

Karl Eibl:

Animal Poeta

Bausteine der biologischen Kultur- und Literaturtheorie

Abstract of the German original:

The proponents of a 'Third Culture' have a background in natural sciences and tend to reduce the humanities to a game involving pseudo-problems. In this book, an academic from the field of literary studies sets out to expose the biological roots of culture and literature. This new viewpoint determines the mode and line of argument. The book begins with an account of contemporary issues and trends in the biology of human behaviour, introducing Comparative Ethology, Sociobiology and, the most mature of such disciplines, Evolutionary Psychology. Experts in these fields will gain a new insight only in so far as they see an unfamiliar or occasionally critical point of view throw new light on things. For instance, this author (as a literary researcher, no stranger to bold feats of interpretation himself) more than once has cause for astonishment at the theoretical and methodological insouciance with which 'accurate' experiments of quite narrow significance are quoted in support of very general assertions. – The author's continuing reconstruction of biological knowledge is gradually infiltrated by the development and application of three core propositions on the problematic nature-culture constellation:

(1) Referring back to Ernst Mayr's concept of open genetic programs, he defines the interaction of genetic dispositions and the cultural environment as an interaction between exploratory impulses of innate programs and cultural information. When innate programs make reference to culture, they process cultural data and scan the environment (both natural and cultural) for information in order to support their own viability – hence their malleable quality, their capacity to operate successfully in extremely diverse settings.

Cultural rules operate quite literally as a complement to open biological programs (i.e. they complete them). This simple model makes it possible to avoid the biases of biological or cultural fatalism. Without such an exploratory impulse, nothing can be found; by the same token, even the exploratory impulse can only find what comes its way. This explains the development of 'human nature' into such diverse phenotypes within different cultures or simply in different social conditions. And this also explains why the biological perspective in particular, if correctly understood, cannot be indifferent to the social circumstances.

(2) From the proto-language of the early hominid species which was originally 'tri-functional' (i.e. Bühler's three functions of human language – expression, appeal and representation – were as yet undifferentiated), increasing linguistic sophistication over the course of evolution permitted the isolation of factual references (the representation function). This enables mental entities to be detached from people themselves and converted into 'objects'. The adaptive value of human language resides not only in the possibility of very flexible communication, but also in the capacity it bestows to weave an autonomous fabric of objectified concepts which transcends individual personalities. In this way standardised exosomatically coded informations ('culture' as 'second nature') can complete the open genetic programs. On this basis the specifically human, 'cumulative' or 'cascading' type of culture can be developed, where the technical skills already accomplished lay the foundation for new skills.

(3) That this line of argument is carried right through to poetic literature is, of course, a facet of the special interest of the literary researcher. But this viewpoint sheds light on an aspect of behavioural biology which evolutionary biologists have been notoriously reticent to explain: it is relevant not just to utilitarian techniques, but also to the question of whether there is a biological explanation for what Kant called 'interesseloses Wohlgefallen', in the sense of a pleasure without utilitarian considerations. The line of argument will overlap with the evolutionary

stress-pleasure mechanism, which can relativise and supplement the still-widespread paradigm of tooth-and-claw Darwinism. When organisms, particularly vertebrates, find themselves in borderline survival situations, they are exposed to natural selection not only from starvation or mutual suppression or annihilation, but equally importantly, from the state of chronic stress they endure and the loss of vitality this causes. Ultimately they cease to reproduce, their weakened immune systems succumb to infections and they die. So chronic stress stands out as a crucial selection factor. And sources of relaxation stand out as crucial adaptations, the predispositions for which were established and reinforced at a correspondingly early stage in the evolutionary process: the sense of contentment derived from harmonious coexistence, knowledge-based security, as guaranteed by religious certainties, and aesthetic pleasure, which acts as the basis for art and literature. So input from artistic and literary disciplines can enrich the biological view of humanity with the facet of a 'natural' need for happiness, security and pleasure.

These three core propositions shed light on a number of long-standing problems, such as the socialisation of 'egotistical' individuals, morality, mutual assistance ('reciprocal altruism'), 'free will' and consciousness. Consequential problems of the ability to use language remain to be discussed, for instance the management of large volumes of objectified knowledge. The 'making of sense' through storytelling has been pinpointed as the oldest method of systematically storing information. In this sense, the human species was quick to become an *animal poeta*, modelling itself and its environment in stories. The basis of aesthetics is thought to originate primarily from practising our adaptations in 'organizational mode' (Cosmides/Tooby), which can act as a mode of pleasure. When our powers of language are activated in pleasure mode, then essentially the whole of our linguistically-coded world is made accessible once more in the 'wit and wisdom' of poetry. As a constantly recurring motif, finally, it is worth highlighting the project of a genome-based critique of ideology: systematic probing to discover

the source of Bacon's *idola tribus*, the phylogenetic emergence of cognitive distortions and prejudices.

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Rüdiger Zymner, Manfred Engel (Hrsg.):

Anthropologie der Literatur

Poetogene Strukturen und ästhetisch-soziale Handlungsfelder

Abstract of the German original:

Why are humans the only living beings who write poetry? And for what reason do they do that, do they perhaps have to do it? And how is poetry developed? Are there any general poetic structures as prerequisites for the creation of poetry?

Questions such as these are discussed in the articles of this book from the perspective of the humanities and of biopoetics. So this book pursues a new path to an empirical anthropology of literature.

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