

*Interpretation and Argumentation*

**Stefan Descher; Thomas Petraschka, *Argumentieren in der Literaturwissenschaft. Eine Einführung*, Ditzingen: Reclam 2019, 188 S., € 6.00, ISBN 9783150176931.**

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This useful little book applies ordinary argumentation theory to literary studies in a remarkably clear way. Reflection on proper reasoning in literary criticism is not new – there has been an interesting current of such studies since the 1970s – but its introductory nature makes the book quite innovative. The book is neutral on methods or styles of literary criticism, even if nuanced but resolute in its refutation of any claim that literary interpretation could forego proper argumentation.

For one could be sceptical about an emphasis on arguments in literary criticism. Aren't literary scholars concerned with the aesthetics of a work of art, and isn't the multiplicity of interpretations a mark of a work's greatness? What has argumentation to offer us if arguments tend to be inconclusive anyway? Or why bother about rigid argumentation if matters of interpretation are always open to doubt? According to the authors, interpretation is required in cases of problems to understand a text. These problems determine the aims and questions of our interpretive practices. Plausible answers are to be preferred over less plausible ones, and there is no alternative to argumentation for determining the plausibility of a hypothesis.

Providing well-argued interpretations is not the only aim we may have in reading literature, but it is a very common one – and substantial aesthetic reflections tend to depend on justifiable interpretations. There are ways to improve one's argumentative skills. Due to the book's introductory nature, the authors spend quite some time explaining the basics of argumentation theory. What is an argument? What is the relation between argumentation and interpretation? What makes an argument good? And so on. The set of questions they discuss will be familiar to readers with elementary background in logic or argumentation theory, but its discussion strikes a good balance between conciseness and comprehensiveness.

The choice and relevant use of examples tailors the text to students of *Germanistik* or literary theory.

The authors explain some types of deductive arguments (modus ponens, modus tollens, arguments from general to particular) as well as a number of types of inductive ones (arguing from indicators, analogy, expert argument, abduction). Premises of arguments need to be well-grounded, and the authors not only introduce their readers to various types of such grounds (textual, historical, intertextual, and biographical data), but also note their respective problems and suggest ways to mitigate these. Their classification of various types of arguments and data is not uncommon, and even though there is more to be said about them, the starting point offered by the book will get students far. Moreover, each chapter comes with some literature suggestions to satisfy further interests.

One of the things that makes this book so suitable for practical use are the overviews offered by various chapters, sometimes nicely captured in little schemes. We find a table with the different types of arguments and a checklist with 14 characteristics of well-grounded arguments. One chapter lists common fallacies, and another provides a number of instructions with suggestions for how to present one's argument („Seien Sie direkt!“, „Machen Sie sich angreifbar!“). This makes the book not just an accessible read, but also a very affordable and useful 'tool' for students in developing arguments of their own. Students of (German) literature, and anyone looking for a means to reflect on and improve one's argumentative skills in interpreting literature, are likely to benefit from it.