

## Approaching Literary Anthropology. Comments on Aleida Assmann's Paper

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1. Is literature relevant to anthropology, and if so, in what sense? Of course, the answer to this question depends on what is meant by "literature" and "anthropology". The title of Aleida Assmann's paper suggests that the central task of *anthropology* is to "define the human". However, as is clear from the same source, Assmann does not believe that this can be construed as a joint, continued effort to work out the one and only correct concept of the human. Rather, *defining* the human is not an "achievement" or "performance" – in the sense of Ryle (1949, 45-51, 149-153) and Kenny (1963, 171-186) – at all, but an "occurrent", ongoing activity of *redefinition* which in principle cannot be completed. Accordingly Assmann does not try to elucidate *the way* in which the study of literature is, or should be, brought to bear on understanding the human. She confines herself to a survey of different existing approaches. These are not organized in a systematic or theoretically exhaustive manner, but are presented as a kind of "conceptual map" that allows for various placements or personal starting points and various directions to move. Each approach has its specific limitations. But although it is acknowledged that placing them side by side may help to counterbalance existing biases and to develop an "interdisciplinary ethos", there is no hope of combining them into a unified field, we are told (pp. 214f.). If not in the project of anthropology in general, at least in the project of "*literary anthropology*" we have to face up to a situation of irreducible theoretical heterogeneity.

As a description of the present "state of the art", this may be adequate and acceptable, as an account of the project as such it is not. Even if we are willing to allow for some form of theoretical and methodological "pluri-perspectivism" (p. 220), if we are not convinced that different approaches *complement* each other and *converge* on a certain point, however ideal, how do we know that they are addressed to the *same question* at all? How do we know that literature is relevant to anthropology? Fortunately, the theoretical situation is not as diffuse and hopeless as one might conclude from the end of Assmann's paper. The task of understanding and (possibly, eventually) defining the human, assisted by the study of literature, is sensible and fairly well circumscribed. Moreover, as I am going to show presently, some substantial lessons can be learned from surveying existing approaches. In doing so, I will not address the question of whether Assmann's description and classification of the authors referred to are correct or fair as inter-

pretations. I shall simply take them as she presents them, and attempt to set out and comment on the systematically relevant points.

2. First I would like to clear up a very general, conceptual point. In contrasting "abstract" and "cultural anthropology" Assmann repeatedly describes the first as an "*aprioristic*" and "*deductive*" enterprise (pp. 205; 213), the second as "*empirical*" and "*inductive*" (pp. 212; 217). This is unhappy and misleading. Admittedly, to the extent that literary anthropology (re-)defines the human in a *prescriptive* or *normative* way, as is partially the case with Frye and Iser (pp. 203f.; 210), it may be taken as a position which starts from a priori premises. However, this is not necessary, as both authors can be interpreted simply as trying to set out certain normative convictions implicit in exemplary texts of Western literature or literary criticism. And if these convictions really have had the status of culturally invariant a priori norms, then the study of literature is scarcely more than a heuristic device for the formulation of an anthropological position which has to be justified independently. On the other hand, if literary anthropology is strictly confined to *descriptive* characterizations of man, it is quite unlikely that any approach whatsoever may be adequately represented as aprioristic, including "abstract anthropology" in Assmann's sense. Even the Islamic and well-known Platonic myths referred to (pp. 204f.), which at first sight seem to articulate an indisputably metaphysical position, gain the plausibility they may have entirely from the fact that their characterizations of man as a "self-creating being" matches empirical evidence. The same holds true of at least secularised versions of the biblical as well as Greek and Roman characterization of man as a "god-like ruler of the rest of the universe" (cf. Gen. 1, 26-28; Psalms 8, 5-9; Sophocles, *Antigone*, 332-375; Ovid, *Met.* I 76-88). There is no plausible way of defining, or redefining, the human independently of human experience. So I suggest that we drop aprioricity as a distinguishing mark of "abstract anthropology".

What distinguishes "abstract" as well as "archetypal anthropology" from "cultural anthropology" in fact is their claim to unlimited, culturally invariant *generality*. They aim, as Assmann says with an overtone of slight scorn (pp. 211; 213), at "Man with a capital M". Now, it is indeed highly doubtful whether the more or less specific "definitions of man" which have been presented, e.g., by philosophers such as Scheler, Gehlen and Plessner have any title to universal validity. Yet this does not mean that a general notion of the human is dispensable. Quite to the contrary, if we could not know, or gradually gain some clarity about what "man" or "human" means, we could have no idea of what we are asking about in "anthropology" and "literary anthropology". Of course we do have this idea and know quite a few things about the species of man as distinguished, e.g., from plants and animals. Therefore the attempt to sharpen and refine our conception of the human successively is by no means a hopeless task. And even if we were

to get no further than the general statement that “man is what he makes out of himself” with an indefinite variety of historical, cultural and individual specifications, *this* statement would still entail a claim for *universal* validity. Furthermore, we could not mark off historical or cultural *differences* if we were not able to work with concepts of *general* applicability, which can be affirmed in the one case, and negated in the other. It is the very point of predication to divide up the (open) universe of (possible) objects into pairs of classes that exclude each other logically (Strawson 1952, 1-12, Tugendhat/Wolf 1983, 50-65). Moreover, the very idea of conceptual or cultural relativity, if taken radically, turns out to be an idea without sense.<sup>1</sup> For all our willingness to acknowledge individual and cultural differences, let us therefore not dispose thoughtlessly of conceptual tools we are badly in need of, if we are going to say something about these matters at all!

3. The foregoing project of “anthropological universalism” does not amount in the least to an uncritical endorsement of “abstract” or even “*archetypal anthropology*” as described by Assmann. As for the latter, it is well known that notions like C. G. Jung’s “archetypes” or “the collective unconscious” are highly speculative and more than questionable as an instrument of any serious, verifiable psychological theory. I fear that the same must be said of much of their application to literary anthropology. Frye’s claim for something like a “generative deep structure of the grammar of Western literature” is speculative, too, and highly implausible from the start. In fact, it seems to be just another example of the inflationary metaphorical use of linguistic terms in fields which they are not made for and simply do not fit. Even more problematic are A. Warburg’s speculations about the determining influence of artistic on collective psychic structures, which appear to have all the charms of “cultural Lyssenkoism”. Bodkin’s and Murray’s hypotheses are less implausible, as they keep to the regular causal order. If there are such things as universal “basic experiences” of mankind, it is to be expected that they are mirrored in a variety of works of art. Conversely, it should be possible to use literary texts of various form and origin as heuristic aids for detecting underlying “anthropological archetypes” of this kind, if there are any. The problem is simply that it is unclear whether, and by what reliable method, such archetypes can be uncovered and to what extent our findings may be generalized. So the lesson to be learned from a survey of existing conceptions of “archetypal anthropology” is that in its present state, at the very best, this is no more than a programme of literary anthropological research, a programme moreover which is badly in need of further clarification.

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1 I have argued for this in Seebass 1981, 194ff.

4. If we drop the notion of “archetype”, the result will perhaps be similar to a clarified version of “abstract anthropology”. If we also drop the claim that *every* predicate used to characterize “the human” in a broader sense must be *affirmable* of every individual independently of its historical or cultural condition, the result will come close to what might be brought out as the central, positive idea of “*cultural anthropology*”. The “*contextual approach*” which Assmann herself favours might easily lend itself to the relevant task of conceptual and methodological clarification. Starting from a broad notion of “literature”, which covers fictional and aesthetic texts as well as texts of other cultural domains, i.e. “concrete verbal constructions as embedded in their social, historical and cultural contexts” (p. 214), its theoretical outlook is neither speculative nor aprioristic in a normative sense, but decidedly empirical and historical. Though broader in scope, its methodology clearly rests on an extension and combination of classical philological and hermeneutic procedures, such as are well-established and have been in use for a long time in literary studies, history and archeology. What, however, remains unclear to me is its character as “anthropology” in the sense of Assmann's title. In what sense is the “contextual approach” devoted to defining or redefining the human? Assmann says that the anthropological turn comes with “a decidedly comparative perspective” (p. 213). Yet this is scarcely enough. So the essential steps towards a clarified, conceptually as well as methodologically promising account of literary anthropology still have to be taken.

At least, one can see or guess how such an account might be provided in the case of “contextual” cultural anthropology. As far as the “*textual approach*” is concerned things are quite different. Its defining characteristics, I take it, are (1) blurring the distinctions between the fictional and the factual use of language and (2) “a certain imperialism of literary (or textual) theory”, summed up in the ominous slogan “all is text” (p. 211). Taken literally this slogan is outright nonsense. First and foremost, predicates that are true of everything are not true predicates at all, as they do not divide the universe of objects in a distinctive manner (see above, § 2). Literally nothing is said by calling something an instance of “text” in this way. Secondly, generalizing the paradigm object of one discipline opens the gates for generalizing the paradigm of any discipline or theoretical approach whatsoever. With the same right as the scholar of literature, the mathematician might say that “everything is formula” or the musician, following the lead of German Romanticism, that “all is song” (cf. e.g. Eichendorff [1835], 103). Moreover, it is more than doubtful that literary theory, which is not exactly characterized by methodological rigour and has a vast number of open ends, should yield a paradigm case for better developed sciences such as physics, psychology or even history. In fact, the idea that this might be so is just another bizarre highlight of so-called “postmodernism”, which will be ready for oblivion as soon as this marvellous achievement of human ingenuity goes out of fashion.

Of course no one acquainted with problems of epistemology will deny that theories, even the most sophisticated and reliable ones, are not “read off” from nature, but are constructed and projected onto the world by humans. But no-one with any sense will mistake this basic epistemological observation for the claim that statements of fact are essentially on the same footing as statements of fiction. Fiction may help in the formation of interesting hypotheses. Also fiction may find a place even within anthropology, if this is understood in a prescriptive sense. But descriptive anthropology cannot itself be a fictional enterprise. Moreover, it is even less clear how the textual approach might contribute to the task of defining, or redefining, the human. So the lesson to learn from the survey of “textual” versions of cultural anthropology is simply that this approach leads to a dead end and should be dismissed entirely.

5. Among the approaches reviewed by Assmann, surely the “*abstract anthropologies*” of K. Burke and W. Iser are the most explicit and refined attempts at defining, or redefining, the human. Man is characterized here as a “being of freedom” which actively has to “create itself”, individually and socially, by choosing among as well as expanding or transforming a given set of possibilities. Moreover, it is claimed that the use of symbols, language and literature, including various forms of fictional and imaginative textual play, are an essential, indispensable means by which man “realizes his full anthropological potential” (p. 209). Stripped of its partly prescriptive aspects, which I believe (pace Assmann, p. 213) are accessorial even in Iser, this is a bold, substantial and highly interesting hypothesis.<sup>2</sup> It could be, and should be applied to and tested not only on the most general level, i.e. “humankind as such”, but also on a variety of levels below this, trying to define (or redefine, as it were) historically or culturally regionalized types of human “self-realization”. Of course, the problem is how such a demanding idea of literary anthropology, which up to now has restricted itself to a highly abstract level, could be transformed into a concrete, workable project of research. Once again we are confronted with quite a number of serious conceptual and methodological problems. I take it that Iser himself has despaired in the meantime of being able to solve them. Others have been pessimistic from the start. Whether this is realistic or wise I cannot judge here, though I am inclined to be more optimistic. At any rate, if the necessary classifications were to turn out to be impossible, the study of literature could not contribute very much to the central anthropological task of defining, or redefining, the human.

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2 In fact it has a close affinity to theses, advanced e.g. by Herder, Humboldt, L. Weisgerber and B. L. Whorf, concerning a general dependence of human thought on language. I have analysed these in detail elsewhere (Seebass 1981).