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The Question of Theory within a Praxeological Perspective on Literary Scholarship

1. The Resistance to Theory and the Return to Philology (Paul de Man)

To address the languages of theory implies to address a theory of language: In 1981, Paul de Man was asked to report on the state of contemporary literary theory for a volume published by the Committee on Research Activities of the Modern Language Association. This volume was supposed to serve as an *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, and de Man submitted what was later to become his famous essay on the "Resistance to Theory." In this essay, de Man claimed precisely that theory was in principle a theory of language or, in his words, "the use of language about language."[1] Consequently, he concluded:

> Literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic considerations [...]. The advent of theory [...] occurs with the introduction of linguistic terminology in the metalanguage about literature.[2]

De Man's definition of 'theory' as a meta-"language about language" refers literary criticism to an analysis of linguistic structures instead of extra-textual meaning. This, of course, is the basic principle of structuralism as it was established by de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* and subsequently transferred to all cultural constructions in the course of the 'linguistic turn:' When every artifact can be described according to the structure of language, there is no need to identify extra-linguistic categories and philosophical concepts such as 'truth,' 'meaning,' 'reality,' or 'value' when analyzing literary texts. Instead, the theory of literature is a theory of language in the same way as the theory of language is a theory of literature, because 'theory' introduces, at the same time, a methodological perspective on language as well as a linguistic perspective on literary texts.

It is precisely this identification of theory, language, and literature that caused the "resistance to theory" that de Man alludes to in the title of his paper: Describing everything according to the structure of language, traditional literary critics feared, would get in the way of the dimensions of art and meaning, i. e. in the way of the possibility to interpret literature as an expression of aesthetic or moral

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1 Paul de Man. "The Resistance to Theory." *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp. 3-20, p. 12.
2 Ibid., p. 7 and 8.

concepts that could be transferred into useful messages when teaching literature to students. Therefore, by rejecting de Man's diagnosis, the MLA-committee displayed the very reflex de Man pointed at and thus involuntarily confirmed the diagnosis by denying it: that literary criticism resisted theory because it reduced the analysis of literature to an analysis of language—a "hostility directed at theory in the name of ethical and aesthetic values."[3]

But as de Man himself emphasized, the rejection of these is not to be confused with a lack of political relevance of theory. On the contrary: by rejecting stable concepts of meaning, linguistic theory is an essential part of the "unmasking of ideological aberrations"[4]—that is to say, any ideology, including the *Aesthetic Ideology* that de Man repeatedly analyzed, e.g. the concepts of canon or genre that are often used as quasi-ontological categories in literary studies.[5] And in resisting these categories, theory also resists its own categorization and therefor is a "model to end all models."[6]

So, on the one hand, there is no point in resisting theory in literary studies, because as a study of linguistic structures (a.k.a 'texts'), the study of literature is inevitably theoretical. But on the other hand, the study of language works against theoretical generalization or abstraction, so that the language of theory results in a model of rhetorical readings that are

> theory and not theory at the same time, the universal theory of the impossibility of theory. To the extent however that they are theory, that is to say teachable, generalizable and highly responsive to systematization, rhetorical readings, like the other kinds, still avoid and resist the reading they advocate. Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory *is* itself this resistance.[7]

De Man's theory that theory is a theory of language results in one of the inevitable paradoxes that go along with meta-linguistic reflections. It is, to be sure, a positive and productive paradox that maintains the anti-ideological potential of literary language. And this potential is still relevant in philological debates, e.g. in Werner Hamacher's plea for a "Befreiung der Philologie von den *doxai* anderer Disziplinen, Erkenntnistechniken oder Erfahrungsweisen" from 2009: In the light of the irreducible openness that the self-referential closure of a "*Sprache über die Sprache*" generates, Hamacher writes: "Die Philologie spricht also *mit* der Literatur nicht als einem Mittel, das sie in den Dienst von Disziplinierungspraktiken stellt, sie spricht *mit* ihr nur, indem sie auf sie hin, *für* sie und zugunsten dessen spricht, was sich in der Literatur freizusetzen sucht."[8]

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3 Ibid., p. 4.

4 Ibid., p. 11.

5 Cf. Paul de Man. *Aesthetic Ideology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

6 de Man. "The Resistance to Theory" (note 1), p. 19.

7 Ibid.

8 Werner Hamacher. "*Für* – die Philologie." *Was ist eine philologische Frage?* Ed. Jürgen Paul Schwindt. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2009, pp. 21-60, pp. 24, 30, and 47.

But remembering de Man when trying to address the languages of theory is not only relevant because his concept of the auto-referential languages of literature and theory still resonates in definitions of philology today. It seems also important because the resistance to theory is still such a powerful attitude within the humanities in general and philological scholarship in particular: Already in the 1990s, scholars such as Stephen Nichols called for a new material philology that would focus on the material evidence of the codex or the book as an individual object of study—an unexpected empiricism that declared theory unnecessary because the linguistic structure of literature was replaced by the materiality of the textual object.[9] And in the first decade of our century, the resistance to theory in Germany proclaimed the need for "Rephilologisierung"—a return to traditional concepts of authorship and meaning, although at the same time a label which, involuntary, sounded much like de Man's pro-theory manifesto on the "Return to Philology" that he published in the same year as "The Resistance to Theory."[10]

But there is another, even more recent trend that seems to aim at abolishing the meta-language of theory from literary studies and that keeps growing in quantity and significance at all of our universities. I am talking, of course, about the implementation of Digital Humanities in literature departments. DH, too, favor empirical approaches and treat literary texts as datasets that can be studied quantitatively by methods such as "macro-analysis" or "distant reading"—methods that not only promise an empirical but even a technological foundation of philological scholarship.[11]

So it may indeed seem that while the late 1970s and early 1980s were the period when theory—Marxist, Freudian, Existentialist, Frankfurtian, Saussurean, Derridaen, Deleuzian—was successfully established in western academic discourse, as Philipp Felsch has recently shown, we have now entered an era "after theory" in which, according to Terry Eagleton, not only 'cultural theory' has come to an end but also a specific culture *of* theory has vanished from our seminars, departments, and universities: a culture of reflection, abstraction, and self-referentiality that had been at the heart of the humanities from the very beginning.[12] And yet, as Achim Geisenhanslüke has convincingly argued, theory is not so easily abolished but—much in the sense of de Man—rather stored and maintained within each individual reading of a literary text in spite of empirical trends such

9   Stephen Nichols. "Why Material Philology? Some Thoughts." *Philologie als Textwissenschaft*. Ed. Helmut Tervooren and Horst Wenzel. *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 116 (1997), pp. 10-30.

10   Cf. *Grenzen der Germanistik. Erweiterung oder Rephilologisierung?* Ed. Walter Erhart. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004, and Paul de Man. "The Return to Philology." *The Resistance to Theory* (note 1), pp. 21-26.

11   Cf. Matthew Jockers. *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013; Franco Moretti. *Distant Reading*. London/New York: Verso, 2013.

12   Cf. Philipp Felsch. *Der lange Sommer der Theorie. Geschichte einer Revolte 1960-1990*. München: Beck, 2015; Terry Eagleton: *After Theory*. London: Penguin, 2003.

as DH or pessimistic manifestos like Eagleton's.[13] Therefore, in what follows, I am interested in an additional aspect of the textual resistance *of* theory against the institutional resistance *to* theory: the relation between theory and practice, that is: the question whether *acting* is also one of the many languages of theory.

The term 'practice' is introduced here, because the concept of theory can not only be defined by distinguishing it from extra-textual empirical references, but also has to be related to non-reflexive modes of action and performance in the traditional sense of the distinction between *theoría* and *práxis*. Similar to the concept of 'materiality,' 'practice' also implies a physical and empirical dimension. But it is also part of the many aspects of the resistance to theory in the humanities, as the article by Hamacher already quoted earlier demonstrates:

> Philo-philologisch nach den Praktiken zu fragen, die 'Philologie' heißen, schärft nicht nur die Sicht auf sie, es schärft auch eine Erfahrung, die der Philologie selber, nimmt man sie beim Wort, unveräußerlich ist: sie ist eine *philía,* eine Neigung, eine Emotion [...]. Die Frage nach der Philologie zeugt also nicht allein davon, daß die Philologie keine primär kognitive Praxis sein und auch kein primär theoretisches Interesse verfolgen kann; sie bezeugt als seine Frage der *philía* zugleich, daß die Philologie als ein affektives Verhalten strukturiert ist, als eine Neigung zur Sprache, [...] als eine Zuwendung und eine Näherung, die am Wißbaren keinen Halt findet und sich deshalb im Durchgang, und sei er unendlich, der Sprache zu einer anderen Sprache und zu anderem als Sprache bewegt.[14]

Clearly, Hamacher and de Man share the notion that literary scholarship has to avoid theoretical generalization by focusing on the irreducibility of language. But while for de Man this anti-theoretical notion is the basic element of theory in a linguistic sense, Hamacher refers to the realm of practical procedures that lie beyond "theoretical interests" and, as such, address language not linguistically but emotionally, affectively, and—ultimately—aesthetically.

But as I am going to argue, one of the remarkable aspects of de Man's essay is that it avoids this clear-cut distinction between theory and practice: Instead of distinguishing the emotional "practices of philology" from "primary theoretical interests," de Man's languages of theory include the pragmatic dimension of literary studies: because of its strong commitment to structuralist theory, it is often forgotten that *The Resistance to Theory* begins with an explicit reflection of the practical dimension of literary studies, and the reference to these practices is part of the argument that using language on language reveals the anti-ideological potential of theory.

If find it especially important to remind ourselves of this praxeological dimension of de Man's argument because the reflection of practices that has been an important element within studies on the natural and social sciences for quite some time may also be of interest for an analysis of philological scholarship: in the same way that the protagonists of the so called "practical turn" in Science

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13 Achim Geisenhanslüke. *Textkulturen. Literaturtheorie nach dem Ende der Theorie*, München: Fink, 2015.

14 Hamacher. *„Für* – die Philologie" (note 8), p. 29.

Studies such as Ian Hacking or Bruno Latour have argued that scientific facts are never "ready made" but always "in the making,"[15] theories in the humanities should also be treated as results of socially, institutionally, and medially embedded practices—so that, eventually, we will be able to overcome the traditional opposition of theory and practice.

De Man's essay already contributes to this project insofar it sets off with an introduction that refers to the institutional framework of publishing papers as well as to academic teaching as the most important realm of philological scholarship. Thus, it introduces a praxeological perspective on philological scholarship that may be relevant for a linguistic notion of theory:

> This essay was not originally intended to address the question of teaching directly, although it was supposed to have a didactic and an educational function—which it failed to achieve. It was written at the request of the Committee on Research Activities of the Modern Language Association as a contribution to a collective volume entitled *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures.* I was asked to write the section on literary theory. Such essays are expected to follow a clearly determined program: they are supposed to provide the reader with a select but comprehensive list of the main trends and publications in the field, to synthesize and classify the main problematic areas and to lay out a critical and programmatic projection of the solutions which can be expected in the foreseeable future. All this with a keen awareness that, ten years later, someone will be asked to repeat the same exercise.[16]

Clearly, de Man doesn't simply present a scholarly article here, he presents an article on the practice of writing articles, a meta-article, as it were, that displays the paradoxical structure of narrative metalepsis: Since it tells the tale of its initial conception and eventual rejection by the MLA, "this essay" that the essay refers to by its first two words cannot be identical with the one it talks about because the story de Man tells is part of the essay's reception that, by definition, could only take place after "this essay" was completed.

But as in the case of the paradox of the theoretical resistance to theory, the paradox is resolved by "pragmatic" and "empirical considerations," as de Man emphasizes with respect to the "phenomenology of the literary activity as writing, reading, or both."[17] Insofar theory is an analysis of linguistic structures, it is, as theory, identical with "the act of reading," i. e. with a practice; and the "resistance to theory is in fact a resistance to reading" because reading not only translates grammatical structures into meaning, but also displays the "indetermination" of rhetorical structures.[18] Therefore, in the second essay de Man published on the topic in 1982, "The Return to Philology," he writes: "But, in practice, the

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15 Ian Hacking. *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; Bruno Latour. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society.* Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1987, 4.

16 de Man. "The Resistance to Theory" (note 1), p. 3.

17 Ibid., p. 4-5.

18 Ibid., p. 15.

turn to theory occurred as a return to philology, to an examination of the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces."[19]

Again, de Man illustrates the return to philology in its practical dimensions here: He refers to a seminar he attended with Reuben Brower that was entirely dedicated to a close reading of literary texts without ever interpreting them—thus turning reading into the practice of linguistic theory:

> Mere reading, it turns out, prior to any theory, is able to transform critical discourse in a manner that would appear deeply subversive to those who think of the teaching of literature as a substitute for the teaching of theology, ethics, psychology, or intellectual history. Close reading accomplishes this often in spite of itself because it cannot fail to respond to structures of language which it is the more or less secret aim of literary teaching to keep hidden.[20]

So, the theory of language is revealed by a specific practice of reading; and the resistance to the language of theory is revealed when one analyzes academic practices of publishing and teaching. Therefore, de Man's theory of theory is based not only on a linguistic model but also on a praxeological perspective. In a recent article, Steffen Martus labeled this perspective "Praxeologie der Literaturwissenschaften" and claimed that in philological scholarship, theoretical reflection is not the opposite but a specific mode of practice—a mode that he calls "Theoriepraxis."[21] But since praxeological approaches tend to establish empirical methods, in the light of de Man's analysis of the resistance *of* theory against any extra-linguistic reference, the reverse concept seems equally important: We will also need a 'Praxistheorie' to be able to account for the actual inseparability of the language of theory and the practice of language in literary studies.

2. The Practice of Theory and the Theory of Practice (Bruno Latour)

Based on the praxeological implications of de Man's theory of the resistance to theory, one will have to account for both the practical dimension of theory and the theoretical implications of an analysis of scholarly practices. To be able to do so, I am going to take two steps in what follows: first, I will suggest to establish a praxeological perspective on literary theory by using the approach of Actor-Network-Theory as introduced by Bruno Latour and others, because contrary to many of the empirical approaches within Science Studies, ANT focuses on the medial and semiotic structure of scholarly communication and is thus best

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19 de Man. "The Return to Philology" (note 10), p. 24.

20 Ibid.

21 Steffen Martus. "Wandernde Praktiken 'after theory'? Praxeologische Perspektiven auf Literatur/Wissenschaft." *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 40 (2015), pp. 177-195, p. 188. Cf. Steffen Martus and Carlos Spoerhase. "Praxeologie der Literaturwissenschaft." *Geschichte der Germanistik* 35/36 (2009), pp. 89-96.

compatible with the linguistic modeling of theory.[22] Second, I will transfer this praxeological perspective and the question of theory that it implies to a new area within the field of literary studies that seems to stage the most recent variation of a resistance to theory: Digital Humanities. By presenting quantitative data and empirical evidence when analyzing literary texts, computer philology seems to declare the debate on theory over: While all the debates on the crisis of the humanities and on a possible era 'after theory' have remained within the realm of theory because they were still using "language on language," DH seem to put an end to theory not by discursively declaring it but by implementing technologies that are based on non-linguistic algorithms.[23]

So is there a theory of practice that allows for conceptualizing theory as practice? Considering for how long Science Studies have used praxeological approaches, it is somewhat surprising that there is still no similar analysis of scholarly communication in the humanities. The basic idea seems perfectly compatible with historical and hermeneutical scholarship: Science Studies analyze the emergence of knowledge from materially, socially, and institutionally embedded practices of research. These actual research practices differ from the 'rational,' 'efficient,'r and 'goal oriented' accounts that are given once a project is completed and its findings are presented. Contrary to such accounts, Science Studies consider contingencies, accidents, and involuntary findings as well as social hierarchies, technical equipment, and social interaction equally relevant for the process of establishing valid, influential, and authoritative facts, standards, and theories within a field.

Accordingly, analyzing scholarly practices would have to address medial and institutional presuppositions of knowledge production in the humanities by examining the processes of identifying relevant authors and topics, publishing and quoting papers, adopting and criticizing new methods, but also proclaiming theoretical 'turns' as *practices* within the field of philology. Similarly to the way Latour distinguishes "ready made science" from "science in the making," a practical analysis of 'scholarship in the making'[24] focuses on the strategies of producing and publishing statements that will be met by attention, affirmation, or critical transformation by the academic community—for example when discussing the pros and cons of theory.

The foundation of Latour's method to analyze these processes consists in decontextualizing routines of scholarly communication and thus highlighting them as strategic choices within the ongoing competition to establish 'facts' and 'authority' within the field. The "six rules of method" that Latour introduces for this decontextualization of scientific practices are easily compatible with

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22 Cf. *The Science Studies Reader*. Ed. Mario Biagioli. London/New York: Routledge, 1999; *Science and Technology Studies: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences*. Ed. Michael Lynch. London/New York: Routledge, 2011.

23 Cf. *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*. Ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.

24 Cf. Marcus Krause and Nicolas Pethes. "Scholars in Action. Zur Autoreferentialität philologischen Wissens im Wandel medialer Praktiken." *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 91 (2017), pp. 73-108.

scholarly routines in the humanities: (1) retracing the controversies that lead to (afterwards established) facts; (2) following up on the transformation of facts through the process of publication and reception of published papers; (3) treating technical objects, social structures, and scientific debates as symmetrical and interdependent actors without any determining power over one another; (4) paying specific attention to what is excluded from research processes in the course of establishing a fact at any given time, as well as to (5) subsequent accusations of irrationality against contesting claims; and (6) focusing on material "inscriptions" and "paperwork" as the source of knowledge producing processes instead of cognitive categories.[25]

Obviously, these six rules are also relevant for our understanding of theory: Theory, as well as any resistance to it, also has to stage controversies, transformations, exclusions, accusations etc. to be able to position itself within a debate. There is no theory without its resistance to a previous one, and there is also no theory that wouldn't provoke the resistance of its subsequent reception: as an element of scholarly communication, 'theory' follows the economic principle of innovation and tradition as well as affirmation and rejection within the system of knowledge management. Niklas Luhmann, another theoretician who explained the dynamics of scientific communication, emphasizes the significance of redundancy and variation for any systemic process: operations within a system have to be consistent with previous operations in order to be recognizable, but they also have to introduce changes in order to be relevant.[26] In the same way, theory is a mode of scholarly communication that suggests a variation in perspective, but can be refused with respect to the necessary stability of the general framework of a discipline.[27] But most of all, as a strategic and economic mode of communication, theory is one of the practices that produce 'scholarship in the making.' It doesn't present evidence of 'ready made facts,' but is a way to 'make' them within institutionalized contexts.

At the same time, it is important to note that the opposite is also true: when we describe theory as one of the practices of scholarship, we subsume theoretical practice to the theoretical framework of 'praxeology.' More importantly, though, scholarly practice is also 'theory' in the sense of Paul de Man as a linguistic structure: one of the most interesting aspects of Latour's argument is that it does not actually adopt an empirical approach to scientific practices. Contrary to actual ethnographers of science such as Karin Knorr-Cetina who observe procedures, machines, and social interaction within a laboratory[28], Latour focuses on an analysis of the written traces that empirical research produces in notebooks and on other papers.

25 Latour. *Science in Action* (note 15), p. 258.

26 Niklas Luhmann. *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft.* Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1990, pp. 436ff.

27 Cf. *Kontroversen in der Literaturtheorie/Literaturtheorie in der Kontroverse.* Ed. by Ralf Klausnitzer and Carlos Spoerhase. *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 19 (2007); *Theorietheorie. Wider die Theoriemüdigkeit in den Geisteswissenschaften.* Ed. Mario Grizelj and Oliver Jahraus. München: Fink, 2011.

28 Cf. Karin Knorr-Cetina. *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge.* Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1999.

In their legendary study on *Laboratory Life*, Latour/Woolgar emphasize

> the central importance of literary inscription for laboratory activity: the work of the laboratory can be understood in terms of the continual generation of a variety of documents, which are used to effect the transformation of statement types and so enhance or detract from their fact-like status.[29]

So *Laboratory Life* actually consists in the production of documents. In the natural sciences, Latour/Woolgar argue, writing is no secondary action that takes place 'after' the observation but rather the only way an observation becomes available and workable—and therefore also the only way an observation can become a scientific 'fact.' Therefore, for their analysis of laboratory practices, Latour and Woolgar distinguish between experimental apparatuses that "transform pieces of matter between one state and another" and the writing desk that "transforms pieces of matter into documents," and in doing so emphasize the relevance of basic philological practices such as studying texts and taking notes, of reading and writing, for empirical research:

> One area of the laboratory (section B [...]) contains various items of apparatus, while the other (section A) contains only books, dictionaries, and papers. Whereas in section B individuals work with apparatuses in a variety of ways: they can be seen to be cutting, sewing, mixing, shaking, screwing, marking, and so on; individuals in section A work with written materials: either reading, writing, or typing.[30]

That is to say that, within a laboratory, 'nature' exists only in diagrams, hypotheses or reports. Instead of actually studying the materiality of scientific objects and machines, Latour develops a semiotic model of "circulating references" according to which facts are established not as representations of nature but by written references on previous inscriptions such as notes, diagrams, lists etc. Scientific research produces and is based on "paperwork" as Latour calls it with an obvious reference to bureaucratic procedures of administrating documents[31]—cultural practices that Volker Hess and Andrew Mendelsohn call "paper technologies" in their studies on the history of medicine;[32] and that result in a specific *Paper Knowledge* according to Lisa Gitelman.[33]

So on the one hand, in the laboratory "things" are "drawn together" on paper, as Latour calls it. And on the other hand, these papers have to be turned into

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29 Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar. *Laboratory Life. The Construction of Scientific Facts*. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979, p. 151.

30 Ibid., p. 45.

31 Bruno Latour. "Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together." *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*. Vol. 6. Ed. Henrika Kuklick and Elizabeth Long, Greenwich, CT: Jai, 1986, pp. 1-40, p. 25.

32 Volker Hess and Andrew Mendelsohn. "Paper Technology und Wissensgeschichte." *NTM. Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Wissenschaften, Technik und Medizin* 21 (2013), pp. 1-10.

33 Lisa Gitelman: *Paper Knowledge: Towards a Media History of Documents*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2014.

"immutable mobiles," i. e. representations that can be transported without being changed, e. g. maps, graphs, or books. The main agent for producing and distributing "immutable mobiles" is the printing press, a device that reproduces papers and as such is also the precondition for scholarly communication until today. Accordingly, Latour/Woolgar distinguish two types of 'paper,' as material and genre:

> *It is as if two types of literature are being juxtaposed*: one type is printed and published outside the laboratory; the other type comprises documents produced within the laboratory, such as hastily drawn diagrams and files containing pages of figures.[34]

Obviously, the term literature here does not refer to fictional narratives, although Latour/Woolgar do emphasize the fictionality of laboratory constructions as well as the relation between laboratory notes and "drafts of a novel." And indeed the concept of "paperwork" is interested in the basic technologies of "inscription" and "drawing things together" that are the foundation of scientific and literary writing alike: Latour emphasizes time and again that sociologists who are interested in the production of facts "have a lot to learn from artists"[35] who are oftentimes better aware of this constructivist dimension. If one recalls, e. g., novels by Jean Paul at the turn of the 19th century, it becomes immediately evident to which degree literature is able to reflect the paper technologies it is 'made' from: the library catalogue (*Leben des vergnügten Schulmeisterlein Maria Wutz*, 1793), the slip box (*Leben des Quintus Fixlein*, 1796), or recycling (*Leben Fibels*, 1812) are all part of a narrative construction that reflects the material dimensions of 'literature in the making.'[36] So even with respect to its object, the literary artwork, philological practices are more closely related to the praxeological approach in Science Studies than one might have expected. The fact that Latour favors semiotic structures over other elements of research that has been repeatedly criticized within Science Studies is therefore especially fitting for an analysis of literary studies where paper and books are both objects and tools of research. So besides Latour/Woolgar's *Laboratory Life*, there is a *Library Life* to be discovered within which scholars both *use* and *contribute to* an archive of written documents and by doing so constitute and perpetuate cultural memory.[37]

Praxeological analysis of scholarly communication is based on written material, i. e. the production, distribution, and reception of semiotic elements. And

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34 Latour/Woolgar: *Laboratory Life* (note 29), p. 47.

35 Bruno Latour. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 82.

36 Cf. Nicolas Pethes. "Actor-Network-Philology? Papierarbeit als Schreibszene und Vorwegnahme quantitativer Methoden bei Jean Paul." *Medienphilologie. Konturen eines Paradigmas*. Ed. Friedrich Balke and Rupert Gaderer. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2017, pp. 199-224. In the same spirit, Latour himself published a novel on ANT, *Aramis ou l'amour de techniques*, in 1992.

37 Cf. *Library Life. Werkstätten kulturwissenschaftlichen Forschens*. Eds. Friedolin Krentel et al. Lüneburg: meson press, 2015.

when scientific facts are in this sense 'made' through semiotic material, both scientific practices as well as their reflection qualify as theory—as long as we follow de Man's definition that theory is the analysis of semiotic structures. This is also why de Man's interest in theory doesn't contradict his reference to philological practices. Rather, 'practice' is itself one of the languages of theory, insofar scholarly practice consists precisely in its involvement with written material and the linguistic structures of academic teaching that the most influential of all structuralists in literary studies, Roland Barthes, analyzed in his essay on the seminar as well as in his last lecture on how to prepare a novel.[38] All these practices of scholarly life shape the notion of tradition, education, and art within a given society not only by transporting contents of knowledge, but also by a certain symbolic dimension of these institutionalized activities itself—a symbolic dimension of practice that, if we follow Clifford Geertz, can be considered as a 'text' in its own right and in consequence be 'read' as such. In other words: we remain in the sphere of language and signs even when we act or analyze practices. There is no 'outside' of the texts that cultural interaction produces both as written material and semiotic structures that shape the institutionalized practices of writing and teaching.

3. The Empiricist Agenda and the Resistance of Theory (Franco Moretti)

There is no outside of semiotics, and therefore no outside of theory: what sounds like a tedious deconstructive commonplace is in fact highly relevant with respect to the fundamental changes that philological practices underwent in recent years—the changes that came along with computer based analyses of texts, of quantitative evaluations of large textual databases, and of a "distant reading" of trends and genre evolution within the "great unread" of literary history. As Franco Moretti, one of the protagonists of the digital turn within the humanities and founder of the *Stanford Literary Lab*, puts it: "With digital databases [...] we'll be able to search just about all novels that have ever been published, and look for patterns among billions of sentences."[39]

But Moretti also claims: "Quantitative research provides a type of data which is ideally independent of interpretations."[40] There is, in other words, a strong empirical, if not positivistic, trend within Digital Humanities when they transform textual corpora into statistical graphs. I will not question or criticize this trend, especially since Moretti is of course aware of the provocative character of

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38 Roland Barthes. "To the Seminar." *The Rustle of Language.* Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986, pp. 332-341; Roland Barthes. *The Preparation of the Novel.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

39 Franco Moretti. "The Novel: History and Theory." *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013, pp. 159-178, p. 164.

40 Franco Moretti. *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for a Literary History.* London: Verso, 2005, p. 9.

his statements as well as of the need to pose the reverse question how to transfer numbers into meaning.[41] What I am interested in is the consequence of the transfer from texts into numbers for the language of theory within literary studies: if Paul de Man is right and theory sets in whenever readings refuse to establish external references for a text's meaning, then Digital Humanities are indeed the latest version of a resistance to theory. And as such, they also reframe the question of the relation between theory and practice of philological scholarship.

As an empirical approach conducted by computer technology, Digital Humanities seem to abolish the fundamental self-reference of philological analysis that language is analyzed by language. Digital Humanities seem to highlight "section B" of the laboratory, the world of apparatuses and experimental quantification, and it may be no accident that Moretti labels his research institution at Stanford as a "Literary Laboratory." But when we choose a praxeological approach to these methodological and technological claims, the self-reference that computer philology seems to have lost is re-introduced on a different level of observation: as we have seen, Actor-Network-Theory opens a perspective on scientific research that resembles the method of philology quite closely when it focuses on "paperwork" and "inscriptions", so that we could easily refer to Latour's works as a philology of scientific writing.

But at the same time, Latour's focus on the relevance of "section A" of the laboratory within empirical science reminds us that precisely when they claim to work empirically, Digital Humanities, too, are based on aspects of paperwork and inscriptions: computer readings may replace traditional close readings, but they are nevertheless forced to present and publish their results in visual formats or written texts.

Therefore, the claim that computer philology will finally lead philology from the shaky grounds of fuzzy scholarship into the save harbor of hard science must itself be subjected to a praxeological analysis: when Moretti claims that "quantitative research provides a type of data which is ideally independent of interpretations," Latour's answer would have to be that Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees* are merely inscriptions used to 'draw things together,' and that his *Stanford Literary Lab* is but another machine producing facts.

A praxeological analysis of digital philology will therefore reveal the rhetorical dimension of the promise of empirical data as well as the semiotic structure of the representation of these data. It is, in other words, going to be a *theory* of

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41 Cf. Franco Moretti. "Style Inc.: Reflections on 7,000 Titles." *Distant Readings.* London: Verso, 2013, pp. 179-210, p. 204: "This is a quantitative study: but its units are linguistic and rhetorical. And the reason is simple: for me, formal analysis is the great accomplishment of literary study, and is therefore also what any new approach— quantitative, digital, evolutionary, whatever—must prove itself against: prove that it can do formal analysis better than we already do. Or at least: equally well, in a different key. Otherwise, what is the point?" Accordingly, the debate on DH-methods is much more differentiated than my brief account here might suggest and able to mediate hermeneutic and quantitative approaches: cf. *Distant Readings. Topologies of German Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Ed. by Matt Erlin and Lynne Tatlock. Rochester: Camden House, 2014.

digital practices—so that we can conclude that in the case of the digital turn the theoretical perspective on semiotic structures has become a second order observation: while de Man claims that philology itself has to remain theoretical and avoid extra-textual references, in the case of the extra-textual references Digital Humanities produce it is the scholarly practice itself that constitutes the 'text' and that is to say: theoretical reference.

To transfer Actor-Network-Theory into the humanities therefore implies to establish a philology of philology: even when Digital Humanities should succeed in replacing traditional close readings by quantitative analyses, it can still be subjected to a close reading of its own practice, so that a self-referential closure of philological knowledge on the level of a second-order observation is established. And as the agent of this second-order observation, Actor-Network-Theory would be a theory in the strong sense of the word: a perspective that does not produce external reference but is based on a process of self-referential reflection, in this case written practices of analyzing other written practices. And in addition to de Man whose concept limits this self-referential epistemology of philology to its linguistic elements, Actor-Network-Theory is able to extend it to the materiality of writing, paper, and publishing: the philology of philology that the praxeological analysis of Digital Humanities establishes contributes to our general understanding as to how scholarship produces both the facts as well as the institutional framework for the cultural memory of written texts within the age of digital codes.

So there is indeed not only a language of theory that is revealed by a theory of language, but also a practice of theory as well as a theory of practice. Paradoxical as it may sound, it is precisely the praxeological perspective of Actor-Network-Theory that maintains the theoretical perspective within the changing field of the humanities: in spite of the claim to be empirical, a second order observation of this claim results in a theory of the rhetoric of empirical evidence that deconstructs and decenters it and overcomes once more the resistance to theory.

There is, in other words, nothing wrong neither with Digital Humanities nor Science Studies in the humanities. On the contrary, it is the very constellation of empirical observations of empirical studies that maintains the realm of theory within philological scholarship of the 21st century.