongs to and to look for manifestations, expressions or traces of this system's autopoietic character. An example is the search for and interpretation of stylistic features: Historically, literature as a system in the Luhmannian sense can be related to the manifestation of literary styles within different texts of a time. In general, therefore, *style* is defined as the mode in which form and context are connected to each other. The historical propagation and differentiation of style since the 18th century can be seen as a new way to organize the self-reproduction of artworks. For writers “it was not allowed to imitate anymore, but at the same time the concept of perfection remained alive” (Schwanitz, 1990, p. 256; my translation³). Besides technically inexplicable qualities such as “sensibility, emotion, ‘delicatesse’, taste and ‘je ne sais quoi’” (Schwanitz, p. 256), style consequently became an important criterion for producing and judging art and literature. Thus, it became art's aesthetic impulse for the production of further artworks and, at the same time, set out the specific field in which that production took place. In the concrete interpretation of texts, the respective traces can be considered as historicizing marks of systemic self-production. Regarding the development towards postmodernist and contemporary literature—in which the concept of style is successively challenged, subverted and dissolved—it can be assumed that similar functions are overtaken by other features such as intertextuality.

Besides such examples in which the connection of autopoiesis and literary interpretation is related to social systemicity, one can also think of cases in which literary texts as works are related to aspects of self-production, self-referentiality, self-maintenance and so forth. This does not indicate, however, that the texts are autopoietic themselves – they cannot be, as they are not systems (the disregard of this fact, combined with a florid style, gives some elaborations on the topic a certain mystifying aura). However, as I already indicated in the introduction, this essay deals with the preliminary idea that literary artworks are able to approximate the border to systemicity more than other objects are, and to demonstrate or simulate systemic qualities due to their special mediative position between social and psychic systems. General ways of justifying this idea will be discussed in section 2, possible forms of correlation in section 3.

In this context, the most described features of literary texts are analogies to systemic self-referentiality. In a general sense, the term is applicable to many cases in

3. In the following, all quotations from this book (Schwanitz, 1990) are my translations.

which a text contains another text (e.g., a play within a play, narrative embedded in a narrative), or in which a text refers to itself in content. The most famous and often-cited⁴ exemplary novel for both cases is Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*: Cervantes' hero thinks he is a knight because he read too many stories about knights, fights fictitious characters because he takes them for real, and, in the beginning of the second part of the novel, struggles with people's reception of the first part which was recently published within his fictitious world. In a narrower sense, it can be said that the literary problematization of self-referentiality as totality (as a manifestation of a system's operational closure) becomes virulent on the horizon of modernity. In Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, first published in 1759-67, the narrator struggles with the narration of his own life, constantly confusing references, frames and times. Neither is he able to narrate everything that is important in content (because, from his position, every narration is linked to many others, so chronological order is permanently disrupted by retrospective and foresight; the action begins in 1718 and, after nine volumes, ends in 1713), nor to summarize what happened in time (the narration of actions takes a lot more time than the actions themselves, which confuses the narrator; the content of the narration can never reach its end, namely the moment of narration). Schwanitz relates these basic problems of narration to basic principles of autopoieticity: Like the system, narration needs an asymmetry between a complex outside and less complex inside. The problems of "avoiding the permanent interference between the narrated and narrating" and "compensating the rupture of time coherence" (Schwanitz, 1990, pp. 165f.) correspond to the tasks of the closed psychic system as described in systems theory's term of double difference: The *I* is thought as the *self* (the one which is thinking) and the *other* (the one which is thought of); and the thought, again, differentiates between itself and the preceding thought it deals with – it cannot deal with itself due to the temporality of consciousness. Similarly narration has to integrate the difference between the past (the narrated, seen from the narrator's viewpoint) and the future (narrating, seen from the perspective of the narrated). "Then, in order to differentiate itself from this unity, narration has to atemporalize the difference between itself and the narrated; and this determines the way in which narrating becomes invisible" (pp. 167f). In other words, a central task of narration in the dawn of modernity—while struggling with similar problems as the contemporary subject (whose new idealistic constitution is described, for instance, in Fichte's dialectology of the self)—is to draw a full circle of referentiality. The further development towards postmodernism can then be described as a narrowing process – and, literally, as a form of self-problematization. In this sense, postmodern epic as described by Foucault can be seen as the culmination of self-referentiality:

4. See e.g., Schwanitz, 1990, p. 154; Roberts, 1999, p. 42; Clarke, 2008, p. 96ff. Livingston reminds us of the well known fact that the hidalgo's "dilemma whether to follow the path of arms (that is *praxis*, action) or the path of letters (*poiesis*, creation, production)" is the quasi-etymological source of autopoiesis itself, as it inspired Maturana on his search of a fresh linguistic formula for the description of "circular organizations" (Livingston, 2006, p. 86, referring to Maturana, 1980, p. xvii).

Language which has no other law than that of affirming ... its own precipitous existence; ... to curve back in a perpetual return upon itself ... as if its discourse could have no other content but the expression of its own form (Foucault, 1973, p. 300; cited in Livingston, 2006, p. 18).

Besides self-referentiality, analogies to systemic self-maintenance are other possible features of literary texts. An example is Luhmann's description of meaning, the common basic medium of social and psychic systems, as the constant recreation of the difference between the actual and the possible. For every actual situation, there is a horizon of possibilities from which one is selected (actualized) that, on its part, carries a new horizon of possibilities and so forth. Meaning always relates to and is maintained through meaning. Literature as a type of fiction can contribute to this process by enlarging the horizon of possible perspectives on the world; in the case of narration, furthermore, it can demonstrate the continuous process of selection by describing specific paths through the endless amount of events and actions, correlating actuality to past and future actualities. Finally, in the development towards postmodernity, literature successively tends to subvert the production of meaning, as in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which the diachrony of selection is replaced by a flood of synchronic thoughts and processes which demonstrates the endlessness of selectivity, culminating in the novel's abrupt ending after Molly Bloom's famous internal monologue. As another source of examples, I consider the work of Jorge Luis Borges, which in a unique way weaves together real names and events with fictitious ones, realities with possibilities, facts with guesses. In "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain," the framing narrator recapitulates a fictitious author's fictitious book named *April March*, which has a regressive structure: The second, third and fourth chapters contain different possible histories leading to what has been described in the first chapter, while the other nine chapters contain different possible histories leading to what is described in chapter numbers 2, 3 and 4. However, the actual content of this nonexistent novel remains unknown, as the narrator only gives vague comments on particular details, presupposing (as critics typically do) his readers have read the book (which, of course, is impossible in this case). Thus, reading here means interpreting the narrator's retrospective interpretation of Quain, or fitting together possibilities to reconstruct intratextual possible realities (and then, of course, interpreting this interpretation of an interpretation in order to say something about Borges' story). In other words, the interplay of possible realities is transferred from the framed to the framing narration (and, from there, to the reader's reading of the text), giving an impression of what is cited as Quain's ultimate literary goal: "infinite stories, infinitely branching" (Borges, 2000, p. 105). In another story, "The Garden of Forking Paths," the narrating figure is told about the first (and only) "non-selective novel," written by the Chinese author Ts'ui Pen: "In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses simultaneously all of them." The result is an incomplete, incomprehensible literary "labyrinth in time." Again, as in the case of mysterious *April March*, the book's concrete content remains unknown. Instead, its effect encroaches on the narrator's reality, making him

feel “an invisible, intangible pullulation,” his surrounding being “saturated, infinitely, with invisible persons ... – secret, busily at work, multiform – in other dimensions of time” (Borges, 120ff.).

Finally, a very distinct set of examples can be found for literary analogies to self-production, primarily in lyrical and dramatic language features such as measure, tropes, figures and so forth, which provide possibilities of parallelizing the description of an event with its actual realization. In this sense, for instance, Shakespeare’s famous percussionist verse “A drum, a drum, Macbeth doth come” (Act I, Scene iii) describes an event in content and pursues it in measure and sound. Rhyme, rhythm and other paradigmatic structures transgress semiotic boundaries.

By adjusting the materiality of language to meaning, perceptual potential is released in language itself, ... temporal retardation and sequentiality are now at the disposal of psychic systems, which can then perceive and enjoy their own perception in a virtual second edition that is richer and more complex. (Schwanitz, 1996, p. 496)

In a similar sense, German literary theorist Renate Homann describes modern poetry as an expression of *heautonomous autopoiesis*, converting Kant’s heautonomy – which originally denominated the aesthetic judgment legislating its own activity – into a potential quality of poetry itself: “lyrical self-production establishing its own rules.” She refers to the poem’s possibilities of incorporating diverse existing social as well as older literary texts, reshaping them within new paradigmatic schemes and, thereby, recombining them into new horizons of meaning. Its way leads from deconstruction to “re-construction” of a “basis” for poetic language (Homann, 1999, p. 478; my translation).

Despite their brevity, the given examples for literary analogies to systemic features such as self-referentiality, self-maintenance and self-production demonstrate a specific need for methodological differentiation in interpretation. In the often dense analytical net of systemic-literary relationships woven by Schwanitz and others, the question what aspects of autopoiesis are actually involved may help in sorting out disparate threads.

2. Aspects of Literature: Communication, Language, Text, Art

My second question on the correlation of literature and autopoiesis does not concern qualitative specifications of systematicity, but the intramedial specification of literature: namely the distinct classifications of communication, language, text and art. Definitions of communication, of course, play a key role in the complex interdisciplinary history of autopoiesis. Peter Hejl subdivided the geneses of the term autopoiesis into two main developments: A generative (or material) and a formal (or structural) use (Hejl, 1990, p. 213). According to this differentiation, generative approaches take the original biological notion of autopoiesis as a basis of non-biological knowledge formation. An example is Hejl’s own description of society as consisting of autopoietic biological beings, thereby forming a *syn-referential*, but non-

autopoietic pattern (it cannot be, as it does not have a body). In this sense, most forms of empirical radical constructivism use a generative model of autopoiesis. Empiricism, then, is not based on objective knowledge of the external world, but, as Siegfried J. Schmidt paraphrases, on “shared operational knowledge within our cognitive field” (Schmidt, 1987, p. 39; my translation). The question of how knowledge can be shared then leads to the problem of intersubjective communication: As Maturana already emphasizes, communication is not an objective parameter, since it depends on perception and, therefore, underlies the system’s – that is, in his case, the body’s – operational closure. Instead, Maturana considers communication to be a form of ontogenetic structural coupling, creating a consensual domain and transforming each autopoietic system into a medium for the realization of the other. This means that a communicative act does not express reality, but

relations of relative neuronal activities in a closed neuronal network. ... the behavior of organism A perturbs organism B triggering in it an internal change of state that establishes in it a new structural background for its further interactions and generates a behavior that, in turn, perturbs organism A, which ... perturbs organism B, which ..., and so on in a recursive manner until the process stops. (Maturana, 1986, pp. 52f)

An example of what Hejl calls the formal or structural use of the term *autopoiesis* is Luhmann’s description of society. Here, as already indicated in the last section, communication is the basic element of a social system, which is coupled to, but substantially independent of, the subject, whose consciousness is described as another class, namely as a psychic system, its basic elements being thoughts; both, again, are to be separated from the third class, living systems. This diversification of the term *autopoiesis* is criticized harshly by many theorists of generative models as a rhetorical dilution of the original concept. Systems theorists reply that Luhmann’s use is not just formal or metaphorical, but an advancement of Maturana’s model. Luhmann stresses the continuity between physical, psychic, and social conceptions of autopoiesis: All of them appear as modes of secondary observation and description of a world which is never primarily accessible. “Just as the cognitive system compensates the operational closure of the nervous system, society compensates the operational closure of the cognitive systems” (Luhmann, 1995, p. 22; my translation). Within this compensation, communication plays an important role. According to Luhmann, it consists of three selections – utterance, information, and understanding – which are principally of the same value; the distribution of dominance for every concrete situation is, in short, variable and unpredictable. Therefore, Luhmann describes the general processuality of communication as a synthesis of these selections—understanding requires the differentiation between utterance and information—and not as a transmission of content between an addresser and an addressee, as this would imply a fixed hierarchy and the possibility of cognitive exchange. But as a part of the cognitive system’s environment, the other subject is just as distant as any other part of the world – a world which “is not understood as an object, but, in terms of phenomenology, as a horizon, and therefore, as unreachable. Hence, there is no other possibility but to construct

reality and, maybe, to observe observers constructing reality” (Luhmann, 1996, pp. 18f; my translation).

Thus, like Maturana, Luhmann describes communication as an operation of closed systems, not as a transmission of information. But, unlike Maturana, he separates it from physical processes and equates social, psychic and biological systematicity as modes of description on the basis of a general unattainability of the real. Here, as German philosopher Harald Wasser puts it, Luhmann’s operational constructivism appears to be a lot more radical than many contemporary forms of radical constructivism.

Similar differences can be observed between the respective definitions of language. Maturana describes it as a special form of meta- or second-order communication, as it enables the reflection on the restrictions and limitations of communication, and even on itself as being bound to the systemic closure of the communicating body. As language is “the necessary evolutionary outcome, in the recursive interactions of organisms having closed, structurally plastic nervous systems, of a selection realized through the behavior generated on the interacting organisms through their structural coupling in a domain of expanding ambient diversity” (Maturana, 1986, pp. 53f), its examination has to be based on the examination of the nervous system.

Luhmann, on the one hand, shares the evaluation of language as being an exceptional, self-referential form of communication and expressing a system’s internal state rather than an external reality. On the other hand, once more, he does not agree with Maturana’s physicalism. In Luhmann’s conception, language is not connected to the nervous (psychophysical) system, but, as any other medium of communication, in principle classified as a medium of social systems. In particular, however, it has specific qualities which make the success of communication more likely. Due to language’s partial similarity to thoughts, it is seen as enabling the interpenetration of social and psychic systems (Luhmann, 1988). And due to its distribution through writing and the development of mass copying technologies, it uncouples communication from physical presence and the moment of utterance from the moment of understanding, thereby enlarging communicative possibilities in space and time (Luhmann, 1996).

On this last point, Luhmann’s characterizations of language (a medium of communication) and text (a medium of distribution) can be linked to his description of art (a symbolically generalized communication medium). The art system, as any other social system, is autopoietically closed and consists of communications. What makes this system unique, however, is that there are two types of communications: communications about art and communications through art – more precisely, through artworks (Luhmann, 1995).

The processuality of artworks basically can be described by means of operation and observation – both being performed by artist and recipient: The artist not only produces, but also observes his work while working on it (sketching, re-reading, etc.) as well as afterwards (interpreting, remembering, justifying); and the recipient not

only receives, but also constructs meaning while being confronted with the work (relating it to his or her situation, filling in the blanks) as well as afterwards (interpreting) (Luhmann, 1995, pp. 65ff.).

Thus, in the context of social systematicity, it is insufficient to define artworks as something through which an artist's intention of whatsoever kind is expressed. Rather, they are to be seen as products of the double dualism described above. This is also the reason why artworks are not translatable into denotative language. However, they can be seen as communications from the moment in which one basic condition is fulfilled, that is, the assumption of differentiation between utterance and information. As the work cannot be reduced to intention, the most common denominator of all art is that this assumption happens, with diverse results (Luhmann, 1995, pp. 41ff.). This, however, is by no means a dead-end of observation: What can be observed is communication itself. The recipient may even be able to observe himself observing and operating. In this sense, the artwork's communication is neither bound nor arbitrary: "Physicists would perhaps call this a non-linear coupling" (Luhmann, p. 76).

The psychic system, for its part, observes the artwork as an object, thereby establishing – as Luhmann describes it with reference to Spencer-Brown – a specific form (or an amount, a form of forms). As, in the context of social systematicity, communication contains or refers to communication, form here contains or refers to form. Thus, the artwork is not only describable as communication of communication, but also as perception of perception.

If the recapitulated aspects of communication, language, textuality and art are referred to literature, it becomes obvious that, from the perspective of systems theory, literary texts appear as focal points of multi-leveled intermediations or couplings: Consisting of language, they may enable structural coupling of psychic and social systems more than other forms of communication do; in their textual form, they may provide far-reaching communication independent from physical presence; and as artworks, they enable the observation of these and other features as well as self-observation.

In view of the fundamental differences between these levels of intermediation, what also becomes clear is that it is important to distinguish between them when it comes to concrete interpretive correlations of literary texts and autopoiesis. This conclusion is based, first, on Luhmann's general descriptions of literary texts as artworks, which enable the observation of their own communicational features as described above. Secondly, it goes beyond this general notion by asking which intramedial level of literature the observation refers to. Possible answers include (but are not limited to) a) literature as language (as a medium, compared to other forms of communication), b) literature as written text (as a medium of distribution, compared to other forms of language), and c) literature as art itself (as a symbolically generalized communication medium).

Concerning level a), a general proof for the importance of language in literary interpretation of course lies in its processual omnipresence. It may be, at the same

time, a mental condition, an instrument and the object of communication, language can be grasped, reproduced, transmitted through language – as Ira Livingston puts it, “it participates in what it represents” (Livingston, 2006, p. 11). The phenomenology of this relation reaches from simple wordplays – autological loops (“This sentence contains five words.” “There is a ... missing in this sentence.”) or endless constructs (T is The fourTh, elevenTh, nineTeenTh ... [letter in this sentence]),” which accent the overlapping of participation and representation (Schwanitz, 1990, p. 57ff) – to complex literary simulations of self-production, as exemplified in section 1. In these cases, literature radicalizes general features of the medium in which it participates. As a consequence, Maturana’s claim that “human beings can talk about things because they generate them” (Maturana, 1986, p. 56) could be turned towards the neocybernetic reformulation of a classical idealistic idea: Literature talks about things by generating them, and generates things by talking about them.

Concerning level b), it can be said that the written text, compared to oral speech, features a specific demonstrative openness. The temporary and spatial uncoupling of participants not only enlarges the range of communication at a quantitative level, but also changes its quality. For instance, as Schwanitz remarks, it “removes the interactional pressure of presence from communication which, by the contagious effect of oral communication, tends to cover up the difference between expression and information in favor of information.” In this sense, writing is “a more ‘communicational’ form of communication, for it reinforces a difference by which communication is constituted ... it enables communication to react to itself and become self-reflexive” (Schwanitz, 1987, p. 286). This argumentation is linked to Derrida’s critique of logocentrism as phonocentrism: Language, therefore, can never catch and fix meaning (information), though it pretends to do so – especially in its oral manifestations, which suggest simultaneity of speaking (word) and meaning (logos). In fact, the signifié is always absent and language is an endless game of signifiants, in which the demonstration of absence as done by *inscription* remains the more “honest” form of what is called communication. In the case of literary texts, this openness is not only revealed, but becomes constitutive, specifying Luhmann’s general notions of the non-linearity of artworks. An example is the lyrical work of Paul Celan, which, according to Derrida, circulates around the physicality of language – in the double sense of being bound to the human body and to textuality. Celan describes his basic idea of producing and reading poetry as “topos research ... in light of u-topia” (Celan, 2001, p. 145; my translation), referring to the ideal of understanding as a literal common ground (the topos as “place”) which is insinuated, but never fulfilled in the signs of inscription. A meta-poetic mediation of this situation can be traced in some of his poems, as in *Flooding* (Flutender):

Flooding, big- / celled sleepyard. // Every / partition overrun / by squadrons of gray. // The letters breaking out of line, / the last / dreamproof tugs – / each with a / vulture-claw / towing a part / of the still- / unsunken sign. (Celan, 2000, p. 21)

The motive of letters clinging to the sign can be related to the temporal and spatial differentiation through writing and reading, which, according to Derrida, stresses the general absence of a final understanding in communication. Though, if interpreted this way, the text presents itself as being uninterpretable, thus showing the paradoxical character of lyrical communication per se: As letters break *out of line* in the replacement of syntagmatic writing structures by paradigmatic ones, they destroy the (semiotic ideal of the) *sign*; however, the sign is *still unsunken*, its enigma still unsolved, as long as it is understood as being destroyed.

Concerning level c), the idea that literary texts as artworks may enable the reflection on themselves as being artworks runs the risk of opening the floodgates to virtually endless (and pointless) interpretatory self-labeling. However, from systems theory's perspective, it can be reduced to one principle of the artwork's communication, namely the above described fact that the process of observing the artwork as a form may itself become the object of observation. In Luhmann's terminology, reflection describes the self-observation of a system as a whole; in terms of Spencer-Brown, this case is called re-entry of the form. In this sense, the many cases which speak about literary self-reflection can be regarded as structural convergences towards the same systemic property. Examples, which, once again, characterize literary history as a narrowing of the respective circularity, can be found in the historical development of drama. In general, drama enables the observation of simulated social interaction processes and programs. Some of its most traditional materials are situations with a strong social framing, the embedding of actions in implicit or explicit restrictive coordinates, as described by Erving Goffman in his 1974 book *Frame Analysis*. Schwanitz lists a number of examples for such classical situations, each of which Schwanitz relates to a specific binary opposition:

- a. rituals with a high degree of symbolic representability, such as governmental or religious ceremonies (based on the opposition representative vs. non-representative),
- b. intrigues, frauds and camouflage, dividing the participating characters into framing (defrauders) and framed (defrauded) (opposition proscenium vs. backstage),
- c. diverse types of conflicts (opposition partial – impartial),
- d. dealing with manners, which marks the distinction between adequate and inadequate behavior, whereas
- e. ambiguous conversation, for example, flirting or diplomatic proceedings, plays with this distinction (the opposition in both cases being official vs. unofficial).
(Schwanitz, 1990, pp. 110-115)

It is obvious that these topics of dramatic observation are, to different extents, theatrical themselves – as Schwanitz puts it: “theater-like enclaves within the real world” (Schwanitz, 1990, p. 110). All oppositions assigned to them can also be assigned to drama. This means that drama traditionally represents aspects of reality

which, in turn, can be seen as representing “dramatic” features in social life. This reciprocity remains balanced as long as the (Aristotelian) concept of representation is valid in drama and individual (inter)action is seen as part of a universal context in social life. Both conditions, however, successively dissolve in the course of modernity. Dramatists replace representation by concepts of abstraction, variation, or negation of reality, while society, as described by systems theory, splits up into different systems and subsystems which increasingly determine individual or private interactions. An example in which “interaction does not represent anything than itself anymore” and “refers to society only ex negativo, by means of absence” (Schwanitz, 1990, p. 142) is the work of Luigi Pirandello. In his drama *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), six persons invade a theater rehearsal and demand the director’s help. They introduce themselves as drama characters unfinished by their author, and in order to become complete, they want their tragic family history to be realized in terms of dramatic reality, that is, played by the actors on stage. This upside-down *dramatization as realization* fails, though, as there is no final truth, no hierarchy between the versions and evaluations of what happened – neither between the played and the playing, nor among the different interacting characters. Drama itself, then, is not a representation, but just another version of reality, a form of traditional and standardized artistic interaction, representing nothing but itself. In the context of this development, aspects of Beckett’s Theatre of the Absurd could also be regarded as “thinning down the manifest signification of the story to a degree at which the interaction between the characters reveals its performative character,” and even the alienating elements of Brecht’s Epic Theatre can be seen as “pointing a finger at the finger pointing at reality”; that is, as tautological, despite their sociopolitical implications (Schwanitz, 1990, pp. 143ff.). Thus, from systems theory’s perspective, the autoreferentiality of interaction and artistic representation are topics rooted in the history of drama, and their auto-problematization literally becomes concentrated – dense and virulent – in modernity.

Again, the given examples can only provide fragmentary impressions of the potential connections between autopoiesis and literary interpretation. However, as consequences of the basic differentiation between intramedial levels of literature, they demonstrate the importance of such a methodological specification on the basis of Luhmann’s dense and complex elaborations.

3. Aspects of correlation

My third question on the correlation of autopoiesis and literary texts is probably the most complex and, at the same time, the most urgent one concerning interpretive approaches. From systems theory’s perspective, it emerges from a basic problem already indicated above: The “theory of forms is not yet a theory of systems” (Luhmann, 1995, p. 67; my translation), and the literary text – a structure, a form of forms – is not a system (yet). The pertinent question is how the correlation between autopoiesis and literary text is actually realized. If it is said, for instance, that a literary

text performs a *duplication, simulation* or *reflection* of systemic features (Schwanitz, 1996, pp. 497; 1990, pp. 100, 180), that it is *able to grasp* and sometimes even to find a *solution* for systems theory's questions (1996, p. 495; 1990, p. 176), that it approximates or demonstrates aspects of autopoiesis (my own words, see the antecedent sections), then all of these (and similar) terms can be questioned from a methodological point of view. The basic questions if and, if so, how a literary text can duplicate, simulate, and reflect anything (and may it be itself) are discussed controversially throughout the history of literary theory, within as well as between hermeneutics, critical theory, psychoanalysis, semiotics, discourse analysis, gender studies, media studies and so on. In the context of this contribution, they can be reformulated regarding the systemic status of literature per se: Is autopoiesis only "represented" in some ways, or may literary texts, as Bruce Clarke writes about narrations, "at their deepest level of abstraction ... allow the construction of functional homologies to real processes of life, mind, and society" (Clarke, 2008, p. 35)?

Systems theory, for its part, focuses on explaining art in its social systematicity – its function, organization, coding, and so forth, including interpretation as the work of critics, specialists and analysts in a socio-historical context – and outlining the general communicative status of artworks between this systematicity and psychic systems. Thus, concerning my third, intra-interpretational and media-specific question on the modes of literary correlation—which has to be raised in order to avoid a naive representationalism of whatever kind—systems theory may only provide general connection points, open ports, to which more exact literature-specific definitions are to be linked. Here, in terms of neocybernetic self-observation, systems theory is to be coupled with other theoretical frameworks.

Historically, this necessity was already foreshadowed during the mostly empirically oriented German debates of the early 1990s, as led by Siegfried J. Schmidt, Gebhard Rusch, Gerhard Plumpe and others. In 1993, Claus-Michael Ort wrote:

The facts that 'literature' as a social communicative system constitutes itself through production, reception, distribution and other operations on and about texts and that it successively autonomizes itself as a cultural subsystem of society ... have been ... treated sufficiently by means of historical and theoretical differentiation. But the question how this happens ... has hardly ever been entered into in theoretical, historical and exemplary ways (Ort, 1993, p. 272; my translation).

"To this end," Ort continues in a footnote, "textual analysis and (social) systems theory would have to converge" (Ort, 1993, p. 272). The question why this idea of conversion (of perspectives on literature as a social system and literature as a system of symbols) did not have broad resonance at that time – Schwanitz being one of the rare exceptions – could be another object for today's neocybernetic epistemology. Most likely, one important factor consisted in the fact that many social-systemic oriented literary theorists had developed their models in decided contrast to hermeneutics.

Schwanitz, as described above, discusses systems theory's relationship to deconstruction, stressing the importance of *difference* as the common ground for both; this leads to a similar perspective on inscription. Besides, his connections to interpretatory theory instead of presenting solutions rather demonstrate the teething troubles of conversion – Schwanitz himself speaks of an *intensification of interpretation problems* (Schwanitz, 1990, p. 217). In the closing chapter of *Systemtheorie und Literatur*, he tries to connect Luhmann's communication concept to Jakobson's and Lévi-Strauss' structuralist descriptions of semantic opposition and paradigmatic language, and even integrates Chomsky's deep structure. The tenor is that literary texts are paradigmatic carriers of *family likenesses* and can be reduced to common grounds of deeper meaning, which consist of semantic oppositions, that is: organize the concrete works' complexity in a similar way as communications organize social complexity. This approach, however, cannot answer the *how*-question either. It parallelizes challenging and interesting aspects of social systemicity and narrative without binding them.

After all, then, comparison is not enough. In contrast, today's neocybernetic literature theory tends to "redescribe narratological matters in systems-theoretical terms," as Clarke puts it in his posthumanist narratology (Clarke, 2008, p. 23). For instance, at the level of theory itself, the differentiation between a narrative's text, its story and its fabula, as presented in Mieke Bal's *Narratology*, can be reread as referring to the same communicational reality as Luhmann's conception of information, utterance, and understanding. The border between structure and system may not be crossed, but both sides can virtually be surveyed from the same (theoretical) observing position. The result may be a new form of close reading, as Joseph Tabbi exemplifies it in his book on cognitive fictions in American literature of the post-1980s era. If texts are referred to autopoiesis – as, in this case, novels by Auster, Markson, and Mathews, which represent a narrative perspective as well as the notation system in which this perspective is written about – they also have to be read in different ways. Criticism, then,

would do well to shift from interpretation to observation, from a concern with an author's subjectivity to what is public and intersubjective. The critic's function, when observing an author's recorded observations, is not primarily to judge the work, produce its history, or even reflect on its meanings. A far more integral activity is to think with the work, to converse through it and explore social forms and possibilities at the level of the work's autopoiesis, its coming to form. (Tabbi, 2002, p. xxv f.)

Perspectives

The problems of conversion between sociology and text on the one hand, and the apparent irreconcilability of biological and non-biological frameworks on the other hand are the coordinates determining the actual discourse of literary interpretation by means of autopoiesis as a figure of knowledge. In order to provide an essential orientation and possibilities of theoretical navigation within this complex field, it is

necessary to focus on some methodological landmarks, which I have paraphrased in the form of three fundamental questions: How is the correlation of literary texts and autopoiesis realized concretely; which aspects of autopoiesis are involved; and which intramedial levels of literature are observed?

Based on these questions, I have tried to exemplify the ways in which the possibilities of parallelizing autopoietic self-labelling and literary aspects such as aesthetic self-referentiality, narrative self-maintenance and lyrical self-production of meaning are not only exchangeable illustrations of system's theory's universality, but may also provide a unique access to literary interpretation. Furthermore, from systems theory's perspective, the differentiation of linguistic, textual, and artistic levels characterizes literature as a medial platform of systemic coupling par excellence, while interpretation may focus on the concrete observation of these levels through literature itself. The step from parallelization to combination, however, demands the overcoming of sociological, biological, or hermeneutical one-sidedness – that is, the establishing of new theoretical couplings. They pave the way towards a coherent and generalizable interpretive framework that goes beyond bare associativity and scattered examples of literature solely illustrating systemic thinking.

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