

Introduction

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Directions in Empirical Literary Studies: In honor of Willie van Peer

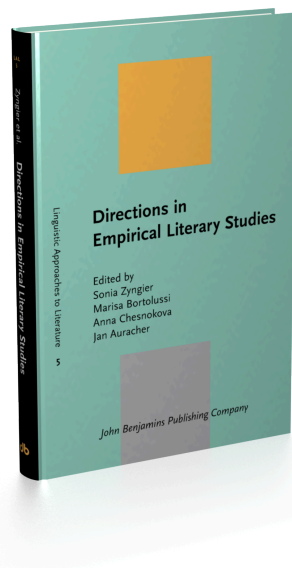
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Introduction

Yet philosophers should not be specialists. For myself, I am interested in science and in philosophy only because I want to learn something about the riddle of the world in which we live, and the riddle of man's knowledge of that world. And I believe that only a revival of interest in these riddles can save the sciences and philosophy from narrow specialization and from an obscurantist faith in the expert's special skill, and in his personal knowledge and authority... (Popper 1959/1980: 23)

This volume has been designed as a tribute to Willie van Peer on the occasion of his 60th birthday for all the work he has done in promoting the area of empirical studies. For a very good reason, as our readers will soon see, junior researchers in Ukraine renamed the area: “vanPeerical studies”. So, instead of a tie or a pen, we agreed the most appropriate gift would be a book that he could share with others. In putting this book together, we followed the same methodology he and Max Louwerse once used in a previous publication: “we contacted friends and colleagues from a range of disciplines, mostly from literary studies, linguistics and psychology, to probe their interest in such an enterprise. The spontaneous response we obtained was so overwhelming that the present volume could be brought together, containing studies from leading scholars in a variety of fields” (Louwerse & van Peer 2002: ix). The difference here, however, is that we cannot say it all started on a warm summer evening, as the four editors work in four different countries in three continents, with contrasting climates, different time zones and various conditions.

All the contributors in this book have in some way or another worked with Willie van Peer, either as editors, collaborators, supervisees, or admirers of his work. We also invited budding researchers, who owe much to Willie van Peer's teaching and inspiration in all the courses he has taught around the world and who find an opportunity here to publish their work with seasoned scholars. By doing this, we believe we follow one of Willie's leading mottos: stimulate students to actively and fearlessly carry out research independently on an international level from an early stage in their studies onwards, with the possible prospect of becoming researchers within and beyond today's academia.

The aims of this volume are twofold: we present a multidisciplinary approach to the field of empirical studies of literature by bringing together perspectives from a wide range of areas, such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, linguistics and

literature, and scholars who work in different parts of the world. These papers stand as a clear demonstration of the great breadth of Willie van Peer's interests and knowledge. In addition, the budding researchers who contribute in this volume illustrate how bonds can be created between both junior and senior scholars from all continents, a principle Willie van Peer strongly holds and which can be found in the tenets underlying the REDES Project, which he co-founded in 2002 (see Zyngier, Chesnokova & Viana 2007; also see www.redes.de).

Popperian at heart, Willie van Peer's interest in empirical studies results from his inquisitive mind and challenging posture. In his seminal work, published more than twenty years ago (van Peer 1986), he concentrated his attention on exploring whether literary quality could be found in the linguistic structure of texts. This dissertation was already empirical in nature as readers' reactions were surveyed in order to validate the arguments, inspired by a speech on the new linguistic approach to analyze literary quality delivered by Geoffrey Leech.

Going beyond formal and structural approaches, Willie van Peer wanted to observe the effects of literature on readers rather than predicting it without empirical evidence. His students and colleagues still often hear him say that some concepts can only be grasped by assessing what the majority thinks. This is how he might have worded it: when it comes to interpretation or opinion of elusive concepts like "beauty", it is much more reliable to ask 30 people on the street than one solitary expert. It has been his constant concern to be as distanced as possible from theories and ideologies in order to find out what real people think and what their attitudes are. His program can probably be best described as *democratic*, and it necessarily leads towards an interdisciplinary approach at the interface between literature and psychology. Perhaps his experience in Medical School may have influenced the way he sees research: an evidence-based process, the quality of which depends much on collaboration and team-work. This perspective explains the number of his joint publications.

Next to the shift towards psychology, Willie van Peer has also insisted on the need for statistics and a quantitative approach to literary studies. Granting that each reader has individual characteristics, he holds that trends in text-reader interaction need to be observed in larger groups and that it is high time that the hypothetical models of readers should be replaced by real people, who account for what the majority actually say, think and do.

In his production, Willie van Peer has been exceptionally prolific. So far, he has published 5 books, edited or co-edited 11 volumes of articles, authored over 165 articles and 30 reviews (see http://www.daf.uni-muenchen.de/personen/professoren/van_peer/index.html). The range of his academic interests comprehends narrative studies (van Peer & Chatman 2001), the role of the literary canon in education (van Peer & Soetaert 1993), and the quality of literary texts

(van Peer 2008). His publications, which are all interdisciplinary in nature, have greatly impacted a variety of fields, including stylistics, text linguistics, thematics, narratology. He has delivered over 200 talks to international audiences in 27 countries, which have inspired dozens of young and already mature researchers to bravely take a similar scholarly path. And more of his works are on the way.

In fact, Willie van Peer had already developed many of his concepts by the time the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature (ESL or ISEL – *Internationale Gesellschaft für Empirische Literaturwissenschaft*) was founded, providing him with “a broad highway to unite systematically all appropriate metatheoretical, empirical, philosophical, historical, linguistic, sociological and psychological researches, in order to present a modern multidisciplinary approach” (Halász 1995: 11). It was actually with Siegfried Schmidt at the helm that sociologists, psychologists and literary scholars founded the ISEL in 1987. As Schmidt confessed at the Round Table held during the tenth biennial ISEL conference in Munich in 2006, the label had been coined for political purposes and he himself never intended the Association to actually take an empirical turn. However, the statement that the Society aimed at promoting empirical research both by junior and senior scholars (see www.iselweb.org) was taken literally by scholars such as Willie van Peer, who played a major role in promoting cooperation and personal contact in all areas supported by ISEL. As a founding member, member of the executive committee and former President of ISEL, he has been able to contribute both on an individual and an institutional level to empirical studies.

By empirical, and very much in the light of our epigraph, we mean “a kind of reasoning and a kind of research that is based on real evidence, that is, on evidence from the real world, which can be inspected by anyone ... one that bridges the gap between the Humanities and the Natural Sciences, in the realization that both need each other for a better understanding of the world” (van Peer et al. 2007: 7). And there are many systematic ways of conducting this kind of research. Some of them are questioning, observing, experimenting. Many of the chapters in this book illustrate different ways of being empirical.

The present volume focuses on how this approach to Literature and other cultural artifacts builds bridges between different areas. It consists of four sections, each focusing on a different aspect of ELS development and application. The articles in the first section, “Theoretical and Philosophical Perspectives”, provide different ways of understanding what empirical means and what it entails. Section II, “Psychology, Foregrounding and Literature”, represents the interface in which Willie has contributed most in his attempt to define foregrounding. Part III, “Computers and the Humanities”, illustrates how new technology has impacted the understanding of literary texts and how computational linguistics can work to illuminate readers and their experience with verbal art. Section IV collects works

by young researchers who have participated in the REDES Project Willie van Peer has been supporting for so many years now and who unarguably can be called The New Generation. Each of these sections offer an Introduction which will help the reader see the links between the chapters. The book closes with an Afterword, a tribute to Willie van Peer by one of his many distinguished colleagues.

Here, then, we present the state of the art in empirical studies of literature. Much of this could not have been obtained were it not for the efforts of Willie van Peer, whose academic generosity, relentless search for knowledge, and provocative posture have helped make history.

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 Jan Auracher
 January 2008

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