The Humanities as Life Sciences: The Role of Language, Discourse, and Narratives

1. Introduction

Recent and current research regarding the relationship between the Natural Sciences and the Humanities produced new paradigms in literary criticism and such diverse studies as Joseph Carroll’s *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* and Sigrid Weigel’s *Genea-Logik. Generation, Tradition und Evolution zwischen Kultur- und Naturwissenschaften*. In his collection of essays on Darwinist readings of some major literary texts, Carroll argues that we should start basing our view of literature on what modern science and biology have to tell us about human nature. In her study, Weigel also applies an interdisciplinary reading to a wide variety of texts and discusses among other issues the necessity for an overlap of culture and nature, of biology’s new insights into the human genetic fabric and the literary concept of genealogy. She rightly criticizes, however, the positivistic approach to simply transferring evolutionary models to culture since this ignores the fact that cultural phenomena are transferred via verbal or symbolic media and do not always coincide with conventions but are often ahead of their time. Instead of an ‘evolution of culture’ she demands a ‘culture of evolution’ which, by means of historical and philological methods, would investigate the constitutive role of metaphoric language of scientific texts and how the awareness of the metaphorical character of scientific models vanishes over time by turning into scientific claims to truth.
In light of these new discussions and of the ‘biological turn’ within the system of modern science, whereby the sciences again privilege nature and biology over cultural and discursive models, it is in the interest of the Humanities to question the still powerful dichotomies between the once closely intertwined knowledge cultures. The knowledge of life should not be reduced to a biotechnological-medical dimension, appropriated by the traditional Life Sciences such as medicine, natural philosophy, physiology, psychology, and the emerging discipline of biology. Instead, insights into human nature and the empirical world should rely on the complimentary roles of the Sciences and Humanities. This article will focus on the contribution of the latter.

2. Discourse and Identity Formation

With regard to the significance of language and discourse and their role in the empirical world, Richard Mole contends in his study on *Discursive Constructions of Identity in European Politics* that “in constructing a sense of nationhood, discourse is not just ‘describing a pre-existing social reality’ but is rather ‘a medium through which reality is created and the material world is given meaning’.”

While external reality exists beyond language, the meaning of real objects depends on “the discourses in which they are constituted as objects” (15). That the articulation of meaning is always contingent, that there is “no a priori relationship between the signifier and the signified” (16), was first asserted by the Swiss structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure whose insights about the construction of meaning also became significant for the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault was the first to apply a discourse analysis to the study of society and to show that the force of discourses and language may depend on their “unnoticed permeation of
our ways of thinking and talking and making sense of the social world” (16). The arts and the historical and hermeneutic disciplines have always worked empirically, whereas the sciences have long dealt with questions calling for the interpretative capacity of the humanities.

In contrast to the tendency of science policies to fall back on the ‘two cultures’ model, this article intends to examine how the humanities, through language and narratives of different genres, contribute to the Life Sciences, to new structures of knowledge, discourse and identity. In the case of intercultural literature, the imaginary is used “as a mode of understanding both within a language area and between several linguistic and literary traditions without erasing cultural specificities.” Within the context of the much-analyzed concepts of national, racial or ethnic identity in both the social sciences and cultural studies, language is probably the most important determinant. Narratives for example, specifically epics and novels, “institute and support national myths and shape national consciousness,” as Azade Seyhan convincingly argues in Writing Outside the Nation (8). On the other hand, they also record what history and public memory often repress and forget.

In the following, I want to focus on the general concept and empirical pertinence of discourse and identity as a way of commenting on the shift of German identity and the constructing of a “New Europe,” by touching upon a variety of texts, including literary narratives by the German writer of Turkish origin, Zafer Şenocak, a leading voice in German discussions concerning national and cultural identity and a critical commentator
on relations between Turkey, Germany, Germany’s Turkish diaspora, and Europe. As Richard Mole states in the introduction to his essay collection, the “processes of categorisation and identification are […] ‘fundamental and universal’ because they satisfy ‘a basic human need for cognitive parsimony’.” According to psychological theories, identity and identification thus help us “make sense of our environment by defining our location and that of others in the social world” (4). Psychological theories, however, make no assumptions about the nature of groups, the signifiers used to demarcate group boundaries or norms at any given time. “While the process of identity formation is instinctive,” the “boundaries and content of specific identities are not ‘given’” but socially constructed and historically contingent. For Mole, they “‘reflect the perceptions, priorities and aspirations of those people who have the power to both construct categories and promote them as natural or superior’.” Whereas – according to the primordialist position – “nations are organic communities, united by shared biology, culture and history” (6), the non-deterministic constructivist approach to identity views nations and national identities as shifting constructs. As Eric J. Hobsbawm observed in his study *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, nations are changing social entities and “dual phenomena, constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, […] needs, longings and interests of ordinary people which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist.”

3. Constructivism and National German Discourse

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Although constructivism leaves certain questions unanswered, such as why people identify with symbols and traditions crafted by the elites, the constructivist approach nevertheless helps to understand the shift in Germany’s identity-constructions from ‘blood and soil’ and the insistence on an exclusive, distinct national community to a more multicultural conceptualization in the age of immigration and globalization. It was Benedict Anderson’s groundbreaking work, *Imagined Communities*, that contributed greatly to the shift from the study of nations, i.e., from the realm of the object, to that of national identity “as subjective consciousness and perception with a focus on discourses, representations and social practices.”

While Anderson presents the nation as “an imagined political community,” as an image of the community which lives in the mind of each of its members, he also comments on the increasing tension between the demands of globalization and the continuing efforts to define space in national terms. Since the end of the cold war, the fall of the Berlin Wall and unification, there is a growing concern in Germany with borders and cultural identity. The debates over a coherent national and European identity have thus increased in spite of or rather because of the rise of a vast cultural diaspora and the challenge of the traditional hegemony of Western culture through ethnic minorities. The cultural historian Norbert Elias has pointed out the particular historical conditions of Germany's earlier nationalist self-isolation as a belated nation and its effect on the German concept of *Kultur* as the basis of German civil identity which clearly differentiated itself from its neighboring countries and their concept of *Zivilisation*. Since Germany was late in establishing itself as a political nation, the concepts of *Kultur* and *Bildung* arose among
the politically disenfranchised educated middle-class and took on a particular role in creating a unified cultural-national identity. Germany conceived itself as a *Kulturnation*, based on the belief of a relationship between art and nation. Together with the concept of the *Volk* as “bearer of a particular *Geist* and as belonging to a specific place,” this notion of a particular cultural-national identity profoundly contributed to Germany’s self-awareness and still informs the understanding of its national community today.\(^9\)

Whereas, according to Elias, the French concept of “civilization” emphasizes certain universal values and, due to colonialism, has a global, cosmopolitan claim by embracing paternalistically that which is foreign instead of excluding it, the German concept of “culture” stresses “national difference and the particular identity of groups.”\(^{10}\) German constructions of identity thus became based on exclusionary concepts which defined German belonging in ethnic terms rather than abstract ideas that could be open to anyone. The necessity to respond to globalization and growing immigration, however, has caused a push to redefine and reassert national identity and cultural spaces of belonging. The challenges of the 21st century led to the nation's new self-definition as ”an open-minded country” and a society of immigration in order to reflect a more multicultural self-conception. This resulted in 2001 in a revised citizenship law, according to which the principle of citizenship is for the first time in German history no longer defined by blood lineage (*ius sanguines*). In a country where currently 15 million people, more than 18 percent of the population, come from migrant families, “integration” has been declared to be a task of national importance, a “key task of our time” and “of society as a whole” as the *National Integration Plan* states, established at the second Integration Summit in July
2007, followed by a new Immigration Law in the same year. The *National Integration Plan* stresses a “dialogue with migrants” and demands a commitment from each participant “to get involved with life in our society, to accept unconditionally our Basic Law and our entire legal system and, in particular, to demonstrate visibly the belonging to Germany by learning the German language.” On the side of the government and host society, the *National Integration Plan* promises to improve integration courses, to ensure good education and vocational training, “acceptance, […] civic commitment and willingness to honestly welcome people living lawfully among us.” Besides the obvious gap between official proposals, statements of values and promises and the everyday experiences of migrants, the official national discourse with its focus on social and judicial ‘integration’ (a shift from the earlier term of ‘assimilation’) is predominantly concerned with securing society’s peace and with taking advantage of the economic and demographic potential in the immigrant population.

What is lacking in the *Integration Plan* is a revision of the traditional notion of cultural identity in the sense of cultural differences, that would correspond with Homi Bhabha's attempt in *The Location of Culture* to redefine the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness and cultural value in our multicultural age of migration and ethnic hybridities in a rapidly changing Europe. What is politically crucial for Bhabha and reflects his post-modernist thought on identity-construction, is the “move away from the singularities of ‘class’ or ‘gender’ as primary conceptual […] categories.” Instead, the “awareness of the subject positions” reflects “the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are
produced in the articulation of cultural differences.” Thus the minorities, even if they have assimilated, are far from being regarded as inconspicuous citizens. From the German perspective they remain foreign.

Germany’s ongoing notion of an ethnically defined cultural identity has also been experienced by Zafer Şenocak whose narratives will be discussed later on. As a transnational nonnative writer, he writes in the national language but outside the canon and shares Bhabha’s post-structuralist thought that today’s identities are “an amalgamation of the huge collection of exploded fragments of cultural entities that are not clearly geographically locatable,” resisting discursive as well as physical demarcations. Bhabha has been criticized, however, in that his idea of hybridity as a totalizing concept and “constant of all modes of cultural expression and as the ‘third space’ that enables the emergence of multiple positions, foregoes an analysis of actual social spaces where cultures interact and literature as an institution of cultural memory intervenes,“ as Seyhan rightly points out. Thus, fictional texts are able to engage in a genuine dialogue and as such also represent a forceful medium in understanding the complex global culture at the end of the millennium. While national and cultural identities as versions of “imagined communities” continue to be debated in Germany, there is an ongoing negotiation of the meanings of Europe, representations of ‘Europeanness’, of its borders, of inclusions and exclusions.

4. Constructivism and the idea of Europe
In her contribution to Richard Mole’s essay collection on *Discursive Constructions of Identity*, the Sociolinguist Ruth Wodak remarks with regard to ‘Constructing Europe’ that Europe today with its shifting boundaries “has become the kernel for the processes of identification and the redefinition of identities.”¹⁵ The EU’s most recent crisis seems to confirm this. Ireland’s no-vote on the Lisbon Treaty in June 2008 which was to replace the failed draft for a European Constitution from 2005 and improve the decision-making and enlargement process, has put the reform once again on hold. At the start of the French EU presidency, Nicolas Sarkozy called the Irish rejection of the reform treaty “a call to change the way Europe is being constructed.”¹⁶

The continued failure of the reform treaties demonstrate that the public perception of the idea of a “new Europe” remains vague and the tension between the cosmopolitan idea of Europe and a Europe of nation states a fundamental problem. Political scientists as well as philosophers are posing the question whether the constitutional legitimacy and procedural arrangements of a federal Europe are sufficient to translate the idea of Europe into a political reality. In a recent interview with the German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Jürgen Habermas addressed the increase in Euro-Skepticism.¹⁷ From his perspective, based on the perception of a democratic deficit in EU institutions, the limits of integration have been reached. A “European Public” from the bottom up is needed, an identification with “European citizenship,” a public communication network with open discussions about European issues via the national public in each of the twenty-seven member states. At the same time, however, Habermas, well aware of the constructed nature of such a European identity formation (*europäisches
Gemeinbewusstsein), recalls the discursive construction of a relatively recent national identity by Prussian historians in the nineteenth century and its policy of exclusion.

In light of an ever more enlarged Europe with different political, national, regional and local interests and traditions, certain values have to be found or newly created in order to provide cohesion and allow for acknowledged legitimization. A new narrative and vision is needed, according to Ruth Wodak, “in which European citizens could believe and with which they could identify.”  

In response to these problems of political representation and communication with the general public on European issues, the official ‘Europe’ has begun to focus on the notion of ‘diversity’ as an expression of a new ideology, of a ‘multicultural society’ and appreciation of local cultures within Europe as evidenced by the efforts of the European Cultural Parliament, founded in 2001, whose belief it is “that the European idea is based on a balance between respect for the diversity of cultures in Europe and cross-cultural tolerance and understanding.”  

With its focus on the “idea of Europe” as a “cultural project,” “intercultural dialogue”, acknowledgement of ‘the other’ and “space of shared values” such as human rights, democracy and rule of law, the European Cultural Parliament has discursively constructed a membership category of ‘being European’ that covers the member states of the EU and emphasizes group solidarity, while using the multiple ‘inclusive we’. Diversity is defined here in a positive way, as a richness of cultures, traditions and languages and “not as something negative, as it is perceived in the everyday experiences of migrants.”

5. Literature as Knowledge Culture

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The other argumentative strategy consists of “constructing uniqueness” by drawing spatial borders and establishing the meta-distinction of inclusion/exclusion. In view of the EU’s further enlargement, the start of Turkish accession talks with the European Union and the ongoing debate concerning Turkey’s compatibility with European values, Zafer Şenocak in his article “Auf ewig anders?” (“Eternally different?”) warns of the renewed danger of exclusion so often characteristic of the construction of national state identities. During the time of classical German nation-building, Prussian historians such as Treitschke concentrated on the others within and stressed the non-compatibility of Jews with the German nation. In his novel, Dangerous Affinities (1998), whose protagonist and narrator is of hybrid identity, a persona of mixed German-Jewish-Turkish heritage, Şenocak ironically comments on the controversial identity politics in post-unification Germany and the European Union while also redressing forcibly forgotten similar mechanisms of exclusion in Turkish history at the time of Turkey’s construction of a nation-state. The protagonist, while searching for his roots in the family history of his ancestors, finds out about the Shoah and the Armenian genocide, and thereby realizes that he is the grand-child of both victims and perpetrators. Jews and Turks are thus associated in an imagined context which transcends ideological and social differences of alleged “otherness” as the author points to the historical tradition of projecting the image of the Oriental from the Jews onto the Turks. The paternal family history of the narrator-protagonist is also enmeshed in developments in the Turkish history of the twentieth century which reflect a new nationalistic political course of action. This course of action would reject the idea of a multiethnic state, exclude (and in the case of the Armenians, annihilate) non-Muslim, non-Turkish minorities and emphasize a constructed Turkish
identity on the basis of a common history, religion, and language to prepare for the founding of the nation-state through Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. This was a dark chapter in Turkey’s history that Turkish society continues to repress.

In the hybrid identity and origin of the narrative persona as a literary construct in Şenocak’s novel, historical narratives of several nations, ethnic groups, and cultures merge, form new constellations and combinations, and thus gain new meanings and novel forms of transcultural dialogue. Şenocak defines his role as a border artist in terms of a negative hermeneutic practice that contrasts with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theory of intersubjective understanding. While in *Truth and Method* Gadamer argues that the desire for understanding through the medium of language “originates in the self’s experience of its otherness” and is always the interpretation of the other, the realization of historical understanding takes place “in the fusion of familiarity and foreignness,” a fusion that comes very close to consuming the foreign.23 Contrary to the fusion of horizons in interpretations that cannot explain different cultures that do not share our histories, Şenocak’s transcultural narratives maintain historical and cultural specificities and, as aesthetic and social documents resist the erasure of geographical, historical, and cultural differences.

Literary imagination thus functions as a major social force in our contemporary society. Through the power of language, the capacity to respond creatively to questions of cultural difference, and the use of fiction to come to terms with the gaps in records and memories, narratives such as Şenocak’s contribute greatly to new structures of knowledge, discourse
and identity and thereby to the Life Sciences. Literature belongs to the Life Sciences in that it not only contributes to the circulation of knowledge in and of life but it also interrupts this circulation by revealing that life and knowledge always remain incongruent. Thus, the abstract dichotomy between the Humanities and the Life Sciences is a false expression of the fact that life and knowledge can not be reconciled, as literature shows us.

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6 See Mole, *Discursive Constructions*, 12.


9 See the Introduction to Writing against Boundaries. Nationality, Ethnicity and Gender in the German-speaking Context, ed. Barbara Kosta and Helga Kraft (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2003), 3. With regard to the German concept of culture see also Todd Kontje’s Introduction to German Orientalisms (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 7.


11 For the current German integration policy see REGIERUNGonline-The National Integration Plan (http://www.bundesregierung.de). The following quotes are taken from this website as well.

12 See Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London/New York: Routledge, 1994, 1.


14 Seyhan, Writing Outside the Nation, 5.


16 See “France Sees Irish No-Vote as Wake-Up-Call,” Deutsche Welle Online, June 14, 2008.


18 Wodak, “‘Doing Europe’,,” 72.


20 Wodak, “‘Doing Europe’,,” 79.
See also Wodak’s criticism of the EU’s constructive strategies, “‘Doing Europe’,” 79.


For a discussion of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, see also Seyhan, Writing Outside the Nation, 6.