TEXTTEORI FÖR LÄSFORSKARE

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SUMMARY

Summary of the book's chapters: Introduction, Wittgenstein, Kenneth Burke, Luhmann and Onwards.

INTRODUCTION

My point of departure in this thesis is a failed reader-response research project. Originally, I wanted to explore the reading competencies that are needed to read school textbooks in a accordance with the goals in national upper secondary school curricula. The project failed because of an underlying theoretical problem: Interactional theories of reading (like those found in German reception æsthetics) presupposed a text that was given and transcendent to any reading practice, but these theories could never show that this was indeed the case. Transactional theories, on the other hand, did not presuppose a transcendent text, but in making the text unique to each transaction, they also made it impossible to observe another reader's text.

I consider »the text« to be something that enables and restricts reading experiences, and start out by examining this problem as it occurs in current Swedish reception studies and in international theory. I find that while the problem surfaced in the reader-response boom in the seventies, it has never really been solved: throughout the last three decades there have been numerous attempts to tackle it, all of them failing in one way or another. In current research, this results in either reception studies that hardly take the text into much consideration at all, or studies that make unproven claims about the

connections between response-inviting textual structures and the documented response. There are also wider consequences in pedagogy, as teachers are unable to grasp the actual texts that their individual students respond to, and the problem is ultimately related to the larger, ongoing debate about subjectivity and objectivity in research and in the educational system. I use Frank Furedi's *Where have all the intellectuals gone* (2004) as an example of this debate, and propose that a new text theory would be useful to counter a few of his arguments.

I suggest that some kind of constructivist, two-step theory is needed in order to be able to describe a text that is created rather than given: the text must first be »concipiated« (latin *concipere*: 'to conceive, imagine') and then responded to, making it both a result and a cause in the reading process. To explore this possibility, I decide to examine three different theoretical approaches. The first of these is Wittgenstein's language games, the second is Kenneth Burke's socio-rhetorics and the third is Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. These theories all have a strong focus on practices (games, dramas and systems) that are in one way separated from their environment but in another way dependent on it. I stress that I intend to *use* the theories in order to produce a new perspective on texts and reading; it is not my primary goal to engage in a thorough and convincing exegesis.

In order to test different theoretical approaches, I also need something to analyse: some kind of literature and different reading practices in which it occurs. My initial, failed project comes to use in this regard. Out of its huge textbook material, I pick four pages about Mayakovsky and futurism in *Litteraturorientering för gymnasieskolan* (1978) ('*Literary orientation for the upper secondary school*'). I admit that this choice is arbitrary, since in my perspective, texts do not exist before they are being read in some practice – there is no way to motivate the choice in advance by saying that these pages are

(for instance) especially interesting, complicated, diverse or representative. They are simply one possible selection among innumerable other possible ones.

I get the reading practices through analysis of national curricula for the Swedish subject in upper secondary school during the period 1971-2000. This period corresponds roughly to the time that *Litteraturorientering* has been in use, and involves the documents *Lgy70* (1971), *Supplement 22* (1975), *Supplement 80* (1982), *Lpf 94* (1994) and the unnamed changes to *Lpf94* made in 2000.

The introductory chapter ends with an outline of the thesis. I state that one chapter each will be dedicated to Wittgenstein, Burke and Luhmann. A final chapter will revisit a few of the questions posed in the introductory chapter and contain a meta-theoretical perspective on the main issue.

WITTGENSTEIN

In the Wittgenstein chapter, I start out by explaining that it is the later Wittgenstein that interests me, since his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) can in some ways be considered a reaction to a more static view of language (represented in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922)). I also state that I am interested in Wittgenstein interpreted as a relativist, since interpretations that frame him as a realist or foundationalist will only result in a perspective on reading similar to the insufficient, interactional perspective that I described in the introductory chapter. I use Donald Barry's *Forms of Life and Following Rules: A Wittgensteinian Defence of Relativism* (1996) as companion in my relativist reading of *Philosophical Investigations*.

First, I discuss a few key terms in wittgensteinian philosophy: forms of life, language-games, rules, family resemblances and aspect seeing. From my relativist perspective, I use

these terms to describe particular (as opposed to universal) and collective reading practices (language-games) that are situated in a diverse society (our forms of life). The meaning of an utterance is always related to its use in the specific practice. When we read, the words on the page become actions in a language-game, and our responses become counter-actions. Reading practices can be learned by the use of rules, but the rules do neither constitute nor govern the practices; they are secondary observations of regularities in these practices. Each reading practice fosters a particular aspect seeing that makes us perceive a literary work in a certain way (i e connect a specific utterance with a specific use). I suggest that aspect seeing might also concern objects *as* physical objects, so that our perceptions of something as mere sounds or ink on paper are also the result of a specific seeing rather than something objective and transcendent. Hence, what makes us think we are talking about »the same« artifact or literary work in different reading practices can not be grounded in a common, physical reality. It is instead an effect of family resemblances that are secondary to the games compared and do not enable nor restrict anyone's reading. Family resemblances are not common demeanors. They are like intertwined fibres, creating a group out of something that has no single thing common to all parts of the group.

With these key terms I turn to the analysis of national curricula. I point to two obvious reading practices that are described (and prescribed) in the curricular documents: a personal reading practice and a historical reading practice. The former focuses on the individual reader's freedom of interpretation, on reading as a way to broaden the reader's perspectives and on reading as a fun, stimulating activity. The latter focuses on a more distanced relation to literature and is more concerned with literary canon, intertextual comparisons, the works' socio-historical backgrounds, cronological classifications and

literature as a cultural heritage. In the historical reading, the personal gain from reading is not immediate, like in the personal reading, but comes through its use in further education (i e you read to better deal with university).

In this chapter I analyse the introduction to futurism in *Litteraturorientering* as it appears in the personal and the historical reading practices. I demonstrate how the text in the personal reading tries to make the reader identify with perspectives and personas in the textbook narrative and the quoted Mayakovsky poem (»They Don't Understand a Thing«, 1914), and to use her own, personal experiences in her responses. It is particularly obvious that the text means for the reader to identify with Mayakovsky as a young person at odds with conventions and an older generation. On the other hand, the text in the historical reading practice tries to accomplish the opposite. It tries to help the reader to keep her distance and observe the perspectives and narrated events more coolly, evaluating them in relation to a literary canon. I also find that even in cases where the texts show family resemblances, there are differences in aspect flavour (a term that relates to nuances in aspect seeing). All in all, it is very obvious that readers in the different practices will respond to different texts.

I end the chapter with a discussion of the shortcomings of my wittgensteinian perspective. While I think that it serves well to outline the principles of a functional text theory (in the sense that it solves the thesis' problem), one is pretty much left to one's own inventions or the devices of other theories when it comes to details in the analysis. Also, *Philosophical Investigations* does not – at least not in my interpretation – give sufficient answers to the role of the artifact in the reading process. I suggest that further Wittgenstein studies, specifically of *On Certainty* (1974), might be of use here. Finally, I stress the need of a developed theory for self-observation, since this is the basic principle for the example analyses in the thesis.

In the Kenneth Burke chapter, I start out by describing Burke's production as varied and extended in time, but I also consider it consistent in that it approaches the same problem again and again from different angles. The basic problem for Burke must be understood in the context of the Great Depression and World War II. Put simply, Burke wants society to move towards a better life through a greater understanding of language use. Both his early works on literary theory and the later works on rhetoric can be explained as such attempts, the latter being a development of the former. In this perspective, I argue that it is not only necessary for Burke's use in this thesis but also exegetically sound to consider his early works in the light of his later works.

I use Burke's concepts of form and identification, as well as his famous method of dramatism, in order to develop the wittgensteinian perspective from the earlier chapter. Form, which for the early Burke consists of the offerings of the text coupled with the appetites of the reader, becomes a function of the reader's identity, which in turn can be understood as a continual renegotiation of the subject's self-understanding in relation to the outer world. This means that what is percieved as »text« and »reader« is always dependent on acts of identification – on the drawing and re-drawing of the boundary between them. Specifically, text is percieved as symbolic acts whose motives are grounded in the *scene* of the reading. This scene consists of the reader's expectations, which are in turn embedded in her overall understanding of herself and the world. Through the use of Burke's dramatistic pentad (scene, act, means, actor and purpose) and its internal relations (ratios), the equivalent of Wittgenstein's aspect seeing can be broken down and analysed in grammatical categories, thus providing the detail that was lacking in the former chapter.

After this introduction of new analytical tools, I turn again to the national curricula. I translate the rules for the personal and historical language-games into scenes, and introduce a third, technical-analytical scene. I contend that in this scene, the ideal reader uses professional, analytical tools (terms and concepts from literary theory) in order to understand how the literary work »is built« and to ascribe value to it. This means that the motives of the textual, symbolic actions are always understood in relation to this over-arching goal. There is no ulterior motive behind the technical-analytical reading – it is considered its own reward.

In this chapter, I analyse the first half of the main section on Mayakovsky in *Litteraturorientering* as it appears on the personal, historical and technical-analytical scenes. A comparison reveals that while the scene–purpose ratio dominates all three texts, the means–purpose ratio is strong in both the personal and the technical-analytical readings. I suggest that this shows that the symbolic actions in the historical text are more direct: they do precisely what they say they do and what is expected against the background of the historical scene. In the other two readings, the means category is used to make allusions and create expectations in order to direct the reader towards personal and technical responses respectively. There is also a major difference in what can be considered themes and motifs (which in burkean terms are forms) in the different texts. In the personal and historical readings, the-poet-that-dies-young is theme and motif respectively, while in the technical-analytical reading there is no actual narrative and hence no proper theme at all. This is also reflected in the offerings of identification that can be observed in the texts. In the personal reading, the text tries to transform the scene's ideal reader (a soon-to-be-adult) into a revolutionary youth similar to they young Mayakovsky, but in the historical reading, the text offers identification with the ideal reader of the scene. In

the technical-analytical reading, the ideal reader of the scene and the reader proposed by the text's offerings of identification are at odds, since the latter is much less independent. Finally, I conclude that at the end of the first half the Mayakovsky section, the reader is left in different stages of suspense. Most notably, the text in the personal reading is on the verge of an explanation of the reasons behind Mayakovsky's suicide, while the text in the technical-analytical reading is not at any verge at all – it is expected to continue on in the second half with more examples of Mayakovsky's poetry.

In the concluding discussion of the short-comings of my burkean perspective, I contend that it does indeed provide more detail than the wittgensteinian perspective. However, the problems of self-observation and the role of the artifact have still not been solved. In the example analysis, a problem of recursivity also manifested itself – the reader's response may involve a transformation of scene, resulting in a corresponding transformation of the motives of the textual symbolic actions.

LUHMANN

I begin the Luhmann chapter by pointing to the universally acknowledged difficulties in his vast and complicated production, stressing his position as a radical constructivist but also pointing to the weaknesses in his own over-simplified view of regular reading (as opposed, for Luhmann, to the reading of »text-art«). I contend that it is possible to use a few basic concepts in Luhmann's theory of communication in order to build a new theory of response that can adequately solve the remaining problems in the former chapters.

I picture several systems that are involved in the process of reading, but I focus on what I call the reading system. This

system is operatively closed but in a state of interpenetration with a psychic system (our consciousness – thoughts, perceptions), which in turn is structurally coupled to a biological system (the heart, the central nervous system etc) and systems that produce books (authors, publishers). The operative closedness of these systems means that the bio-systems cannot operate in the psychic system (i e they can't think) and the production systems cannot operate in reading systems. At the same time, the interpenetration of the systems make them able to affect each other through acausal, structural couplings. This autopoietic solution takes care of the problem with artifacts in the former chapters, since the artifact's role can now be clearly defined by structural couplings. It has no control over nor any direct influence on (since it's not directly coupled) what goes on in the reading system.

The reading system is responsible for the production of text in the form of communications, which are three part forms consisting of selected information, utterance and understanding. When we read, the psychic and the reading systems observe one another and function as each other's outer environments. Through the selections of the respective systems, some of our thoughts result in text, and some of the text result in thoughts. But not everything that goes on in either system gets a response in the other. This mechanism forms the basis for an explanation of the recursivity found in the Burke chapter, as both systems evolve in a state of interpenetration that can be observed and described.

The reading system chooses what it wills from the surrounding psychic system according to some kind of program, for instance the personal, historical and technical-analytical programs. Very personal thoughts might become text when the personal program runs the reading system, but they will not when it is run by the historical program. Programs are altered from within the system through its operations, either

as a consequence of the system's structural couplings or as a result of self-observation. The latter term refers to what George Spencer-Brown (an important influence on Luhmann) refers to as »re-entry«, which means that the distinction between system and environment appears as an internal distinction in the system. For the reading system, it means that it communicates about itself.

Luhmann's theory of self-observation is key to what he perceives as a general, epistemological turn that must affect the entire science system. For me, it answers the most troubling question in the earlier chapters: does a reading that observes itself produce the same text as one that doesn't? I contend that the text is the same, although in the self-observing reading it is also percieved as contingent, which in a sense is only a sharper and clearer view of the text.

Lastly, I turn to the notion of persons, which in Luhmann's systems theory are internal structures resulting from the continuous attribution of communications to separate poles. In the reading system, I contend that there is an author and a reader person. Communications whose utterances can be traced to the (indirectly) coupled production system are attributed to the author person, while utterances that cannot are attributed to the reader person. The communications of the former are not to be understood as the text, however, as the text is *all* of the communications in the system. The reader person is helpful to describe the human »participation« in the system, but it is not a complete representation of it (which is rather to be found in the more complicated interpenetration of the psychic and reading systems).

After this theoretical discussion, I begin the third and last example analysis. I translate the rules/scenes from the earlier chapters into programs and move on to the discussion of the second part of the section on Mayakovsky in *Litteraturorientering*. I find that when the historical and personal programs

run the system, the image on page 307 of *Litteraturorientering* represents a turning point in the narrative. In the personal system, Mayakovsky turns from youthful liveliness to self-sacrifice and ultimately suicide. In the historical system, the turn does not so much consist of a change in Mayakovsky's person as in his poetry, whose content shifts from Mayakovsky's personal revolt against the bourgeoisie to a collective praise of the new Soviet Union. This change is also manifest in the formal aspects of his poetry, but in the technical-analytical system, there is no real turning point but rather a repetition of the structure found in the first half of the Mayakovsky section in the textbook: hints and instructions for analysis are given, followed by an example of poetry (that the reader is meant to analyse) and a conclusion that refers back to the poem. This time, however, the conclusion has less the character of a »correct« analysis, making the discrepancy between the program's rather independent reader and the reader person as it evolves in the system less acute than it appeared in the Burke chapter.

This example analysis reveals a number of things about my attempt at a systems theoretical response theory. While the theory does solve the remaining problems from the earlier chapters, the solutions come at the expense of simplicity and intuitive use of analytical tools. Also, the notion of programs coupled with Spencer-Brown's form makes the boundaries between system and environment in the three examples unnecessarily sharp, to the point where the systems seem artificial and alien. On the other hand, my attempt at describing the communications and their attributions during the systems' evolutions is surprisingly simple and might well be used by anyone, without much knowledge of systems theory beforehand. I end the chapter by suggesting that a few of the above issues might be solved by a deeper study of Luhmann's theory, but that some of them must be considered inherent.

In the final chapter I revisit the controversy between interactional and transactional perspectives on reading and point to the underlying assumptions about autonomy. The transactional perspective tends toward a view of humans as completely free and self sufficient. The most radical theories – those of Bleich and Holland – are adapted to the observation of altogether individual texts. Paradoxically, their theories are often used in cultural studies, where class, gender and other aspects of man as a social, non-autonomous being is stressed. The interactional perspectives on the other hand tends toward historically and socially determined human beings that don't perceive the text individually but in accordance with the general conditions of their collective situation. This quality is often replaced by open or implied universalism, but there are examples of studies that use interactional theories while keeping a strong and rather narrow social emphasis. I contend that the theories I have developed in the thesis are all in one way or another firmly social in character, but still flexible enough to deal with an infinite number of separate collectives at a given historical moment. I thus combine qualities from both interactional and transactional perspectives. However, I also conclude that from a systems theoretical point of view, any interaction will ultimately appear as a transaction to an observer of second or higher degree (i e there are no entities that exist independent of observation).

Instead of presenting some kind of master theory, I define a number of conditions that I believe need to be filled by any theory that aspires to solve the thesis' problem. First and most important of these is the condition of *immergence*, which is a term I coin to describe a feature in the three main theories in the thesis: the elements of reading, including the text, the reader and the reading situation itself, are only properly visible

from the inside – they emerge when and because someone immerses himself in a collective reading formation, for instance by way of its outward tokens or by the account of others already immersed. This condition basically says that it is not only impossible to predict another person's literary experience without belonging to the same interpretive community – it is also impossible to observe the *textual conditions* (i e the text) for that experience.

The condition of separation says that the reading process and the elements involved in it must be kept apart, most notably text must be kept apart from literary experience and reading kept apart from non-reading. The condition of response says that »text« must be defined as something that demands response (as opposed to having an effect, being a passive repository of repertoire elements or constituting some kind of code for the reconstruction of authorial meaning). The condition of reciprocity says that the response must be bidirectional, so that the text can respond to reader actions. Finally, the condition of transcendence says that the experience of the reading process must be able to transcend the reading situation, so that it can change not only the reader but the human that reads.

In my discussion of the potential use of these results in further research, I review several of the cases I have earlier discussed as problematic due to their dependence on current reader-response theory. I propose that immergence theories would be most useful to any reception study in which the text is acknowledged as one of the underlying causes for a particular response. While historical reception studies might already be considered immergent in a sense, I suggest that a proper immergence theory would make it easier to examine and compare not only the reception, but also the text, in much smaller and more local reading formations than what is possible with the help of the common interactional theories that are currently used.

For the teaching of literature, I see immergence theories as essential, since teachers – no matter what their pedagogic preferences – are constantly dealing with students that belong to different reading formations: it would be a great benefit to be able to see the text as the specific student sees it. Specifically, the so called *erfarenhetspedagogik* ('pedagogic of experience') would benefit from this perspective, as it can show where and how texts make offers of identification. The pedagogic of de-familiarization would similarly benefit from knowing where and how texts try to distance a reader, and the pedagogic of literary competence would be able to understand »incompetent« readings as textually supported. I also point out that a systems theoretical perspective on teaching in general is an interesting field of study.

As for Furedi and the debate about objectivity, I recognize that there is no reconciliating Furedi's libertarian ideals with the views implied by the thesis' theoretical perspectives, but I believe that immergence theories do offer a way out of what Furedi describes as a 'anything-goes' situation. I also define immergence perspectives as cross-combinations of social dependency and epistemological relativism, and contrast this position to the objectivism of Ayn Rand (autonomy+realism), the radical American left (autonomy+relativism) and Marxism (social dependency+materialism).

Lastly, I explain that I have not discussed the thesis' implications for the core activity of the discipline of comparative literature, simply because history shows that it is pointless: all earlier attempts to have an impact have failed. I contend that maintaining the notion of universal texts is not helpful in the current crisis of the discipline, and suggest that a non-universal notion would be. However, a change in doxa can only come about through the discipline's internal operations, as a response to external events.