

Dysphoria: How (some) Scholars Feel about Literary Studies

In 1969, when the "Student's Revolution" had already begun to turn into a nostalgic concept, Carl Hanser Verlag in Munich published a volume with fourteen future-oriented views of German Studies ("Ansichten einer künftigen Germanistik"), in the aggressively yellow cover of its then very popular pocket series Reihe Hanser. Nothing perhaps underlines more, in a reading after thirty years, the intellectual distance that separates us from those euphoric moments than the strong centripetal dynamics which bring the different contributions in Ansichten einer künftigen Germanistik to several points of convergence. Not even the well-established chairholders of the then younger Professoren-generation who wrote for this volume – among them Bodo Allemann, Wolfgang Iser, Eberhard Lämmert, and Harald Weinrich – made any efforts to avoid the provocation of a slogan, dear to many German students at that moment, i.e. the slogan of "abolishing German Studies" ("Abschaffung der Germanistik"). And while there certainly were nuances in the support given to this rhetoric of discontinuity, four major claims emerged, which were, astonishingly enough, carried by all the different authors: that the academic discipline of Germanistik was contaminated by a number of social and political functions that it had taken over during its history (not exclusively, by the way, during the Nazi period); that a profound renovation of this discipline was therefore necessary – and would be viable – as a self-reflexive effort; that the scientific rigor of modern linguistics would be an indispensable tool (and an important measure of success) for this effort of transformation; and, above all, that the telos of this transformation was the shaping of Germanistik into a social science (which – quite naively, at least from our perspective – implied that the renewed discipline would be more willing and better prepared to take over neatly circumscribed "social assignments" ["soziale Aufgaben"]).

Ansichten einer künftigen Germanistik was too successful, especially by the standards of a more or less scholarly book (the fifth edition came out as soon as in 1971), not to encourage a follow-up project which, under the market-friendly title of Neue Ansichten einer künftigen Germanistik, appeared in 1973. But while the main title of the second book opted for intellectual continuity (and for a continuation of excellent sales), its complicated subtitle tells the story of a quite abrupt change that had occurred – experienced, if I remember things correctly, as a smooth development – within a span of only four years. Kritik der Linguistik, the middle phrase of this subtitle, indicated that literary scholars (for multiple reasons) had quickly grown weary of that "linguisticization" of their field on which they had originally set such strong hopes. Probleme einer Sozial- und Rezeptionsgeschichte der Literatur meant that their fascination had shifted from

the formalism of linguistic structures (and from the elegant models of their description) to the complexities of an approach to history in which the adjective "social" implied two impossible promises: that no past phenomenon whatsoever could be excluded; and that, by paying attention to the reader (as to the hitherto neglected footsoldier in the history of literature), the discipline of Literary Studies would somehow turn more democratic. Finally, we can read Literatur- und Kommunikationswissenschaften, the third and final part of the subtitle for Neue Ansichten, as pointing to a problem that continues to haunt our own disciplinary present. It lies in the need to look, after the vanishing of a metahistorical notion of "literature" that used to give shape to the discipline, for potential conceptual substitutions (such as "communication," "culture," "discourse," "memoria" etc.). This (perhaps altogether fortunate) loss of energy and direction marked by Neue Ansichten in the pursuit of the disciplinary renovation went along with an almost radical change of personnel: only two of the eighteen authors in Neue Ansichten – the linguist Hans Glinz and the literary historian Eberhard Lämmert – had been among the contributors to the first volume. But as I already said, such dramatic transformations happened greatly unnoticed. Belonging to the very youngest generation of scholars in 1973, colleagues of my age felt that we were just carrying out a politico-intellectual mandate which came from the "revolutionary" moment in our immediate past. Nothing less – although we began to use the word "revolution" with an increasingly mild socialdemocratic tone, and although Bertolt Brecht's word about the (necessary) "fatigue of the march through the plains" ("die Mühen der Ebene") became suspiciously popular in the 1970s. Soon the intellectuals of that decade felt obliged to flagellate themselves for their "pragmatism" (i.e. for their loss of the "utopian spirit" of the 1960s).

So there was something of a generational obsession revived when Walter Moser and I, in the late 1990s and encouraged by the editors of the Canadian Review of Comparative Literature, asked about fifty scholars to contribute to an issue under the title "The Future of Literary Studies?" I do not remember us having any precise expectations as to how the ensemble of answers to our question (we ended up receiving twenty-three of them) would look different from those in the Ansichten-volumes of the late 1960s and early 1970s. One important change was semantically implicit in our question and logistically present in our approach to this task. We were referring to the future of Literary Studies at large (and not to the future of one "national" discipline, like Germanistik), and we also programmatically tried to involve colleagues from as many different cultural traditions and from as wide a generational range as possible – including some academic disciplines that do not belong to the realm of Literary Studies. In their views about the future of our field, these reactions indeed turned out to be as diverse as one could (and probably should) have expected. There is one level, however, where, within so much diversity (not to say diffuseness), the convergence among the literary scholars is nothing short of uncanny – and this is the tone in which they all write about the future of our discipline. Throughout their twenty-

three statements, our colleagues from the literary disciplines write about *Literary Studies* and its future in a tone of dysphoria. Even those among them who are not overly pessimistic about this future, write as if they were at odds with their discipline – without knowing (or, at least, without wanting to say) what to do about it. It is this simultaneity between bad humor and a seeming disinterest in constructive alternatives that I want to highlight. Nothing could be more different from the revolutionary confidence (“let’s abolish the old regime of our discipline and inaugurate the ideal realm of the future”) and from the post-revolutionary display of goodwill and patience (“it is worthwhile to take up the fatigues of the march through the plains”) that predominated in the Ansichten-volumes – and nothing among the results of Moser’s and my experiment was a greater surprise than the solidity of this dysphoria.

Where does it come from (if the impression which our snapshot reflects is not a completely random impression)? To use a metaphor, it may have to do with a status of *Literary Studies* that resembles those buildings to which subsequent generations – and within each generation: several architects – have made their contributions, without an overall vision and producing thus a thoroughly unappealing hybridity. Likewise, our discipline, since the late 1960s, has undergone innumerable waves of “reforms,” “renovations,” and (minor) “revolutions” which have all left their traces and many of which have produced specific intellectual pockets, without ever having had an impact on the entire institutional or intellectual shape of the discipline: there are some Marxist enemies left from the Student’s Revolution; there are several fractions of Foucaultians caught in tenacious internal struggles; there are former students of the social history of literature reborn as champions of cultural studies; they may interact with renegade semioticians who have become disciples of the dire Paul de Man; with Derridean illuminates and their malicious smiles; and with scholars who have sold their souls to the righteous cause of college pedagogy. All these parties and splinter groups defend the tiny institutional islands that they have conquered (“Centres de recherche sémiotique,” “Talleres para los estudios culturales,” “Institute für Diskursforschung” etc.) with pride and jealousy – but what secretly and paradoxically unites them is the (indeed dysphoric) feeling that they alone (each of them, individually) should occupy the entire space of *Literary Studies*. *Literary Studies* is thus like an assembly of John Lacklands. In addition, all these John Lacklands have lost their nurturing mother figure, the international Left. While (stemming from 1968) the obligation continues, for literary scholars, to define themselves as belonging to the Left – they all secretly know that it is no longer so certain where exactly the Left is (which irritation is yet another reason to be dysphoric). What is worse than the loss of one’s mother, at least for an institution, is the loss of all your worthy enemies and antagonists – and this, too, has happened to *Literary Studies*, diluting their sense of self-esteem and of direction. For the university administrations (whether public or private) have never really “shut down” the literary departments (in spite of innumerable – and mostly quite goofy

– structural reforms); for the new students’ generations have never truly abandoned us (rather, we fear that large proportions of them have believed in our disciplinary fake-heroisms); and there are still capitalists left (or should there even be an increasing number of capitalists?) who offer donations to departments of literature. Does this all not mean that nobody has taken seriously our “revolutionary threat” (speaking in the language of 1970) or our “resistance to mainstream social conventions” (speaking in one of the discourses of 1995)?

And who am I to speak with such dysphoria about my colleagues (and, to make things worse, also about colleagues who were kind enough to contribute to a collective publication whose coeditor I am)? As if it were to prove my own point, I am of course a literary scholar, one of those literary scholars indeed who (as a very young Wissenschaftlicher Assistent) contributed to the second *Ansichten-volumen*. Trying to describe, on the following pages, the sourish mood in which my discipline finds itself today (i.e. about the dysphoria in which everybody speaks about everybody else and the profession at large) will therefore be an exercise in self-description – which is one reason why I decided not to associate different aspects of this picture with different individual names (among the contributors to Moser’s and my volume). I would like to add, as a minimal declaration of good will, that it is neither my intention to psychoanalyze the profession nor, for the moment being, to come up with yet a new score of “valuable alternatives.” All I am trying to do is to identify the different aspects, implications, and nuances of a surprisingly uniform mood – which, today, may well be the predominant mood of our profession.

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No Focus

We all want to be many different things at the same time, and none of us does quite know which of them should be central. We pretend to be specialists and generalists, historians and judges of good taste, theorists or interpreters, educators or researchers, removed dwellers of an ivory tower or amateur politicians. Of course some (if not most) of these roles are mutually compatible – but the general experience is that when you speak about your own choice and your own emphasis, there will always be a colleague there, staring at you as if you were just betraying or even selling out the holy grail of the profession. The problem may well be that we have no criteria of selection. Nobody needs, most certainly, literary scholars (as people need physicians, lawyers, or engineers), and this is why we have to choose ourselves the criteria for our choosing among different possible shapes of our profession. Should the earliest tradition of the discipline be a model – and if so, should we rather look to the Anglo-American model, or to the French or to the Prussian situation before 1850? Or are we supposed, rather, to bring to their

completion one (or more) of those utopian projects that were proliferating in the late 1960s and early 1970s? Are we morally obliged to train our students for a certain range of professions (and which would these professions be today?), or is it our privilege to teach them the values of a specific experience without any practical or material yield? Granted again, many different things can coexist in a discipline called "Literary Studies" – but how much of a contiguity and of an overlapping among these different things can we give up before it ceases to be one discipline? What do a Derridean reading of Francis Ponge and a (pseudo-)economic analysis of TV channels in India, what do the work on a philologically meticulous edition of a medieval prayer and the politically committed teaching of contemporary Cuban film have in common? No wonder that we are increasingly eager to be acknowledged as fulfilling service functions for other disciplines, and that many colleagues have taken a liking to the (borderline trivial) metaphor of us being part of a larger "network of knowledge." For this metaphor at least helps us to overlook the fact that the different places and branches which we occupy within this network have long become mutually isolated. They are all somewhere connected – but not necessarily to each other.

Too many targets

So if Literary Studies can no longer be circumscribed as a unity (which is, after all, what we expect from an academic discipline) – why don't we make a joined effort to come up with a proposal for a new shape (after all, most of us share a more or less vital interest in the survival of this operation)? The problem is – and I have already mentioned it – that if we literary critics ever converged in such an attempt (which might well turn out to be a nightmare in its own right), we wouldn't easily agree on the criteria for the choice of such a disciplinary shape – as we do not easily know how to choose an intellectual center among the many subfields of Literary Studies. Some colleagues, I suppose, would like to maintain at least a glimpse of that German dream to be "*wissenschaftlich*," i.e. to discover and to describe universally valid regularities within a limited field of objects of reference. Others would argue that, almost by definition, whatever we call "literature," resists such generalizations, and they therefore want to ground any claim for a specific professional competence on that *esprit de finesse* which is required for the analysis of reference objects without any intrinsic regularities. Perhaps we have always had too many (conflicting) ambitions – and too many parameters to keep in mind. The age-honored hope, for example, to base the shape of the discipline on a metahistorically and transculturally valid concept of "Literature" (that hope which gave so much energy to the Formalist and Structuralist waves within our profession) has almost tragically shipwrecked under the exceedingly good intention to be sensitive to historical and cultural

difference. So what could be our new frame of reference? Personally, I like to think the academic future of my students within the larger framework of the Humanities. But have the Humanities really developed, as we anticipated twenty-five years ago, in tandem with the Natural Sciences and the Social Sciences? Or have the Social Sciences collapsed? And do we not share, today, too many epistemological concerns with the Sciences to really identify them as our Other? If we take one further step of generalization from here, this step will take us to the future of the University at large – and definitely not to any palpable solutions. For the views are divided between the two extremes of a future university whose function would be coextensive with that of professional education at large – and that of a university of the future which, on the contrary, would focus on all those types of experience that have no obvious practical application. Or shall we just be faithful to the legacy of 1968 and define our goals "politically" – i.e. at the largest possible distance from any "real world" politics? Do we not all want to help the underprivileged, and do we not all want to sharpen our students' critical judgment? To agree on such targets will at least make us feel good about ourselves – and at the same time dispense us from any further responsibilities.

No (media) revolution

It is true, the digital mechanism in the laptop on which I am writing at this moment, could care less about my and my readers' (I hope) analogue minds. And it is also true, I am inclined (or naive enough?) to believe, that pretty much everything we are thinking these days ends up getting inscribed somewhere on silicon chips. Much is indeed going on behind "the back" (or behind the "blind spots") of what we perceive as our acts of communication. Ten or fifteen years ago, many of us happily jumped on the opportunity to become the apocalyptic prophets of this technological revolution. Traditional concerns were launched in a new tone of intellectual melancholia – some of which are still around in the disorderly discursive monade of our profession. But the redemptive hopes that we had invested into the "media revolution" have not come true. One reason is that most of us – unfortunately – found it too tiring to acquire a more than metaphorical knowledge of the new media technologies. And those who did hardly ever made it back from there to a tolerable level of discursive sobriety. Not surprisingly, however, these discursive commuters turned out to neither possess the literary power of Thomas Pynchon nor the lightness of the best software producers. And the true intellectual task that remains to be tackled is by far too complex to be appealing. It would be the description and analysis of those complex media arrays that are neither the direct continuation nor the (so frequently announced) end of the "pre-revolutionary" forms of communication. We are all persuaded, for example, that the difference between writing on a PC and writing with a

pen has an impact on our style – but who has the stamina to describe this difference in detail, and who has the genius to invent the first steps of a research project that would identify the reasons why this is so. Likewise for the changing status of the book (no, it will definitely not disappear!) in its new environment of electronic media, and for the imagination of children who grow up with enormously sophisticated skills in playing computer games (when have you last beaten your son or your granddaughter in *Nintendo Soccer World Cup 98*?). I fear that the contributions which (former) literary critics have made towards the solution of such questions is inversely proportional to the frequency with which they use the concept of “virtual reality.”

Not “Culture”

Since it began to dawn upon us that we had gone too far in pressing the issue of the historical and cultural specificity of “Literature,” since we realized that there was no return to a concept of “Literature” which could provide unity and shape to our discipline, the notion of “culture” has made an amazing career among us. Why not, after having become over the years *socio*-historians of literature, discourse-analysts *tout court*, and many other things, why not claim now that our true vocation and competence is that of academically taking care of culture at large, high and low, spiritual and physical, exotic and homey? In the German context, this move brought the postmodern champions of “cultural studies” in an undesirable closeness to *Landeskunde* – the teaching of the Frenchness of French wine, cheese, and literature, or of the Britishness of British tea, landscape painting, and pop music (and so forth) – which we full professors had generously and condescendingly left to the lower academic ranks. The more intellectually respectable problem related to cultural studies, however, lies in the question whether there is any phenomenon associated with human interaction at all that can be exempted from the totalizing concept of culture. Although, on a level of connotations, Art, Literature, and Music seem to be more or less identical, once the concept of “literature” is replaced by the concept of “culture,” there is no way *not* to end up identifying “culture” with “society” at large (at least with society in the sense of that tradition of sociology which has been shaped by authors like Weber, Schütz, and Luhmann). Most of us would easily agree that “culture equal society” does not make up for a particularly desirable scholarly field, and I can see two types of corrective reactions to this problematic broadness. One is to identify, within this vast new field, certain areas and structures which seem to be constitutive for culture and which are yet specific enough to be compatible with a generally accepted concept of Literature. Focussing on the so-called “interdiscourse,” i.e. on those discursive phenomena which make possible the communication between different “social systems”

(whatever that exactly means), could be such a solution. The other reaction is much more ambiguous – and has become quite conventional over the past years. It consists in praising the merits of cultural studies (including the pronouncedly socialdemocratic position that has become associated with them) – *ma non troppo*, not without confessing that one has experienced something (deep, aesthetic, resistant – you name it) in Literature that a cultural analysis could never grasp.

“Reading” as reactive minimalism

So if real Literature is all kinds of very wonderful things, “katharsis,” “mimesis,” and “semiosis,” political resistance in Eastern Europe and in the People’s Republic of China, emerging National Identity in Mozambique, and just fun in L.A. – why will some Literary Critics say that some other literary critics never understand and celebrate this general wonderfulness? Those critics who play the part of the true lovers of true Literature blame those who, according to them, care too much about things non literary (about abstract concepts, for example, or about – it has to be said: often exceedingly vague – political goals), the one group of critics blames the other group of critics for what they all jointly perceive (this indeed is their one and only consensus) and somehow enjoy as the crisis of Literary Studies. In doing so, the lovers of Literature enact the favorite slogan of all spoiled children: “cutting off my arm is the right punishment for my daddy!” Or, to say it in other words: theirs is the *schadenfreude* of those *Titanic* passengers who are drowning happily because the bad rich passengers are also dying. In this way, the self-declared lovers of Literature among the literary critics indeed react to what they see as the demise of their discipline – but their reaction is truly minimal because it just consists in *ostentatively* not doing anything to rescue Literary Studies. In the Anglo-American academic world, this attitude has produced a truly blown-up version of the concept of “Reading.” For reading, so the lovers of Literature imply (quite unsurprisingly), the one and only important thing about the reception of Literature – is what Literary Studies has managed to push into the background. The misery of such a both solemn and tearful concept of Reading (not unlike the concept of “culture” that we discussed) comes from the obvious result that there is nothing considered to be meritorious that cannot be associated with it. And this is why the minimalistic lovers of Literature easily converge with a similarly minimalistic brand of philosophers, i.e. with those philosophers who still get excited about the discovery that language is a shaky ground for any claims of world-reference. I am of course referring (!) here to the position of that reactive philosophical minimalism which is associated with the name of Paul de Man. Without probably planning to do so, de Man offered the possibility of a comeback to the most old-fashioned literary critics. He did so by telling us (but who needed

to hear it again?) – and by telling them – that any “careful” Reading of Literature would prove wrong those who believe in the world-reference of any kind of text. Thus the concept of “Reading” became the opposite of “unsophisticated,” “non-rigorous,” “trivial” – and, above all, it became the opposite of cultural studies.

Encouragement?

While the general cultivated public tends to find Literary Criticism “wonderful” in a non-compromittal way (tell somebody sitting next to you on a flight that you are a scholar of Literature, and she will either tire you with her most heartfelt reading experiences or immediately lose interest in the conversation), while the general public does not even do us the favor of being against us – scholars from other disciplines often have quite a high opinion of Literary Studies. There is reason to fear, however, that such gratifyingly optimistic outside evaluations normally are the result of a confusion between Literature and Literary Studies. It is certainly moving to see philosophers argue that Literature always opens the view of a social future and is therefore always truly critical. But even if what they say were true (which I doubt), it would not necessarily help Literary Criticism. On the contrary, should one not rather draw the conclusion that the discipline has failed – either because it does not prevent highly qualified thinkers from making such flagrant generalizations or (if one likes such generalizations) because it has not managed to draw this conclusion itself? Something similar needs to be said to those mild-mannered scientists who praise the anti-entropic forces of mythology and Literature in an environment which, at least for the part that we call “nature,” is experienced as being chaotic. All the qualities and functions conventionally attributed to Literature will not – and should not – really increase (nor lower) the esteem in which Literary Studies stand. And what can we make of the fact that some historians expect us to work on contributions towards their own research agendas? There is nothing generally unusual in this expectation – although, once again, it comes more from an appreciation of Literature itself (as a potentially interesting field for historians) than from an admiration for Literary Studies. On the contrary, historians quite customarily complain about too narrow a documentary basis and about too much imagination whenever literary scholars seriously compete with them. So the aura of “Literature” will provide us, the literary critics, with some generous (and sometimes condescending) shoulder-padding. But if what’s at stake is the survival of Literary Studies, then we should – enjoy and – quickly forget such friendly gestures. For they are not really directed toward us.

Failures

But are not “the margins,” the emergent nations and their cultures outside Europe and Northern America, the horizons of our great hope? Did not much (or most) of that Literature which, over the past fifty years, has engaged us with its refreshingly unacademic strength come from there? And should not Pakistan or South Africa, for example, be countries in need of Literary Criticism, as an agent of national identity formation? As soon as we begin to think through the South African and some other, similar situations, we discover a whole range of asymmetries in the potential relation between the institutional shape of Literary Studies and the present state of the cultures in question. The main problem is that Literary Studies, as they developed in their different national variations during the 19th century, “found” as their field of reference “national literatures” whose historically grown shapes appeared so obvious and so convincing that they ended up suggesting – and partly orienting – the creation of the nation states. South Africa today, in contrast, is a place of convergence and contention between a multiplicity of “native” cultures and, at least, a duality of colonial languages and literatures. Even if we bracket the (both rude and necessary) question whether South Africa does not have more pressing budgetary priorities than the creation of a “national philology,” and even if we trust that all these different cultures will once be able to constitute an interplay of harmonious plurality, even then it is not clear that the discipline of Literary Studies will have anything meaningful to contribute to the shaping of a South African cultural identity which is not yet there. How indeed could this possibly happen? Should literary critics invent a blueprint that South African authors would then “execute” towards a new national Literature? Would the critics accompany, correct, and redirect the authors’ efforts? The more we think about it, the clearer it becomes how much, until the present day, the form and the potential intellectual performance of Literary Studies depend on a very specific constellation of frame conditions from the European past. And how do we react to the comment of an eminent literary critic from Japan who thinks that only Literature can afford enough agency to imagine the ultimate crime, the crime of mankind’s collective suicide? Is what he studies then alien and monstrous to him? Or is he simply recycling the postmodern *idée reçue* of the vanishing subject-agent? We can certainly export Literary Criticism, along with western Literature. But we cannot reenact the social and political situations of that 19th century Romanticism which was the condition for the emergence of our profession.

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Perhaps some – most? – Literary Scholars become so ill-humored when they think about the future of their discipline because they do not dare to confront themselves with the conclusion that there might be no worth-while future for it at all. Or, as a more upbeat version of the same thought: perhaps allowing oneself to imagine the end of Literary Studies would be the first step towards imagining a worth-while future for Literary Studies. After all, the end of Literary Studies would not be the end of the world – nor the end of western culture, and not even the end of the jobs that we occupy. It would definitely not be the end of Reading (although, personally, I would hope that the word may lose, in a not so remote future, some of the awkward pathos that characterizes its present). Reading (and other forms of “cultural appropriation” – could there not be a better-looking and better-sounding word than this?), Reading as an activity into which one invests considerable time without any material yield; Reading as exposing oneself to unimposed intellectual complexity; Reading in this sense, I bet, will survive for many years to come and remain an indispensable part of what will be taught and what will be learnt in Higher Education. But Reading does not have to be exclusively associated with one individual discipline. Nor need the culture of Reading be exclusively linked to what we call Literature – or with the frames of a national language, a national culture, or a nation state. Perhaps Literary Studies ceased to exist in the moment when critics began to distinguish between the historical interest and the aesthetic value of the texts that they analyze. But this does of course not imply that we will not continue to read certain texts from a historical angle – and that we will continue to appreciate (or discuss the conditions of) their beauty. Why should we not admit that we literary critics do many different things, and that many of the things that we do are completely separated from each other. There is space, as far as I can see, for all these things somewhere on the map of academic fields. But perhaps the space for a discipline in which all these things are united, has vanished.

NIKLAS LUHMANN*

La littérature comme réalité fictionnelle

Les termes fiction/fictionnel/fictionnalité renvoient toujours à un rapport problématique à la réalité. Mais ils renvoient aussi nécessairement à la question du statut de réalité de la fiction elle-même. Nous connaissons bien la technique des fictions juridiques, ancienne puisqu'elle remonte au droit civil romain mais qui est également pratiquée dans le “common law”: les enfants nés à bord d'un navire anglais doivent être considérés comme s'ils étaient nés à Londres. Cet exemple se rapproche de l'argumentation analogique mais il souligne en même temps la plus grande précision de la fiction, du point de vue de la technique juridique. Les fictions permettent de combler ces lacunes qu'on repère facilement dans les règlements divers. Leur caractère d'évidence de même que la possibilité de les justifier par l'analogie légitime la démarche. Autant qu'on puisse en juger, la fiction est utilisée avec circonspection et chez des juristes dont la discipline professionnelle est indéniable, elle est, sociologiquement parlant, en de bonnes mains.

La situation se complique lorsque des philosophes font appel à une philosophie du “comme si,” pour résoudre des apories fondamentales dans leur matière. On traite des synthèses transcendentales ou des constructions de l'esprit comme si elles correspondaient à la réalité. Ceci a freiné

* Professor of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld, died on 6 November 1998, at the age of seventy-one years. No other scholar emerging from the German humanistic tradition during the second half of the 20th century (for Luhmann's intellectual style owed more to the history of philosophical thought than to the Social Sciences) built a theoretical work comparable to his in coherence and monumental dimension; no other philosopher of his generation (it has even been said: no other philosopher since Hegel) fascinated and provoked the German intellectuals more than he did; and very few German scholars have had as broad an international reception as Luhmann.

The *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* and library are proud to present to its readers one of the last still unpublished Luhmann texts — which he had written for this issue, responding to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's and Walter Moser's invitation. This text is testimony of one of Luhmann's unique talents: it shows his capacity to understand the specific epistemological problems of specific academic disciplines, and to rearrange, complexify, and sometimes even resolve such problems in the mirror of his own “Systems Theory.”

— H.U.G.