Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies 42.2
September 2016: 27-43
DOI: 10.6240/concentric.lit.2016.42.2.03

The Uses of Empathy in Literary Theory and Hermeneutics: A Systems-Theoretical Approach*

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Abstract

This paper discusses, from a system-theoretical perspective, the role of empathy and emotional involvement in literary studies. In general, empathy appears on different levels: as an element in the content of fiction, as a response by the average reader, and as an analytical tool for literary scholars. As for the latter, the object of empathy is often an authorial figure who is meant to warrant the "appropriate" emotional response. In this frame, criticism and authorship may be said to play correlative roles, and consequently affective criticism describes itself as enhancing the empathic response to literature. However, such criticism may naturally have certain biases with regard to texts and topics of greatest interest, and a focus on particular empathetic effects of texts might lose sight of how empathy works more generally in the system of literary communication: how it arouses interest for example, and discriminates between high and low literature. Thus I want to argue that criticism can detach itself from the role of the emotions in order to question their cognitive or practical value. I also want to suggest that the study of literature as a system of communication, by taking into account the systemic role of empathy and the emotions, could achieve a deeper understanding of text processing activities, in species-typical ways and also in conventional frameworks, and a clearer grasp of both individual and social levels.

Keywords

empathy, reading, fiction, systems theory, decoupling

* This paper is part of my work in the Research Project "Current Trends of Hermeneutics" (FFI2013-41662-P), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economics and Competitiveness and the European Regional Development Fund for years 2014-2017. I wish to thank Rosalía Baena, Andrew Breeze, Ruth Breeze, Matei Chihaia, Rocío Davis, Alberto García Martínez, Katja Mellmann, and the referees of *Concentric* for their comments and suggestions.

This essay offers a theoretical approach to the role of empathy in literature and criticism. I will focus on the discourse of literary studies with regard to empathy and the emotions: how we talk and write about them, why, and to what end. Given that the emphasis on this approach has really led to an affective turn in literary studies, further theoretical reflections are now needed.[1] I will argue that we now see two trends in empathy studies. Those following the first trend work on the assumption that there is an adequate or warranted response to texts, and it can be said to endorse the intended emotional effect of literature. Those following the second trend take their own position vis-à-vis literary communication; they select their own set of questions, and set their own goals for the average reader as they have defined him or her. I would suggest that systems theory may help to characterize these two trends and also help refine the second one.

I begin by summing up some facts about the key roles that empathy, emotional involvement and identification play in literary studies.[2] On the one hand, these concepts belong to the philosophical tradition extending from the Greeks to Phenomenology; they were the concern of philosophical aesthetics in the 19th and early 20th centuries, being at the foundations of hermeneutics as the central discipline or technique of the Human Sciences or *Geisteswissenschaften*. As for Hermeneutics, it seems to have been somewhat neglected in surveys of empathy theory (but see Fontius). Neither Schleiermacher nor Dilthey often use the word *Einfühlung*, but the idea is certainly there. See, for instance, Schleiermacher's definition of the "divinatory" method: "one tries to grasp immediately what is individual by means of transforming oneself, so to speak, in the other" (Schleiermacher 169; my translation). This is how Dilthey describes the process of understanding (*Verstehen*):

> the existence of other people is given us only from the outside, in sensory events, gestures, words, and actions. Only through a process of reconstruction (*Nachbildung*) do we complete this sense perception, which initially takes the form of isolated signs. We are thus obliged to

[1] For the "affective turn," see Clough and Halley. With this "turn" following the "linguistic", the "narrative" and the "cognitive" turns, the humanities begin to resemble The Beatles' long and winding road. However, doubts have been raised as to the appropriateness of discussions about the linguistic turn itself (see Williamson).

[2] I will deal with these topics in a general manner, since surveys safely subsume them under one heading (see e.g. Feagin, "Emotions and Literature"; or Fontius; "Einfühlung/Empathie/Identification." Of course, finer distinctions between empathy, sympathy, identification, engagement, emotional involvement, etc., are important on other levels of analysis (see e.g. Carroll, "Art"; Feagin, *Reading* 83-142; García).

> translate everything—the raw material, the structure, the most individual traits of such a completion—out of our own sense of life (*Lebendigkeit*). ("The Rise" 231)

In a nutshell: reconstructing is reliving, "*Nachbilden ist eben ein nacherleben*" (Dilthey, "*Über vergleichende*" 277); understanding other people is re-experiencing their states of mind ("The Rise" 238; "Nachfühlen fremder Seelenzustände" in the original). Now, what is it that this process brings back to life? Schleiermacher (94) says that the goal of hermeneutics is to understand a discourse (*Rede*) as its author understood it, and then better than him; whereas for Dilthey it is "to understand an author better than he understood himself" ("The Rise" 244). Thus, the former sets out to re-enact a linguistic event whose style, ideas, etc. are expressive of its author's lived experience; the latter, to recover the living subject of the experiences expressed in language. The significance of this shift will become more clear later.

Besides the philosophical tradition that lies behind empathy studies we have to consider their interdisciplinary relevance. Empathy plays a key role in the areas of cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, and human ethology (see Breithaupt; Tomasello, *The Cultural* and *Origins*). The cognition and communicative behavior of humans have as their basis the unique human capacity for identification with conspecifics, the sharing of attention and the understanding of others as intentional agents.[3] Thus, empathy becomes a starting point for what has been called Biopoetics, the study of literary communication as a behavior that is functional in the life of the human species. This approach has been successful in recovering a key idea from the old human sciences—that of human nature—and it consequently warrants traditional methods and interpretations based on that idea.[4] However, empathy cannot be taken for granted; human nature adopts many shapes, and some differences are not easily overcome. The concept of empathy is in fact critiqued by those who claim that it may be a form of Eurocentrism, a patronizing attitude, a blindness to alterity, a kind of stupidity, or philistinism (see Fontius 138-41; Keen, *Empathy* 145-71).[5]

These, I think, are symptoms of a more general, even if less acute, problem with Biopoetics: that findings about the human mind and behavior as developed in evolution do not immediately permit us to analyze what happens in historical time.

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[3] See Quine (42-43, 68) for the importance of empathy in both language acquisition and understanding, and linguistic research (for the latter topic, see also Kabatek).

[4] See Boyd; Eibl; Hogan, *Affective*; Mellmann, "Objects" and Wilson. Concerning the relationship between Hermeneutics and natural sciences, see Mantzavinos.

[5] There is also more nuanced criticism; e.g., Eagleton writes that the moral benefits of empathy are sometimes exaggerated (*The Event* 60-62).

The picture they provide is not fine-grained enough. It makes sense to speak about the adaptive value of language and even of fiction—as compared to not having these faculties—and to explain the prominence of literary motifs such as love and jealousy by pointing to the mating patterns of the human species. However, it would not make sense to assess the adaptive, evolutionary value of syllabic as compared to dynamic meter, and to explain *Othello* or *Anna Karenina* through mere reference to mating would be a generalization verging on triviality. Thus, this caveat should be borne in mind: Biopoetics may inherit the traditional concerns of Hermeneutics and the *Geisteswissenschaften* but, without further methodological development, it will be less able to advance our understanding of literary communication.

Thus I want to argue here that the inspiration for such a development may really have come from systems theory, especially the theory of autopoietic or self-referential systems. In the first place, systems theory is sufficiently universal to be applied to the study of life forms, consciousness and cognition, and society, thus unifying the whole field of knowledge that concerns us here. Secondly, the dynamics of self-referential systems is understood by analogy with evolutionary theory—that is, as the interplay between variation, selection, stabilization, as these recur through the course of millennia—but the analysis of these processes is developed enough to fit the historical scale, even to the point of grasping the contemporary acceleration of history (Luhmann, *Die Kunst* 341-92). Within this frame, of course, we would speak less of literary works than of a literary system of communication made up of such works and of responses to them.

A system is autopoietic when it recursively produces its own components, thereby also drawing a boundary between itself and its environment. This does not mean that the system is closed in the sense of being isolated, but only that no surrogates can bring about the system's operations: it has to operate itself or else collapse (Maturana; Luhmann, *Soziale* 57-65). The most obvious instance of an autopoietic system is a living being, and we can intuitively distinguish between that system's operations and the operations of some observer who is describing it—even though the observer is also a living being. For social systems, the distinction between the internal operations and the observation and analysis from the outside is not so easily drawn, but it is nonetheless crucial (Schmidt, "A Systems-Oriented" 131).[6]

[6] Even if the distinction participating/observing is essential to systems theory, its relevance may be advocated also without such a theoretical allegiance; see, e.g., Mignolo; Montaner. The difference participating/observing must not be confused with the contrast emic/etic, which are two ways of observing (see Pike 37-72).

Thus I will revisit from this perspective the discourse of literary criticism on empathy. Empathy and emotional involvement in general show up in different contexts or on different levels. In the first place, empathy is an element of the content of fiction, for literary characters empathize with one another or fail to do so (see e.g. Carroll, "The Wheel"). Secondly, empathy is a possible, even typical response by the average audience member or reader; scholars may conduct empirical research on empathy, or reconstruct its history, and theorists wonder how it is possible to empathize with fictions (Currie; Keen, *Empathy* 65-99; Walton). Third, empathy serves as an analytical touchstone for literary scholars, in more or less direct connection with the hermeneutical tradition mentioned above (e.g. Jauss 231-49; Iser 251-56). Besides, it is not always clear whether the distinction between readers and scholars is one of degree or one of kind. Moreover, in system-theoretical terms, numbers 1 and 2 indeed belong in the literary system; but does number 3 refer to a further element of this system or rather to an outside observer that operates in another system, namely that of science?

It would be silly to contend that empathy should be kept within just one context, but it cannot be assumed that it has the same function in all contexts. It is like a deck of cards: you can play many games with them, but they have different values and goals in each game, all according to definite rules. Even though it seems to me that there is likely no problem with statements about empathy in literature taken in themselves—ordinary language being, as usual, in perfect logical order (Wittgenstein, § 5.5563)—something may still be gained by specifying the rules and goals of their use in each context.

In order to do this, let us consider what elements are empathetically connected on each level. As noted above, in a narrative, characters empathize with one another, and the narrator may empathize with them; in reading and criticism, it is real people who may empathize with characters, with narrators, and even with authors—whether the actual writer or theoretical constructs such as the fictional or the implied author.[7] The affective turn in literary criticism shows a clear commitment to authorial figures, one that goes hand in hand with the search for grounds which warrant the appropriate emotional response.[8] Gregory Currie puts it very succinctly: "Our responses to fiction

[7] See Keen, *Empathy* 121-43. Concerning the notion of "implied author" in empathy and reading, see especially Booth 122-55. As it is well known, the notion is controversial; it is endorsed by Chatman (74-89) and Phelan (39-49) but opposed by Genette (135-54) and Kindt & Müller. Besides, there are other approaches to the topic of the author; see for instance the extraordinary research by Keen ("Empathetic") on Hardy's attitude concerning empathy and altruism.

[8] However, the search for a warrant need not make it depend on an authorial role; see Feagin, *Reading*.

are appropriate, then, when they are congruent with the responses of the fictional author" (214). Carroll argues:

> A criterially prefocused text brings our attention to certain details, stimulating an emotional response, which quickens our attentiveness and which binds us to the text so that we are ready to assimilate it in the relevant way. Relevant to what? Relevant to the presiding emotional state, which, in the standard case, is the one that the author designed the text to engender in us. ("Art" 203)

Now, authorship and criticism play correlative roles in the system of literary communication: the author provides the critic with an endpoint for the latter's task of interpretation, without which it could go on indefinitely (Barthes; Gumbrecht, *The Powers* 41-44). The author serves as the hypostasis of critical postulates about the conceptual and stylistic traits of works (Foucault, "*Qu'est-ce*"). Moreover, even if critics say that authors are the source of rich, complex meanings, in fact they use these in order to select one meaning—"what the author really meant"—and discard all the rest. Insofar as its alleged function is exactly contrary to its real one, authorship is an element of ideology, one of the means of controlling and excluding discourse (Foucault, *L'Ordre*).[9] Thus, as long as literary criticism continues to correlate itself with the role of the author and to be concerned with the correctness of critics' interpretations and of their statements of appreciation, it remains inside the literary system. In order to observe this system from the outside, literary studies would have to assume that there is no direct correlation between literary techniques and empathetic effects (see Keen, "Life Writing"), and consequently to discard the idea of the "correct interpretation"—and to explain instead how different readers assign different meanings, and to analyze what follows from them.

Two consequences arise from this in connection with the issue of empathy. First, to the extent that mainstream affective criticism understands itself as a means of enhancing the empathic response that is assumed to be natural to many readers, it aims to teach or train students about the appropriate use of fiction. Thus it plays a role inside the literary system, ensuring that literature attains its goal of providing the reader with "affective flexibility"—or, to put it the other way around, that readers attain their goal of acquiring affective flexibility by appreciating fiction (Feagin,

[9] For a particular case, take the criticism of Georges Poulet. Poulet adheres to the relevance of the author for the critical enterprise; but, in fact, he evades this constraint thanks to more protean principles, such as collective conscience, history, and language (see Miller; De Man 79-100).

Reading 242).[10] Not so long ago, literature used to be "an instrument for teaching reading"; it has now become an instrument for teaching feeling.[11] In this frame, empathy is usually assumed to be a good thing, similar to physical fitness or peace of mind: if you ask why you would have to want them, you have probably not understood what they are.[12] But, of course, empathy is not really like fitness and peace of mind in that it is, to put it phenomenologically, an intentional act with noetic and noematic components (Stein 6-12). And this is precisely the point, for the noema, the content of the act, is not indifferent to the assessment of empathetic experiences.

For instance, texts that elicit our empathy by recounting deeds of child abuse or female genital mutilation are viewed as being problematic (Keen, *Empathy* 131-40), and other examples clarify this point. Recent novels about Nazism, such as Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* (*The Reader*) and Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*), display a point of view or a narrative voice that elicits our sympathy for Nazi criminals, which has been perceived as a readiness to understand their behavior and hence to relativize or condone it (see Hörisch). There is a real life correlate: we now know that Paul de Man, in his youth, published pro-Nazi articles in occupied Belgium; when this was disclosed in the 1980s, his friend Jacques Derrida was willing to understand De Man's behavior, and expressed his sympathy for a brilliant young writer who had found himself in a hostile environment. Derrida was thus reproached for sympathizing with the wrong person, and was even charged with feeling sympathy for the Nazis and with being somewhat entangled in the Holocaust (Wiener; Hirsch 81-87).[13]

Another problematic issue is that of suicide, a prominent motif in fiction. An important trend in the literary representations of suicide in the last century and a half consists in approaching the mind of the persons who want to kill themselves, so as to understand the deed from the inside. This certainly goes hand in hand with the increasingly tolerant stance toward suicide adopted by legislation as well as by public opinion during this period. However, certain critics remind us from time to time that

[10] See empirical assessments of this issue, e.g., in Djikic and others; Oatley and Johnson-Laird.

[11] It may be worth recalling that "reading" was the key word—if not the scare word—in the seventies and eighties, in the wake of Deconstruction (see Culler). The words between quotation marks above were uttered by Gayatri Spivak in a lecture that I attended in June 17, 2010, in Freiburg.

[12] The comparison is borrowed from Feagin: "Appreciating fiction stretches and flexes the human mind . . . . Its value is usefully thought of as an analogue of the value of physical exercise, the stretching and flexing engaged in during a good workout at the gym" (*Reading* 242). She borrowed it from Nelson Goodman.

[13] My remarks do not attempt to assess the entire De Man case, but signal the role of empathy in the discussion. For a sensible discussion, see Eagleton, *Figures* 152-57.

suicide should not be depicted as something attractive or desirable, for fear that more people should resort to it.[14]

Not everybody will object to the topics I mention, and somebody will object to none of them, but I doubt that nobody will object to any topic whatever, especially if we think of literature as a subject matter not only for research but also for teaching. Consider, in particular, that the topic of suicide is critical for high school and university students, suicide being reported by WHO as the second leading cause of death for persons between the ages of 15 and 29.[15] Thus, a critical approach that adopts a stance of participant in the literary system and endorses the empathy-effects prompted by literary texts tends very naturally to entail selections and exclusions. Plato's ban on the poets was only a theoretical preview for many real proscriptions that followed lead.[16] Such a state of affairs does not look like the cumulative growth of knowledge one wants to associate with a scientific enterprise.[17]

This leads me to the second consequence, for literary studies, of the need to observe the operations of literary criticism from outside the literary system**.** By focusing on how empathy and the emotions work in individual texts, we risk overlooking how they work within this larger system, i.e., what the function of arousing empathy in literary works is, as well as the function of commenting on it in criticism. We do have some surveys of the ebb and flow of the emotions in aesthetics and literary theory (Keen, *Empathy* 37-64; Hammond & Kim 2-10), but I find that these are usually taken as a factual background instead of being placed in the forefront, in order to ask how and why they are brought about.

What is the role of the emotions in the basic drive of literary communication toward interest by means of novelty? Of course, novelty may be achieved by escalating as well as by eliminating the emotions; we should also consider how these emotions are used in the discrimination between high and low literature, and consider

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[14] See Alvarez for a survey of the motif of suicide in literature; and Minois for law and opinions. Galván ("Sociedad") analyzes some instances of concern about representations of suicide in literature and news.

[15] Reported at the WHO webpage; see http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevent/en/ (accessed 25 Sept. 2015).

[16] Sometimes poets are admitted (or re-admitted) at the cost of having their works enclosed in an airtight aesthetic realm, a strategy that is found wanting by Gadamer (89-100), for it leaves the aesthetic experience outside the unity of human existence and self-understanding.

[17] The idea of cumulative growth should not be taken at face value; there are program shifts, whereby former theories and explanations are superseded, but in any case the new theory must explain all that was explained by the earlier ones, plus new data that the former could not explain (see Lakatos).

their consequences for the literary market,[18] i.e., their consequences in system-theoretical terms for the structural coupling between literature and the economy. How do emotions correlate with different aspects of literary content and form? Ortega y Gasset paired the emotional effects of 19th-century art with its human subject matter, and pointed out that the Modernists deprived "things human" and "human matter" of "human form" and "aspect" (22-23).

This issue has a methodological corollary. Until recently, mainstream research on empathy seems to have put more emphasis on content than on form. For instance, Carroll talks about the connection of emotions with features of the objects represented in fiction, be they situations, characters or events;[19] Feagin goes so far as to state the following principle: "the warrant we acquire for responding in some way to actual events carries over as warrant for responding in that way to description of that sort of event in fiction" (*Reading* 219). Here it is also noteworthy that current supporters of the emotional value of literary fiction agree with Plato's mimetic view of representation and response.[20] The emphasis on content might be balanced with research—already in progress, but not on the same scale—on formal techniques for achieving empathy such as internal point of view, figural narrative situations, interior monologue, free indirect speech and so forth.[21] Such a development may converge with a certain paradigm shift in narratology which proposes that we account for narrativity, not in terms of content or plot but in terms of discourse, the verbal representation of the experiential quality events have for an individual human consciousness (see Fludernik 20-52).

The diachronic, dynamic approach to the role of empathy in the reception of literature can be of use as well for the explanation of particular readings of texts. We would then perhaps find that warrant or appropriateness are not sufficiently defined by reference to aspects either of the work only, or of the work together with the author

[18] See Even-Zohar; Fontius; and especially Keen, *Empathy* 101-09.

[19] This is how Carroll sums up his proposal: "authors present readers . . . with propositions to be imagined that depict or describe situations that have been criterially prefocused and that arouse our concern so that we become emotionally focused on the text—that is, our attention (1) becomes riveted to the objects of our emotional state . . ., (2) our attention is inexorably drawn to those features of the object of the emotion that are apposite to the emotional state we are in, (3) we are encouraged to search the situation for more features of the sort that will support and sustain the prevailing emotional state" ("Art" 210); see also Hogan, "The Epilogue," and *Affective*.

[20] See also Mellmann ("Evolutionary") for the mimeticism that prevails in Darwinistic approaches to literature.

[21] See Adamson, "From Empathetic," and "The Rise"; Keen, *Empathy* 92-99, and Shank. The empirical assessment of the effects of these techniques is a research program in its early stages; see Van Peer and Pander Maat; Fletcher & Monterosso, and Keen, "Pivoting."

and the reader. It is also necessary to invoke the conventions in force in the literary system at a given time. Even synchronically, conventions change as rules change when we switch from one game to another; such may be the difference, on occasion, between the average reader's approach and that of the critic. This is also consequential for our teaching: an emotional response may not necessarily be a constraint that the text puts on its readers but rather one we put on our students. And they might end up simulating empathy, i.e., simulating a simulation (see Feagin, *Reading* 83-112), because we make their marks depend on it.

In order to reach a set of tentative conclusions, I want to begin, on the one hand, by shifting the focus. Whereas I have been talking about the insights that the study of empathy in literature may gain from a system-theoretical approach, now I would like to point out that the study of literature as a system of communication will profit greatly from taking into account the systemic role of empathy and the affects, and especially if these are connected with the cognitive and biopoetical frame mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The affective approach may allow for a deeper understanding of text processing activities, both in species-typical ways and in given conventional frames. This, in turn, would lead to more suitable hypotheses about the articulation of the individual and social levels: how the personal, idiosyncratic task of reading a particular text enters the flow of literary communication on a social scale, and what the emergent characteristics of this might be.

These findings would help to satisfy some concerns about system-theoretical studies of literature. It has been said that such studies mainly remain within the traditional boundaries of hermeneutics, for the project of explaining the autonomization and evolution of the literary system boils down to the analysis of a distinctive sequence of topics that have successively aroused interest and satisfied the desire for novelty (see Schmidt, *Kommunikationskonzepte* 242; "A Systems-Oriented Approach" 121). Besides, the crux of a systems theory of literature and the arts lies in the definition of their social function. For a system to become autonomous and self-reproducing, it must necessarily have its own function in society, but so far no consensus exists as to what the social function of literature is (see Gumbrecht, *Making*; Schmidt, *Die Selbstorganisation*; Werber; Even-Zohar; Luhmann, *Die Kunst*).

On the other hand, the affective turn would benefit from the kind of meta-discursive reflection I have tried to engage in here. This turn has to be assessed as a step in the development of a discipline that tries to further its explicative power, and such reflection would help to promote the self-understanding of literary criticism, which is seen both as an element in the system of literary communication (especially insofar as this is aimed at self-description) and as an area in the field of scientific

research linked with that system. This double-role remains to be more accurately described, whether as a case of interpenetration or one of structural coupling (see Luhmann, *Soziale* 286-345 and *Kunst* 269, 391). Perhaps here we are facing a homonymy, and "literary criticism" names two essentially different activities, one belonging to literature and the other to science.

I have tried to show that there are in fact two trends in the study of empathy, and that the second one is more apt to absorb the system-theoretical element I want to propose. Such a study need not be, however, an esoteric activity without concern for average readers. For them, this approach might yield a sort of "second-order decoupling." "Decoupling" is a term introduced by cognitive and biopoetical studies which names our capacity to entertain thoughts without assenting to them, as when we listen to or read fictions. This is essential to our ability to assess counterfactual scenarios and possible courses of action, and thus could be survival-based; eventually, humans have developed conventions and institutions for engaging with it. [22] "Second-order observing" means, in systems theory, to observe an observer, where observation is defined as the use of a distinction for indicating one, and not the other, of two sides so distinguished. Once the first-order observer chooses a certain distinction, communication can go on from that point without any need to question the choice, whereas the second-order observer may perceive the contingency and thus possible drawbacks of this distinction, and seek for alternatives.[23]

In our present context, "second-order decoupling" would refer to the possibility of observing the contingency of our emotions that are associated with definite sources or means, and of questioning the cognitive or practical value of these emotions. In this way we reach a sort of division of labor: even if it may be assumed that empathy is a very important part of the reading experience, it does not necessarily follow that criticism must give empathy the same weight. While we may acquire "affective flexibility" and empathy through reading, we may detach ourselves from the affects through literary criticism. Detachment is not any less necessary than empathy in an environment so intent on arousing and manipulating our emotions.

[22] See e.g. Leslie; Tooby and Cosmides. Concerning the importance of counterfactual thinking from a philosophical perspective, see Williamson. For its application in literary analysis, see Galván, "Lógica"; "La lógica bidimensional" and "Relevant."

[23] See Luhmann, "Deconstruction," and *Die Kunst* 92-164. Even though Luhmann considers Deconstruction a suitable critical approach, perhaps Bakhtin's social stylistics is more akin to systems theory, and more fruitful too (see Roberts).

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[Received 17 December 2015; accepted 12 April 2016]