A Note on Rational Inquiry in Literary Criticism

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Zusammenfassung

Am Beispiel eines neueren einschlägigen Themenbeitrages werden einige der Gründe dafür herausgestellt, daß die Bemühungen um eine Theorie der Literaturwissenschaft bisher kaum zu überzeugenden Ergebnissen geführt haben. Es handelt sich hierbei insbesondere um die Verwechslung von Methodenlehre und praktizierter Methode, die Nichtunterscheidung normativer und deskriptiver Aspekte sowie die unzulässige Eingliederung von philologischer Arbeit und großzügig verfahren Textauslegung. In diesem Zusammenhang wird an die alexandriniachen Anfänge der Literaturwissenschaft erinnert, in denen die Interpretation als abschließende Überhöhung verbindlicher und empirisch ausgewiesener Kleinarbeit begriffen wurde.

In a recent article 1 Suresh Raval has tried to defend the received view of literary criticism as a non-objective discipline, whose features are diversity in interpretation and variance of conceptual framework. His contribution is explicitly meant to contrast with a well-known 'objectivistic' approach to the same subject that has been formulated by E. D. Hirsch 2. According to Hirsch's conception, literary criticism can be methodologically orientated to Popperian notions like those of the testability of hypotheses and the refutation of false statements. Raval argues that we are dealing with a hermeneutical discipline whose assertions cannot be treated in the same way as the propositions of natural science. He holds that controversies in the field of criticism do not contribute to scientific advance and takes this view against a Popperian as well as a Kuhnian reconstruction of theoretical change.

At first sight, Hirsch's and Raval's approaches appear as extreme opposites - at second glance, they are seen to comprise parts of the same anachronism with regard to the methodological appraisal of inquiry. One need not take into consideration whether Popper or Kuhn ever held the positions that are attributed to them, whether Popper took the position of 'naive' falsificationism or Kuhn used his contested concept of paradigm in the way Raval does. They have both endeavored to clarify and develop their theses to such an extent that they can hardly be taken as representatives of the respective views. In its present form Popper's methodology dealing with the growth of scientific knowledge stresses restricting the falsificationist account in favor of other criteria 3 - Kuhn has given a more precise explication of 'paradigm' as

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'disciplinary matrix'. In both cases, the problem is not that difficulties arise in applying these notions to literary criticism. Considering the intentions of the authors and the scope and structure of their theories, the problem derives from the fact that there is no possibility to relate such notions to this field seriously in either a positive or a negative way. It simply does not make any sense to ask for modus-tollens-arguments or features of 'normal science' in the context of an inquiry where experimental and mathematical techniques, explanatory and prognostic arguments play no role. One of the things Kuhn and Popper have in common is that they do not follow the methodological monism of Hempel and others. We need only think of Kuhn's attitude to certain kinds of reception of his The Structure of Scientific Revolutions or Popper's well-known polemic against naturalized history ('historicism'). Another reason why it is questionable to apply Popperian or Kuhnian notions to literary criticism arises from the modal ambiguity of these views. Popper and Kuhn cannot give true or false descriptions of what goes on in the cases Raval cites because they do not offer simple descriptions at all. Both conceptions are partly normative, though not as clearly so as, for example, Lakatos' account. In addition to this it is necessary to see them as highly stylized models which cannot take the place of case studies or similar analyses. It is one thing to appraise inquiry in literary criticism by the standards suggested in the works of Kuhn or Popper and quite another to compare it with the actual practice of natural science. The question of whether there are analogies between science and criticism in regard to the reality of inquiry still remains to be answered.

A problem which has to be seen in conjunction with this is how literary criticism is to be conceived as rational, for Raval has extended the traditional question of criticism as science in this way. If the distinction made above – which is a commonplace in the contemporary discussions between philosophers and historians of science – is accepted, it should be clear in what respect a concept of rational inquiry is prescriptive or descriptive. Raval's comparison of science and criticism is based on the acceptance of prescriptions for the activities of scientists on the one hand and permissive views of criticism on the other. Raval describes literary criticism as a genuine mode of reasoning within various conceptual frameworks, regarding as a misconception the view of it as a puzzle-solving-activity or as an activity governed by logical rules. He supposes critics to be uninterested in reaching agreement with competing theories. Raval claims that there is no knowledge-transfer across different

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