

Experiencing Texts and Cultures: A Review Article of New Work Edited by Nemesio and Tötösy and Sywenky

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**Fedora GIORDANO**

**Experiencing Texts and Cultures: A Review Article of New Work Edited by Nemesio and Tötösy and Sywenky**

Is it possible to fully understand the experience of reading a text? Some of us who in the early 1970s were students of Donald Hirsch and Ralph Cohen at the University of Virginia exploring the fields of hermeneutics and literary history, tried to follow Norman Holland's pathbreaking *Five Readers Reading*. Holland and his disciples followed a psychoanalytical approach to the literary text, semiotics, analytical psychology, archetypal theory, then anthropology, and now we finally to step into the field of ethnic cultural studies -- in North American literary and cultural studies African-American and Native American, for example -- and border studies, leaving aside the problematics of reader's reception in favor of a cultural and historical approach. Others, such as Aldo Nemesio, have followed the path of semiotics and now involve empirical textual studies in their work. Empirical textual studies is a new interdisciplinary field where semiotics, sociology, systems theories, and applied psychology meet to explain the experience of reading.

Aimed as much as possible at the general reader, the essays collected in Aldo Nemesio, ed., *L'Esperienza del testo*. (Roma, Meltemi <<http://www.meltemieditore.it>>, 1999, 214 pages, ISBN 88-86479-82-4, Lit 34.000, paper) win the reader's interest through the use of a discourse kept as plain and accessible as possible. In his very useful introductory essay Nemesio explains the reasons for the use of new empirical (i.e., verifiable) tools applied to the study of traditional literary issues such as interpretation and evaluation. To give an example Nemesio tells his story, the history of his interest in literary incipit, the analysis of the beginnings, of the opening passages of a good number of Italian novels and of how the reading of these beginnings was experienced by a set number of readers. This experiment resulted in a number of questions which show the complexity of this kind of research and the reasons why objective results are hard to come by. The definition of the field of research itself (what do we consider as beginning? A few lines, a few paragraphs or a few pages) of the research subjects (what kind of readers) of tools (a pencil mark on the printed text or other means), the presence or absence of the experimenter, the correct time for the experiment (during the act of reading or after). In this instance, literary beginnings are postulated as a variable field which seems to coincide with the varying typologies of readers. Nemesio then offers an introductory survey of the field of empirical research, especially useful to the Italian reader who is not much aware of these studies, although some basic works, i.e., those of Siegfried J. Schmidt, have been published in Italian translation. For this reason the editor has asked all authors to present the history of their research as well as the results achieved, thus offering a good idea of the scope and range of this field. After Nemesio's introductory essay, two long theoretical essays follow thus offering the reader solid grounding for the understanding of the following articles.

The first is by Steven Tötösy -- long active in the field in North America -- who offers a useful history of both the empirical approach and of the various branches of contemporary systemic theory (to which the 1997 volume he edited and that I am reviewing below is devoted) applied to the study of literature and culture. Tötösy explains that part of the difficulty with the approach may be that scholars in the humanities today often find it difficult to accept that painstaking experiments will bring comparatively small results and therefore tend to dismiss this kind of research as useless. In a very useful Appendix to his article, Tötösy offers a survey of the theories involved in experimental and systemic approach that I will briefly summarize. The theory of empirical study of literature, born as an attempt to solve one of the fundamental problems in hermeneutics, that of validation in interpretation, has divided interpretation from the strictly scientific study of literature. Its methods derive from the social sciences, theories of reception, the cognitive sciences, psychology, etc. The theory of the literary institution takes into consideration everything implied in the production of the text, i.e., technology, the media, economics, scholarly conferences, literary prizes, etc., and at the other end, literary genres, styles, themes, and all imaginary and creative processes. The polysystem theory sees literature as a complex of interrelating systems historically determined, its field are the codes and laws according to which

writers, texts, and readers work. This theory works towards the description of national literatures and of relations among national literatures and brings to focus the key role of literary translation. The theory of literature as system developed on the basis of Talcott Parson's system theory has been elaborated by Niklas Luhmann into a theory of society concentrated on communication and epistemology. The *système de l'écrit* (derived from the general theory of systems of Ludwig von Bertalanffy) works on methodology and on interpretation in relationship to the agents of production, distribution, and conservation of texts. Its most successful research field has been bibliological sciences. The theory of the *champ littéraire* sees literary practice as a social space formed by the interaction of agents, works, and phenomena which make up literary practice and must be considered historically and politically. Phenomena commonly attributed to individual talent thus appear as effects of the field.

The second theoretical essay is by Siegfried J. Schmidt, the founder of the *Empirische Literaturwissenschaft* in Germany in the late 1970s grounded on epistemological studies and constructivism. Schmidt explains how literary actions and not single texts in isolation are the basic units for investigation. These are part of literary processes which in turn are linked into literary systems, which are in relationship with other social systems. Meaning is therefore the result of cognitive actions which are socially and culturally oriented within a particular context. The readers use texts in widely varying ways in order to produce meaning useful to their personal cognitive sphere. A good number of applied studies follow, offering a wide range of examples of the kind of work which is being done by psychologists. Steven F. Larsen and Uffe Seilman present their study of how personal memories work in the reading of literary texts. Malcolm Hayward discusses the use of statistics in the humanities and presents his experiment on the perception of genre distinction between literary narrative and history. Shannon N. Whitten and Arthur C. Graesser discuss the systematic understanding of discourse, distinguishing between surface code, textbase and situation model. Richard M. Roberts and Roger J. Kreuz have investigated differences in the production of discourse tropes, a comparatively new kind of analysis, since most experiments deal with the question of reception. David S. Miall and Don Kuiken present the uses of a new questionnaire to investigate individual differences in the reception of literary texts. Peter Dixon and Marisa Bortolussi present an instance of psychonarratology, the study of mental processes during the elaboration of a narrative text, to investigate changes in the perception of the literary narrator in relation to the use of direct or indirect speech. Ernest T. Goetz and Mark Sadoski present the imaginative component in experiencing the text. László Halász offers a comparative study of the emotional effect in the understanding of literary and historical texts conducted on a group of high school and university students. Els Andringa's article deals with an experiment in empirical narratology. Presenting two groups of readers with two short stories and their simplified version, the experiment tried to understand how narrative distance may influence the emotional involvement of the reader. János László explores the ways in which previous socio-historical knowledge of readers may influence the evaluation of a short story. All texts are accompanied by explanatory footnotes in which the editor has traced available Italian translations of quoted works and has appended an extensive bibliography which will make of this book a very useful research tool (for an online version of the bibliography, see <<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/library/sysbib97.html>>).

In order to follow the history and developments of this kind of research readers will find of great interest a much more ponderous and comprehensive work, published jointly in 1997 by the Research Institute for Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta and the Institute for Empirical Literature and Media Research at Siegen University is *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture as Theory and Application* edited by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Irene Sywenky (University of Alberta, 605 pages, US \$40, paper ISBN 0-921490-08-9). This is a volume aimed at specialists in the field and consists of selected papers presented at the 5th Biannual Conference of IGEL: International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature organized by the then president of the association, Steven Tötösy, in August 1996 at the Nakoda Lodge Conference Centre near Banff and hosted by the University of Alberta. It includes 44 essays divided into three sections: The first is devoted to theory and meta-theory, the second to its

Fedora Giordano,

"Experiencing Texts and Cultures: A Review Article of New Work Edited by Nemesio and Tötösy and Sywenky" page 4 of 5  
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 2.1 (2000): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss1/7>>

applications in literature, culture, and the media, the third to its applications in literature and reading. A fifteen-page long selected bibliography of works in the systemic and empirical approach to literature and culture by Tötösy is appended to the volume. The large number of papers and the specialized fields covered make it very difficult to give a full account of the book. The main areas covered are theory of literature and of the media (philosophical background, attention to sensorial perception, recurring patterns in canon formation, rules of language behavior, of perception and of reception), applied studies in the sociology of reception (canon formation, literary genres, critical and professional reception, the function of journals, translation, paratextual elements, cultural interaction between Eastern and Western Europe, history of the book), empirical studies of reading (dynamics of identification, of perception, narratology, psychophysiology, comparative analysis of literary and scientific communication, textuality and electronic texts, computer-aided analysis, comparative study of reading behaviours in different countries, memory of the act of reading, reading comprehension of narrative and historical texts, affective response, reading pornography). Research methods include data collection, think-aloud protocols, and evaluation reactions.

There are two further aspects of the volume I would like to call attention to. First, it is a relatively seldom occurrence to see in a volume of literary studies a good number of papers resulting from team work, even if these papers tend to be by scholars working on literature in departments of psychology. Second, I am impressed by the interdisciplinarity of research which I consider important to avoid what happened in the 1970s when literary theorists had no communication with colleagues in the cognitive sciences and other areas of study which would be useful to literary study. Thanks to IGEL: International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature and IAEA: International Association for Empirical Aesthetics (a parent association with similar aims and objectives), people working in different areas are now getting together in this very promising field from all over the world. This can be seen in the volume here, by the number of countries represented by the authors in the volume, among which are many very distinguished scholars: G.C. Cupchik (Toronto), H. De Berg (Sheffield), J. Hakemulder (Utrecht), J.W. Harker (Victoria), J. Hoorn (Vrije), C. Martindale (Maine), C. Reinfandt (Kiel), G. Rusch (Siegen), M.L.Ryan (Bellvue), S.J. Schmidt (Siegen), M. Schreier (Köln), M.A. Seixo (Lisbon), Y. Shen (Tel Aviv), R. Viehoff (Halle-Wittenberg), F. Worthmann (Göttingen), E. Andringa (Utrecht), E. Tan (Amsterdam Free U.), P. van Horssen (Amsterdam), B. Cha (Hanshin), E.F. Dahab (CSU Long Beach), R. Deltcheva (Alberta), N. van Dijk, J. Vermunt (Tilburg), R. Esteves (Aveiro), S. Janssen (Erasmus), R. Ma (Alberta), C. Perkes (Laval), J. Perrot (Paris), E. Tschernokoshewa (Bautzen), K. Wehn (Halle-Wittenberg), A. Barsch (Siegen), M. Blazic (Ljubljana), R. Ghesquiere (Leuven), A. Graesser, C. Bowers, B. Olde, M. Chen (Memphis), B. Graves (McGill), L. Halász (Hungarian Academy of Science), D. Hanauer (Tel Aviv), D. A. Leontiev, N. Zerdeva, I. Chugunova (Moscow), T. Noice, H. Noice (Indiana State), S. van den Oetelaar, S. Tellegen, M. Wober (Amsterdam and Vrije), T. Trabasso, S. Suh (Chicago), W. Van Peer (Utrecht, now at Munich), P. Vorderer (Hannover), K. Oatley (Toronto). Tötösy (Alberta) who is also author of two essays in the volume (a comparative study of canon formation and an empirical study on author and gender appropriation in pornography), reports in his introduction about the problems met when proposing systemic and empirical approaches to other scholars in the humanities, and offers these essays to the reader in the hope that in times of decrease of interest in reading a new approach may help "to recognize the importance of the study of literature ... and eventually innovate the study of literature."

My modest proposal to the debate over this interesting field of research -- the systemic and empirical approach to literature and culture -- concerning whether to dismiss it altogether or to consider it a worth while theory and method for work in literary and cultural studies is a "wait and see" attitude. We look forward to hearing about new developments and results from the next conferences of IGEL, the next of which will be held at the University of Toronto in August 2000 <<http://www.lumis.uni-siegen.de/igel/>>, followed by the conference of IAEA: International Association of Empirical Aesthetics in New York, later in August 2000 <<http://www.science-of-aesthetics.org/benefits.html> >.

Fedora Giordano,

"Experiencing Texts and Cultures: A Review Article of New Work Edited by Nemesio and Tötösý and Sywenky" page 5 of 5  
*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 2.1 (2000): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss1/7>>

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Reviewer's Profile: Fedora Giordano works in American ethnic studies and American literature at the University of Torino. She has published studies on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, African American and Native American Studies in *Etnopoetica*, *Gli Indiani d'America e l'Italia* (Edizioni dell'Orso), *Papago Woman* (Gallone), etc. E-mail: < [fedora.giordano@unito.it](mailto:fedora.giordano@unito.it). >.