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El compromiso literario en la reflexión de lo político

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The Interpretation of Literature and Reception Theory: Reconstructing the “Logic of the Poetic Event”

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Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
“Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—
Only this, and nothing more”
Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*

Introduction

With this outline I will demonstrate how Alfred Schutz theory of the life-world including his theory of symbol includes a specific theoretical potential for the interpretation of literary texts. It specifically serves for the analysis of the triad of author, literary work and reader involved in the aesthetic process and furthermore, it is suitable to develop a reception theory. Processes of meaning giving by the recipient in this context are decisive for the functioning of the work of art as such. Edgar Allen Poe’s famous poem “The Raven” (Poe, 1965 [1845]) serves as an example I will use to demonstrate how reception aesthetics forms part of the functioning of the work of art in general. From

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a phenomenologically based perspective of literary interpretation following Alfred Schutz's theory of the life-world, I will outline how the literary or poetical text establishes an aesthetic reality within the interrelationship of author, recipient and work of art. The aim is to phenomenologically underline the relevance of the reader involved in the functioning of the literary work of art. As far as Poe's narrative poem of melancholy, grievance and horror is concerned, only certain aspects will be presented that are significantly relevant for my argumentation. "The Raven" was written in 1845, first published in *The New York Evening Mirror* and tells the story of a student's lost lover named Lenore. The lonely man, the unnamed narrator cannot find release in his sorrow over the death of his lover Lenore. During a late December night, when he opens the window, a raven enters and perches "upon a bust of Pallas" above the door. The poem opens up diverse layers of symbolism that allow the recipient to interpret and experience the poem to conceive – how Poe himself argues – "Beauty" which "is the sole legitimate province of the poem" (Poe, 1965 [1846], p. 201).

Phenomenological reflections have been decisive for art theory, especially for literary theory. Alfred Schutz's theory of the life-world and his theory of the symbol had an impact on literary theorists such as Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss who are considered to be the founders of the so called Konstanz School of reception theory. Schutz' interpretative approach is especially apt to the analysis of aesthetic forms, as it is capable of comprehending the interrelationship between the author, the artistic work and the recipient. Reception theory also refers to this triangular relationship, in which the recipient is not to be viewed as passive: without the active participation of an addressee, the literary work would not be possible. Only with the help of readership's accomplishment does the work step into the horizon of experience of continuity. In this process, the production exceeds established aesthetic norms through active reception. In this sense, the reader and interpreter of Poe's poem "The Raven" is in part responsible for the meaning giving involved in the aesthetic process of the poem.

According to reception theory, the literary text is completed by the reader in the process of reading through "concretization" (Ingarden, 1994, p. 47). The literary work possesses an artistic and an aesthetic pole — the *artistic pole* is created by the author, the *aesthetic pole* is the concretization accomplished by the reader. Therefore, the literary work is not identical with the text; it is more than the text since it obtains life by concretization. Through

the reader's active participation in the aesthetic process, the work obtains a virtual character in the world of thinking. The work can only unfold in the process of reading and it comes into being through constitution activities of the recipient consciousness. The work is the state-of-being constituted in the consciousness of the reader.

The Schutsonian life-world analysis specifically captures the major premises of reception theory due to its origin at the interface of phenomenology and social science. First of all, it offers a potential to investigate the particular "interaction process" between author and recipient, taking into consideration the possibilities of interpretation to be potentially realized by the imagined reader. Furthermore, the Schutsonian differentiation between multiple reality spheres of the life-world and their symbolically established interrelations allows the deciphering of the literary work. It allows the reconstruction of the "logic of the poetic event." A particular interpretation method based on life-world analysis following Schutz will be explained which serves to investigate what he calls the "logic of the poetic event which runs contrary to both everyday life and rational thinking, just as there are grammatical categories in the language of verse that run contrary to the grammar of colloquial speech" (Schutz, 2013 [1948], p. 357; Dreher, 2012a, p. 245).

Life-world theory and analyses of art and literature

The life-world theory is influenced by the reflections on art by Schutz. It is subsequently also being used as a tool to analyze art, in particular for the interpretation of contexts of literary works. The life-world theory, and Schutz' symbol theory as an essential part of it open up the opportunity to identify multiple realities in works of art, to differentiate these realities and to reconstruct the interference between them (Dreher, 2012a, p. 245). According to Schutz, the subjectively focused life-world of the individual does not only consist of a world of the solitary I, but also the social world characterized by intersubjectivity and "multiple realities." Not only everyday life is part, but also dream worlds or worlds of phantasy and imagination, the worlds of religion, of politics, of science, the playing world of the child etc., as well as and in particular aesthetic realities of the arts (Schutz, 1962 [1945]). A connection between everyday transcendent reality spheres and

the everyday world is made with symbols as specific forms of signs – the life-world as a meaningful entity is “held together” with the help of signs and symbols. With regards to the analysis of aesthetic forms, uncovering and deciphering symbolically established relationships between the layers of meaning in a work of art now come to the fore. It is assumed that the interpretative approach used by Schutz, developed from life-world theory and symbol theory, is particularly useful for the analysis of aesthetic forms because of the systematic inclusion of the triangular relation between the author, the work of art and the recipient (Dreher, 2012b, p. 195).

It can be theorized that the analysis of art forms by Alfred Schutz —as Ilja Srubar argues— was in this case not just the random activity of a member of the educated classes, but is instead a systematic layer in his oeuvre. Schutz, with his early concentration on the structure of works of art, develops the understanding that social reality is an intersubjectively, communicatively formed construction. With this in mind, it is particularly relevant that literary fiction is bestowed a character of reality in the interaction between author, work and recipient, and for Schutz, the structural components of the construction of reality in the life-world become accessible through this. In this context, the aesthetic foundation of the structures of the life-world as well as the construction of social reality can be worked out (Srubar, 2007, p. 72). Literary art forms are understood as empiric study fields, with which the communicative functions of reality constructions can be analyzed, assuming that specific aesthetic realities are established in the difference between everyday and everyday transcending use of language.

The narrative poem *The Raven* on the one hand uses the words of everyday language with which the narration presents a plot with, until the last stanza, can be considered realistic. On the other hand, the words of everyday language are presented in poetical form with a specific rhythm and a design which – in Poe’s own words – was a composition “with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (Poe, 1965 [1846], p. 195). This composition of course transcends the everyday use of language and allows to open up everyday transcending provinces of meaning as aesthetic realities.

In a comparison between Schutz’s approach towards the interpretation of phenomena of art and, for example, Karl Mannheim’s reflections on art that come from a viewpoint of cultural sociology and sociology of knowledge, it becomes clear that both Schutz and Mannheim seek to gain access to the social construction of styles of thought and cultural worlds via the analysis of

works of art as social products. Mannheim's analytical concept of the aspect structure of styles of thought and world views (Mannheim, 2013, p. 237) starts from an analysis of the documentary meaning of art forms (1965), which is expressed paradigmatically in works of art. This attempt to gain access to the social character of the cultural world in a non-Marxist way was accompanied by a historicist view of art history as common intellectual history. However, this variant of interpreting phenomena of art as chosen by Mannheim, which originates from historicism and eventually from epistemological relativism, is not Schutz' choice. The latter goes into the search for an interpretive method of the social sciences and for a general theory, and the concept of a general life-world theory takes into consideration the necessity of the historical relativity of respective cultural worlds.

When Schutz regards works of art as social products, according to Srubar, he is not concerned with their respective historically determined style, but the universal principles of meaning of art, which allow the transformation of individual experiences into different intersubjective reality constructs of the art forms (Srubar, 2007, p. 74; Schutz, 2013 [1926]). It is important to note that the work of art as a social product always has to be viewed in a way that focuses on the relationship of creation and interpretation of meaning. As Schutz argues in one of his early works, "Sinn einer Kunstform (Musik)" ("Meaning Structures of Drama and Opera" (Schutz, 2013 [1924])), the work of art, understood as a social construct, needs to be analyzed with regards to its particular relationship with the Thou-Problem (*Du-Problem*), in which the work of art is embedded both in its purpose and also in its effect.

The mere material form of a work of art lends itself to a dual interpretation of its meaning. On the one hand, an interpretation of the objectified concrete work of art refers to the meaning posited by its creator. On the other hand, its meaning interpretation finds its problematics and its limitations in the objective meaning content in which the work of art presents itself to the art appreciator (Schutz, 2013 [1924], p. 172).

These reflections on the meaning-giving function of the work of art again refer to the triadic relation —particularly central for analyses of literature— between the intention of the *author*, the *work of art* itself as the objectification of this intention and also as a social product *sui generis* and

the *recipient*. In addition to this theoretical focus on the communicative relationship between author, work of art and recipient as a core idea of literature analyses, a second focus proves particularly relevant; the focus on the interdependent relations between multiple realities, which are decisive for the functionality of the literary work. The difference between the multiple realities that exist in the work of art and those of the everyday world is particularly characterizing for the literary aesthetics. This can be expressed by Schutz's remark mentioned before on the logic of the poetical event that runs just as contrary to those of everyday life as those of rational thinking (Barber, 2009; Schutz, 2013 [1948], p. 357).

As far as the meaning-giving function of the literary work of art is concerned, we ask the following question: Where does the potential of language to change the respective context of reference, and thus to open up multiple realities of meaning, come from? There is a principal difference between the grammatical structure and the semantic structure of language. The latter —and this is decisive— is ambivalent. The semantic structure is shapeable and changeable and allows for a subjectifying use of the language material, which is not bound to the pragmatics of everyday communication. It permits paradoxical linguistic formulations, which again have the potential to create everyday transcendent layers of reality. By using the mechanism of estrangement, language can be deprived of its everyday pragmatic symbolic character, and the linguistically used signs can be changed into symbols. This creates an everyday transcendent reality on the one hand and simultaneously makes it accessible on the other (Srubar, 2007, p. 79).

In our example “The Raven,” the bird of ill-omen that monotonously repeats the word “nevermore,” establishes a symbolism of death, the death of a loved person. The poem symbolically expresses the never-ending mourning of the narrator's lover; the story of the “The Raven” symbolizes the narrator's mournful and never-ending remembrance. It is the ongoing repetition of the word “nevermore” in the refrain of the poem which signalizes that the mourning and remembering will never come to an end, which somehow expresses the fate of the student dealing with the great loss of a loved person.

Reception Theory - Reception Aesthetics

The influence of Alfred Schutz' paradigm on the development of specific theories of literature is in fact noteworthy, which can especially be seen with regard to his essay "Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality" (Schutz, 1964 [1953]). The impacts of Schutz' way of thinking, especially the impacts of his life-world theoretical considerations, are particularly recognizable in the context of the development of a reception theory in literature studies, which began to form at the end of the 1960s. For this theory, the irreversible dialectic between the production perspective and the reception perspective of symbolic acts and their mediation through a commonly accepted scheme play a crucial role (Stierle, 1975). This is a result of the phenomenological analyses of Schutz' "Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt" (The Phenomenology of the Social World) (Schutz, 1970 [1934]). The action-theoretical reflections contained therein are explicitly applied to linguistic acts from a literary studies viewpoint, picking up the idea that the understanding of others is based on the understanding of one's self, which in itself requires the understanding of others. The phenomenologically oriented action theory of Schutz can thus be applied to achieve a mediation of "production aesthetics" and "reception aesthetics". Originating from Schutz' concept of *Verstehen* (understanding), which refers to symbolic action, different modes of reception, from understanding to realization can be distinguished. If the understanding of texts is understood as the successful accomplishment of the act of communication, i. e. that the creator and the recipient assume a certain action plot, realization in terms of texts needs to be understood in a way that the reflective view is ascribed to the "logic of its produced-ness" on the one side, the existence of the text in the reflective consciousness on the other (Stierle, 1975, p. 11).

Two of the most important German-speaking representatives of the Konstanz School of reception theory influenced by Schutz, Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauß, critically discuss Roman Ingarden's phenomenological literature theory, but take on his concept of "concretization", which describes the creative activity of the reader. The reader, on his or her own initiative and with the power of his or her own imagination "fills" or "completes" undetermined parts or blank spaces with elements from the abundance of what is available or valid (Ingarden, 1994, p. 47). As a consequence, a renewal

of literature history is called for with which the preconceptions of historical objectivism can be overcome, and that also allows for a foundation of the traditional production aesthetics within a reception aesthetics. According to Jauss, the historicity of literature is not based on a post festum established context of 'literary facts', but on the prior experience of the literary work by its reader (Jauss, 1982b). In reception theory's understanding of literature, *the text is only completed in the act of reading by the reader's concretization.*

The literary work has, as mentioned, an artistic pole as well as an aesthetic pole. The artistic pole is the text created by the author, the aesthetic pole is the concretization accomplished by the reader. Following from this, the literary work is neither identical with the text, nor with its concretization: the work is more than the text, because it only comes to life with its concretization (Iser, 1978, pp. 20-22). With the active participation of the reader in the aesthetic process, the work gains a virtual character. It is decisive in this context that the work can only develop in the process of reading and becomes a reality only through the constituting contribution of the receiving consciousness. *The work is the state-of-being constituted in the consciousness of the reader* (p. 21). According to Iser, there are specific undetermined parts in the literary text that do not represent a shortcoming, but provide elementary communication prerequisites of the text, which involve the reader in the creation of the text's intention. These undetermined parts or blank spaces open up a certain spectrum of realization, which is not to be understood as a random comprehension, but proves to be the central condition in the interaction between text and reader (p. 24). In this context, Iser talks about the "implicit reader": the implicit reader does not actually exist, but instead embodies all preliminary orientations a fictional text offers its potential readers as a prerequisite for reception.

Following the reflections on reception theory, the poem "The Raven" functions through the accomplishments of the reader. The reader fills undetermined blank spaces created and 'left open' by the author. The aesthetic quality results from the variety of different levels or modes of interpretation of what is narrated in The Raven. The chamber in which the narrator is positioned is richly furnished; it reminds the narrator of his lost love, does create the effect of beauty. The isolation of the man is expressed by the tempest outside, since the tempest of the dark night establishes a sharp contrast to the calmness and coziness of the chamber. One other potential interpretation leads to melancholy. In his own deciphering of "The Raven,"

Poe himself describes the most poetical of all topics related to melancholy. “When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover” (Poe, 1965 [1846], p. 201).

The poem in its specific composition characterizes the artistic pole of the work of art which is designed by the author Edgar Allan Poe. But the aesthetic pole of the poem, if we follow reception theory, only comes into being through the interpretation process of the recipient.

Parting from Schutz’ differentiation of topic and horizon in “Reflections on the Problem of Relevance” (Schutz, 1970), Iser develops considerations regarding the interaction of the inner perspectives of the fictional text, while the so-called “perspective carriers”, i. e. the narrator, figures, plot and reader fiction are ultimately always being referred to each other. The reader creates the aesthetic matter after the sketched-out guidance of a variable viewpoint constellation. The different perspectives are focused on a common aesthetic manifestation, however due to the selective character of perspectivity, the manifestation is never completely represented. On the one hand, the inner perspectivity of the text frames the combination of selective elements, and traces out the specific structure that directs the combination on the other. This combination is understood as topic structure and horizon structure, which organizes the contributions of the reader; at the same time it allows for the constitution of the text as a system of perspectivity (Iser, 1978, pp. 96-97). The important aspect here is that whatever the reader focuses on becomes topical for him or her, and this means that if one position becomes a topic, another position is unable to also be topical. However, the position that is not in focus does not disappear, it simply loses its topical relevance and creates a blank space with regards to the position that is raised to a topic (pp. 197-199). Contrary to pragmatic communication, in which the range of possibilities is continually limited and eventually hidden completely by the increasing individualization of the act of speaking, the connectability interrupted by blank spaces in fictional texts follows a very different direction in literary communication. In texts a range of possibilities is created and this either calls for the reader to make a selective decision or puts the responsibility for the connectability onto the reader (p. 184). The recipient as the reader in this sense is responsible for an update of the repertoire of interpretation

possibilities offered in the text, is responsible for a filling of the blank spaces with meaning.

One possibility for a certain topical interpretation of our poem “The Raven” concentrates on the continuous repetition of the word “nevermore” which gives a circular structure to the poem. This aspect is related to what Poe calls the “unity of the effect,” which means that each word and each line of the poem adds to the larger meaning of the poem. The interpreter and recipient has to fulfill the task to decipher the “composition” of the author. The cyclic structure of the poem with the continuously returning concept of “nevermore” somehow “forces” the recipient into the belief in a never ending mourning which is eternal. The author in this case establishes a strong topical relevance with respect to the mournful and the never ending remembrance which is to be interpreted by the recipient. The involved appresentation processes of the author who is filling up the blank spaces in The Raven with meaning are based on various past experiences related to feelings of melancholy and mourning. These past experiences therefore interfere in the interpretation of the poem and are important for the functioning of the poem as a work of art as such.

If we at this point reflect on the difference between fiction and poetry with respect to reception theory, it becomes obvious that Edgar Allen Poe’s poem The Raven leads the reader and recipient into a certain pre-composed interpretation not only through the words of the narrative. It is also the rhythm and the grammatical structure of the poem which is the basis for the communication of author and recipient. Reciting the poem in the co-presence of an audience of listeners and also the sole reading of the poem in solitude establishes a synchronization of the inner time of author and recipient which is involved in the interpretation process. This form of communication is related to the listening and interpreting of music. In this sense the poem establishes a different form of communication between author and recipient if we compare it to fiction which is not necessarily based on a rhythmic structure.

Schutz’ theory of multiple realities has also made an impact in literature studies and has influenced Hans Robert Jauß’ theory of aesthetic reception in particular. The concept of *sub-universes of meaning* is especially important here. Schutz highlights the sub-universes of religion, science, phantasy and dream which are not constituted of different subject areas, but instead by the different meaning the same reality can acquire when it is

perceived from a religious, theoretical, aesthetic or other approach (Jauss, 1982a, pp. 120-121). Dependence on Schutz' life-world theory becomes apparent when Jauß highlights that aesthetic perception is able to create a world of its own without removing the reference to the "suspended" everyday world or other spheres of meaning of the life-world. Aesthetic perception can form a communicative relationship with the everyday world and any other reality, as Jauß argues in agreement with his colleague Wolfgang Iser — it can overcome the polar opposition of fiction and reality. In the words of Iser, instead being the exact opposite, fiction tells us something about reality (Iser, 1978, p. 54). In a similar way, Schutz assumes a literary-symbolic focus on the life-world boundaries, for example the discussion of the fundamental fear of death, which represents a shock to the everyday life.

Conclusion

Outlining Alfred Schutz's major contribution to literary interpretation and reception theory could demonstrate that his theory of the life-world including his theory of symbol are the decisive theoretical "tools" for an interpretation of the work of art. His standpoint on literary interpretation highlights the triangular structure of author, work of art and recipient with a specific focus on the recipient. From a phenomenological perspective, the recipient is involved in the aesthetic process of the literary work since interpretation activities involving meaning giving of the *reader* are crucial. While the *artistic* pole of the work of art is presented by the author, in our case by Edgar Allan Poe, the *aesthetic* pole is established by the recipient through concretization. This means that the active participation of the reader is required so that the work of art is able to obtain an aesthetic quality. The work of art can only unfold through constitution, specifically appresentation processes of the recipient's consciousness. Schutz's theoretical framework allows the reconstruction of the "logic of the poetic event", which is a specific logic functioning contrary to rational thinking. Taking author, work of art and recipient into consideration, Schutz is able to present ideas for a holistic theory of art including the subjectivity not only of the artist, but also of the recipient as part of the work of art as such.

And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
 On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
 And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
 And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the
 floor;
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
 Shall be lifted - nevermore!

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