

FRANK KELLETER

A Tale of Two Natures

After decades of emphasis on the special status of humanist scholarship, a counter-movement has recently emerged, claiming that human culture can be understood by recourse to scientific research and empirical method. Two scientific fields in particular haven proven attractive to crisis-ridden humanists: the cognitive sciences and evolutionary biology.

The present essay surveys the field of neo-naturalist approaches, arguing that they have something crucial to contribute to the study of literature and culture in the early twenty-first century. Their dissatisfaction with self-serving theoretical disputes provides an antidote to the obscurantism of much humanist scholarship today. Their interest in principled analysis has the potential of opening up cultural studies to unjustly forgotten fields such as rhetoric and stylistics. Their concern with the anthropological status of literature can act as a control on hasty brands of cultural relativism.

However, cognitive poetics and literary Darwinism are more limited in their understanding of proper method (in the sense of *Wissenschaftlichkeit*) than appears at first glance, because there is a nontrivial difference between human artifacts and natural objects, between knowledge of history and knowledge of evolution. In this sense, neo-naturalist approaches frequently misconstrue the status and function of literary works in their social and cultural worlds. One reason for this is a widespread misconception about the way particularity and universality relate in affairs of human history. This misconception in turn derives from the analytical fallacy to confuse the orderliness of one's propositions with the properties and conditions of one's object.

As a result, the findings of neo-naturalist studies frequently serve to establish nothing more than the soundness of the chosen method, while failing to address the most distinct features of their objects of study. Furthermore, samples from neo-naturalist research illustrate that the results of zoomorphic approaches to cultural artifacts are often bizarrely out of proportion with the complexities of their method. If it is a mark of *Wissenschaftlichkeit* that methodological effort and eventual findings stand in a balanced relationship, then the scholarly value of many neo-naturalist studies is at least debatable.

This is so because these studies are often marred by a conceptual – not an ontological – confusion between humankind's first and second nature and by an attendant confusion between the modes of knowledge appropriate to either realm. In this sense, neo-naturalism suffers from a failure of logic, not a failure of morality or a failure of aesthetic piety. Nowhere is this more evident than in the manner neo-naturalists employ the word ›the mind,‹ perhaps the most fetishistic

and at the same time most central constituent of their vocabulary. Drawing on Bennett and Hacker's critique of the neo-Cartesian ›mereological fallacy‹ in contemporary neuroscience, the present essay investigates the usages of this word in neo-naturalist literature, arguing that neo-naturalism suffers from an astonishing terminological fuzziness at its very conceptual center.

Thus, in order to become productive for the study of literature and culture, neo-naturalist approaches must be relieved of their logical errors. Prime among these errors is a misguided conception of literary and cultural activity as something that essentially occurs *in* human beings, in their bodies and brains, as opposed to something that is an act *of* human beings, for which they make use of their bodies and brains, acting on and contributing to their self-created environments. Culture is not *simply* physiological matter; it is a historical process of differentiation involving intentions, non-intended determinations of intentions, misunderstandings, appropriations, and contingencies. If we want to profit from the important issues raised by evolutionary and cognitive discussions of literature, we need to restate these issues at the level of culture(s), where they belong.

In its final chapter, the essay addresses the causes of the current vogue for neo-naturalist explanations in the humanities. Drawing on Garber's concept of ›discipline envy,‹ this chapter argues that the advent of cognitive poetics and literary Darwinism can be understood in historical terms as an example of growing humanist self-doubt in the face of a rapidly shifting balance of symbolic power between academic disciplines. Fantasizing about ›science‹ as »that more complete other thing« (Garber), the humanities not only tend to fall for popularized and simplistic notions of scientific method but also to surrender whole areas of knowledge to the fashionable promises of a flawed and equally simplistic understanding of interdisciplinarity.

What we are witnessing, then, is less a paradigm shift than a symptom of institutional insecurity. As far as paradigm shifts go, neo-naturalism satisfies the humanist desire for such intellectual models no better or worse than Marxism, psychoanalysis, or poststructuralism. The institutional attractiveness of neo-naturalism lies precisely in its competitive continuity with earlier master theories. In each case, the charisma of the chosen approach resides in its internal intellectual irresistibility: Once the truth of the theory is established, everything makes sense *within* its propositional system. As a result, external critique can either be dismissed as incompetent or restated in terms of the theory criticized, thus proving its fundamental veracity. Neo-naturalist rhetoric operates according to the same principles and is therefore badly qualified for bringing forth a period of ›Post-Theory‹.

Full-length article in: JLT 1/1 (2007), 153-189.

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Frank Kelleter, A Tale of Two Natures. Worried Reflections on the Study of Literature and Culture in an Age of Neuroscience and Neo-Darwinism.

In: JLTonline (19.03.2009)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-000477

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-000477>