# Literature in Society

# Literature in Society

Edited by

## Regina Rudaitytė

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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# FOREWORD

The essays in this volume focus on the text-world dichotomy that has been a pivotal problem since Plato, implicating notions of mimesis and representation and raising a series of debatable issues. Do literary texts relate only to the fictional world and not to the real one? Do they not only describe but also perform and thus create and transform reality? Is literature a mere reflection/expression of society, a field and a tool of political manipulations, a playground to exercise ideological and social power?

The problematic relationship between literature and society has always been the focus of literary scholarship. Admitting that literature both reflects society and affects it, on what theoretical premises can we model the relationship between literature and society? And how do specific literary texts support the validity of these arguments? The present collection of essays aims at highlighting these problematic and controversial issues.

Herbert Grabes' seminal essay "Literature in Society/Society and Its Literature" which opens this volume perfectly captures the essential functions of literature in society, whether it be Derridean belief in a revolutionary potential of literature, "the power of literature to say everything", or Hillis Miller's view of literature having the potential to create or reveal alternative realities, or, according to Grabes, the ability of literature „to offer to society a possibility of self-reflection by way of presenting a double of what is held to be reality", and, last but not least, the ability of literature „to considerably contribute to the joy of life by enabling a particular kind of pleasure" – the pleasure of reading literature.

The subsequent essays collected in this volume deal with complex relations between Literature and Society, approaching this issue from different angles and in various historical epochs. They are on diverse thematics and written from diverse theoretical perspectives, differing in scope and methodology.

Regina Rudaitytė

# Literature in Society / Society and Its Literature

# Herbert Grabes

As the title of my essay indicates, I will look at the multi-faceted and problematic relationship between literature and society from opposite perspectives: from the one of literature or rather the literary theorist who unavoidably finds literature immersed in society, and from that of society or the sociologist who also has to deal with the somewhat strange phenomenon called literature. Both are, of course, no more than heuristic positions chosen in order to give some structure to my approach to an often discussed yet ever anew challenging topic. If this strategy should, however, suggest that it is quite obvious what is meant by 'literature' and by 'society', and that it is only the character of the relation between the two that is a matter of dispute, I had better say at this point that I will operate on the opposite assumption that this relation will become transparent once it has been settled which of the many possible and at least partly controversial notions of 'literature' and 'society' is used by me and the one or other theorist included in the discussion.

First then, a delimitation of the concept of literature: that it is necessary can be gathered from the entry in the OED according to which 'literature' can mean:

> Literary productions as a whole; the body of writings in a particular country or period, or in the world in general. Now also in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect.[1]

That I will not deal with the whole "body of writings in a particular country or period, or in the world in general," will, I assume, be expected in the present context, although the variegated genres and types of writings to be found in a particular country or period can be a rewarding object of cultural history, and even on a global scale it makes sense to study, for

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[1] *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, I, 1638.

instance, the differences between oral cultures and cultures that possess writing and writings. Operating with literature "in a more restricted sense," I can, however, not accept the nineteenth-century criteria that are mentioned in the OED because quite a few literary works from the advent of modernism onwards cannot claim any particular "beauty of form or emotional effect."

Being quite aware of the fact that the creation of a domain of writing labelled "literature" in a narrower sense (and called "poetry" until the late eighteenth century) is a cultural construct that depends on various assumptions and is subject to historical change, I will take a first orientation from the way in which in our own time 'literature' is understood when bookstores tend to divide up their shelves and publishers their catalogues and try to remain close to it in my theoretical differentiation. In the attempt to register the criteria which at the present time seem valid and sufficiently precise to define 'literature' in a narrower sense, I will, of course, also make use of the pertinent offers included in the flourishing of theory in more recent decades. Thus, for instance, the highlighting of the liberating effect of what traditionally has been called the 'fictionality' of literature by Jacques Derrida who in an interview published in 1992 pointed out the "suspended relation to meaning and reference" that gives to literature

> In principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history.[2]

 And when he even went so far as saying,

> The law of literature tends, in principle, to defy or lift the law. It therefore allows one to think the essence of the law in the experience of this 'everything to say.' It is an institution which tends to overflow the institution.[3]

There is no doubt that in his opinion literature possesses a revolutionary potential and is, or at least can be, anything but harmless. No wonder that dictators install strict censorship and that the granting of a free space in which literature can unfold this potential is by no means a normal component of society.

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[2] Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature", 48.
[3] Ibid., 36.

Being much more modest and apologetic in his argumentation, Peter Widdowson in his monograph *Literature* from the very end of the last century replaced 'literature' by 'the literary' as a "working term for the kind of written discourse I believe has some irreplaceable uses in our society, without which our cultural lives would be impoverished and diminished."[4]   As the first distinguishing feature of 'the literary' he mentions "its own sense of being '*of* the literary'," of its being

> the product, first, of a writer who *elects* to write a poem, a drama or a prose fiction, itself a choice knowingly made within a cultural context which is also known to ascribe meaning to these genres. Second, it is the product of a reader who *recognizes*, by way of their [sic] own 'literary competence' […] that what they are reading is indeed a literary text.[5]

In terms of the Systems Theory of Niklas Luhmann – to which I will come back in the second part of my essay – this is the claim that there exists in society a self-referential, autonomous system called "the literary" – a system within which both authors and readers of 'literary texts' operate. This claim is supported by the second distinguishing feature Woddowson points out, the fact that literature "is actually 'making' […] *poietic* realities"[6], whereby 'making' implies being creative in the sense of "making for the first time"[7] and "*poietic* realities" means something "which would not otherwise exist"[8]. This quite obviously is an assertion of what in more recent theory has also been called 'literary worldmaking', of a phenomenon I have recently explained in terms of the phenomenological theory of Roman Ingarden, the constructivist theory of Nelson Goodman, and the cognitive-psychologist theory of Schank and Abelson,[9] and of what in Luhmann's Systems Theory is the feature of the *autopoiesis* of an autonomous system.

The distancing of 'the literary' from other domains of culture and society that becomes evident in the features that have already been mentioned most probably was what made Widdowson for a third feature quote Louis Althusser's view that art, including literary art, owing to its formal composition achieves "a *retreat,* an internal distantiation"  and is

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[4] Widdowson, *Literature,* 93.
[5] Ibid., 96.
[6] Ibid., 100.
[7] Ibid., 101.
[8] Ibid., 104.
[9] Grabes, „Three Theories of Literary Worldmaking: …", *Cultural Ways of Worldmaking,* 47-60.

thus able to "make us see"…"make us perceive"…"make us feel"… something which *alludes* to reality … [that is] the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*"[10]. What is claimed here for literature is an anything but normal achievement, is actually an almost impossible feat regarding the Marxist view that every feature and aspect of society is tainted – if not altogether determined – by the dominant ideology. Literature accordingly would give the members of a society a chance to detect the blind spot in – or rather the normally well hidden presuppositions of – their view of the world and the self, and thereby first enable social change based on self-knowledge.

A similarly optimistic assessment of the potential of literature can be found in Hillis Miller's *On Literature* from 2002:

> Though literature refers to the real world […] and though reading is a material act, literature uses such physical embedment to create or reveal alternative realities. These then enter into the ordinary 'real' world by way of readers whose beliefs and behavior are changed by reading – sometimes for the better, perhaps sometimes not.[11]

And he therefore holds that "all literary works can be usefully thought of as a species of magic"[12]. What becomes quite clear here is that the influence of literature on society can only be an indirect one, mediated by its readers and dependent on who reads what and how many readers particular works will find on the given condition of whether its dissemination will be supported, left to chance, hindered or even suppressed by the institutions of society.

According to Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) literature is perhaps not exactly like magic but it is in the experience of a special event, of the event of encountering a "reformulation of existing norms" in the act of reading "*as an event*, an event which opens up new possibilities of meaning and feeling (understood as verbs), or, more accurately, the event of *such opening*, that we can speak of the literary"[13]. An experience of this kind can, of course, only be had by individual readers, yet an important precondition of it is cultural and social: "To respond fully to a work that presents itself as literary one has to be

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[10] Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre", quoted by Widdowson, *Literature,* 118.
[11] Miller, *On Literature,* 20.
[12] Ibid., 21.
[13] Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature,* 59.

embedded in the culture in which literature, and perhaps even this literary form, is a part, and one has to deploy one's familiarity with the conventionalized routines of the literary institution"[14]. And "[al]though literary inventiveness is something that is experienced only by individuals, it is the culture at large that determines whether this or that work is literary. A significant number of a work's readers must acknowledge a work's inventiveness before it can be called 'literary' from a cultural or institutional perspective"[15]. While agreeing on the important role of what sociologists tend to call the literary field or literary system, I don't think that the criterion is quantity, that is the number of readers that decides but that it is influential critics and scholars as well as already well established authors who, to use Bourdieu's term, 'consecrate' or legitimate a work as a literary work of art, and that there is also what is called the 'test of time'. One dare say that, for instance, most of the bestsellers of the last century have not made it into the canon. Yet Attridge further defines a literary work of art as "a configuration of cultural materials" that "holds out the possibility of a repeated encounter with alterity"[16] and literature in this sense may be "a cultural product, but it is never simply contained by a culture"[17].

Eminently focused on the relation between literature and society is another more recent version of literary theory, Hubert Zapf's "Literature as Cultural ecology", presented with examples in his *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie* (2002) and in a condensed form in an article from 2006 on "The State of Ecocriticism and the Function of Literature as Cultural Ecology." The core of this theory is the assumption of a triadic function of literature as (1) "cultural-critical metadiscourse," a "representation of typical deficits, blind spots, imbalances, deformations, and contradictions within the dominant systems of civilisatory power"[18]; (2) as "imaginative counterdiscourse," a "staging and semiotic empowering of that which is marginalized, neglected or repressed in the dominant cultural reality system"[19]; (3) as "reintegrative interdiscourse," bringing about a "reintegration of the excluded with the cultural reality system,

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[14] Ibid., 86-87.
[15] Ibid., 61.
[16] Ibid., 28.
[17] Ibid., 6.
[18] Zapf, „The State of Ecocriticism and the Function of Literature as Cultural Ecology", 62.
[19] Ibid., 63.

through which literature contributes to the constant renewal of the cultural center from its margins"[20].

If literature should be able to fulfil these functions, it would be of considerable value for society. As has been mentioned by Widdowson, the possibility of the first of these three functions has already been pointed out by Althusser: it rests on the ability of art to distance itself to the ideology within which it is produced. And once the deficits of the dominant cultural and social system have been detected, the further possibility to create an "imaginative counterdiscourse" is also given. What remains an open question is, however, whether society will grant literature a space free enough to function as an openly critical discourse or even a "counterdiscourse". And the third function even depends on the cooperation of individual readers. I assume that you have a sufficient amount of experience regarding how people, and even more cultural and social institutions, tend to react when you confront them with their "typical deficits, blind spots, imbalances, deformations, and contradictions. There usually is not much of a chance that the response will be other than negative, either aggressively so or at best in the way of taking recourse to excuses. Perhaps the chances to actually reach those who think or feel differently are better when literature appears in the shape of an "imaginative counterdiscourse," according to Zapf a discourse in which "what is culturally excluded" is "linked to the delimiting pluralisation of semiotic possibilities as well as to a mythopoetic energy of creating meaning," or what I would call telling stories, stories, stories…

For while agreeing that literature may under favourable conditions fulfil the functions described by Zapf, I hold that the reason why this is so has neither been mentioned by him nor any of the other theorists I have referred to. What I mean is literature's disarming modesty in regard to the call for general validity bound up with its restriction to a presentation of the particular.[21] There is, of course, also the reduction of its validational claim by the frequent foregrounding of fictionality, be it by textual markers or by institutionalized expectations bound up with a genre. But even when this is lacking there is still the significant restriction of the scope of validity in propositions to individual cases, to specific situations or events, to particular acts or inward states of individual characters. There are, of course, also more general comments and statements to be found in literary discourse, but they are linked to the particular perspective of a narrating voice or perceiving character and thus also restricted in their

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[20] Ibid., 64.
[21] Cf. Grabes, "Introduction: Literature and Philosophy – A Relationship under Debate," Grabes, *Literature and Philosophy*, 11-12.

claim to validity. In literary discourse we find ourselves confronted with individual fates, ways of speaking and acting, thinking and feeling. And though much of what we thus encounter may be not strange to us, we are fairly free in the process of identifying with or distancing ourselves from the particularities that are presented and can above all decide ourselves how much more general validity they deserve to be granted. There is never the impression of being compelled to agree or disagree that is always bound up with the claim to general validity inherent in conceptual and referential discourse. In the institution of literature we therefore may with good reason grant authors the freedom "to say everything," as Derrida remarked, for whatever may be said is neither presented with a truth claim nor does it necessarily pertain to us or even make claims in face of our convictions.

Literary discourse may indeed be able to achieve, as Zapf says, a "reintegration of the excluded with the cultural reality system," but only because we as readers are the ones to decide how serious and consequential we take or make it. One could also say that literature can the better fulfil the functions mentioned by Zapf and others the more it appears as being devoid of any particular function, for only when it succeeds in overcoming the individual, communal, and institutional defences it will be able to initiate a personal, cultural or social change from within. I would like to mention just two pertinent examples from entirely different historical contexts: when Chaucer in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" made fun of the theological dispute whether divine prescience necessarily implied predestination by letting it be carried out between a cock and his favourite hen[22], he quite obviously could make his point and get away with it, while a similarly irreverent attack in another kind of discourse would certainly have caused him serious trouble. And while after the event of 9/11 it would not have been without considerable risk to publicly state that finally the Americans had been made to experience a bit of the pain they had before inflicted on others, this is, after all, exactly what Jonathan Foer was able to indirectly do through a narrative linking of this event with the bombing of Dresden in his very successful novel from 2005, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close.*

To sum up what literature more or less exclusively has to offer to society is a possibility of self-reflection by way of presenting a double of what is held to be reality, a distorted image that strengthens some features and weakens or eliminates other, or an imagined world as unlike the one people live in as possible. In all these cases the readers are confronted with

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[22] Chaucer, "The Nonne Preestes Tale", l. 412-430.

modes of thought, models of behaviour, and varieties of feeling they can either sympathize with, experience as strange, or detest – quite similar to the way they react in the life world, with one important difference: the artificial world they encounter has been construed in a manner that will efficiently influence their intellectual and emotional response. They will, of course, forget at times that what they experience is only imaginary, yet as more recent findings of cognitive psychologists have shown, the reaction of the brain to imagined experiences is hardly any different from those made in the life world, and Keith Oatley in his quite recent study *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction* (July 2011) has been able to show how reading fiction can improve the chances to change ourselves and strengthen our social abilities.

It is true that the influence on society can only be exerted indirectly through individual readers, but if their number is sufficiently large or if some of them are in an influential social position, literature does also matter regarding society. Just imagine the difference between a situation in which bestsellers or classics disseminated in the educational system tend to be nostalgic, another one in which they are rather imitative in a 'realistic' sense, and still another  one in which they are mostly avantgardist or utopian, and it will become evident that the influence on society will be anything but the same.

Yet before I come to this aspect of my topic, some more attention must be given to what already has been mentioned in passing: that for literature to be able to fulfil its social function some preconditions on the part of society have to be guaranteed. The most important one is the granting of a space ideally free of the political, legal, religious, and moral laws that are in place, a free space for a free play of the imagination. Another precondition is the possibility of a free dissemination, a free trade, the opportunity of having access to literary works through public libraries, and the right to possess them. In order to demonstrate what I mean I only have to mention that in the 1970s a Russian colleague from what then was Leningrad was put in prison for several years just because some novels of Nabokov were found in his private library. And finally the institution of literature needs also some social prestige in order to find an adequate place in intellectual life and education, and not least a way in which authors not yet able to live by the sale of their works can be supported – like the solution that has been found in the United States in terms of hiring them to teach creative writing in the universities.

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It is high time by now to switch over to the opposite perspective, the one from which society regards 'literature' and deals with it in the one or other way. As in the case of 'literature', I will first insert a brief definition of society, although in this case the danger of a misunderstanding appears to be much lower. Again I will resort to the OED in order to bring in common usage, and best suited to the present context appears definition no. 3 of the entry, "An aggregate of persons living together in a more or less ordered community," made more precise by definition no. 2, "The state or condition of living in association, company, or intercourse with others of the same species; the system or mode of life adopted by individuals for the purpose of harmonious co-existence or for mutual benefit, defence, etc."[23] Sociologists have, of course, come up with much more elaborate concepts and descriptions, and some of them have given closer attention to the relation between society and its literature. Within the given framework I have to be very selective, and I will in due brevity at least deal with some of the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu as presented in *The Rules of Art*[24] and with some of Niklas Luhmann's views published in *Art as a Social System*[25] and in his *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur* from 1980.

According to Bourdieu the whole area of the social is made up of a number of 'fields' like those of economy, politics, religion, or art, fields differentiated by their own rules and logic, and by *habitus*, a key term of Bourdieu referring to the acquired patterns of social behaviour which determine the style of living of both individuals and social groups. The historical development is seen as being determined by an increasing autonomy of the various social fields, a development, Bourdieu feels, threatened, however, by more and more interventions of the political and economical in other fields, among them those of art and of literature. As to the work to be done by the sociologist regarding the latter, I would like to quote his view in some detail:

> First, one must analyse the position of the literary field within the field of power, and its evolution in time. Second, one must analyse the internal structure of the literary (etc.) field, a universe obeying its own laws of functioning and transformation, meaning the structure of objective relations between positions held by individuals *and* groups placed in a situation of competition for legitimacy. And finally, the analysis involves the genesis of the habitus of occupants of these positions, that is, the

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[23] *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary,* II, 2902.
[24] 1996; originally *Les Régles de l'art,* 1992.
[25] 2000; originally *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft,* 1995.

systems of dispositions which, being the product of a social trajectory and of a position within the literary (etc.) field, find in this position a more or less favourable opportunity to be realized […].[26]

What is typical of the literary field in the field of power is that being "[a] real challenge to all kinds of economism, the literary order […] presents itself as an inverted economic world: those who enter it have an interest in disinterestedness"[27]. Nevertheless, the literary field as a field of cultural production is

> at any one time the site of a struggle between two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, which favours those who dominate the field economically and politically (for example, 'bourgeois art'), and the autonomous principle (for example, 'art for art's sake'), which leads its most radical defences to make of temporal failure a sign of election and of success a sign of compromise with the times.[28]

And Bourdieu holds that the "degree of autonomy of the field […] varies considerably according to periods and national traditions. It is related to the degree of symbolic capital which has been accumulated over time by the action of successive generations"[29].

As to the internal structure of the literary field, Bourdieu directs his readers' attention in particular to his view that the "producer of the *value of the work of art* is not the artist but the field of production as a universe of belief which produces the value of the work of art as a *fetish* by producing the belief in the creative power of the artist"[30], and he refers to "the ensemble of agents and institutions which participate in the production of the value of the work via the production of the belief in the value of art in general and in the distinctive value of this or that work of art"[31]. I would like to remark, however that there is sufficient evidence to qualify this opinion: while it is certainly so that without the support of mediators like lectors, publishers, reviewers and critics it seems almost impossible for authors to let their works even enter the competitive literary field, a strong support from all sides can produce a short-term bestseller yet not prevent its subsequent falling into oblivion if its quality will not allow for a constant renewal of interest. For as Bourdieu rightly holds, "the

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[26] Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art,* 214.
[27] Ibid., 216.
[28] Ibid., 216-217.
[29] Ibid., 220-221
[30] Ibid., 229.
[31] Ibid., 229.

work is made [--] hundreds of times, by all those who have an interest in it, who find a material or symbolic profit in reading it, classifying it, decoding it, commenting on it, reproducing it, criticising it, combating it, knowing it, possessing it"[32].

It is typical of the sociological approach to literature that the focus is on the communal, social aspect, and in a postmodern fashion the field of art and literature , including the corresponding *habitus*, is seen to rest entirely on a communal belief,

> A belief that in turn is founded on the *illusio,* the adherence to a game as a game, the acceptance of the fundamental premise that the game, literary or scientific, is worth being played, being taken seriously. The literary *illusion,* that originating adherence to the literary game which grounds the belief in the *importance* or *interest* of literary fictions, is the precondition – almost always unperceived – of the aesthetic pleasure which is always, in part, the pleasure of playing the game, of participating in the fiction, of being in total accord with the premises of the game.[33]

Yet while the belief in the creative power of the artist may also be seen as a mere part of the game, it must not be forgotten that if it did not really exist, the game could not be played at all. No author, no game.

Another influential sociological conception and description of literature in society is the one presented by Niklas Luhmann on the basis of his Systems Theory. According to this theory a society had best be conceived of as a dynamic system differentiated into autonomous, self-referential subsystems like economy, politics, science, law, and art, subsystems serving different functions in their own, evolutionary determined manner. What these functional systems have in common is communication, and their difference lies in how they communicate, in their specific binary codes like have / not have, power / no power, know / not know, legal / illegal, or beautiful / ugly. There are also other aspects in which the subsystems differ, and Niels Werber has in his postscript to the Suhrkamp edition of Luhmann's *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur* (2008) presented a useful schema of a functionally differentiated society according to Luhmann.[34]

Luhmann holds that the process of functional differentiation within the history of European societies has taken place in the form of a change of social conditions towards a situation in which art was granted more and

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[32] Ibid. 171.
[33] Ibid., 333.
[34] "Nachwort von Niels Werber", Luhmann, *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur,* 448.

more freedom. Beginning in 14th century Italy, when the sponsoring of art moved over from the Church to the cities and small courts of the nobility, the new system of patronage was gradually abandoned from the late 17th century onwards in favour of a rising market, and since the end of the 18th century exists an autonomous system of art and literature that could then exploit the implied freedom in the 19th and 20th centuries. Since early modern times we have also an increasing orientation towards novelty, and after the mid-18th century "[a]ll functional systems have been faced with the necessity of creating the new and contain it in a net of a sufficient amount of redundancies"[35]. It further seems worth noting that Luhmann asks whether it might be that art has come to a point where it imitates the social urge for the new only in order to reveal its absurdity – a development perhaps reflected on by the concept of postmodernity[36].

What became possible with the becoming autonomous of the literary system was the concentration on fictional reality, a distinction allowing for a degree of freedom that would not work in everyday life. Luhmann further draws attention to the fact that the "distinction between fictional and real reality […] creates the possibility to observe the World from within the world with a view for the contingency of all realized forms. No reality can now exclude the possibility of being different"[37]. More specifically he sees in the autonomy that results from the restriction to fictionality a precondition for the particular function of art and literature in modern society:

> If you now attempt to bring together the analysis of the work of art with the analysis of systems, with the idea of an autonomous system that continuously produces uncertainty and permanently wears it out, continuously fosters various styles and gives them up again, then you possess in the system of art a model of society one could call harmless because devoid of consequences, a model functioning everywhere in the way art functions, except that it is loaded in economy, politics, law, or an intimate relationship with more consequences than it is the case in the art system.[38]

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[35] Luhmann, "Die Ausdifferenzierung des Kunstsystems", *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur*, 347.
[36] Cf. ibid. , 347.
[37] Luhmann, „Literatur als fiktionale Realität", *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur,* 287.
[38] Luhmann, „Die Autonomie der Kunst", *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur,* 426-427.

Yet when Luhmann adds that it would be interesting for a sociologist to note that "modern society makes everywhere real what in art is presented in an exemplary manner and in a certain way protected by being without consequences"[39], he is late (as most theorists and critics are) in pointing out what an author like Nabokov in his parodic autobiography *Look at the Harlequins!* from 1974 had already presented as the dying protagonist's summary review of his life: "historically, art, or at least artifacts, had preceded, not followed, nature"[40]. In any case, the achievement of art and literature in the present time is seen by Luhmann in its exemplary function: "exemplary – that is meant to say that art faces the problem that comes up for all living creatures, for every individual consciousness, for the social system and its functional systems, organizations and interactions, also regarding itself and that it tests it on itself"[41]. This is also the reason why it seems rewarding to operate within the wider frame of the social context of art and literature: One can so better notice which connections exist between particular features of the production of literary texts and general social developments. This holds true, for instance, regarding the conception of individuality or regarding "the consequences of the differentiation of the art system on literature"[42].

With all respect for the achievement of social theories, there seem to be some aspects of the manner in which society tends to deal with literature that do not receive due attention. An important one is that for various reasons the privilege granted art and literature to establish and keep in place a more or less autonomous field or system of literature has – when considered on a global scale – remained rather an exception. Not trusting the assumed harmlessness of fictional texts, most societies have established some direct or indirect censorship on political, religious, or moral grounds. In the DDR, for instance, an author held to be counter-revolutionary could be put in jail or in an insane asylum or at least be forbidden to publish anything at all, and if he was merely held to be not trustworthy enough, he was informed that there was a serious shortage of paper preventing the printing of his works. And there is, of course, the well known example of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie on the basis of a religious world view that does not accept the distinction between fictional and referential discourse. It obviously takes a considerable degree of

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[39] Ibid., 427.

[40] Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!,* 244.

[41] Luhmann, „Literatur als fiktionale Realität", *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur,* 289.

[42] Luhmann, „Literatur als Kommunikation", *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur,* 389.

tolerance on the part of those in power and of society as a whole to respect and even protect a social space in which the demands of the dominant political ideology or religious convictions of influential social groups as well as the social conventions sanctified by tradition are suspended.

Then there is the less rigorous influence on the literary field in terms of a selective support and instrumentalization of a particular kind of literature by the state via the educational system, by influential critics attempting to monopolize certain categories of quality, and publishers bent on enlarging their share of the market. When, for instance, the fact that there is only a very small readership for poetry in Germany is explained by the existence of an adverse 'Zeitgeist', it is not taken into account that poems have practically disappeared from schoolbooks and been displaced by short short-stories with a 'politically correct' bias. The matter is, of course complicated, and that it may be necessary to check the values disseminated particularly through childrens' books becomes evident when one realizes that, for instance, in the traditional German *Struwelpeter* a child gets its fingers cut off for not having obeyed its parents, and in the egalitarian Swiss *Der Regenbogenfisch* a beautiful multicoloured fish has to give away all his beautiful colours but one to his drab fellow creatures in order to be accepted by the group and be able to live in peace.

What will motivate governments and whole societies to grant literature a certain amount of freedom is the unmistakable cultural competition between nations. None of the theories I dealt with give sufficient attention to the very telling fact that almost all histories of literature are national literary histories, that in Europe they came up at the time of the rise of the early modern nation states (that is, in Britain and France in the 16th and 17th centuries). This is not sheer speculation because, for instance, the histories of British writing from the mid-16th century onwards and the histories of English poetry since the late 17th century were  presented by their authors expressly to demonstrate that British authors are at least as good or even better than those of other nations. In the Victorian era all candidates for the British civil service in India, and soon also in Britain, had to take an exam in English literature, and      soon after new nation states appeared on the map after the end of the British empire there also appeared new histories of their national literatures.

In contrast, the market of literature has to a considerable degree become international, if not global. According to the figures published in connection with the Frankfurt Book Fair, some 80 percent of the fiction published annually in Germany are translations. The literary market is, of course, a favourite object of empirical sociology; it includes not only the field of production and marketing but also that of the reading public and

its development. Regarding the historical aspect, there exist a number of studies of British book production and distribution, and I would just like to mention classics like H.S. Bennett's three volumes on *English Books and Readers* for the time 1475-1640 or Richard D. Altick's *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900,* and the still useful monograph by Per Gedin, *Literature in the Marketplace*. More recently, research regarding readership has been subsumed under the wider heading of media and communication studies, with the result that readers and reading culture are considered in relation to the consumers of the new media.

     All this is certainly quite useful, especially for those doing business in that field, and as useful as more knowledge about the role of texts in society that do not claim to be useful. Yet while agreeing that in the domain of theory one has to be serious in order to be taken seriously, I finally cannot hide my astonishment that the sociology of literature does hardly ever take into account what I hold to be one of the most important, if not the most important motivation to sustain something like a literary field or literary system in society: the sheer pleasure of reading literary texts, of making excursions into and becoming acquainted with the imaginary worlds presented in these texts while we help to construe them or stage them in what Byron called the 'theatre of the mind'. The neglect I am referring to is proved by the fact that the index of Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art* contains 33 references to "cultural production" and 39 to "writers" but not a single one to "pleasure", that in the index to Luhmann's *Art as a Social System* can be found 158 references to "first or second order observation" and at least  10 to "pleasure," yet as it turns out leading to contexts in which either Kant's 'disinterested pleasure' is interpreted as nothing else but a particular kind of observation or in which it is reduced to a sheer addiction to novelty, and that in the index to his *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur* are listed 101 references to "Problem" (or 'problem') and not a single one to "Vergnügen" (or 'pleasure'). I remember being treated with a condescending smile by a well-known theorist when a long time ago I mentioned that one of the things I liked best about James Joyce's *Ulysses* was the humorous note that prevails despite the dealing with quite serious aspects of life. This sneering has not healed me, however, of the conviction that if art and literature were not able to considerably contribute to the joy of life by enabling a particular kind of pleasure we would not have them – neither openly in society nor clandestine in private. The pleasure of reading literature is so special because it results from the possibility to go (often far) beyond our own living space and to experience whole imaginary worlds; to sympathize

with, be concerned about or detest other people; and to analyse or judge situations and behaviour of all kinds – yet always without the normal consequences we have to face in the life world, without any danger to our social position, health or even life. Literature allows us to lead many imaginary lives on top of our own that is always restricted by the 'either-or' our body enforces and our mind regrets.

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# NATURE, LAW AND KINGSHIP IN JOHN DRYDEN'S *ABSALOM AND ACHITOPHEL*

## INGO BERENSMEYER

> I never read nor heard that *lex* was *rex;* but it is common and most true that
> *rex* is *lex*, for he is *lex loquens,* a living, a speaking, an acting law.
> —Sir Robert Berkeley, Justice of the King's Bench, 10 February 1638[1]

John Dryden's famous Restoration satire *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) is one of the key seventeenth-century texts that demand a political reading: it engages its readers in the political debates and idioms of its own time while also calling for a more general reflection on the connections between literature and society in (early) modernity. Responding to Milton's *Paradise Lost,* Dryden's satire contends that scriptural authority, employed in discourses of dissent, is not the exclusive domain of republicans and puritans but can be employed to defend the Restoration compromise. In this essay, I shall argue that *Absalom and Achitophel* marks a crucial turning point in seventeenth-century culture because it posits a new relationship between poetry and society as well as between the poet and his audience. Dryden's response to the political crisis of the 1680s does not consist in a transcendence of the political for the sake of a higher (e.g. religious) concept of reality but in the subordination of scriptural reference to a contemporary political narrative. Yet it seems to be less an actual contribution to political debates than an attempt to avoid discussion. In this context, I shall pay close attention to the figural nexus between nature and law as it is established in the poem. In my reading, *Absalom and Achitophel* is symptomatic of the decline of any self-evident relation between concepts of nature and law towards the end of the seventeenth century, and also of the increasing separation between literature and politics discourse in English neoclassicism.

In the 1680s, those who had celebrated Charles II on his return to the throne in 1660 increasingly found themselves on the defensive as the problematic aspects of the Restoration settlement failed to disappear. The

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[1] Coward and Gaunt, *English Historical Documents,* vol. 5 (B): 1603-1660, 391.

Exclusion crisis foregrounded the king's lack of integrative power; the stand-off between crown and parliament over a potential Catholic successor to the throne (Charles II's brother James, Duke of York, later James II) might well have erupted in another rebellion and civil war. Dryden's predicament as a royalist apologist is pithily summarized at the beginning of his preface:

> The Design, I am sure, is honest: but he who draws his Pen for one Party, must expect to make Enemies of the other. For, *Wit* and *Fool,* are Consequents of *Whig* and *Tory.* And every man is a Knave or an Ass to the contrary side.[2]

Poetry no longer communicates eternal truths to its readership, nor can it simply be relied upon to educate 'the people' or 'the nobility' in the virtues of civility and obedience. The emergence of partisan opinion as a judge of intellectual and artistic merit has inevitable consequences for literature, which can no longer assume a stance of non-involvement in partisan politics. Earlier in the century, in the epic poems of William Davenant and John Milton, the purpose of poetry had been to elucidate a higher order of reality that should either idealize (in the case of Davenant) or "justify"[3] (in *Paradise Lost*) the political reality of their time. In Davenant's *Gondibert*, this normative idealization was laid down in the chivalric ethos of heroic poetry; for Milton, justification could only occur in religious terms; for Hobbes, it had to be rational.[4] These options are no longer open to Dryden. The ironies of this poem ultimately infect and corrode the function of poetry itself, at times threatening to drag it down to the level of merely topical contingency–a polemical allegory whose edge is thus blunted from the start.

The strengthening of the role of political opinion in public life entails a weakening of the role of poetry as political discourse, even as it turns a poem into an explicitly topical political statement. Compared to Dryden's earlier panegyric *Astraea Redux* (1661), *Absalom* is a much more direct form of political allegory: a 'straight' reading of contemporary politics through the lens of 2 Samuel. Here, creative energies are harnessed rather than disseminated–even though the poem begins with images of sexual

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[2] Dryden, *Works*, vol. 2, 3.

[3] Cf. *Paradise Lost* 1.26: "And justify the ways of God to men", in Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose,* 212.

[4] For a more detailed analysis, see Berensmeyer, *Angles of Contingency* and Berensmeyer, "Literature, Politics and Representation in English Neoclassicism: The Hobbes-Davenant Exchange".

promiscuity. Charles is no longer Moses or Christ (as he was in *Astraea Redux*); but now he has to be David in much greater detail, "a comedic or even a picaresque figure."[5] This does not make Dryden's task of supporting royal prerogative any easier.

As Steven N. Zwicker explains, the stakes in such a venture of brushing a cultural idiom against the grain, in an attempt to undermine the Biblical rhetoric of Whig anti-royalists at a critical historical moment, were particularly high:

> to allegorize political crisis as sacred history in 1681 was hardly to present an original template; it was rather to insist on an idiom that not only excited the memory of familiar ways but indeed risked, and perhaps willingly courted, platitude rather than novelty. Politics allegorized as Scripture could only have recalled the days of "dreaming saints," of insurrection and enthusiasm. That was of course the point: to suggest to the whole of the poem's readership that the ill-affected were once again stirring civil war and that the history of the Jews applied to English politics allowed more than one party to claim narratives of exile and election as their own.[6]

The poem therefore has considerable work to do in redefining the very terms with which it operates, and in managing the framework of correspondences on which it depends–and which it nonetheless ironizes, exposing its constructed, artificial character and its contingent aspects. Its artistry can be seen to consist in the maintenance of a precarious poetic balance between the stability and instability of allegorical signification, a balance that, in the poem, is recommended as politically virtuous as well as expedient. Balance is, for Dryden, a keyword not only in his figural and poetic economy but also in his political one.[7] It is, first and foremost, in the character of King David that this balance between fixity and flux, solidity and slippage, is epitomized.

> In pious times, e'r Priest-craft did begin,
> Before *Polygamy* was made a sin;
> When man, on many, multiply'd his kind,
> E'r one to one was, cursedly, confind:

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[5] Carroll and Prickett, eds., *The Bible,* notes to the Old Testament, 342. On Dryden's literary technique in *Astraea Redux* see Berensmeyer, "The Art of Oblivion".

[6] Steven N. Zwicker, "Reading the Margins. Politics and the Habits of Appreciation," *Refiguring Revolutions,* ed. Sharpe and Zwicker, 101-15, 107

[7] I owe this idea to Poyet, "Contrat et poésie", 109.

When Nature prompted, and no law deny'd
Promiscuous use of Concubine and Bride;
Then, *Israel*'s Monarch, after Heaven's own heart,
His vigorous warmth did, variously, impart
To Wives and Slaves: And, wide as his Command,
Scatter'd his Maker's Image through the land.
*Michal,* of Royal blood, the Crown did wear,
A Soyl ungratefull to the Tiller's care:
Not so the rest; for several Mothers bore
To Godlike *David,* several Sons before.
But since like slaves his bed they did ascend,
No True Succession could their seed attend. (ll. 1-16)

The rhetorical strategy pursued in these lines is a reinterpretation of keywords of contemporary political theory in terms of sexual practices and hierarchical relations between the sexes, or more specifically between the monarch and women. The focus is on the personal and familiar, centred on David, whose kingship is vaguely aligned with divine right theory ("after Heaven's own heart", "his Maker's Image"). Critics have wondered about the potentially subversive (and, for Dryden, potentially counterproductive) effect of descending to the level of the King's well-known and often satirized promiscuity, but these lines seem motivated by a subtle strategy of aligning Charles II *as a person* with the concept of nature–a concept that, like many others from the environment of political theory, is kept deliberately vague and multivalent in this text. Out of the many possible meanings of the word "Nature", Dryden selects one that emphasizes a human (more narrowly: sexual) dimension of desire as opposed to–unnatural–"law" that forbids and controls ('denies') desire. In the rhetorical economy of *Absalom and Achitophel,* the terms 'nature' and 'law' perform a complex function of initial opposition and subsequent convergence in the person of Charles II/David. Their disjunction in the initial opposition works towards a negation, or at least a devaluation, of the concept of 'natural law' invoked by Whig theorists as a juridical and political possibility anterior to the establishment of political order and sovereignty.[8] The same devaluation of political language by dint of eroticization befalls the word 'slaves', which assumes an almost exclusively sexual connotation ("like slaves his bed they did ascend"). By making the King's indiscriminate desires stand for the natural, the poem carefully extends this epithet to the King's "Godlike" benevolence and magnanimity. The King 'naturally' combines the apparent opposites of

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[8] See Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories.*

nature and law; even his "Lust" can then be represented as "divine."[9] Incited to rebellion by the evil counsellor Achitophel/Shaftesbury, the King's illegitimate son Absalom/the Duke of Monmouth has to acknowledge this royal quality:

> My Father Governs with unquestion'd Right;
> The Faiths Defender, and Mankinds Delight:
> Good, Gracious, Just, observant of the Laws;
> And Heav'n by Wonders has Espous'd his Cause.
> . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> Mild, Easy, Humble, Studious of our Good;
> Enclin'd to Mercy, and averse from Blood.
> If Mildness Ill with Stubborn *Israel* Suite,
> His Crime is God's beloved Attribute. (ll. 317-20; 325-28)

Next to mercy and mildness, 'ease' is a significant quality of a King who behaves naturally, and is naturally "observant of the Laws" even in fornication. Furthermore, it is a quality that the King has passed on to his "Scatter'd", illegitimate offspring. In the first description of Absalom's character, we read that "[w]hat e'r he did was done with so much ease, /In him alone, 'twas Natural to please" (ll. 27-28). 'Easy,' 'natural' and 'pleasing' thus become almost synonyms that stand for the positive qualities of divinely ordained kingship, qualities under which the more salacious aspects of Charles's character are easily and naturally subsumed. His fertility is then only one more sign to prove his election "after Heaven's own heart."

In contrast to this stability of order, justice and goodness in a union of nature and law embodied in the "Godlike" King,[10] Dryden's speaker presents the King's opponents as slippery, insecure and unstable. In the process, terms like 'liberty' and 'fortune' are played off against terms like 'loyalty' and 'virtue' in such a way that the former–key terms of the Whig vocabulary–are rhetorically connected to images of instability, uncertainty and flux, even illegitimacy or unlawfulness. In the "natural Instinct" that motivates the populace to "change" their sovereign "once in twenty Years" (ll. 218-19), the term 'nature' is again brought in proximity to lawlessness, to the Hobbesian state of nature that is Dryden's image of terror: "Nature's state: where all have Right to all," the state of anarchy to which

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[9] Cf. ll. 19-20: "Whether, inspir'd by some diviner Lust, /His Father got him [sc. Absalom] with a greater Gust[.]"

[10] David Gelineau notes that "the motto at the base of the English monarch's coat of arms is *Semper Eadem,* 'always the same.'" See Gelineau, "Allusion, Legitimacy, and Succession: Milton's Hands Suit Ill with Dryden's Voice", 30.