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CHRISTOPH BODE (Kiel)

LITERARY VALUE AND EVALUATION:
THE CASE FOR RELATIONAL CONCEPTS

Wenn eine Wissenschaft ohnehin wertet, dann hat
sie allen Grund, es nicht gedankenlos zu tun.

Walter Müller-Seidel

Although the various 20th-century theories on literary value and evaluation present, by their mere number and divergence, a somewhat confusing picture, it is not too difficult to group them quite neatly into two opposing camps, according to their basic assumptions.

On the one hand, there are those theories which presuppose that literary value resides in certain literary texts (and is lacking in others) as an objective, inherent quality which human beings can experience or discern (or cannot, lacking the disposition). In any case, according to these theories, literary value is not dependent on its being perceived or realized (which would make it a *relative* value only and subject to change) but is an objective, absolute and immutable feature of a given text. In this paper, these approaches are therefore called *objectivist*, although other labels such as ontological, absolutist or essentialist are possible, too.

On the other hand, there are those theories which do not take value to be an inherent property, but, see it as the outcome of a special relationship between an assessing consciousness and the assessed object, i.e. according to them, value exists only *in relation to* human beings, something is valuable *for somebody in a certain respect*, and therefore all statements of value are in principle predicates involving *two terms*, not just one. These approaches can be called *functional, relational* or *relativist*.

Each camp has, as is often the case, its extremists. In the objectivist camp these are the ontologists proper. Believing, as they do, that being-of-value is a special mode of being which cannot be proved logically but can only be *experienced* ("Werterlebnis"), they are, although objectivist, generally reluctant to debate conditions or criteria for the "Wertgefühl", upon which, as they see it,

value is not dependent anyhow.¹ This is, I think, an honourable position, but it stops the discussion at a fairly early point. The extremists in the other camp are the subjectivists. They hold that for value to be there it is sufficient that somebody deems something valuable, no matter what features the object of evaluation displays: The subjective will alone constitutes the value, and the original two-term predicate consequently collapses into a statement containing one term only. Again, such a position is of course perfectly tenable, but as with the ontologists, discussion stops here, in view of such absolute subjectivity. Obviously, *les extrêmes se touchent*.

It is true that at the end of this century philosophy in general and aesthetics in particular hardly subscribe to the idea of "value as such" any more and are more inclined to a functional view of the problem. (I should add that problems of *literary* value are only subcases of problems of aesthetic value and can, fortunately, be solved by analogy.) But it seems to me that the state of the art in philosophy and aesthetics has had deplorably little bearing on the discussion in literary studies and that, in spite of their philosophical refutation and notwithstanding their limited explanatory power and apparent theoretical insufficiencies, objectivist concepts of literary value die hard and keep cropping up, especially in debates on canon formation, curricula and the like. So for *practical* reasons and for the sake of this paper, which argues the case for a new, integrated concept of *functional* evaluation, it is, I think, worthwhile to critically recapitulate how objectivists other than ontologists proceed once they have established their premise that literary value is an objective, inherent and unchangeable property of certain texts.

Obviously, the next step, if you think this is true, is to try and define which specific qualities are - regardless of historical circumstances - good-making

1 See for example Herbert Wutz, *Zur Theorie der literarischen Wertung: Kritik vorliegender Theorien und Versuch einer Grundlegung* (Tübingen, 1957). For archetypal objectivist positions see Wilhelm Emrich, *Zum Problem der literarischen Wertung* (Mainz, 1961) and "Wertung und Rangordnung literarischer Werke", *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* H. 12 (1964), 974-991; Wolfgang Kayser, *Die Vortragsreise: Studien zur Literatur* (Bern, 1958), 39-70; Emil Staiger, "Einige Gedanken zur Fragwürdigkeit des Wertproblems", in Norbert Mecklenburg, ed., *Literarische Wertung: Texte zur Entwicklung der Wertungsdiskussion in der Literaturwissenschaft* (Tübingen, 1977), 103-118. Other anthologies or compilations: Inge Degenhardt, ed., *Arbeitstexte für den Unterricht: Literarische Wertung* (Stuttgart, 1979); *Der Deutschunterricht* 19 (1967), H.5: "Probleme der Wertung"; *Englisch-Amerikanische Studien* 1 (1979), Nr. 4: "Literarische Wertung"; Peter Gebhardt, ed., *Literaturkritik und literarische Wertung* (Darmstadt, 1980); Norbert Mecklenburg, ed., *Zur Didaktik der literarischen Wertung* (Frankfurt, Berlin, München, 1975); Georg Pitz/Ernst Kaiser, eds., *Literarische Wertung und Wertungsdidaktik* (Kronberg/Ts., 1976); Edigna Schrems, ed., *Wertung und Wirkung von Literatur* (Hannover, 1976); Joseph Strelka, ed., *Problems of Literary Evaluation* (University Park/London, 1969); Jutta Wermke, ed., *Literarische Wertung und ästhetische Kommunikation* (Pfm., 1975). See also Jochen Schulte-Sasse, *Literarische Wertung* (Stuttgart, 1976), and Manon Maren-Grisebach, *Theorie und Praxis literarischer Wertung* (München, 1974).

features, in other words, which qualities a literary text has to display to be counted as a text of high literary value. (Objectivists are notoriously vague about whether these qualities are meant to be necessary or sufficient conditions, but this point need not concern us here.) The search for these qualities supposed to be shared by all texts of high literary value usually ends in a list of criteria which are (or are not) met by the literary texts measured against this gauge. One such list of timeless textual virtues constituting, in aggregate, literary value, is, for example: "Originalität, Komplexität, Spannung, Innovation, ausgewogenes Gesamtgefüge".² If you don't like this one, here's another list, by Emil Staiger: "Einstimmigkeit, individueller Charakter, Gattungs- und Sprachgerechtheit, gemeinschaftsbildende Macht, Gewicht".³ Or how about Müller-Seidel's "das Öffentliche, das Höhere, das Ganze, das Wahre, das Menschliche"?⁴ Of course, "sinngestaltete Gestaltung, geschlossener Gefügecharakter, Lebensbedeutsamkeit" and "Erkenntnisbedeutsamkeit" sound pretty absolute, too.⁵ For a few more absolute criteria, see Wolfgang Kayser: "Einstimmigkeit", "Spannungsweite" and "Spannungsfülle".⁶ Or, if you think one criterion would do, "significant form" and "serious content" are the most likely candidates.

Now, the disturbing thing about these lists of absolute criteria for literary value is not that there are so many of them (although it makes you wonder ...). After all, one of them *might* be the genuine article. No, all these attempts at defining objectively and a-historically what constitutes literary value fall short for a number of other reasons, each of which would suffice to finish the whole approach off: For one, objectivist theories do not take into account the unbridgeable hiatus between factual statements and value judgements.⁷ It is one thing to state a fact and describe it but it is quite another to say that this fact is

2 Jörg Drews, "Literaturkritik und literarische Wertung", *Protokolle: Wiener Halbjahresschrift für Literatur, bildende Kunst und Musik* 1 (1978), 223-241, here: 233. Drews does not identify uncritically with this catalogue.

3 Staiger in Mecklenburg, ed., *Literarische Wertung*, 114.

4 Walter Müller-Seidel, *Probleme der literarischen Wertung. Über die Wissenschaftlichkeit eines unwissenschaftlichen Themas* (Stuttgart, 1969).

5 Hans Egon Hass, *Das Problem der literarischen Wertung* (Darmstadt, 1970), 36. It should be noted that Hass is very sceptical about whether these "Bestimmungen" can be used as "Wertmaßstäbe" at all: "Allgemein ist von diesen Bestimmungen zu sagen, daß sie ganz eigentlich nicht 'Wertmaßstäbe' sind, sondern lediglich Gesichtspunkte der Wertung [...]. Fragwürdig sind solche Bestimmungen erst, wenn sie als Maßstäbe im eigentlichen Sinne gelten sollen" (41/42). Later on, he even ventures to say "[daß] die Vorstellung aufgegeben werden mußte, daß es absolute, immergültige Normen der Wertung gebe" (93). Therefore, Monika Schrader's account of Hass' position, especially her rendition of a collated list of criteria purportedly his, is somewhat misleading (Monika Schrader, *Theorie und Praxis literarischer Wertung: Literaturwissenschaftliche und -didaktische Theorien und Verfahren* [Berlin, 1987], 282 ff.).

6 Kayser, *Vortragsreise*.

7 See John M. Ellis, "Great Art: A Study in Meaning", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 3 (1963), 165-171.

good or valuable. The latter statement cannot logically be derived from the former, and yet this is what objectivists constantly claim to do: To deduce value from facts.

But how can they get away with this glaring *non sequitur*? There is one major strategy used to obfuscate the gap between description and evaluation: Quite often the terms used to describe a certain textual feature are not strictly descriptive but in themselves evaluative.⁸ For example, in the phrase "this is a good poem because it has a meaningful form", the evaluative statement "this is a good poem" is *not*, as objectivists would claim, derived from a *factual* statement but from another *value judgement*, because "this form is meaningful" is itself strongly evaluative and only another way of saying that it is "good". If, however, you question the basis of *this* value judgement and ask how you can tell a "meaningful form" from one that is not, there are only two ways open: You are either referred to other criteria or you are told that "meaningful form" is the sort of form you find in good poems - which is evidently a circular definition or tautology. In the first case, there are again two possibilities: You are either given additional criteria which again prove to entail hidden value judgements (which sends you on a possibly infinite regress) or you are given purely descriptive terms this time (in which case it is not clear why the features thereby designated should necessarily be thought valuable). John Ellis comes to the same conclusion when he writes, "[...] the search for criteria of value originates from a desire to explain judgments of value. But if such criteria are genuinely descriptive, they explain nothing, and do not even support partial judgments. If, on the other hand, they are evaluative, they are no longer criteria that explain judgments, but only smaller scale judgments, more limited in scope than general aesthetic value judgments but not logically distinct from or explanatory of them. Neutral facts neither entail nor are entailed by value judgements".⁹

To sum up, objectivist definitions of literary value suffer from a confusion of descriptive and evaluative statements, which is scantily hidden behind a smoke-screen of circular definitions, tautologies, *non sequiturs* and infinite regresses - quite a gallery of inadmissible logical forms.¹⁰

This is only the first objection to objectivist attempts at defining literary value. The second is that their criteria are incredibly vague, which makes it very difficult indeed to decide whether or not a criterion is actually met by a given text, or, as John Ellis put it, "Their aim is to clarify the notion of aesthetic value, but the end results are notions that themselves stand just as much in need of clarification, such as 'significant form' and 'organic unity'. The pinning down of descrip-

8 See G.M. Matthews, "Evaluative and Descriptive", *Mind* 67 (1958), 335-343.

9 John M. Ellis, *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis* (Berkeley, 1974), 81/82. See also Ellis, "Great Art", 166: "No purely descriptive phrase guarantees any value, and if it appears to do so, this is because the phrase is already in part evaluative".

10 See Mecklenburg, ed., *Didaktik*, XI, XII.

tive properties has simply not occurred when the results are as undescriptive as this".¹¹

Here, as above, the objectivists' preference for circularity stands out. Take, for example, two critics who are agreed that "Einstimmigkeit" is a necessary or even sufficient condition for high literary value. How do they, in a concrete case, decide whether "Einstimmigkeit" is given or not? Or, even worse: As the best minds among the objectivists soon found out that there are possibly two kinds of "Einstimmigkeit", the good one that you can find in the classics and the bad one that you find in *Kitsch* and popular literature, how can you tell the one from the other? Again, you either have to introduce additional criteria (such as "Spannungsfülle", which is, by the way, again evaluative) or you take the short-cut to circularity: The right kind of "Einstimmigkeit" is the kind you find in good literature. For clarification, this is the full circle: Q: What is good literature? A: The one that displays a good kind of "Einstimmigkeit". Q: What is good "Einstimmigkeit"? A: The kind you can find in good literature. As Ellis says, "Thus the arbitrary definition is supported by the value judgement, and the value judgement by the definition".¹²

Evidently the vagueness of the criteria almost necessitates these dubious manoeuvres, and this is true not only for criteria of inclusion, such as "Einstimmigkeit", but also for criteria of exclusion, such as "Störung" and "Bruch", which *may be*, objectivists concede, features of some aesthetic value, only: When are they and when are they not? Surely to say that a "Bruch" in a classical text may be forgiven, as the genius stands above common rules, is to beg the question and jump on the circular merry-go-round again.¹³

The third objection to objectivist theories of value is that, although they claim to be absolute, a-historical and non-relativistic, they are anything but. Historical

11 Ellis, *Theory*, 78/79.

12 Ellis, "Great Art", 165.

13 Emil Staiger, himself an objectivist with ontological leanings, admits that all these rules and criteria are not really very helpful: "Sollen wir dies nun mit Hilfe eines Punktsystems ineinander verrechnen, derart, daß wir vielleicht der Einstimmigkeit drei Punkte, dem individuellen Charakter etwa fünf zusprechen? Ich fahre nicht weiter. Jede Faser sträubt sich gegen eine solche ästhetische Buchhaltung. Bedenkenswert ist aber der Umstand, daß sie sich gar nicht durchführen läßt und daß es das maximale Werk, das die höchste Punktzahl erzielen würde, nie gegeben hat und überhaupt nie geben kann. Inwiefern? Undurchführbar ist das Verfahren nur schon deshalb, weil man sich schwerlich über den Rang der Einzelkriterien einigen wird und weil sogar, wenn dies gelänge, die Frage noch immer offen bliebe, wie etwa eine leichte Störung der Einstimmigkeit - man denke an Goethes *Mailed* - zu bewerten sei und wie man allenfalls einen grandios-individuellen Verstoß gegen Gattungsgesetze einzuschätzen habe. Niemand kann einem Leser unseres zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts verwehren, den Ausdruck einer Individualität für wichtiger zu halten als die gemeinschaftsbildende Macht und also etwa einen Dichter wie Heinrich von Kleist Schiller vorzuziehen. Und ebensowenig konnte man es noch Lessing verwehren, wenn ihm die gemeinschaftsbildende Macht mehr als jede andere Qualität am Herzen lag". ("Einige Gedanken zur Fragwürdigkeit des Wertproblems", 114) - This, of course, opens the floodgates for relativism.

relativity, driven out the front door, re-enters through the back door. For a mere glance at their catalogues of criteria will suffice to show that they are all modelled on an extremely confined, historically limited poetics, usually the poetics of classicism.

It is therefore not surprising to find that in general objectivists have nothing to say of any value about 20th-century literature written after 1910.¹⁴ "Denn freilich, wenn man den Gattungsbegriff der Poesie zuvor einseitig aus den alten Poeten abstrahiert hat, so ist nichts leichter, aber auch nichts trivialer, als die modernen gegen sie herabzusetzen".¹⁵ This is Friedrich Schiller in *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*, apropos *la querelle des anciens et des modernes*. It should give one reason to wonder, I think, that even if one took their rules and criteria seriously and applied them to the *production* of literature, the inevitable result would be as Adorno foretold: Ephemeral classicist *Kitsch*.¹⁶

But if the objectivists' project to stringently deduce value from facts and to establish, by pure philological analysis, an absolute scale of literary values¹⁷ has failed - and failed disastrously -, so that we are compelled to conclude not only "that there is no timelessly valid table of absolute critical norms",¹⁸ but also that, for fundamental reasons, *there can be no such thing*, why is it then that objectivist assumptions are still shared by so many? And why is it that, as Monika Schrader informs us, there has even been a kind of objectivist roll-back since the mid-1970s (of which her own book is a good example)?¹⁹ And why is it - to cite two

14 See for example Emil Staiger and the *Zürcher Literaturstreit, Sprache im technischen Zeitalter*, H.22 (1967).

15 Friedrich Schiller, *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795) (Stuttgart, 1975), 38.

16 Theodor W. Adorno, *Ohne Leitbild: Parva Aesthetica* (Ffm., 1979), 126.

17 See Emrich, "Wertung", 977, 978, 990. For a critique see Klaus Gerth, "'Ästhetische' und 'ontologische' Wertung: Ein kritischer Literaturbericht über die Arbeiten W. Kaysers und W. Emrichs zur literarischen Wertung", *Der Deutschunterricht* 19 (1967) H. 5, 43-57.

18 Joseph Strelka in Strelka, ed., *Problems*, X.

19 See Schrader, *Theorie*, 69, 101. Schrader's survey is the result of extraordinary diligence, but she cannot always hide her objectivist bias against functional theories of value (see for example 148, 192, 220, 285). Her assessment that functional approaches reduce literature is, of course, only valid if one tacitly adheres to an essentialist definition of "literature", which, however, she never makes explicit, although it shows more and more towards the end of her study (e.g. 345, 346, 358). The vital flaw of her book is that her central thesis is awfully muddled: She argues, "Angesichts der Vielzahl von Wertungsansätzen ist deutlich geworden, daß es nicht zulässig sein kann, normativ an einer bestimmten Position festzuhalten" (303), which is an obvious *non sequitur*, and then she continues, "Gleichzeitig aber ist auch erkennbar, daß die Verschiedenheit der einzelnen Modelle nicht notwendig die These vom Relativismus aller Wertungen rechtfertigt" (303). This seems acceptable, but when she goes on to speak out in favour of a plurality of approaches because texts are ever so different ("Die Vielfalt literarischer Formen und Wertbestimmungen erfordert eine Vielfalt unterschiedlicher Wertungsverfahren", 344), the circle becomes obvious: *Implicitly* she must have had her fixed notion of literary value all along, otherwise she could not say that the values in various kinds of texts are so different that they need extra treatment: "[...] es

recent examples - that, on closer analysis, essentially objectivist concepts of literary value are promoted in the guise of such apparently empirico-philosophical studies as Anthony Savile's *The Test of Time* (1982) or Hugo A. Meynell's *The Nature of Aesthetic Value* (1986), both of which, as it were, boldly stem the tide of relativism in what reminds one strongly of fifth-column tactics?²⁰

kann wohl kein Zweifel daran bestehen, daß Goethe, Hölderlin, Kafka einen anderen Bildungswert haben [yes] und mit anderen Wertungsverfahren zu beurteilen sind [why?] als z.B. experimentelle Literatur, Gebrauchs- und Trivialliteratur" (308). "In einem auffälligen Bewertungsrelativismus werden Schiller, Mörike, Unterhaltungs- und Werbeliteratur mit gleichen Verfahren beurteilt. Kulturverlust und Verlust des literarischen Erbes sind die inzwischen viel beklagten Konsequenzen der gegenwärtigen Wertungspraxis" (309). QED, I suppose.

20 Savile's thesis (*The Test of Time: An Essay in Philosophical Aesthetics* [Oxford etc., 1982]) is, I think, for all its meticulous presentation, the easier to refute. Although he proclaims to be against a-historical theories of art and aesthetic value (41), his ultimate aim is to arrive, by accumulation of historical value judgements, at a trans-historical concept of value - as if the adding up of relatives produced an absolute. Of course, he is not the first thinker to hope, after the undeniable failure of objectivist attempts at solving the theoretical problem of aesthetic value, that the anonymous process of history will sort it out for him. Savile maintains that "where a work of art has securely passed time's test we infer that it is a work of high quality" (12). This belief, however, is totally unfounded, presupposes a strange kind of literary Darwinism, and can only be substantiated with circular reasoning. If we acknowledge that the evaluation of certain literary texts has varied in the past, there is no reason whatsoever to conclude that our present way of seeing things will be permanent and that ours will be the last word. Quite on the contrary, we have to accept that changing evaluation is not the exception but the rule in the history of criticism, and that the history of criticism does not stop with us.

Emrich's position is quite similar to Savile's: "Trotz aller historischen Relativierung vollzieht sich im Lauf der Geschichte ein ständiger Ausleseprozeß, in dem sich bestimmte literarische Gebilde Jahrhunderte oder Jahrtausende als Kunstwerke behaupten, auch wenn ihre Epoche sie ablehnte oder geringschätzte, andere dagegen, obwohl sie von ihrer Zeit als Kunstwerke gefeiert wurden, als nicht künstlerische Gebilde ausgeschieden werden und nur noch historisches Interesse als Ausdruck ihrer 'Zeit' zu bewahren vermögen" ("Wertung", 981). As with Savile, the central flaw in this is the patent inability to see the present as *transitory*, its judgements as equally revisable, and to acknowledge the possibility that there may be literary treasures to which we are still blind. For a criticism of Emrich's "Ausleseprozeß" see Max Wehrli, "Wert und Unwert in der Dichtung", in Gebhardt, ed., *Literaturkritik*, 205-222, here: 206, and Hans-Georg Herrlitz, "Lektürekanon und literarische Wertung", in H. Müller-Michaels, ed., *Literarische Bildung und Erziehung* (Darmstadt, 1976), 243-261, here: 251.

To return to Savile's study: Even if one presupposed an unwavering and permanently high evaluation of certain works of art in the past (for which only very few instances could be named), one could not possibly conclude from this that they will *continue* to be judged so for ever and a day (false induction).

Apart from this, Savile's definition is, of course, in constant danger of becoming viciously circular ("Great art is what we, at present, think is great art"). This is because, in his theory the present evaluation of art is reified and hypostatized as the end result of an objective evolutionary process ("Value as such"), whereas in reality it is just - the present evaluation of art [...] Thus the whole study teems with circularity. Another of its shortcomings is that Savile does not differentiate between *artefact* and *aesthetic object* (Mukarovsky), so that the possibility of a work of art's being

I think there are three very good reasons for this intransigence. The first is that it is nice to believe in absolute values, especially in a world like ours.²¹ The

praised for totally different reasons in the course of time strangely eludes him. (For this see William E. Kennick, "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?", *Mind* 67 [1958], 317-334, here: 327).

Meynell's is a slightly different case, although he shares some basic assumptions with Savile, such as the implicit denial that criticism has a history of disagreement, of changing evaluations and breaks rather than continuities, and, to give another example, the belief that there is a "natural selection operat[ing] over a long period of time" so that "in the end the consensus of the informed public [...] is the most reliable index of artistic merit". (*The Nature of Aesthetic Value* [Basingstoke, London, 1986], 12). But Meynell differs from Savile in that he gives an "objective" definition of "aesthetic goodness" right at the beginning: "it is proposed that aesthetic goodness [in works of art] [...] is a matter of their capacity in appropriate circumstances to give satisfaction" (2) - a definition which *looks* very functional as it implicitly presupposes the presence of a subject which is to be satisfied. But behind this definition lurks the old objectivism and literary essentialism, because Meynell goes on to list qualities which are commonly attributed to works of art which are held in high aesthetic esteem in our society, and seems to believe that thereby he says something about "the nature of aesthetic value" (as his title indicates) - *which he does not*. His descriptions of common value judgements are not value judgements themselves, nor do they say anything about the object of evaluation or the "nature" of its value - they are just descriptions of *a certain social usage* (as he admits himself in certain passages, e.g. 58: "The point at issue here, it is worth repeating, is not that this particular critic is correct in attributing these qualities to this particular author; but that *if* the author has these qualities, they are valid grounds for commending him"). So when he assembles in great number criteria for goodness in literature, the visual arts and music, he does not prove what he thinks he proves, *viz.* that aesthetic value can be shown objectively - he just describes an established practice of *talking about art* and his study would be less flawed if he stuck to that without any further pretensions. As he does not, Meynell reminds me of the man who bought 10 copies of *BILD* to ascertain the truth of one of its articles [...] I definitely do not see, as he claims, his theory as complementary to Dickie's and Danto's *institutional approach* (21); a look at his catalogues of criteria reveals him to be firmly entrenched in the objectivist camp. This, for example, is his list for prose literature: "Illustration and Demonstration of What is of Central Importance of Human Life; Originality in Use of Language, and in Treatment of Plot, Character etc.; Representation of People, Things and Circumstances; Overall Unity in Variety of Substance and Effect; Seriousness of Theme". And this is the one for poetry: "Original Treatment of the Medium of Words and Ideas; The Bringing Out of How Things Are or Might Be; Overall Unity of Substance and Effect" - a classic case of a-historical essentialism, which inevitably bears all the marks of history and relativity, based as it is on a *glaringly temporary* aesthetics. The final proof that Meynell is not functional or relational at all but objectivist to the core comes when he practically retracts "satisfaction" (as an all too dynamic criterion of aesthetic value) and reintroduces *the classics* as the absolute norm: "The classics as a *body* are in an important sense the very standard of criticism; if the standard itself comes under attack, what basis can there be for criticism but fashion or personal caprice?" (37). The spectre of subjectivity and relativity haunts him, as it does all objectivists.

21 Compare L.F. Manheim in Strelka, ed., *Problems*, 130: "My contention, quite simply, is that absolute evaluation, the measuring of a work of art against some universally accepted norm, is not a valid function of criticism but is, rather, a product of the critic's being 'hot for certainties in this our life'". See also Pilz/Kaiser, eds., *Literarische Wertung*, 17.

second is that it gives you a good advantage in debates: If you think highly of a certain literary text but your colleague doesn't, this is no longer a matter of contending views. For as the value you can see (but he cannot) is an objective fact, you need not worry any more - any remaining qualms can be stilled with Kayser's famous dictum, "*Die echten Wertungen stammen doch nur von den Berufenen!*"²²

The third reason is that most of us are inclined to believe that "being good", "being of literary value", is a property like "being blue" or "being square" or "being 6 foot 4". That is, we automatically reduce - as we do often in everyday language - a two-term predicate, "this is good for X", "this is of value for X" to a one-term predicate, and are then consequently confronted with innumerable paradoxa. Talking about literary value would be much easier if we thought of value not in terms of *inherent property* but in terms of *relational property*. But exactly how does the concept of relational property help us to surmount the difficulties of an axiology of literary texts? What exactly are we to understand by a property which does not reside in the object itself?

I believe the use of this concept can best be demonstrated when it is applied, first of all, to the project of defining what *literature* is, before one tackles literary evaluation. It was Wolfgang Kayser who observed, "*jede Wertungslehre ruht auf einer Theorie der Dichtkunst, ja auf einer Ästhetik, ob sie nun ausgesprochen wird oder nicht*",²³ and I think that the objectivists' failure to define literary value is ultimately due to a mistaken idea of literature, from which their mistaken idea of literary value is only derived.²⁴

Objectivists generally suppose that there is one common quality in literary texts which make them different from non-literary ones and that if one could lay one's finger on this *differentia specifica* one would have found the nature or essence of literature, which is an assumption that can be called *essentialist*. The tragic thing about this concept is that the quest for this essence of literature has produced - nothing. There simply is no one feature common to all literary texts, excluding all others from this class. But if literariness is not a *textual* feature, not an *intrinsic* property of certain texts, then the grounds for a text being treated as literature can only lie without it. In other words: Literariness is a *pragmatic* aspect, it is not a substance or essence; and literature is a purely *conventional* category²⁵ which is defined (and constituted) by the *use*²⁶ an interpretive com-

22 Kayser, *Vortragsreise*, 57.

23 Kayser, *Vortragsreise*, 45.

24 See also George Boas in Strelka, ed., *Problems*, 13: "The problem of literary criticism cannot be solved unless we first have a clear idea of all that the word 'literature' connotes".

25 See Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 10, 11.

26 See Christoph Bode, *Ästhetik der Ambiguität: Zu Funktion und Bedeutung von Mehrdeutigkeit in der Literatur der Moderne* (Tübingen, 1988), 340-378.

munity makes of certain texts which, prior to their being processed in this way, do not have a common denominator.

Consequently, to say that a text is literary is not to point at an inherent textual property, but it is to point out a *relation*: In this community this text is subjected to special treatment and in the process of being treated specially its property of being "literary" is constituted. This means, of course, that texts can lose or gain this property, according to how they are dealt with or regarded. This consequence may seem hard to swallow, but this is how relational properties behave: My Uncle Humphrey is an uncle to me, but it would be foolish to conclude that therefore he is everybody else's uncle, too. To his wife, he is a husband, to his parents a son, to his daughter a father etc. But that, in turn, does not mean that "being an uncle", is no real property of his - he is, undeniably, an uncle, though not to everyone. Such are relational properties.

Once we accept that "being literary" is a relational property and that, as Ellis says, "the category of literary texts is not distinguished by defining characteristics but by the characteristic use to which those texts are put by the community",²⁷ so that here, "*performance* is the key area for a definition"²⁸ [*italics mine*], we begin to understand why the essentialist questions "What is art? What is literature?" always leave us at a complete loss. *Of course*, we know - because we use both concepts day in day out. But we only know until somebody asks us. Then we don't know,²⁹ and we don't know because tacitly we accept the underlying essentialist assumption that the "real essence" of literature or art resides somewhere *beyond* our use of them, be it in the works of art or literature themselves or in some metaphysical reality. Remove this unfounded assumption and all difficulties disappear: "Literature" is *the use* we make of certain texts *and the body* of these texts at a given time. We know this concept because we can use it correctly in our culture. "Literature" is thus a function involving us and a group of texts as its relational terms.

However, at least two serious charges can be levelled against this relational concept of literature. The first is that it is a circular definition, the second that it opens the door to extreme subjectivism. Both charges can, I think, be convincingly refuted. Admittedly, if you take this relational concept of literature as a *definition* of literature, it is circular to the degree of downright tautology. But then, it was never meant to be a definition in the objectivists' sense, i.e. a revelation of the a-historical and immutable nature or essence of literature; rather, it only serves as a starting point for further investigations into how different societies have, at different times, practically dealt with literature, which para-

²⁷ Ellis, *Theory*, 50. See 24-53 in general.

²⁸ Ellis, *Theory*, 36.

²⁹ See Kennick, "Mistake?", 320, who is very good about this. The formula is, of course, taken from St. Augustine's answer to the question "What is time?": "If I am not asked, I know, if I am asked, I know not".

digms govern the processing of literary texts today, etc. etc. As such, I think, the concept can be validated.³⁰

The second objection - extreme subjectivism - is even easier to refute. Relational theories of literature and art - such as Mukarovsky's functional structuralism,³¹ Danto's and Dickie's institutional approach,³² Stanley Fish's concept of interpretative communities,³³ John Ellis' excellent logical analysis of literature and literary criticism or my own ascriptive aesthetics - are about the *social, collective use* of texts, not about individual idiosyncrasies. It is true that as a confirmed relationalist one could not possibly contradict somebody who says that *for him* a certain text is literary although nobody else shares his opinion. But who would want to deny him this right, anyway? As for literature as a *social fact*, it is free from any subjectivism, since all established ascriptions are contained by, or indeed identical with, the practice of the social and cultural body (even individual assessments are, as a rule, only variations against this matrix of pre-established conventional practice - man being a *social animal*...).

This is not the time and place to criticize the above-mentioned relationalists or functionalists for minor inconsistencies. It is true, that, on closer inspection, Danto is not really an institutionalist, that in Mukarovsky there are residuals of deviational aesthetics, just as there are residuals of substantialism in Dickie.³⁴ The essential point is how these relational concepts of literature can help us solve the problem of literary value, about which, with the notable exception of Mukarovsky, they say next to nothing. And yet, by virtue of their work, an integrated, non-subjective, strictly relational value theory of ascriptive aesthetics is near at hand. The implications have only to be drawn.

If we acknowledge that the impasse created by objectivist attempts at defining once and for all the a-historical essence of literature can be overcome by a relational concept of literature, it is only logical to try and solve the problem of literary value along the same lines. Certainly, to give up any essentialist notion of literature but to stick to the idea of value as an inherent and permanent quality would be inconsequential. If we have come to accept that "being literary" is a relational property, then "being of literary value" cannot constitute an absolute, it must be a relational property, too. And if this is so, a relational concept of literary value can be sketched in analogy to relational concepts of literature and art.

30 Ellis, *Theory*, 44, refutes this charge with an amendment to the definition, viz. "literary texts are defined as those that are used by the society in such a way that the text is not taken as specifically relevant to the immediate context of its origin". I believe this is too restricted.

31 See Jan Mukarovsky, *Kapitel aus der Poetik* (Frankfurt/M., 1967); *Studien zur strukturalistischen Ästhetik und Poetik* (Frankfurt, Berlin, Wien, 1977); *Kapitel aus der Ästhetik*, (Frankfurt/M., 1978).

32 Arthur C. Danto, *Die Verklärung des Gewöhnlichen* (Frankfurt/M., 1984); George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, London, 1974).

33 Fish, *Is there a Text?*

34 For these points of criticism see Bode, *Ästhetik der Ambiguität*, 352, 353, 360.

This means that literary value should not be seen as a specific inherent quality of a certain text, but as this text's relation to an individual mind, a community or a society at large. Value presupposes a relation - something is of value *for somebody* - and it is in this relation that value is realized *and constituted*. "Strictly speaking", as John Ellis puts it, "nothing has intrinsic value, if by this is meant value divorced from any situation. For an object to have value a relation with something other than itself is needed. Value must include valuer as well as thing valued; it is interesting to note that both the objective and subjective theories deal with one of these, but neither deals with both".³⁵ Consequently, all statements of the form "this text is of high literary value" suppress the second term of the predicate, "of value for X", and thereby present as intrinsic and absolute what is relational and relative. All major difficulties of objectivist approaches to literary value can be traced back to this suppression of the second term: Be it the dichotomy of temporal vs. eternal values, or that of individual vs. general evaluations, or the phenomena of changing or differing assessments etc.

If, as Danto and Dickie say, the social practice they call "the artworld" constitutes art (and not the other way round, as is commonly held), then it is not difficult to imagine that this social institution - in the widest sense of word - is also constitutive for what is regarded as being of aesthetic or literary value in a given society, at a particular time. Or if, as Stanley Fish says, the meaning of texts is determined by the interpretive strategies prevalent or vying with each other in a given interpretive community, then it is very likely that evaluation, as but a corollary aspect of interpretation, is likewise the everchanging outcome of this specific social practice.

In other words this means that - just as there are a number of competing critical discourses around at any given time among which one will always be predominant and hegemonic, whereas the others only prevail in certain smaller subsections of the community and only aim at establishing themselves against all others - there will accordingly be differing axiologies, differing evaluations, differing canons. Relational concepts of value accept strife and competition as the elixir of life for the process of intra- and intercultural evaluation, the results of which are only quasi-objective and quasi-stationary manifestations of historically transitory hegemonies.

As I see it, three charges can be levelled against this. The first two are identical with the ones brought forward against the relational concept of literature, viz. that this definition of literary value is circular and that it opens the door to subjectivism and relativism. These objections can be countered as above: Yes, to say that a text is valuable if somebody thinks it is valuable to him is a circular statement; but then, this is not the end result of a long objectivist search for a transcendental definition of value (in which case the circularity would be truly embarrassing), it is only the starting point for innumerable studies of the varying

³⁵ Ellis, "Great Art", 167.

social practice of evaluation, and as such it is acceptable and very helpful, because it entails a precious insight into the phenomenon of value.

As for subjectivism: A relational theory of literary value is primarily interested in evaluations which are shared by a considerable number of people, that means evaluations which are of some relevance in a given society or a subdivision of that society.³⁶ Again, idiosyncratic individual assessments cannot be ruled out by this theory, but why should they be, anyhow? These things happen, don't they, and it is our task to explain them, not to exclude them. As for the charge of relativism: Yes, a relational theory of literary value takes account of relativity, and is proud of it because this relativism is, as Kennick says, vicious "only to those who are morally disposed to insist on the uniformity of taste".³⁷

To sum up, it makes good sense to regard literary value as a *strictly relational* property, as the outcome of a social practice which takes the form of a function, and to investigate further into this practice as this is the only sensible way of dealing scientifically and not in a speculative way with literary value.

Of course, this position is open to a third objection, more serious than the preceding ones, viz. that by doing this we are no longer dealing with literary value, but with *effects* of literary value or *ways of talking* about literary value, in other words: That we have silently exchanged the explicandum and are no longer talking about literature but about society. For example, it is evident that Pierre Bourdieu's wonderful *Die feinen Unterschiede: Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft*,³⁸ even in its passages on literature and the arts, is "really" about social classes, and if it contains one message it is that value judgements say very little about the object which is evaluated but quite a lot about the social position of the people who pass them and thereby mark their own social and cultural status.

This objection, however, is only valid if we suppose that "literature" and "literary value" can be defined satisfactorily in a non-relational way - which they can't. Therefore, when we are talking of texts *as used* in a given society, of texts *as being regarded and experienced* as valuable in a given society, we are talking about literature and literary value in the only possible way: As meaningful, non-isolatable constituents of a social practice.³⁹ As for Bourdieu, it is true that he concentrates exclusively on one term of the function, which is a pity - but not a necessity: Nobody can hinder a true relationalist from looking at both terms of the function and from investigating their interrelatedness.

36 See Ellis, *Theory*, 180: "[...] the judgment of the literary value of a text is the same judgment as that of its relevance to the community".

37 Kennick, "Mistake?", 334.

38 Frankfurt/M., 1982.

39 It could be argued that then the same argument cannot be upheld against Meynell - see footnote 20 - but it can: The charge against him was that he investigates prevalent value judgements and *thinks* he thereby learns something about the immutable nature of aesthetic value, which is an inadmissible inconsistency, of which relationalists, who do not believe in such a thing, are not guilty.

There is in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* an interesting exchange about value - Hector and his brother Troilus discuss Helen (II,2, 50-57):⁴⁰

Hector:

Brother, she is not worth what she doth cost
The holding.

To which Troilus answers:

What's aught but as 'tis valued?,

which makes Hector reply:

But value dwells not in particular will.
It holds his estimate and dignity
As well wherein 'tis precious of itself
As in the prizer.

Clearly, Troilus is a pure subjectivist and Hector has functional leanings, although the expression "precious of itself" indicates how difficult it is to get rid of objectivist notions. This is, by the way, the reason why Mukarovsky's theory of literary value, excellent as his functional theory of aesthetics is, cannot be taken over by relationalists without qualifications. Mukarovsky was the first, I think, to assert that aesthetic value is primarily a social fact, that there are no values independent of human beings, that value is a *process* and a potential to be realized by the recipient in his active engagement with the *artefact*, but when he asked himself where exactly value resides, he concluded it must be in the material *artefact*, not in its changing realisations, the so-called *aesthetic objects*.⁴¹ That is, even he had some difficulties in imagining value as a *strictly* relational property, and came down, in this instance, on the objectivist's side.

But couldn't one argue that it is necessary to suppose that certain texts *give at least occasion* for being valued highly, because otherwise the evaluation would be a mere subjective projection? This question builds up a specious alternative and merely restates in new terms the old dichotomy of objective vs. subjective, which relational concepts have overcome: Literary value is neither constituted by "objective" features which "give occasion" nor is it constituted by a subjective consciousness; it is rather constituted by the merging of both: The text *as being experienced* by a mind. Any other view of the case will land us in a contradiction-prone monism of one or the other kind.

⁴⁰ I owe this to Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1986), 58/59.

⁴¹ See Mukarovsky, *Ästhetik*, 73-110.

In his *Language, Truth and Logic*, A.J. Ayer holds that aesthetic judgements, not being statements of fact, are not objectively valid, i.e. you cannot prove or disprove them because they are "simply employed to express certain feelings and to evoke a certain response".⁴² Northrop Frye obviously follows Ayer in this when he says that when a critic evaluates, he is talking about himself.⁴³ I am afraid both propositions are true, in a way: Aesthetic judgements cannot be proved, as we have known since Kant (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 30 ff.), but statements *about* judgements can be and this is where we should continue. And: Evaluations bespeak the critic, yes, but that is not all they do. For when Frye maintains that values cannot be demonstrated,⁴⁴ I should like to heartily disagree: They cannot be proved logically and conclusively, but they definitely can be *demonstrated*. The moment I communicate emphatically to somebody that a certain literary text means a lot to me I engage in a persuasive act, and my aim is not to prove something but to induce somebody to enter a relation I have found valuable and to experience something similar. There is no guarantee that I or he will succeed in this. It is an open bet: Try this and see. It is the suggestion of an experience, which, should it occur, constitutes its own proof and validity. This is the pragma-aesthetic category *katexochen: experience*.⁴⁵ And if my persuasive evaluation has resulted in this, it is, I think, a bit more than just a statement of my feelings.⁴⁶ And it is, by the way, the only sense in which we can say that one assessment is more valid than another: The proof of the pudding is in the eating, not in the recipe.

What, then, are the practical consequences of a relational concept of literary value? I think there are a great number, but the most important probably is that it makes us reformulate questions like "How good is this text?" or "Is it better than the other?", because to these we can only reply, "How good *as what?*", "Better than the other *in what respect*, and *to whom?*"⁴⁷ That is, once we have accepted literary value as a relational property, we cannot help but bring into consideration the *purpose* of our evaluation, the *aspect* under which we mean to review literary texts, and the *group of people* we have in mind. But as there are innumerable purposes for which one might want to evaluate texts, and innumerable aspects one could choose, not to forget a great many different sets of people, we arrive at an abundance of rankings, a galaxy of canons. And this is a good thing. *Hamlet* might be "better" than *Macbeth* in one respect, but less suitable in another - it all depends on what you want it for. It seems a foolish idea to

42 A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) (Harmondsworth, 1971, repr. 1972), 150.

43 See Northrop Frye, "Contexts of Literary Evaluation", in Strelka, ed., *Problems*, 14-21, here: 16.

44 See Frye in Strelka, ed., *Problems*, 14, 21.

45 See Bode, *Ästhetik der Ambiguität*, 369-375, 383.

46 Frye (see Frye, in Strelka, ed., *Problems*, 21) seems to think that such persuasion is more the task of the teacher than of the critic; I, for one, would not draw the line.

47 See David Daiches, "Literary Evaluation", in Strelka, ed., *Problems*, 163-181, here: 169.

try and reduce the richness of individual aspects under which a text can be evaluated to a single one which contains all in the aggregate and is supposed to yield the amalgamated general "literary value" of that text. Any *general* statement about a text's value is much more vague and imprecise than the plurality of evaluative statements about the various uses this text might be put to. General evaluative statements are *reductive summaries*, they impoverish the versatility of a given text and blur its individuality. Likewise, to cite John Ellis again, who is very strong on this point, "to take a body of texts that displays very great diversity, and to categorize the whole field on the basis of a judgment allowing only one factor and one dimension - good or bad - is to simplify a very complex situation [...]. But this kind of crude judgment has been promoted to the status of the most important kind of judgment we can make on literary texts, and this it cannot be."⁴⁸

As Stuart Hampshire wrote in 1952, if in aesthetics you move from the particular to the general, you go in the wrong direction⁴⁹ - a statement with which I agree, though only in this context.

There is no inherent necessity to choose between *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, nor, for that matter, to choose between *Hamlet* and *Look Back in Anger*. You can read the three of them and like them for different reasons and use them for different purposes. It is only in practical situations, such as when it comes to canon formation and the compilation of reading lists, that we feel we are forced to pass these crude, general judgements. But then, to profit once more from John Ellis' brilliant analysis of this, "Practical situations force us into all kinds of irrational acts; a weight limit on baggage may force us to choose between a tennis racket and a pair of binoculars. Yet it would be absurd to claim that anything about their real value had been said when one has decided that the one would be more important for the trip than the other."⁵⁰

What are we to conclude from this? I think there are two morals to be drawn: The first is that we should as often as possible replace general summary value judgements on literary texts by concrete specific relational assessments of them. And the second is that any discussion of general canon formation which leaves out the questions of what we are doing, why we are doing it and for whom we are doing it, is absolutely pointless. To put it in more general terms: Without a sense of purpose and without an idea of ourselves as critics there can be no genuine evaluation.

⁴⁸ Ellis, *Theory*, 97, 98; see in general 96-102.

⁴⁹ Stuart Hampshire, "Logik und Wertschätzung", in Rüdiger Bittner/Peter Pfaff, eds., *Das ästhetische Urteil: Beiträge zur sprachanalytischen Ästhetik* (Köln, 1977), 55-62, here: 62.

⁵⁰ Ellis, *Theory*, 98/99.