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## PROLEGOMENA TO A THEORY OF THE LITERARY GENRES

### I

It may seem somewhat strange to invite the reader's attention to prolegomena to something which has existed for a long time and whose right of existence can hardly be questioned. In defence of the following views I could point out that metaphysics was studied for many centuries before Kant published his *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können*. But such a defence would probably create the impression that the present writer fancies himself to be on the same level with Kant, even though he does not harbour any such thought. However, there are, without any doubt, similarities between the purposes of Kant and the purposes of any one reflecting upon the basic principles of his particular field of scholarship; and this conviction does not imply anything concerning the intellectual level of these reflections. Moreover, there is also some similarity between metaphysics and the theory of the literary genres or literary scholarship in general. This has been recognized by others like, for instance, by Epstein in *Die Metaphysizierung in der literaturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung und ihre Folgen, dargelegt an drei Theorien über das Literaturbarock* (Berlin 1929)<sup>1</sup>. At this point a specific question arises: are we to regret this similarity, as Epstein does, and are we to keep literary scholarship free from metaphysics, or whatever especially neo-positivistic thinkers mean by this term? Another question is whether we can keep literary scholarship entirely free from metaphysics.

In many respects literary study and philosophy do not differ as much as they appear to at first sight, and in some respects there is, strictly speaking, no difference at all. For instance, the scholar who wants to classify literary works is immediately faced with the general problem that unavoidably arises whenever the attempt is made to classify a number of objects which are similar (or thought to be similar) in a certain respect, but are dissimilar (or thought to be dissimilar) in other respects.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. note 2.



This is, to a certain extent, an epistemological problem; and if the scholar does not want to become the victim of a pre-critical use of language, he shall have to think out certain philosophical problems in connection with his particular subject.

There is still another factor that could induce someone to write prolegomena once he has resolved to classify literary works on the basis of their similarities and differences and to describe by scholarly method the varieties he has distinguished. He is not dealing with literary works only. He certainly has to take into consideration also the existing terminology, while the ideal procedure would be to consider everything that has been written about literary genres. Whoever attempts this type of study as though he were the first one to deal with it incurs the risk not only of not achieving as much as he could achieve if he were supported by the findings of others, but also of developing a theory that has been formulated before — and formulated better at that — or one that has been conclusively refuted a long time ago. But as he takes cognizance of the many books and articles about literary genres, he will be struck by the very diverging opinions expressed in them. At the same time he will most likely discover that not one of them completely satisfies him. In 1932 J. Overmans wrote an article on *Die Wirrnis unserer Literaturwissenschaft*<sup>2</sup> — a title that could scarcely be called stimulating. Such chaos existed thirty years ago, and it has not diminished in the last decades. It continues to exist also in regard to the theory of the literary genres. This does not mean that in many respects there is no important progress to report, nor does it imply that the Polish journal especially devoted to the study of the literary genres has only increased the diversity of opinions without furthering and deepening the insight in the issues themselves. But thus far disagreement prevails and reality — that is, in this case, literature as a whole — does not in all respects allow itself to be caught in the network of theory (or of one of the theories), and finally, the terms that are used do not satisfy all the demands of scholarly exactness. As long as these phenomena prevail we are faced with the problem of discovering their causes. The quest for these causes is the quest for that which comes “before” or lies “under” the theory. If developed systematically, an account of whatever is revealed by such a search can justifiably be considered to belong to the prolegomena. It will partially coincide with what is to be learned from reflecting upon the problem itself, i. e. upon the implications of classifying literary works.

I am aware that by far not everything in my observations is new. Certain aspects of the problems I intend to consider have already been dealt with by others. These I have but formulated in my own way and organized within the new context.

<sup>2</sup> *Stimmen der Zeit*, CXXII, 6. — The question of the acceptance or non-acceptance of “metaphysics” is only one (though not one of the most insignificant) of the factors that have given rise to the chaos (see section VI). At the very opposite of the above-quoted study by Epstein we find W. Plümacher's *Versuch einer metaphysischen Grundlegung literaturwissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe aus Kants Antinomienlehre mit Anwendung auf das Kunstwerk Hermann Hesses*, Bonn—Würzburg 1936.



## II

In histories of philosophy, systematic surveys of philosophy, and in philosophical dictionaries little, if any, attention is paid to linguistics and literary scholarship. This cannot be justified, for they, too, in their own way, partake of general philosophical questions; they, too, can furnish concrete examples for explorations in the field of the theory of knowledge; and finally, they, too, can be subjected to epistemological and linguistic criticism. They show a variant of the problematic relationships between the parts of the triad "language-thought-reality". When we limit ourselves to literary scholarship, reality is to be equated, as I have said before, with literature as a whole. But as soon as we speak of "literature as a whole", we realize that the discussion of philosophical problems has to be preceded by a discussion of a few difficulties — "practical" difficulties shall we say — of a totally different nature. They are related to the unavoidable limitations of the scholar in question.

No one intending to develop a theory of the literary genres has this reality at his disposal, for everyone's knowledge of literature is limited. When one begins a classification one is acquainted with only a part of a few literatures. It seems trivial to make such a remark, but scholarly caution compels us not to exclude it completely from our discussion. Analogous situations can be found in other fields of research. General linguistics and the so called *grammatica universalis* have often wrongly been limited to the Indo-European languages, and this has caused them to be seriously lacking with respect to universality. A theory of verse that would not take into consideration Hebrew and Chinese poetry would not only be incomplete, but would also most likely fail as a general theory in its primary classification of poetry (or at least that which has the form of poetry) into types of verse. It is generally known that the discovery of just one new fact can basically change the entire world-picture of the physicist. Less generally known is the fact that something similar — perhaps to a smaller, but nonetheless demonstrable, degree — holds good with regard to literary scholarship. Its development has proved to be dependent (if not completely, then at any rate partially) upon changes that took place in the object of its research. A certain influence upon literary scholarship was noticeable whenever this research was extended to literatures hitherto unknown or not yet theoretically investigated.

It certainly has not yet been conclusively proved that specifically the theory of the literary genres would also change to a more or less considerable extent if the empirical material now available were to be enlarged. Yet it has not been conclusively demonstrated either that this possibility is excluded. The theory — and I am thinking in this case mainly about the primary classification(s) of literary works — carries the pretension to be applicable to all literatures and all periods of literature; yet such a theory has unavoidably been based upon a limited numbre



of data taken from literatures that have been written in rather cognate languages belonging to somewhat related cultures. Besides, there is the danger, which is not an imaginary one, that new data, if they, too, are used to develop the theory, will be arranged according to categories that have been set up on the basis of older data. These are categories, in other words, that are simply with us at present and can hardly be disregarded by the scholar, even though their adequacy with regard to the new material is not certain. But this is a problem of a different order.

The above mentioned limitation has been discerned before by others. Staiger says: "Die Beispiele sollten grundsätzlich der ganzen Weltliteratur entnommen werden. Es wird sich aber kaum vermeiden lassen, dass die Auswahl den Standort des Betrachters verrät. Die deutschen und die griechischen Dichter werden bevorzugt, einzig deshalb, weil ich mit diesen am besten vertraut bin. Mein Standpunkt verriete sich aber auch, wenn ich in slawischer, nordischer oder gar ausser-europäischer Dichtung besser belesen wäre. Es wäre immer noch einer, dessen Muttersprache deutsch ist, der dieses Schrifttum zu beschreiben sich anheischig macht. Solche Grenzen bleiben gezogen, man mag sich stellen, wie man will. Der Schaden ist freilich nicht so gross, wie wenn es sich um eine Poetik im alten Sinne handeln würde. Dennoch könnte es sein, dass alles in einer Hinsicht betrachtet wird, die nur für das deutsche Sprachgebiet von einigem Interesse ist. Dies zu entscheiden, steht mir nicht zu"<sup>3</sup>.

The limitations of the scholar, even of one that has a reasonable command of six or seven foreign languages, reveal themselves in yet another way. He is not acquainted with scholarly publications in the field of literature in the languages of which he has no command. Something could have escaped his attention — something that would have been greatly important for his own investigations and his own theory, and that would have prevented his committing certain errors. These remarks convey more than mere unfounded suppositions. Rather frequently, opinions are committed to print which previously, in another language, have been either formulated better or conclusively refuted. In a number of cases this is made clear by gaps in the list of consulted works: works written in a certain language are not listed. At many an international congress it happens that papers are read which scarcely demonstrate more than the speaker's lack of knowledge of certain publications. Obviously this is caused by his lack of knowledge of the language in which they are written. These remarks are not intended to censure others. Every scholar in the field of literature can at one time or another ascertain such facts and can draw the conclusion that he himself has most likely more than once failed in the same way without ever having been aware of it. It is a less serious affair when someone, for the same reasons, seems at times to commit plagiarism.

<sup>3</sup> E. Staiger, *Grundbegriffe der Poetik*, Zürich 1946, p. 11. In this quotation Staiger alludes also to another limitation. This is discussed in section III.



## III

The above mentioned practical difficulties, these limitations, which are as disagreeable as they are unavoidable, are in themselves not very important. Much more interesting and at the same time much more important for the prolegomena I have in mind are the differences between the languages in relation to the differences between the theories developed in these languages. A student of literature in The Netherlands reads mainly French, German, and English (also American) publications in addition to what is published in his native language. At times he may get the impression — I am eliminating for now the Dutch contributions — that he has to deal not with one but actually with three different species of literary scholarship: a French, a German, and an English one. My colleague, J. G. Bomhoff, who teaches general literature at the University of Leyden, has formulated it in this way. Although in this wording a relative truth may have been expressed in too absolute a manner, there are indeed differences, even though it is difficult to describe them exactly. In such a case we are inclined to work more or less intuitively and to react “synthetically” to totalities. In doing so we do not become conscious of the moments of these totalities — the concrete characteristics of what appears to us as typically “French”, typically “German”, and typically “English”; these could be elucidated only by a comparative-analytical investigation. For example, we call French literary scholarship “essay-like”, the German “philosophical” or “speculative”. Such synthetic judgements are undoubtedly worthwhile, but they are also somewhat dangerous. Although there is little reason to question the correctness of our first impression, viz. that there is a difference, it would nevertheless be better to aim at a more precise description.

Of the many questions that come to mind we can ask ourselves the following. If there is a difference, to what extent is this difference to be considered a result of a difference between the languages in which the literary theories are developed? The possibility that language differences could account in this situation for all the differences has to be ruled out. It is, however, a reasonable assumption that the differences between these languages can exercise some influence, although they are not as marked as the differences that exist between any one of them and, for instance, Chinese. This is based, among other things, upon the following considerations.

The student of literature cannot (some will say not yet) make use of a universal language of ideographic symbols. He has to rely upon one of the natural languages. Since very strong demands are placed upon his command of the language, he will usually prefer to use his native tongue. But whatever his choice may be, he uses words that are available in a particular language and that were available long before he used them in his own sentences. No matter how far the possibilities to translate these words may go, the meaning-unit of a particular word in language A is not completely equal to one of the words in language B. The reason for this is, among



other things, that it belongs to a different series of partial synonyms. This series may be either smaller or larger than the one in language B, but it is, at any rate, a different series. In addition, it should be noticed that the meanings available in the language used by the theorist are not always sufficient for his purposes. Compelled by the object of his research, or by his views of that object, he sometimes has to modify these meanings as they do not adequately express that which he considers the reality of his special field. He therefore has to work inventively on the semantic level, and this causes the distance between his own and another language to become still greater. It is well-known — and it is also one of the reasons why poetry is untranslatable — that a word in one language cannot be used in the same way as its counterpart in another language.

The problem becomes even more complicated when a new word, and not just a new shade of meaning of an existing word, is needed. In scholarly work in literature, or in the humanities in general, one sometimes feels the need for, and sometimes is forced to make, partial neologisms, i. e. new derivatives and compounds. This is done with the help of the means at one's disposal in the language one uses. But precisely in this field the differences between, for instance, German and French are very great. Let me give one example of this, borrowed from the theory of the metaphor.

In a study by H. Pongs, *Das Bild in der Dichtung*, I,<sup>4</sup> there appear terms such as "erfühlen", "auffühlen" and "sonderfühlen", "urbildend", "sinnbildend" and "erbildend". The process is clear: the three parts of each of the triads named have the last morpheme in common; they differ in the first one. Formal similarities and differences are accompanied by semantic similarities and differences; in each instance the original meaning is varied or qualified in another way. It seems impossible to me to find equivalents to this in French. Anyone who wanted to translate Pongs's work into French would not find his task to be an easy one. It is not my purpose at present to discuss these difficulties of translation. This is only one other aspect of the problem I am referring to. If certain word-formations were not possible in German, Pongs would not have had them at his disposal. He could not have made these words, these partial neologisms, and he would have had to master the extremely complicated phenomenon "metaphor" in another way, that is, with the help of another terminology.

It is not my intention to maintain that his theory is correct and that, in a scholarly sense, we are helpless without these and similar German words when we want to make a study of metaphorical language. It is even less my intention to evoke the idea that in my opinion a language which is synthetic in respect to the way its words are formed would be better suited to literary study than one that is analytical in this respect. But I do hold the opinion that in some cases one can demonstrate that a theory is dependent upon the characteristics of the language in which it is deve-

<sup>4</sup> *Versuch einer Morphologie der metaphorischen Formen*. Marburg 1927.



loped. The question now is whether or not this also applies particularly to the theory of the literary genres.

A primary classification of literary works into three categories has become traditional in a number of countries. In order to simplify matters I am not taking into account the fact that some people view all literature of a didactic nature as a separate fourth category. In German they speak of "lyrische, epische und dramatische Literatur". Similar words appear in English, in French and in other languages, but for brevity's sake I shall not discuss these at present. Since the terms we are now dealing with are international terms, the English words bear a close resemblance, as far as their form is concerned, to the German ones; and at first sight their meanings do not seem to deviate from those of the German words. Nevertheless, they belong to other complexes of formally and semantically connected words, and they have, moreover, a different syntactical and morphological valence.

In German there are, along with the adjectives „lyrisch, episch, dramatisch", the substantives „(die) Lyrik, (die) Epik, (die) Dramatik", and, moreover, the substantives (adjectives used substantively, "das Epische, das Dramatische". Thinking particularly of Staiger's work, we may notice that the formal-semantic difference between words that end in "-ik" and those that end in "-ische" plays an important part in the German theory of the literary genres. In spite of its world-embracing title the well-known *Dictionary of World Literary Terms*<sup>5</sup> records nothing concerning this German theory and its terminology, neither does it have entries on anything that could be considered its English equivalent. We find only the substantive "(a) lyric", meaning a certain kind of poem, and this time we have a word for which no analogue is to be found in German. "Epic" functions in the entry "Epic poetry" as an adjective. In the article it appears also as a substantive: "an epic, the epic"; the latter is a universal and cannot possibly be rendered in German by "das Epische". Similar observations can be made about "drama". In this entry some reference is made to "drama as an art form", but used in this way its meaning cannot be made to coincide with the meaning of the German adjective which is used as a substantive, since the latter alludes to something other than "form" or "form" only. In addition, one who reads the discussions in these three entries does not get the impression that they are aimed at three equivalent, primary categories which together span the whole of literature. Moreover, in no one of the three entries is reference made to either one of the other two. If the articles in the above mentioned dictionary have been written with a certain communication between the co-workers and with the proper editorial coordination which is important in such cases, we do have to conclude that English and American scholars in the field of literature do not

<sup>5</sup> *Criticism. Forms. Technique. Edited by Joseph T. Shipley with the Collaboration of 250 Scholars and Other Authorities.* London 1955. This means that the book was published after Staiger's *Grundbegriffe*.



attach much value to a primary classification and its ensuing problems, and that their view of literature as a whole is not the same as that of their German (and other) colleagues.

I would still like to add that Dutch too has the substantives "lyriek, epiek, dramatiek" (German: "Lyrik, Epik, Dramatik"). The two words mentioned last do not appear in Dutch-English dictionaries, evidently because in English no word forms exist that render their meanings. In Dutch, furthermore, the three adjectives can be made into substantives without any difficulty "het lyrische, het epische, het dramatische".

In German, then (like in Dutch and perhaps also in other languages) the following formulation is possible. "All «Dramen» — in the broadest sense of the word: farces, comedies, tragedies, etc. — belong to «Dramatik». A novel, for example, does not belong to it. It is nevertheless conceivable, and it can be ascertained, too, that in a novel «das Dramatische» can be manifested in a more powerful and purer way than in many plays". Naturally, what has been formulated here remains more or less vague as long as "das Dramatische" is scarcely more than a word that has not yet been developed into a scholarly concept. It seems to me, however, that this example, though not fully elaborated, may suffice as an illustration of the relationship between language and theory I had in mind.

Is it true, then, that such a word cannot possibly be translated into a number of languages? This question can hardly be answered in the affirmative without some hesitation. In a language in which words such as "ein Drama — die Dramatik — dramatisch — das Dramatische" are practically or wholly impossible because of the existing morphemes and the rules in effect for word formation, we can resort to some group of words and attach the same meaning to it. Neither is it entirely inconceivable that a Frenchman or an Englishman, each in his own language, would arrive at a theory essentially the same as the one Staiger developed in his *Grundbegriffe der Poetik*. This, however, is but speculation. Facts are more important than possibilities. And it is simply a fact that French and English scholars have not done what they perhaps could have done. At the same time it is a fact that this theory did attain its development in German. And in view of the characteristics of the German language, this does not surprise us.

I repeat what I have said about the theory of metaphorical language when I gave the example from Pongs's study. It is not my intention to show or even to suggest that German literary theory at this point is ahead of literary theory in other languages. I am convinced that comparative evaluations of languages are unproductive and that all efforts to prove that one language is superior to another are null and void. English, French, German, Dutch, Polish, Russian, or any language for that matter is just as good as any other for scholarly work in general and for literary scholarship in particular. My example is borrowed from German simply for want of a better one in one of the other languages. Moreover, I have not expressed complete agreement with the theory referred to. On the contrary, as I have



yet to explain, it does not seem convincing to me for more than one reason — though this is not detrimental to my admiration for Staiger's achievements.

Certain fervent critics of language have presumably more than once overestimated the influence which a particular language exercises on thought. It is no easy task to separate this influence from other influences and to demonstrate it clearly in each particular case. Nevertheless, it can hardly be questioned that one's train of thought occasionally is compelled to move in a certain direction because of the characteristics of the language one uses. This has been pointed out rather frequently but, to my knowledge, only sporadically so in connection with the theory of the literary genres. Staiger makes a very pregnant allusion to this point when he says (see the quotation in section II): "Es wäre immer noch einer, dessen Muttersprache deutsch ist, der dieses Schrifttum zu beschreiben sich anheischig macht". The question belongs to the field of the special critique of language. It goes without saying that also in the realm of the general critique of language one's attention can be directed to this theory. But first our attention should be directed to something the relationship of which to language may be apparent only after an extensive analysis. I am now referring to the fact that we place together, and separate, certain phenomena on the basis of similarities and differences, in other words, that we classify. But in order to classify, not only the nature but also the number of our categories is relevant. Certain considerations on this point ought not to be missing from the prolegomena, for it has so often been the object of methodical doubt.

#### IV

A primary classification practically always results in a small number of main categories. For quite a long time this number has attracted the attention of sceptics, agnostics, and those occupied with epistemological problems. "A small number" could be two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and even, if need be, ten. When we take into consideration all primary classifications in the realm of scholarship and in philosophy, we are faced with a striking phenomenon, viz. that a few of these numbers are clearly preferred above the others. Especially the number three seems to be very useful in this respect. This has already been recognized by the satirist Swift. In *A Tale of a Tub* he says that philosophers of all times have made use of the pulpit, the ladder, and the moveable stage in order to rise above their fellow men, after which he tries to show that "the bench and the bar" could not be used for this purpose. His concluding argument runs like this (and now I take the liberty to quote at length):

"But if no other argument could occur, to exclude the bench and the bar from the list of oratorical machines, it were sufficient, that the admission of them would overthrow a number, which I was resolved to establish, whatever argument it might cost me; in imitation of that prudent method observed by many other philosophers and great clerks, whose chief art in division has been to grow fond of some proper



mystical number, which their imaginations have rendered sacred, to a degree, that they force common reason to find room for it in every part of nature; reducing, including, and adjusting every «genus» and «species» within that compass, by coupling some against their wills, and banishing others at any rate. Now, among all the rest, the profound number three is that which hath most employed my sublimest speculations, nor ever with delight. There is now on the press, and will be published next term, a panegyric essay of mine upon this number; wherein I have, by most convincing proofs, not only reduced the senses and the elements under its banner, but brought over several deserters from its two great rivals, seven and nine”<sup>6</sup>.

Swift has had several imitators who have contended that the mysticism of a number, notably the number three, reigns over the classifications we find in the realm of scholarship and in philosophy. They have given to the word “trichotomy” a very unfavourable connotation. The triad “Lyrik—Epik—Dramatik”—I now do have to use the German terms—is only one of the very many that could be mentioned in this connection. Is there sufficient reason to view this triad with distrust or even to reject it entirely?

Criticism of the trichotomy is based, among other things, on the following considerations. From of old three has been viewed as a sacred and perfect number. For some reason a threefold division satisfies the human mind more than a fourfold or fivefold division, especially when the three categories are conceived in a Hegelian manner as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis — and the literary genres are sometimes conceived in this way. It is highly improbable that reality itself (in the broadest sense of the word) would in different respects be constructed according to this principle. In applying the number three to reality in general or to a reality of a particular order, one voices what is essentially nothing but an irrational *a priori* judgement. From it one gets a system that is experienced as self-contained and harmonious, but it is a system in which there can be no place for reality (or for a reality). For surely reality is far too complicated to be caught in a network having three points of junction.

This reasoning certainly looks acceptable. Methodical doubt is indeed difficult to suppress if one sees how time and again the number three turns up in the most widely diverging realms of learning. Recently, however, it did get a formidable competitor in the number two, especially in linguistics and in stylistic studies. But fortunately we have, after all, but to pass judgement on each classification separately and not on a number of classifications together. From case to case it has to be decided whether someone has violated the material at his disposal for the sake of maintaining the threefold division, for example, by neglecting a part of it because it does not fit very well into the scheme, or by gathering phenomena that

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<sup>6</sup> *A Tale of a Tub*, Section 1, *Introduction*. The quotation is taken from the *Works*, Edinburgh 1761, I, p. 39. The number seven and nine have long since had their day.



are essentially different and reducing them to the same denominator on the basis of common, though irrelevant, characteristics. A classification based on a threefold division does not in itself provide sufficient reason for concluding that a mystical number and not scholarly reasoning has determined the classification. And this only means that the categories and the criteria on which they are based must be examined in connection with the data and that their exactitude must be put to the test — entirely apart from their number, whether it be three or twenty-nine. On second thoughts, the number of categories does not present us with problems different from those presented by the categories themselves.

In defence of the literary triad one could still present the following argument. Nature, to which Swift refers in his satirical discussion of classifications, is a totally different object than literature. Not only the classification of literary works, but also literature itself is man-made. If man is actually under the power of the number three, it is also probable that his literary expression has manifested itself in three different ways. In that case the classification is of its own accord adequate for the object under examination. The distance between thought and that upon which it is brought to bear is in this case much smaller than in a number of other cases, for example, in biology. The "natural system of biology" has frequently been called a *contradictio in adjecto*<sup>7</sup>. This is scarcely or not at all applicable to the "natural system" of the literary genres.

Indeed, relationships in the field of biology are different from those in the field of literature. Still the argument is far from convincing. In the first place, the power of the number three over the human mind is apparently not strong enough to prevent some scholars from preferring a fourfold division. Secondly, the adequacy of three as such is beside the point; what is at stake is the value of three categories, mentioned expressly and described in a scholarly manner. And for determining this value more is needed than what is contained in this argument, even though in some respects it is acceptable<sup>8</sup>.

## V

Investigating the value of an existing classification seems to be needless work because of its repetitious nature; for he who carries out this investigation has in fact no means at his disposal essentially different from those used when the clas-

<sup>7</sup> Already expressed by Goethe in this way. Cf. on this question, among others, Claus-Groben, *Lehrbuch der Zoologie*, p. 21. Remarkably enough, a pre-critical view of natural system is to be found in H. Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, 4th edition, Leipzig 1920, p. 25 and pp. 328 ff.

<sup>8</sup> It is over-simplifying matters to make a distinction between the so-called natural sciences and the so-called humanities on the basis of the relationship between the thinking subject and the object of research. Limiting ourselves to the humanities, we notice that they, for that matter, do not in this respect constitute a homogeneous group. This becomes evident when we make a comparison between jurisprudence, linguistics, and literary scholarship. Moreover, each one of the humanities, considered by itself, lacks this homogeneity.



sification was first made. It seems advisable, therefore, that each scholar in turn direct his attention to the material itself, in other words, to literature (or, rather, to that part of literature to which he of necessity is limited) and, on the basis of the similarities and differences he has found, decide on a classification. Having done so he may, if he deems it necessary, compare his classification with the classifications of others. Contrary to what has been argued in section II, this would imply that someone for the formulation of a theory (his theory) of the literary genres does not, in the first instance, need to know what has been achieved by others in this field.

It cannot be denied that the student of literature (and he is not the only one) is in a somewhat paradoxical situation. On the one hand he is conscious of the fact that, no matter which subject he wants to deal with, it is necessary to know as much as is possible about everything published on that subject. On the other hand, he would like once and for all to free himself from what is known to him from publications of others, i. e. free himself from all existing theories, classifications, terms, and definitions which somehow tend to direct his view of the phenomena and sometimes perhaps even cloud his vision as well. But this is a pious wish.

In the history of literary scholarship (and of other fields of learning) it has happened repeatedly that a theory, terminology, or classification which was hundreds of years or even more than two millenniums old and sanctioned by tradition proved to be disastrous to any substantial progress. In this connection I will only mention the following: the imitation theory — “the poet or writer does nothing but imitate reality (in a beautiful way)”; the theory of double expression — “it is possible to convey in language the same thing in two ways (in an ordinary and a beautiful way); what one express with the help of a metaphor, one can also say without the use of metaphoric language”; and, finally, the fourfold division of metaphors based on the contrast between “living and lifeless”. An explanation of existing terms and a paraphrase of existing opinions have far too often taken the place of an inquiry into the facts and into the nature of the phenomena. Who has never felt the need — to quote Locke who expressed himself somewhat bluntly — “to remove the rubbish that lays in the way to knowledge”?<sup>9</sup> Yet no one dealing with the theory of the literary genres is even by far anything like “the thinking subject an und für sich” — in other words, one does not bring one’s mind to bear upon a certain object in perfect freedom and independence, moved only by the will to know something. Long before the student of literature begins his research the threefold division we are discussing has been fixed in his mind, and he has come to know such terms as “ballad, romance, novel, short story, hymn, ode”, and the like. The influence of this knowledge on his thoughts on literature is unavoidable even if it would prevent him, wholly or in part, from gaining a correct insight into the problems. Only extremely compelling reasons can keep him from yielding to the influence of the existing terminology.

<sup>9</sup> J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book III, Ch. IX, § 21.



Concerning a term that has become traditional, the following responses are possible.

Someone can completely reject such a term because in his opinion it does not aim at reality, because it does not aim, he thinks, at the object (or a characteristic of the object) in question; he can also wholly reject the term because it suggests, on account of an irrelevant similarity, the identity of essentially different things.

Furthermore, he can accept the form of an existing term while attaching a different meaning to it, something which often happens and contributes to the confusion Overmans had in mind (see section I). In that case he attaches what is usually called a partially new meaning to an existing word. This means that in his opinion the word always did aim at something, but that the object aimed at has hitherto not been understood correctly and not been subjected to exact scholarly description<sup>10</sup>.

Finally, he can accept both the form and the meaning of an existing term without making any change at all. Whether or not he would have arrived at the same concept (though perhaps named differently) if he had never heard of that term is in this case an idle question. A scholar will remain wavering on many points if he in his own scholarly work wants to mark the boundary line between tradition and himself, i. e. between his own scholarly use of language and that of others.

The inquiry into the value of terms cannot be so easily distinguished from the examination of the facts. Only one who is content with immanent criticism and merely requires coherency can keep terms, systems of thought, and theories rather far removed from the object of his research. A comparison with reality — or, more carefully formulated, with one's view of reality — is necessary in the case of a transcendental critique. But on the other hand, anyone attempting a description of this reality itself is positively in need of words and terms. For the very same reasons this comparison and this description are precisely as difficult. I shall now attempt to explain the nature of these difficulties.

## VI

In addition to a certain terminological knowledge there is something of the scholar himself that enters into his research. It is something more intimately a part of himself, and it also influences his work in a more intimate way. This particular "something" is the type of thinker he himself is. It is — more concretely and better expressed — the individual variant of the type of thinker he is by virtue of his

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Staiger, *op. cit.*, p. 9: „Meine Idee von »rot« muss dem entsprechen, was man gemeinhin »rot« nennt. Sonst brauche ich ein falsches Wort. So muss die Idee von »lyrisch« dem entsprechen, was man gemeinhin, ohne klaren Begriff, als lyrisch bezeichnet“.



natural ability and the way he has developed. Among both students of literature and of philosophy one can easily point to synthetical and analytical thinkers. One finds them, in fact, in a wide range of gradations. Among them one finds Platonists and Aristotelians, realists and nominalists, metaphysicians and neo-positivists, idealists and sceptics — we come near to saying: believers and unbelievers. Some scholars use the language (their language) with complete confidence; others hardly know how to be sufficiently distrustful and are continually afraid of becoming the victim of words — the victim of *flatus vocis*. These are two positions that are poles apart; and between these two, between a point of view that practically excludes a critique of language and one that implies an almost total and essential language criticism, there are but few seats which are not occupied. Whether a term, a theory, or a classification is accepted or rejected depends to a great extent on a “habit” which, as it appears to me, is essentially a philosophical one, though by far not always consciously so.

As concerns the field of literature Mrs. Irene Slawińska has clearly elucidated this point in her article *Toward the Definition of Poetic Drama*<sup>11</sup>. Speaking about the term she mentions in her title she says: “There is almost a general consent nowadays to extend it to cover a great many various attempts in the history of drama, starting with Aeschylus and including the most recent plays. Is this extension justified? Are we able to discover in such different literary phenomena as Greek tragedy, medieval morality plays, Shakespeare, French 17th c. classicism, romantic drama, Sartre or Camus, any valid common factors? At its very core the dilemma would take us back to the old controversy of nominalism versus realism. Nominalists would not admit the notion of poetic drama in such a broad, universal sense. They would deny its very existence”.

It goes without saying that the controversy may also have a bearing on the drama (without modification), the epic, the lyric, the novel, and so on. It is understandable, therefore, that Jean Hankiss, even immediately in the first sentence of his article on “Les genres littéraires”, places realists over against nominalists<sup>12</sup>. The controversy arises on the systematic as well as on the historical level. For example, does it make sense to speak of the history of the drama or of the sonnet and to write such a history? Here we find a series of problems that cannot be solved with an appeal to reality, which, in this case, means an appeal to works of literature. Students of literature do not have to take this as a personal offence, for these problems

<sup>11</sup> „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, III, 2, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, I, 1, p. 49. A note to the title states: „Paru comme chap. XIV d'un livre presque inconnu en Europe — J. Hankiss, *La littérature et la vie* (Obra publicad e prefaciada por Fidelino de Figueredo, Sao Paolo 1951)”. I have to admit (see supra, last paragraph of section II) that it had also escaped my attention when I wrote *Problemen der Literatuurwetenschap* (*Problems of Literary Scholarship*), Antwerpen and Amsterdam 1953. In this book I did quote a few other works by this author. Whoever recalls the *Note de l'éditeur* at the beginning of the first issue of this journal will understand why I mention this here.



are not especially inherent in literary scholarship and not even exclusively inherent in the so-called humanities. In mathematical thinking, to take an example from a totally different field, they appear just as well. Belief or disbelief in the "existence" of numbers has resulted in different types of mathematics.

When I now say that in dealing with this question we ought not to begin working too "synthetically", I reveal something of my own type of thinking just as I did, for that matter, in a considerable part of the preceding discussion. It implies that I cannot so soon decide to ascertain identity in a reality which is of a complicated nature. It appears to me that at this point questions of a different order present themselves and that a few distinctions still have to be introduced.

There is, in the first place, the question whether or not universals such as "the drama, the poetic drama", etc. "exist"<sup>13</sup>. This question can be answered differently; and from of old it has been answered not only in a nominalistic or realistic way, but in other ways as well. There would be no point in elaborating this problem within the scope of this article. This problem is related to another question, viz. whether or not we are guilty of a dangerous use of an "organistic" metaphor when speaking of the history of any one of the literary genres; the question, in other words, whether or not "history" is just a metaphor in the unfavourable sense in which Aristotle and Augustine have already occasionally used the term<sup>14</sup>.

We are dealing with a question of a different nature when we inquire into the relevancy or the characteristic (or characteristics) on the basis of which a number of objects in general, or of literary works in particular, are reduced to the same denominator. Not every classification is acceptable, not even to one who believes that classification can justifiably be undertaken (after philosophical reflection or just spontaneously and in good faith) and who does not interpret the necessary terms nominalistically. In line with this question we find the problem concerning the objectivity of the criteria used as the basis for determining the characteristic (or characteristics). One of the aspects of this problem (if not fully then at least in part) is the diversity of opinions.

Finally, there are a few very fundamental questions which arise from a theory such as the one advanced by Staiger. Although these questions are of a distinctly different character, they do show some relationship with the others. There are more questions that should be mentioned and subsequently discussed, but in order to stay within the limits of an article I prefer to conclude these prolegomena with a brief analysis of a few essential aspects of the *Grundbegriffe der Poetik*<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> "The question of the existence of universals" is the usual and pregnant, though inexact, formulation of the problem under consideration. Cf. my *Het begrip Metaphoor. Een taalkundig en wijsgerig onderzoek* (Amsterdam 1941), p. 609.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A, 9, 991 a 20; Augustine, *Quaestionum in Heptateuchum*, Book III, c. L. 74.

<sup>15</sup> A more extensive critical discussion is to be found in my article *De theorie der literaire genres*, *Feestbundel Prof. Dr. H. J. Pos* (Amsterdam 1948), pp. 128-141.



## VII

Up till now I have made it appear somewhat as if we have but to compare as many concrete literary works as possible with respect to their similarities and differences. By way of a logical process we would obtain a system of concepts with parts hierarchically arranged according to their degree of abstraction; the concepts placed highest would in that case be the primary literary genres conceived in scholarly manner.

One could say that this way of presenting the matter is precisely the presentation of one of the opinions that "has already been conclusively refuted by others" (cf. section II). Although a theory of the literary genres may not, and cannot, avoid, in my opinion, the level of logical abstraction, I admit at once that on this level it can never reach "das Lyrische, das Epische, das Dramatische" and that an "eidetic intuition" (in Husserl's sense) frequently has to co-ordinate the theory and the phenomena. But when we have to give verbal evidence of it, this eidetic intuition is not free from difficulties either. Moreover, the gap between it and the characteristics of concrete literary works that are ascertained in another way cannot wholly adequately be bridged. The characteristics of a literary expression are not of the same order; on the contrary, they vary considerably. We experience a poem, a novel, or a play on very different levels of our psyche at one and the same time. Consequently, on the level of theoretical reflection there arises the need for a changing attitude, at least if we want to give as much as possible all aspects their due. But this does not benefit the coherency of the concepts at our disposal. We can wonder whether this is to be regretted and whether we may judge these concepts by comparing them to an ideal which is the correct norm in a few other fields of learning but which does not hold in the field of literary scholarship because of the peculiar character of the object of its research. Theorists of the literary genres do not explicitly raise this question. But their (positive) answer becomes evident from the fact that they do strive for coherency. It has still to be examined whether (and eventually in how far) their efforts have succeeded.

The reasoning about das Lyrische as "Idee" (German) is at first sight extremely simple. Staiger says:

"Wenn ich ein Drama als lyrisch oder ein Epos — wie Schiller *Hermann und Dorothea* — als dramatisch bezeichne, muss ich schon wissen, was lyrisch oder dramatisch ist. Ich weiss dies nicht, indem ich mich an alle vorhandenen lyrischen Gedichte und Dramen erinnere. Diese Fülle verwirrt mich nur. Ich habe vielmehr vom Lyrischen, Epischen und Dramatischen eine Idee. Diese Idee ist mir irgendeinmal an einem Beispiel aufgegangen. Das Beispiel wird vermutlich eine bestimmte Dichtung gewesen sein. Aber nicht einmal dies ist nötig. Die, um mit Husserl zu reden, »ideale Bedeutung« »lyrisch« kann ich vor einer Landschaft erfahren haben, was 'episch' ist, etwa vor einem Flüchtlingsstrom; den Sinn von »dramatisch« prägt



mir vielleicht ein Wortwechsel ein. Solche Bedeutungen stehen fest. Es ist, wie Husserl gezeigt hat, widersinnig zu sagen, sie können schwanken. Schwanken kann der Gehalt der Dichtungen, die ich nach der Idee bemesse; das Einzelne mag mehr oder minder lyrisch, episch, dramatisch sein. Ferner können an Unsicherheit die »bedeutungsverleihende Akte« leiden. Doch eine Idee »lyrisch«, die ich einmal gefasst habe, ist so unverrückbar wie die Idee des Dreiecks oder wie die Idee von »rot«, objektiv, meinem Belieben entrückt.

Mag aber die Idee auch unveränderlich sein, vielleicht ist sie falsch. Wer rotgrünblind ist, hat keine richtige Idee von »rot«. Gewiss! Doch diese Frage betrifft nur die terminologische Zweckmässigkeit. Meine Idee von »rot« muss dem entsprechen, was man gemeinhin »rot« nennt. Sonst brauche ich ein falsches Wort. So muss die Idee von »lyrisch« dem entsprechen, was man gemeinhin, ohne klaren Begriff, als lyrisch bezeichnet<sup>16</sup>.

So much for Staiger's views. In the above mentioned publication (see note 12) Hankiss choses to view the three genres as "les résultats philosophiques d'une tentative de grouper ce qui est d'ores et déjà séparé, réparti"<sup>17</sup>. In doing so he takes no account at all of the work of his German colleague published five years earlier. At this point we find no trace of a "grouping" in Staiger's book. He makes no use of a logical process of abstraction, and what seems to be an abstraction as soon as it is "caught in language", alludes to something which remains on the empirical level.

According to Staiger "das Lyrische" (etc.) is in origin and essence an experience; we could even say the experience of a feeling. It is a sensation we undergo rather than a perception presupposing a contemplative habit. As such, it appears before language has been used. When this experience is ours for the first time, for instance in coming upon a landscape, or at least something that is not literature (I now assume this to be possible), we certainly do not at once devise a word for it. When later on a literary work is instrumental in creating in us the same sensation, we are able to recognize it. This recognition does imply some reflection, but this does not essentially change the experience. In attempting to name it we would never arrive at the word "lyrical", had we not first become acquainted with this word in a treatise on poetics. But at this moment the word alludes exclusively to the emotional experience without conveying as yet anything like a clear concept. If necessary we could call it an "Idee". But "eine Idee erfahren" is (and remains) something totally different than "einen Begriff denken". At best we are now naming, without having a clear concept, something that has been so named by others who did not possess that clear concept either. In this respect there is no difference at all between our and their use of language. How, then, do we turn an emotional experience into

<sup>16</sup> Staiger, *op. cit.*, p. 9 ff. In the eighth sentence of this quotation we find the following: "was episch, ist etwa vor einem Flüchtlingsstrom". I have corrected this printing error.

<sup>17</sup> „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, I, p. 51.



an element of a system of concepts? How can such a sensation, as a concept, be placed over against, and alongside, other concepts if it has not already been experienced in contrast to other experiences?

The idea "lyrical" is compared with (and in the comparison is made equivalent to) the idea "red"<sup>18</sup>. It is necessary, therefore, that we become as conscious as possible of how we arrive at this idea. One thing strikes us at once, viz. that our idea "red" is simply inconceivable without our ideas "blue, green, yellow", etc. Let us suppose that the entire universe, everything man could see, was "red" without any nuances. In that case man would never arrive at the thought that he was dealing with a kind of "colour". He would in all likelihood never experience this red as a characteristic of the things he sees, and he would have no name for it. If there would be different shades of this red — that is to say, if what we call "red" had something we call "shades" — man would probably speak of different colours and indicate each of the shades with a separate word. At any rate, he would experience them differently than we who have been placed in a more colourful world. Our experience of red and along with it our idea "red" is positively dependent upon both our experience of blue, etc. and the fact that we also perceive shades of red.

Is there anything of this two-sided dependence to be seen with respect to "das Lyrische", "das Epische" and "das Dramatische" as Staiger views them? Something of the nuances can be recognized in the following sentence: "das Einzelne mag mehr oder minder lyrisch, episch, dramatisch sein"; but at this point qualitative relations are replaced by quantitative ones while, on the other hand, we do not find anything analogous to that which in "red" is determined by the existence of "blue", etc. As appears from the quotation the three experiences (that of a landscape, a stream of fugitives, and a verbal contention) come into being completely independent of one another; there is no evidence of any mutual influence or reciprocal dependence. If this is indeed a correct description of the situation on this level, not a single appeal to experience and not a single reflection upon experience can make the "Grunderfahrungen" or the "Grundideen" into "Grundbegriffe" which together constitute a system. We shall, therefore, have to assume that these relationships have already come into existence in the pre-theoretical consciousness. But a hypothesis is one thing, to ascertain a fact is another. As far as this problem is concerned we are on much firmer ground with "red" and the like.

There are, for that matter, even more differences between the parts of Staiger's comparison. When Staiger says that his idea of "red" has to correspond with what we usually call "red", he does not add "without a clear concept". This would serve no useful purpose. No one writes a book to explain to others what "red" actually is or how it should be understood when used in a scholarly context. "Red" is "red" and there is nothing more to it. And in the same way "lyrical", as experience or as

<sup>18</sup> The comparison with the idea "triangle" has been excluded from the discussion. Although "red" and "triangle" are often named together as "ideas", they are not of the same kind.



idea, is "lyrical", and there is, at least on this level, nothing more to be said about it. At this point it is perhaps best that each person decides for himself whether or not a landscape or a poem gives him the experience "das Lyrische". It is, however, a different matter when we want to describe it in a scholarly manner, i. e. when we desire to enumerate a number of its positive characteristics, or define it as a concept. In doing so the same problem presents itself as, for instance, in the case of "das Poetische": the student of literature, who is always susceptible to literature, can swear to it that he experiences it, but it is very difficult for him to impart something of it to others<sup>19</sup>.

Let us suppose that a certain poem has caused one to experience, without any doubt, "das Lyrische". He now wants to find out which characteristics of the poem have evoked this "idea". How can he be certain of finding the right characteristics and not those which caused experience of "das Poetische" or of something else? There is but one method that can keep him from taking the wrong course. Everything he finds on the level of theoretical reflection must be compared with his first experience. By reflecting upon this experience he must examine whether or not the correlates of these characteristics are present on the other level of his consciousness. Anyone who has ever tried to carry out this examination knows how difficult it is to arrive at absolute certainty for oneself.

We are faced with the difficulty of creating a communicable and definable concept out of a very intimate experience that comes before language is used for its description. To achieve this on a strictly scholarly basis is in all likelihood the most fundamental problem of the theory of the literary genres and at the same time of literary scholarship in general.

## PROLEGOMENA DO TEORII RODZAJÓW LITERACKICH

### STRESZCZENIE

Po wskazaniu racji dążeń do zbudowania teorii rodzajów literackich (I) autor omawia najpierw niektóre zachodzące przy tym trudności natury „praktycznej”. Teoretyk ma ambicję zbudowania teorii i klasyfikacji o zasięgu uniwersalnym. A przecież zapoznał się jedynie z bardzo ograniczoną częścią literatury światowej. Nie znając np. języka chińskiego i japońskiego, ryzykuje, że sformułuje uogólnienia bez dostatecznej bazy empirycznej. Ponadto nie zna on niejednej pracy w języku sobie obcym, stąd zachodzi obawa, że pewne myśli sformułowane przez niego jako nowe były już poprzednio wyrażone (II). Bardziej istotna trudność wynika z faktu bardzo swoistych związków zachodzących pomiędzy myślą a językiem, czy raczej pomiędzy myślą a jakościami języka, którym się posługujemy. Można to wykazać za pomocą analizy różnic zachodzących pomiędzy terminologią w języku niemieckim, angielskim i francuskim, którą posługują się teoretycy metafory i teoretycy rodzajów

<sup>19</sup> The problems I am referring to are excellently discussed by E. Husserl in his *Logische Untersuchungen*, vol. II, part I, section 3: *Die Schwierigkeiten der rein phänomenologischen Analyse* (4th ed. Halle a. d. S., 1928), p. 9 ff.



literackich (III). Pogląd, że istnieją trzy rodzaje literackie, domaga się rozpatrzenia niedogodności „trychotomii” i bezspornych niebezpieczeństw płynących z operowania tą liczbą jako wartością niemal „magiczną” (IV). Ktokolwiek weźmie się sam z kolei do nowego dzielenia ogółu dzieł literackich według kryteriów rzekomo istotnych, nie zmieni faktu, że on sam ma w zasobach swojej myśli całą masę terminów, których przecież nie wymyślił. Nie jest on właściwie w stanie ich odrzucić nawet wówczas, gdy ma wrażenie, że nie są adekwatne do rzeczywistości, którą chce opisać. A wtedy akceptując na swój użytek termin taki, jaki jest — zaproponuje dla niego jakąś wariację semantyczną (V). Wszelka teoria dotycząca systemu i historii rodzajów literackich implikuje „rozwiązanie” problemu idei ogólnych (powszechników), a raczej wybór osobisty, mniej lub więcej świadomy, stanowiska filozoficznego. Każdy teoretyk wybiera gdzieś sobie miejsce pomiędzy realizmem a nominalizmem, pomiędzy podejściem — że się tak wyrazimy — „naiwnym” a rygorystyczną krytyką języka (VI). System rodzajów literackich nie zawsze był uważany za rezultat operowania logiczną abstrakcją, lecz za owoc „fenomenologicznej ideacji” w stosunku do doświadczeń natury emocjonalnej. Emil Staiger w swojej książce *Grundbegriffe der Poetik* zastosował metodę fenomenologii. Autor analizuje parę aspektów i parę problemów tej książki. Jest z jednej strony rzeczą niemożliwą stwierdzać cokolwiek naukowo o utworach literackich, jeśli się ich przedtem nie „przeżyło”. Lecz z drugiej strony ogromnie trudno w indywidualnych i skomplikowanych doświadczeniach uchwycić różnice istotne i przekształcać je w pojęcia dające się zdefiniować i przekazywać. Oto trudność najbardziej zasadnicza i podstawowa przy budowaniu teorii rodzajów literackich i w ogóle teorii literatury.

Przełożyła *Stefania Skwarczyńska*