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Cognitive Poetics Meets Hermeneutics

Some considerations about the German reception of Cognitive poetics

Theoretical discussions and applications of cognitive approaches such as *Biopoetics* and *Cognitive poetics* are remarkably growing in number among German scholars. This indicates that the *cognitive turn* has definitely reached a broader audience in the traditional "Literaturwissenschaften".[1] This article is meant to investigate the reception of Cognitive poetics in the context of German hermeneutics. It will outline the theoretical and cultural differences between Hermeneutics and Cognitive poetics; but it can also demonstrate that the differences between Cognitive poetics and some forms of Hermeneutics are smaller than they may appear at first sight. At stake is whether Cognitive poetics holds the potential to be extended to some kind of cognitive literary studies which is not at all constrained to studying principles of literature, but which could add value to the interpretation of literature itself.

At the same time, we want to discuss if Hermeneutics can afford to ignore cognitive approaches. Obviously, in the following overview we will focus on Cognitive poetics. Many of our observations should, however, also be applicable to Biopoetics. Even if Cognitive poetics and Biopoetics draw on conflicting background theories (e.g. Cognitive linguistics vs. Evolutionary psychology),[2] both Cognitive poetics and Biopoetics are basically *scientific* programmes explicitly concerned with elucidating the interaction between texts and minds.

Cognitive hermeneutics?

The difficulties of a co-operation between Cognitive poetics and Hermeneutics can very well be illustrated with a comparison to Explanatory hermeneutics. A major contribution on Explanatory hermeneutics recently appeared in 2007 under the title *Kognitive Hermeneutik*. In comparison to book titles such as *Cognitive Poetics* (cf. Stockwell 2002), *Kognitive Hermeneutik* (Tepe 2007) may seem very similar at first sight: The same attribute ("cognitive") is followed by a rather vague scholarly term ("hermeneutics" and "poetics" respectively). However, even if these titles sound very similar, they indicate two very different approaches to literature. Peter Tepe's *Kognitive Hermeneutik* proposes a

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[1] Before 2007, there was only spurious reception of cognitive poetics in German studies. Despite various contributions to cognitive narratology by German Anglists (e.g., Fludernik 1993), the reception before 2007 is mostly confined to handbooks (e.g., Müller 2003; Müller 2007) and occasional conferences such as the *Deutsche Germanistentag* in Marburg in 2007. For instance, a German critical review of the Theory of Conceptual Metaphor (Eder 2007) had to rely mostly on English sources.

[2] Evolutionary psychology typically sees the mind as being shaped by a series of innate modules which have been acquired through evolution in the early stages of humanity. On the other hand, cognitive poetics is rather influenced by a holistic cognitive linguistics which defines itself in contrast to modular [!] Chomskyan linguistics (Lakoff/Johnson 1999). Nevertheless, cognitive poetics does also assume regularities in the human mind by the common experience of "a mind in a brain in a body" (Turner 1996, 116). The contrast between these two varieties of cognitive approaches lies in background theories; nevertheless, given the difficulties to prove cognitive models, it seems advisable to keep cognitive assumptions compatible even with different cognitive theories.

framework to achieve knowledge about the *meaning* of a literary text by relying partly on broad understanding of authorial intentions (Tepe 2007, 19). Consequently, *Kognitive Hermeneutik* is a comprehensive refutation of assumptions denying that interpretation can ever be scientific. On this ground it rather critically reviews approaches such as Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Deconstruction or Empirical study of literature (which could all be labelled as anti-hermeneutic). As the following description will demonstrate, Cognitive poetics might be easily included in this list of illustrious anti-hermeneutic literary theories: Cognitive poetics is, among other things, a programme of explaining presumed or observed psychological effects on the recipient (cf. Steen/Gavins 2003, 1). Or at least it is concerned with questions of *interaction* between 'text impulses' and mental 'reader reactions'. Cognitive poetics is much more interested in the personal interpretative behaviour of everyday readers. At the same time, cognitive poeticians do not refrain from critical remarks about hermeneutical practices:

> [Critics] find it more fruitful to do cognitive poetics so as to engage with the epistemology of our intuitive interpretative practices rather than add yet another interpretation of a text to the MLA bibliography's database. In that sense, their research engages more with poetics than with hermeneutics even if doing poetics usually requires reference to a specific text (Hamilton 2002, 2).

> [...] the standard academic practice of producing yet another interpretation of a text from the canon, or, in more recent years, from outside the canon, has been challenged by the taxpayer, who wants better justification for the spending of their money than an academic's sheer individual interest in a particular text (Steen/Gavins 2003, 2).

Such passages could give the impression that Tepe's "Kognitive Hermeneutik" and Cognitive poetics are not only 'false friends', but actual academic enemies: Tepe strives for principles of scientifically controlled reading, called "cognitive hermeneutics" and "Explanatory hermeneutics" respectively. In particular, he works out three different types reading approaches to texts (Tepe 2007, 50–123):

1) EXPLANATORY READING ("kognitive[3] Interpretation"), which focuses on explaining the content and form of a text by taking into account contextual factors of the text's creation;
2) ADOPTING READING ("aneignende Interpretation"), which reads texts for individual purposes (e.g., entertainment or information, consolation or moral orientation);
3) PROJECTIVE ADOPTING READING ("projektiv-aneignende Interpretation"), which is a problematic combination of the first two types of interpretation, as it interprets a text from the subjective view point of an individual recipient (including the projection of a-historical ideologies and theories onto the text) and takes this interpretation as a valid scholarly reading of text.

This differentiation of reading types stands in contrast to the principles of Cognitive poetics, which tries to elucidate common processes of reading literature (hence, kinds of 'adopting' reading). The question remains whether cognitive poeticians could accept that there are different types of readings. We will demonstrate that many cognitive poeticians actually make this differentiation, perhaps implicitly. Moreover, a discussion of possible common interests among hermeneuticians and cognitive poeticians will show that – despite the contrast between the principles of Cognitive poetics and Tepe's rehabilitation of interpretation or literary reading as a scientific procedure – there is also a series of correspondences. First of all, Explanatory hermeneutics is – similar to Cognitive poetics – inspired by a discomfort with current standards of what is sometimes considered "hermeneutic interpretation". Moreover, there have been various aspects of Cognitive poetics that have triggered the interest of hermeneuticians. The following (incomplete) list provides an overview of general and particular cognitivist concepts that have been received with interest in hermeneutic studies:

• Cognitive poetics may inform about general principles of hermeneutic understanding (Lauer 2009; Winko/Köppe 2008, 308). In particular, Cognitive poetics reminds us of irreducible human fea-

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[3] The difference between Tepe's *Kognitive Hermeneutik* and Stockwell's *Cognitive Poetics* illustrates the ambiguity of the term "cognitive". For Tepe, "cognitive" is used in the sense of 'knowledge' or 'finding', with particular emphasis on relation between knowledge by interpretations of literary texts. Stockwell, however, understands "cognitive" in a broad sense which comprises any state of mind including emotional responses (cf. Stockwell 2002, 171f.).

tures in all forms of interpretation (Zymner 2007, 147). Given that "Hermeneutics" is not only a practice of reading, but also a general theory of understanding, Cognitive poetics could disprove unfounded (e.g. post-structuralist) reading practices, which have become fashionable in some parts of literary studies (cf. Lauer 2009, 150; Zymner 2007, 143).

- Cognitive poetics regards literature as not being an entirely different form of language communication. Therefore, it is not restrained to a limited selection or a canon of texts (cf. Köppe/Winko 2007, 334; Lauer 2009, 151). However, this feature may also be interpreted as a lack of a clear conception of literature (cf. Zymner 2007, 143); but we will get to these kinds of criticisms later.

- Individual and idiosyncratic cognitive effects of a text can be described with the tools of Cognitive poetics (cf. Köppe/Winko 2007, 334). Cognitive poetics helps to explain what readers do with fictional text worlds, e.g. how characters are represented mentally (cf. Jannidis 2004; Jannidis 2009); and it may actually inspire new readings of texts (cf. Winko/Köppe 2007, 308).

Nevertheless, there are various serious objections that have been considered among German hermeneuticians. In the following list, we arrange these objections according to whether they rather compare traditional standards of literary studies to Cognitive poetics, or whether they address general problems of applying Cognitive poetics to literature.

- Literary studies typically have high demands concerning the description of the history of concepts. In this context, it has been observed that Cognitive poetics has a general tendency of disregarding historical precursors (Zymner 2007, 144). This is in particular true for George Lakoff's work on the theory of conceptual metaphor.[4] However, a superficial reconstruction of the 'state of the art' is not confined to a particular school or discipline.

- Another criticism has been that Cognitive poetics does not use its potential in historical application, in particular in combination with Biopoetics (Zymner 2007, 145f.). It is striking indeed, that most studies of Cognitive poetics focus on readers of today; but this focus does not necessarily entail a lack of historical dimension. According to evolutionary psychology, our cognitive abilities have remained stable since the Pleistocene Age (Eibl 2004; Mellmann 2006). This stability is a great advantage for cognitive approaches, since it helps explain responses not only of contemporary readers, but also of ancient readers. Even if we take into account major cultural innovations (e.g. invention of writing and printing, development of reading silently), we can still assume a fairly stable cognitive apparatus. Moreover, Cognitive poetics provides, with an elaborate schema theory, a tool to describe historical belief systems (Winko/Köppe 2008, 303f.).

Cultural differences and differences of scientific objectives should not be underestimated. However, the objections mentioned so far are not necessarily insurmountable. More problems arise in discussions of theoretical problems of taking cognitive approaches to literature:

- Cognitive poetics shares with Cognitive linguistics the general problem that cognitive models are mostly based on the observation of language only, and afterwards mostly tested on language material (Eder 2007, 180–183; Winko/Köppe 2008, 306f.).[5] The typical answer is that cognitive approaches should search for "converging evidence":

> In applying a method, we need to be as sure as we can that the method itself does not either determine the outcome in advance of the empirical inquiry or artificially skew it. A common method for achieving this, [...] is to seek converging evidence using the broadest available range of differing methodologies. [...] Where one has five to ten sources of converging evidence, the probability of any particular methodological assumption skewing the results falls considerably. (cf. Lakoff/Johnson 1999, 79)

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[4] For instance, the short list of references in Lakoff/Johnson 1980 is in a stark contrast to the extensive name dropping in their "acknowledgements" (Lakoff/Johnson 1980, xi–xiii).

[5] McGlone's critique of Lakoff's theory is a recurring major reference point in this discussion McGlone 2001. This critique, however, is far away from being bipartisan, as a reviewer observed (Chiappe 2003, 59): "McGlone's discussion of the conceptual metaphor theory is unlikely to be very convincing to proponents of the conceptual metaphor view. For instance, the claim that conceptual metaphors are always accessed during on-line comprehension is not a necessary implication of the theory. [...] In general, McGlone's discussion of psycholinguistic evidence is likely to be regarded as heavily partisan by proponents of the conceptual metaphor theory."

- In addition, the terminology and concepts of Cognitive poetics have attracted particular criticism. There seems to be a danger of explaining something we do not understand by cognitive terms which we do not understand either (Winko/Köppe 2008, 307). In fact, we have seen cognitive models which are far more difficult to understand than the sonnet they try to explain. There is then a general problem with the relationship between a text and its modelled cognitive product. And Zymner's worried observation that it is not always clear when cognitive poeticians are talking about the text or the mind, may point into the same direction: There is even the danger of "unnecessary duplication of terms" (Tsur 1998), if Cognitive poetics merely translates a given text into some kind of mental representation without providing more knowledge about the text (Such a situation would clearly cry out for 'Occam's razor': *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem!*). These problems point towards a fundamental difference between cognitive principles and hermeneutics. If cognitive principles are applied to individual literary texts they are nothing more than machines translating a text into mental representations of the text. The best they can do is *reducing* the meaning potential of a text.

These observations lead to the most important criticism that cognitive approaches cannot account for the *quality* of literary readings (Winko/Köppe 2008, 307–309). Theoretically, Cognitive poetics is bound to take every single act of reading or understanding seriously. We think that this last point is the most important criticism; and we would like to consider it in the context of cognitive conceptions of interpretation and the reader.

The hermeneutics of Cognitive poetics

A simple answer to this last objection would be to restrain Cognitive poetics to investigating the principles of literature, without directly interfering with the analysis of individual texts. This would be in tune with a more restricted sense of "poetics" as theoretical reflection about the principles of literature (cf. Fricke 2003). In this respect, Cognitive poetics has the potential of becoming a general theory of literature, and its results are relevant for the activities of all literary critics, as they concern background assumptions for their philological readings. At the same time, a Cognitive poetics of literary principles would remain closely associated to the empirical study of literature.

However, Cognitive poetics is not a monolithic movement with a single aim. For instance, it has been suggested that Cognitive poetics should rather be considered as "cognitive hermeneutics" or "cognitive rhetoric" (cf. e.g., Hamilton 2005, 280). In this broader sense, Cognitive poetics is not only concerned with abstract principles of literature, but also with their instantiation in particular texts and particular readings. In fact, there are various studies which try to provide analyses of individual texts in the light of Cognitive poetics (they might be labelled as "Cognitive poetics in practice": cf. Gavins/Steen 2003). It seems that – even if Cognitive poetics is primarily a programme of investigating the principles of literature – its applications frequently include the testing (or at least illustration) of hypotheses by reading a particular text. Given that Cognitive poetics aims to elucidate the relationship between text structures and their mental effects (cf. Steen/Gavins 2003, 1), it seems fair to expect some predictions about reader responses to individual texts.

After all, such applications may demonstrate the explanatory power of Cognitive poetics as a theory of literature. However, applications to individual texts have aroused criticism. On the one hand, hermeneuticians have found the results obtained by Cognitive poetics more or less redundant (cf. e.g., Kelleter 2007). On the other hand, there are warnings from Empirical studies of literature that Cognitive poetics may become less cognitive and too hermeneutic:

> Yet Cognitive poetics has avoided this [empirical] route, and as a result, I suggest, is in danger of falling back into the old hermeneutic model of text interpretation that it has proposed to supersede. (Miall 2007)

It has to be admitted that the so-called 'basis problem' of how hypotheses in Cognitive poetics can be empirically falsified or corroborated, is still far away from being solved. Therefore, it is considered to be still too hermeneutic from an empirical perspective (cf. Miall 2007; but also Peer/Louwerse 2009).

However, from a perspective of traditional Hermeneutics, it seems that Cognitive poetics is suspected as not being hermeneutic enough. We believe that the contradictory evaluations of Cognitive poetics stem from different conceptions of dealing with textual evidence in relation to interpretation. Moreover, we think that Cognitive poetics is also liable for this confusion, as it entertains – implicitly – different conceptions of interpretation or reading: Its approach to text corresponds to a broad understanding of Hermeneutics where (with reference to empirical studies of literature) any reading which confounds analyst and reader is considered to be hermeneutical (cf. also Winko 1995, 6). At the same time, there is an implicit practice which suggests that interpretative analyses may potentially be carried out by scholars in a scientifically controlled way.

The readers of Cognitive poetics

The observations above ask the question to what extend cognitive poeticians differentiate types of readers. In cognitivist studies we find uses of "reader" with reference to empirical results about 'real readers' (e.g., Stockwell 2002, 193), but also cognitive assumptions about the processes in an 'ideal reader' or a particular subset of readers such as the 'scholarly/attentive or professional reader'. In addition, particular personality traits of readers or the background disposition of the context of reading is often mentioned as an important constituent (cf. also Köppe/Winko 2007, 335). However, the actual requirements of an individual text – which are, for instance, a defining feature of Eco's model reader (cf. Eco 1997) – are rarely taken into account.[6] In fact, cognitive poeticians have only developed minimal requirements for successful understanding of literary texts. Stockwell defines a complete reading by an individual reader's impression of having arrived "at a sense of the text that is personally acceptable" (Stockwell 2002, 8). As a consequence, cognitive approaches are bound to describe what readers *typically* understand when reading a text, and there are little means to evaluate the quality of readings. However, the term "reader" is sometimes used in a way suggesting that cognitive poeticians may, nevertheless, entertain clear expectations about what readers should do:

> However, line 1 does exhibit a conceptual metaphor in the sense that *the reader has to* construct a cross-domain mapping. (Steen/Gibbs 2004, 344)

> Consider how *the reader has to build* a mental representation of the first utterance. (cf. Steen 2002, 403)

> A complete poetic analysis would reveal how the poem's sounds and rhymes drive the movement relentlessly forward *so that the reader feels* the force and the power of the blacksmith's work (Freeman 2002, 82f.).

> That *returns the reader back* to the beginning (Hamilton 2005, 290; all italics are ours).

There are some reading processes which are inevitable. For instance, it is almost inevitable to read once we have detected a readable text ("you cannot *not* read"). However, it seems difficult to assume that a text obliges a reader to do make certain interpretative moves. Two unfair explanations of this usage of "reader" seem possible. Firstly: Cognitive poetics is not as open towards idiosyncratic individual readings, as it tends to suggest. This explanation would be worrying, because it may give the impression that Cognitive poetics imposes its readings in the fashion of some kind of naturalistic necessity. Secondly: Cognitive poetics can only provide boring results in terms of restating matters of courses as evidence (e.g., "if readers should understand this passage they need basic skills of English"). In this case, Cognitive poetics would be restricted to state general principles and processes of reading which can be assumed to be present in everybody able to read, but this restriction would be in contrast to widespread practices of Cognitive poetics.

We believe that this usage of "reader" can be explained by conflicting conceptions of reading and interpreting among cognitive poeticians. This can be illustrated by the famous insights provided by the theory of conceptual metaphor in Lakoff and Turner's monograph *More Than Cool Reason* (Lakoff/Turner 1989): The authors demonstrate in their work that poets frequently make use of a relatively small number of existing basic conceptual metaphors (e.g., LIFE IS A JOURNEY), which are part of the

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6   With the exception of Brandt/Brandt 2005.

common conceptual apparatus shared by members of a culture (Lakoff/Turner 1989, 51). Lakoff and Turner's valuable observations have helped to put the degree of innovation of poetic metaphor in literature into perspective. Indeed, most poets do rely on established basic metaphors and metaphorical mappings (cf. also Winko 2003). At the same time, however, Lakoff and Turner show a rather inaccurate view of the differences between their own reading and the activities of literary criticism:

> It is important to see [...] that all the detailed analysis we have given does not constitute a literary-critical treatment of the poem. Various literary critics concern themselves with reading a poem by bringing to bear a host of issues: the poem's historical context, the biography, dialect, politics, or profession of the author, the tradition the poem comes from, the way it is influenced by previous poems in that tradition, the genre o the poem, the connotations of particular words [...], the ways and reason poets get published or ignored, the issue of canonizations of the author and his tradition, issues of gender, and so on. What we are to provide throughout this book is instead a prerequisite to any such discussion, namely, a linguistic and rhetorical analysis of the role of metaphor in the way we understand the poem (Lakoff/Turner 1989, 159).

Lakoff and Turner suggest that their own "linguistic and rhetorical analysis" is fundamentally different from readings by literary critics, as it is explicitly de-contextualised and disregards philological information about the historical context of a literary text. This view of reading is in tune with the interest of Cognitive poetics in everyday reading (hence, the emphasised contrast to scholarly reading). However, Lakoff and Turner's analysis is still to be considered as hermeneutical in that they confound reader and analyst (cf. Winko 1995, 6). The ambiguity of the last cited sentence "the way *we* understand the poem" (our own emphasis) is revealing in this respect. Moreover, their de-contextualised view of poems is a problematic interpretative stance, which is rather consistent with opinions held among New Critics, but which is not consistently applied in their study: Lakoff and Turner cannot analyse every poem without taking into account additional context information, and their readings sometimes make occasionally use of rather specialised historical knowledge (cf. also Jackendoff/Aaron 1991, 322; e.g., Lakoff/Turner 1989, 147).

At the same time, it is not clear how their analysis should be consistent with the actual behaviour of everyday readers: Why should readers read a poem without speculating about the author's historical intentions? As a matter of fact, the theoretical background theory of Lakoff and Turner may actually distort the reading of poems, as it focuses merely on figurative language and decodes its content in terms of preconceived conceptual metaphors.[7] In summary, Lakoff and Turner fail to explain (a) how their own analysis is independent from their own "all reading is reading in" stance (cf. Turner 1991, 206); and (b) how they know when readers will develop their mental representation according to the principles of the theory of conceptual metaphor.

This problematic aspect of the theory of conceptual metaphor has been observed before (cf. Jackendoff/Aaron 1991), and there have been attempts to make its text analyses more accountable. For instance a group of metaphor specialists, in accordance with cognitive theories, has developed a philological "metaphor identification procedure", which aims to identify metaphorical expression reliably and control the agreement among several analysts (Pragglejaz 2007). Although this procedure is theoretically committed to cognitive theories of metaphors, it demands activities from the analyst which are very uncommon for most readers (e.g., consulting dictionaries, continuous awareness of possible contrasts between literal and contextual meanings). This philological rigour allows the gathering of statistical evidence about the density of metaphorical expressions in a text. As a consequence, this controlled analytical procedure is designed to find more metaphors than novice readers will probably ever notice. It has, therefore, little in common with the reading experiences of average readers or novice readers, as discourse participants are frequently unaware of metaphorical expressions (cf. Gibbs 1994, 109). It seems that analytical rigour is only achieved at the expense of modelling the behaviour of average readers.

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7   Moreover, in terms of the three types of reading, as proposed by Tepe (2007), Lakoff and Turner's application of the Theory of conceptual metaphor onto literary texts may be considered as a form of projective adopting reading, which reads texts a-historically as mere instantiations of a linguistic theory.

Conclusion

In summary, we have found different conceptions of reading in Cognitive poetics. There are, first of all, models of average readers who may react rather spontaneously, subjectively and emotionally to texts. The principles according to which such readers react are the object of Cognitive poetics. However, despite tendencies of universalising subjective readings in that cognitive poeticians consider every act of reading as subjective, we find in the practice of Cognitive poetics a type of analytical reading which aims to detect textual structures that have a particular disposition of inducing typical reading behaviour. Such analytical readings are in essence hermeneutical, as they confound reader and analyst, but there are some attempts to make this type of text analysis more accountable by maximising agreement among several analysts. Moreover, given the strong linguistic undercurrent in Cognitive poetics, there are indeed high standards of formal text analysis. Such analytical hermeneutical readings are not necessarily explanatory in the sense of Tepe (2007), as they do not necessarily take the author and the author's context as main reference point. Nevertheless, they are presumably more comprehensive than spontaneous reading. As a consequence, it seems that cognitive poeticians theoretically adhere to the idea that all reading is subjective, but that they also believe that a text analysis may be carried out objectively. If they are correct, this observation suggests that text structures and mental representations are sources of literary explanation in their own right.

Mental processes and cognitive principles, as a consequence, cannot be the only source of a proper text analysis. A well-founded text analysis would also require additional philological activities such as looking up words in dictionaries, research on possible authorial intentions, discussion of historical meanings of words, and – above all – checking the explanatory value of other interpretation hypotheses.[8] If somebody is interested in philological knowledge about a given text, Cognitive poetics can only function as an ancillary science, as the study of the text cannot be replaced by a study of the mind. In fact, individual readers (even if supplemented by a statistical narrowing of the group to well cultured readers, cf. Bortolussi/Dixon 2003) have a bad record of providing good and valid readings of a text. Ideally, good readings of a text are a collaborative product of many philologists who control existing interpretations or even falsify them.[9] In this context of scientific argumentation the most widespread opinion is not more important than a well-founded argument.

At the same time, there is no reason why one should discard idiosyncratic readings as a source of explanation in Explanatory hermeneutics. Texts have frequently triggered responses which were not anticipated by the author, and which can, nevertheless, provide knowledge about a text. Cognitive poetics offers the opportunity to take into account such idiosyncratic readings that may be found among both average and professional readers. In this respect, a hermeneutical textual approach should be able to show where texts leave blanks and/or gaps and thereby create poetic ambiguities. On the other hand, a cognitive approach could show how different types of readers tend to fill-up these blanks. Cognitive analytical reading may thereby detect text structures which trigger particular effects (e.g., Kafka's skill of narrating suggesting that somebody is guilty even if there are not explicit textual clues).[10] As a consequence, Cognitive poetics may help Explanatory hermeneutics to extend its scope beyond the question of "Why does the text look like it does?" to "What does it matter if a text looks like it does?"

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[8] For the necessity of *combining* 'philological experience', 'historical experience' and 'empirical experience' in the study of literature, cf. Fricke 1986.

[9] The question if hermeneutic readings of literature can be 'false' or even 'falsified', cf. Strube 1993, 113–130.

[10] A cognitive elucidation of Kafka's tricks in this respect is given in Eisenhut 2009, 38–65.

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