

# Literature as Mind Changer, ‘Valorisation Laboratory,’ and Cultural Resource of Resilience

## Conceptualising the Value of Literature

### 1 Valuable, Compared to What?: Coming to Terms with the Value of Literature

Although there has been a lot of research on the ways in which literary works represent and disseminate ethical values and cultural norms in the wake of the ‘ethical turn’ since the 1980s, the value of literature itself has only recently appeared on the agenda of literary studies. While debates about values, evaluation, and the ethical dimension of literary works have been “central to critical theory for at least the past two hundred years,”<sup>1</sup> as Barbara Herrnstein Smith observes at the beginning of her excellent essay on the critical terms of “Value/Evaluation,” in recent years we have witnessed the emergence of serious concerns about the value of literature in an increasingly digital age, and about the state of literary studies, and even the humanities at large, which have been faced with a whole series of crises. In a pioneering essay, the renowned American critic and literary historian Marjorie Perloff delineated one of the earliest and most convincing attempts at responding to the “Crisis in the Humanities” and at “Reconfiguring Literary Study for the Twenty-first Century,” as the title and subtitle succinctly put it. Perloff not only rejects practical solutions revolving around suggestions for job prospects; she also questions the prevailing assumption that “we have a clear sense of what the humanities do and what makes them valuable.”<sup>2</sup> Perloff does an excellent job of reminding us what the term ‘humanities’ means today and of what the real strengths of the study of literature are or could be. Moreover, her overall diagnosis that one of the main problems is the “bad fit between an outdated

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1 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Value/Evaluation,” *Critical Terms for Literary Studies*, eds. Frank Lentricchia/ Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1995), 177.

2 Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2004), 2.

curriculum and the actual interest of potential students,"<sup>3</sup> may well be as true today as it was almost twenty years ago.

However, we would go even further and argue that the fit has become worse rather than better during the last two decades, in two ways: Firstly, literary studies has failed to catch up with many of the new concerns that have emerged since the millennium; secondly, it has so far failed to respond convincingly to the challenging debates about the uses of literature and the usefulness of literary and cultural studies. Moreover, we are also convinced that Perloff is spot-on in claiming that the discipline has largely failed to come up with good reasons for why reading and studying literature still matters today: "But without clear-cut notions of *why* it is worthwhile to read literary texts, whether by established or marginalised writers, in the first place, the study of 'literature' becomes no more than a chore, a way of satisfying distribution requirements."<sup>4</sup>

Someone who has arguably done more than any other scholar to answer the question of *why* it is worthwhile to read literary texts and to reconfigure literary studies for the 21st century is the American literary theorist Rita Felski. In a series of important interventions and highly stimulating books, Felski has not only redirected attention from the hitherto prevailing forms of critique to other modes of reading and to positive *Uses of Literature*, to quote the felicitous title of her 'manifesto' that was published in 2008. In her books, she has also provided some of the most convincing answers to the question that she raised in the introduction to her book *The Limits of Critique* (2015): "Literary studies is currently facing a legitimization crisis, thanks to a sadly depleted language of value that leaves us struggling to find reasons why students should care about Beowulf and Baudelaire. Why is literature worth bothering with?"<sup>5</sup> In her interventions and manifestoes, Felski has managed to outline a new vision for literary studies that has redirected scholarly attention away from critique towards the affordances and uses of literature.

Taking our cue from Rita Felski and other researchers engaged in arguing for the usefulness of literature and the arts, we should also like to make a modest attempt to answer the two questions of why literature is still worth bothering with in the 21st century and how the value of literature can be conceptualised. By providing answers to these questions, we also hope to make some suggestions as to how literary studies could be reconfigured in ways that would enhance its chances of coping with its current legitimization crisis

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3 Ibid., 15.

4 Ibid.

5 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL/ London: U of Chicago P, 2015), 5.

and securing a blossoming future. Acknowledging the changed, and changing, contexts in which literature is embedded and the pressing concerns that have emerged in the wake of the catastrophes and crises that have shaped the new millennium should be complemented by a positive vision of what makes literature so valuable and what literary studies could look like and what it might have to offer.

At first glance, one might jump to the conclusion that in our current age of multiple crises and catastrophes, ranging from environmental crises and the spread of infectious diseases to growing divisions within societies, that the reading and study of literature might be a mere luxury. Moreover, in a world increasingly dominated and shaped by digital communication and new media, skim-reading has become the new norm, while the kind of deep or literary reading seems in danger of becoming a relic of the past.<sup>6</sup> In today's capitalist and neoliberal societies, the value of literature, the arts and philosophy can no longer be taken for granted. Although there have been some powerful pleas for the indispensability of literature and philosophy like the Italian critic Nuccio Ordine's book *The Usefulness of the Useless*, in a world largely dominated by digital and social media that generates clicks and money, the cultural and financial value of literature is difficult to gauge. There may well be agreement that literary value cannot be measured by quantifiable data, and that it is defined by several intersecting institutions, and not just by 'the economy,' but there is no consensus about what the defining qualities of literature are. Literary critics, theorists, and philosophers have been engaged in an uphill battle in their attempts to delineate the specifics of aesthetic value and the value of literature at large. Due to what Rita Felski called "a sadly depleted language of value," in today's age, more than ever before, the value of anything seems to be equated with its price. More than a hundred years ago, Oscar Wilde's Lord Henry already quipped: "Nowadays, people know the price of everything and the value of nothing."<sup>7</sup> This cynical statement seems to be even more applicable to the 21st century than to the 19th in that the price of everything is defined by facts, figures, and numbers: Money and price tags seem to have become the only true measure of value.

Curiously enough, however, even some scholars working on the value of literature agree on the importance of neoliberalist definitions of value, stressing that readers' and authors' notions of literature and literary value are large-

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6 For a detailed exploration of the impact that the distraction of digital technology and social media has on our changing reading patterns, see Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018).

7 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; London et al.: OUP, 1974), 46; Wilde used this phrase to define cynics in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892).

ly shaped by capital.<sup>8</sup> Joshua Clover and Christopher Nealon even go so far as to argue that “the division of the political and the economic into discrete domains is a fetish of bourgeois thought” and it is impossible “to separate aesthetic value from its economic counterpart.”<sup>9</sup> In this framework, the only question concerning the value of literature is the negotiation of the relations between cultural and economic definitions of literary value. Above all, value is related to capital.

While we certainly do not deny the relevance of economic factors in this context,<sup>10</sup> we will use a broader frame for the conceptualisation of literary value and seek to establish a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the value of literature, one that is not divorced from the cultural context, but that still aims at analytically distinguishing between societal domains and different definitions of value even though these are, in practice, intricately interrelated. With this in mind, we are going to use the following two approaches: Firstly, we will use insights from several disciplines in order to achieve a better understanding of the meanings of the term ‘value’ that is much more multifaceted than a look at the discourse of economics would make us believe; secondly, we shall focus on specific conceptions of the value of literature that are advanced in different theoretical approaches to the study of literature. In addition, many articles in this volume explore the ways in which specific genres or literary works challenge and negotiate neoliberalist and other conceptions of literary value.

In the remainder of this introduction, we will attempt to come to terms with the manifold value of literature by delineating several angles of enquiry. The second section will provide a brief overview of recent conceptualisations of the intrinsic value of literature. In section three, we will turn our attention to the extrinsic value of literary works, a complex issue that has been discussed at great length and in a host of ways by philosophers, psychologists, and literary critics. Focusing on some of the most important approaches to this topic, we will explore conceptions of the cognitive value of literature (section 3), the ethical value of literature (section 4), and broader notions of the cultural value of literature (section 5). In section 6 we will take a look at the significance of lit-

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8 See e.g. Emily Johansen, “Neoliberalism and Contemporary Anglophone Fiction,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 22 August 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-185>, n.p.

9 Joshua Clover/ Christopher Nealon, “Literary and Economic Value,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 27 July 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-123>, n.p.

10 In this volume, Isabel Gil’s and Elizabeth Kovach’s articles are concerned with exploring the collapse between economic and creative values in contemporary culture.

erature with regard to more encompassing notions of value, one that includes such values as ‘freedom’ and ‘benevolence,’ a notion that is at the centre of public debates about the ‘crisis of values’ in postmodern societies. In the final part we will provide a brief overview of the structure of this volume and of the articles that follow (section 7).

## 2 The Aesthetic Experience: On the Intrinsic Value of Literature

Any discussion of the value of literature depends on the underlying definition of literature, and this has, of course, changed quite substantially throughout the centuries and differs from culture to culture. Since the end of the eighteenth century, new ideas concerning the autonomy of literature began to gain currency in Europe, freeing authors of literary works from the obligation to ‘delight and instruct’ and the concomitant expectation that the usefulness of literary works resided in their potential to teach their readers moral truths or practical knowledge. Ever since the Romantic era, there has been an implicit tension between what can for convenience’s sake be dubbed the intrinsic and extrinsic value of literature, between the esteem in which literary works are held on the basis of their intrinsic properties and the value that is attached to literature on the basis of “the properties that an entity possesses in relation to other properties.”<sup>11</sup> Recent publications on the value of literature tend to focus on the extrinsic, derivative, or instrumental value of literature, sharing a belief that the reception of literature will entail positive consequences.<sup>12</sup>

The widespread belief in the intrinsic value of literature is closely connected to debates about the aesthetic specificity of literature. This can be traced back at least to Aristotle and his notion of literature as dealing with the realm of the possible rather than the actual or real. In the early nineteenth century a complex cultural change emerged in the ways in which works of literature and the arts were valorised, culminating in the conception of *l’art pour l’art*, and the movements associated with the aesthetes and decadents of the Victorian fin de siècle. The views of the latter were popularised in Great Britain and North America by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, whose collection of aphorisms on the nature and value of literature in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1899) provoked the Victorian establishment, challenging as they did any belief in the moral usefulness of literary works. According to the conceptualisation of literature as being autonomous, the value of fiction is

11 Rafe McGregor, *The Value of Literature* (London/ New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 8.

12 See, for instance, the volumes edited by Rüdiger Ahrens/ Laurenz Volkmann, by Marion Gymnich/ Ansgar Nünning, and by Jan Alber et al.

inextricably connected to the specific and unique properties of literature and distinct from that of all other texts.

The intrinsic value of literature is often identified as its aesthetic value. Though any work can be read for a variety of purposes that are extrinsic to literature – such as acquiring knowledge about foreign countries, gaining insights into the lifeworld of earlier periods or other cultures – notions about the intrinsic value tend to be linked to the aesthetic, formal, or stylistic quality of literature, which distinguishes literary works from other text-types or domains of writing, such as factual narratives, documentaries, journalism, or academic writing. There are two basic ways of defining this value: one line of argument is based on the belief in specific intrinsic properties of literary works, while the other proceeds from the recognition of the uniqueness of the aesthetic experience that is offered during the reception of works of art.<sup>13</sup>

Frequently, however, these two perspectives are merged, especially when theorists argue that it is the aesthetic specificity of literature which provides the basis for an aesthetic appreciation that is equivalent to the intrinsic value of literature. Martha Nussbaum and Rafe McGregor, for instance, stress the uniqueness of literary works, which is based on the inseparability of form and content: Literary form cannot be detached from its content, which means that the content cannot be extrapolated or expressed in any other way without major changes to the meaning of a work. A mere summary of a literary text or an extraction of its ‘message’ is therefore not an adequate rendition of its content, which cannot be expressed in any other form than that embodied in the forms of a literary work. In this view, the intrinsic value of literature depends on this inseparability of form and content, which enables a reading experience of “literary appreciation, the evaluation of literature *qua* literature.”<sup>14</sup>

This kind of appreciative reading is often regarded as the key to the intrinsic or aesthetic value of literature, which is based on the unity of form and content. The aesthetic value of a given text thus resides in the potential to give rise to an aesthetic experience characterised by pleasure in the appreciation of a verbal work of art: “Literary value is the value of the experience of literary appreciation.”<sup>15</sup> The lineage of this notion of literature and literary value, which can be traced back to Kant and Schiller, is long and impressive. Virginia Woolf’s essays, for instance, endorse this view of literature, stressing the unity of form and content as a precondition for a specific kind of reading

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13 Discussions of the intrinsic properties of literary works frequently focus on the relation between form and content. See e.g. Richard Eldridge, “Form and Content: An Aesthetic Theory of Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 25 (1985), 303-316.

14 McGregor, *The Value of Literature*, viii; see also *ibid.*, 44f. and *passim*.

15 *Ibid.*, viii.

experience which is an end in itself and entails rapture.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Woolf also acknowledges that there are different kinds of reading, and that literary works can also be read in a non-literary way, for instance with a view to gaining knowledge or prestige.

Instead of neatly separating the intrinsic dimension from the extrinsic value of literature, some thinkers claim that the cognitive or ethical (extrinsic) value of literature is part and parcel of its aesthetic (i.e. intrinsic) value. Since aesthetic appreciation depends on the intrinsic properties of literature, it is difficult – if not impossible – to detach this aesthetic appreciation from the cognitive processes that form a part of the mental response to literary works. If literary form and moral or thematic content cannot be separated, then it can be argued that the unique knowledge conveyed by fictional works is the basis of the intrinsic value of literature, too.<sup>17</sup> A similar view is put forward by John Joughin and Simon Malpas, who emphasise that literature can have social or political benefits because of its specific aesthetic qualities.<sup>18</sup>

### 3 Literature as a Mind Changer: Gauging the Cognitive Value of Literature

The study of the cognitive value of literature has been one of the most productive fields of research on the potential functions of literary works for the last two decades or so. The cognitive value of literary works is often held to be inextricably tied to their aesthetic quality, thus constituting an interface between the intrinsic and extrinsic value of literature. The cognitive value of literature has been conceptualised in a variety of ways, for instance with regard to the potential of literature to provide a specific kind of knowledge or to help readers clarify their ideas and attitudes. A different and more promising approach to the cognitive value of fiction is pursued by psychologists and narratologists who study how reading fiction can enhance abilities of social cognition. A specific aspect of this, the value of fiction for changing readers' ingrained paths of automated perceptions, was already recognised by the Russian formalists at the beginning of the twentieth century. Developing the important concept of defamiliarisation, Viktor Shklovsky famously argued that literature serves to make the familiar appear strange, showing things in

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16 Cf. Vera Nünning, "'A Theory of the Art of Writing': Virginia Woolf's Aesthetics from the Point of View of Her Critical Essays," *English Studies* 98.8 (2017), 978-994.

17 See McGregor, *The Value of Literature*, 18f., 38f., 44, 126, and *passim*.

18 See John J. Joughin/ Simon Malpas, "The New Aestheticism: An Introduction," *The New Aestheticism*, eds. eid. (Manchester/ New York: Manchester UP, 2003), 1-19.

a new and unexpected way. Prolonging the process of perception, literature can enable readers to break out of automatic perceptual routines, and to see, appreciate, and evaluate things in a new way.<sup>19</sup>

The cognitive value of fiction is often defined by specifying the kind of knowledge that literary works can offer. Though many readers take away some kind of information after reading a literary work and enlarge their store of knowledge, say, about the Tudor period by reading works such as Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* or about the layout of the streets of London by reading works as diverse as Arthur Canon Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, this is not what scholars have in mind when they explore 'the knowledge of or in literature,' which is usually situated beyond the realm of everyday facts.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars from different disciplines base their analyses on the idea that literature can be "a potential source of knowledge rather than just an object of knowledge."<sup>21</sup> This notion has gained some traction in recent years. Literature is increasingly regarded as a medium of generating rather than representing knowledge. Three social scientists have even gone so far as to claim that literary representations can be seen as a "source of authoritative knowledge."<sup>22</sup> As Roy Sommer notes, there is a growing appreciation of "the insights made possible by and through fiction."<sup>23</sup> Rather than turning to literature for information or knowledge, however, readers frequently assume that literary works can give them new kinds of experiences and insights into a 'higher truth,' e.g. making them aware of problems and ideas that they had not reflected on

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19 See Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, eds. Lee T. Lemon/ Marion J. Reis (1917; Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1965), 3-24, especially 12-13. It must be stressed, however, that the Russian formalists were concerned with the intrinsic, aesthetic quality of literature – which is sometimes difficult to separate neatly from the extrinsic value of literary works.

20 See, for instance, the discussions in and contributions to *Zeitschrift für Germanistik XVII* (2007, 2008), which was triggered by Tilmann Köppe's article "Vom Wissen in Literatur," *Zeitschrift für Germanistik XVII* (2007), 398-410. See also Ottmar Ette, "Literaturwissenschaft als Lebenswissenschaft: Eine Programmschrift im Jahr der Geisteswissenschaften," *Lendemains* 125 (2007), 7-32. For a concise and precise overview of current positions on 'the knowledge of literature,' see Michael Basseler, *An Organon of Life Knowledge: Genres and Functions of the Short Story in North America* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 51-64.

21 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 84.

22 David Lewis/ Dennis Rodgers/ Michael Woolcock, "The Fiction of Development: Literary Representation as a Source of Authoritative Knowledge," *Journal of Developmental Studies* 2 (2008), 198-216.

23 Roy Sommer, "'Reading form': A Narratological Guide to Textual Analysis," *Methods of Textual Analysis in Literary Studies: Approaches, Basics, Model Interpretations*, eds. Vera Nünning/ Ansgar Nünning (Trier: WVT, 2020), 108.



before. The cognitive value of literature is thus closely intertwined with the kinds of experiences and of knowledge that are represented in, disseminated through, and produced by literary works.

Cognitivists are specifically interested in the unique kind of knowledge offered by literary works, which they deem to be part and parcel of the aesthetic and intrinsic value of literature. They claim that both knowledge and the value of literature are implied in the aesthetic appreciation of literary works. Literature “is valuable because it is a source of knowledge [...] bearing upon the extra-fictional world.”<sup>24</sup> There are different approaches to the kind of theoretical or practical knowledge that can be gained by reading literary works. Noël Carroll, for instance, argues that the knowledge readers can acquire through reading fictional works is situated on a higher level of abstraction, claiming that works of art have the capacity to yield “propositional knowledge about the conditions of application of our concepts.”<sup>25</sup>

Other scholars proceed from the insight that literature, especially narrative fiction, provides non-propositional knowledge which cannot be reduced to any other kind of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> This kind of knowledge has important epistemic functions, since propositional knowledge of general rules and principles alone cannot lead to an understanding of human life worlds or psychological states. Instead, one has to take into account the importance and complexity of specific situations, to which several – often contradictory – guiding principles or maxims can be applied. In literary works we are usually confronted with complex characters and situations that eschew simple descriptions and thus cannot be expressed by declarative sentences. The truths offered by literary works can only be expressed by showing rather than telling, by representation rather than abstract conceptualisation. This kind of non-propositional knowledge acquires epistemic importance at the point where the explanatory potential of concepts, reasons, and logical statements ends.<sup>27</sup>

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24 David Davies, *Aesthetics and Literature* (Ann Arbor, MI: Continuum, 2007), 143; for key tenets of cognitivism, see McGregor, *The Value of Literature*, 18 f., 97 f., 126.

25 Noël Carroll, *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 189.

26 Cf. e.g. Alexandra Strohmaier’s article in this volume; she demonstrates how the epistemic value of literature played an important role in William James’ philosophy of pluralism.

27 See Christiane Schildknecht, “‘Ein seltsam wunderbarer Anstrich’? Nichtpropositionale Erkenntnis und ihre Darstellungsformen,” *Darstellung und Erkenntnis. Beiträge zur Rolle nichtpropositionaler Erkenntnisformen in der deutschen Philosophie und Literatur nach Kant*, ed. Brady Bowman (Paderborn: mentis, 2007), 32: “Mit diesem sehr weiten Begriff des Nichtpropositionalen sind Formen des Erkennens gemeint, deren epistemische Relevanz dort beginnt, wo [...] Erkenntnis prinzipiell nicht oder nicht in einem ihr adäquaten Sinne *ausgesagt* werden kann und damit in Opposition zur propositionalen, d.h. aussageartigen Struktur des Urteils bzw. des Satzes steht [...]: Klarheit (nicht

The cognitive value of literature, in this sense, lies precisely in the fact that literary works do not present abstract principles and generalisations, as in the case of many works of philosophy and sociology. Instead, they can help us to “grasp [...] complex and frequently fine-tuned qualitative distinctions, [and avoid] that obtuseness [that] results from a premature reduction of these to quantitative distinctions.”<sup>28</sup> In this conceptualisation, the value of literature resides in its providing a kind of practical (implicit and tacit) non-propositional knowledge that we need in order to make sense of our lives and act responsibly. Through reading literary works, we can thus obtain “knowledge for living,”<sup>29</sup> addressing questions that are important for human beings who want to live their lives consciously and in an ethically responsible manner. In a somewhat similar vein, Terry Eagleton observes: “Art [...] represents an alternative mode of cognition to Enlightenment rationality, clinging as it does to the specific without thereby relinquishing the whole.”<sup>30</sup>

Through the combination of this alternative mode of cognition and the focus on specific situations and individual characters, literature can also be an important means of fostering readers’ insights into their own selves. Noël Carroll and Jèmeljan Hakemulder, for instance, stress that reading literature can lead to (self)-clarification, thus echoing and sharing an idea already expressed by Marcel Proust. Proust explained that he hoped his readers would be “the readers of their own selves, my book being merely a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combray used to offer his customers – [...] I would furnish them with the means of reading what lay inside themselves.”<sup>31</sup> Being confronted with intense scenes, images, or metaphors and with the behaviour, feelings, and thoughts of vividly delineated char-

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Deutlichkeit) der Begriffe; Vermittlung, Aufweisen bzw. Zeigen (nicht Mitteilung, Aussage bzw. Sagen) und Vergegenwärtigung bzw. Versinnlichung (nicht begriffliche Bestimmung) des jeweils Gemeinten; Adäquatheitsanspruch (nicht Wahrheitsanspruch); analogisches (nicht logisches) Denken.” On the specificity of aesthetic non-propositional forms, see also *ibid.*, 36: “erfahrungs- nicht objektgebundene Art der Individuierung, präsentationale Funktion sinnlicher Qualitäten und nicht-begrifflicher Gehalt von Erfahrung.”

28 Martha Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1988), 348.

29 Ottmar Ette, “Literature as Knowledge for Living, Literary Studies as Science for Living,” *PMLA* 125.4 (2010), 986.

30 Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2012), 66; see also *ibid.*, 64: “Literary works represent a kind of praxis or knowledge-in-action, and are similar in this way to the ancient conception of virtue. They are forms of moral knowledge, but in a practical rather than theoretical sense.”

31 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time. Vol. 6: Time Regained & A Guide to Proust*, trans. Andreas Mayor/ Terence Kilmartin (London: Vintage, 1996), 432.

acters that may well appear alien and strange at first can lead to moments of insight and trigger “self-scrutiny” and “heightened self-understanding.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Hakemulder has tested the notion that reading literature or, more precisely, the kind of perspective taking prompted by literary works, can involve self-clarification.<sup>33</sup> Carroll proposes a wider understanding of “clarificationism,” claiming that readers can gain insight into virtue concepts and thereby clarify their moral understanding.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, several psychologists and literary scholars proceed from the presupposition that the cognitive value of fictional works is based on the concept of the truth of coherence. In this perspective on the value of literature, the similarity between the rules governing the real world and the storyworlds of fiction or the experiential worlds in poetry makes it possible for readers to simulate the cognitive processes that they need in order to deal with the challenges of their daily lives. Readers can thus have ‘vicarious’ experiences, enlarge their knowledge about the human mind, and hone their social skills by reading literary works.<sup>35</sup>

The value of literature for enhancing readers’ cognitive abilities has been explored empirically by psychologists like Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar, but literary scholars specialised in cognitive narratology have also shed new light on this issue, drawing on insights gained in the cognitive sciences. As early as 2003, David Herman demonstrated that fiction serves as a “Tool for Thinking,” disseminating means for making sense of a chaotic wealth of stimuli. In the wake of Oatley, Mar, and Herman, numerous scholars have explored the potential of fictional works enhancing readers’ abilities of social cognition. Summarising a wealth of empirical studies on the effect of stories on readers’ social cognitive abilities, Katrina Fong and her colleagues conclude that “narrative fiction is associated with greater social ability. [...] [T]his association appears to be a reliable finding, observed across populations.”<sup>36</sup>

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32 Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 24, 30.

33 Jemeljan Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining the Effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept* (Amsterdam/ Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2000), 92-95, 140.

34 Noël Carroll, “Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding,” *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 128; cf. also McGregor, *The Value of Literature*, 24.

35 For a brilliant summary of the results of experiments and possible reasons for the enhancement of social cognitive skills by means of (fictional) stories, see Keith Oatley, “Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds,” *Trends in Cognitive Science* 20.8 (2016), 618-628.

36 Katrina Fong/ Justin Mullin/ Raymond Mar, “What You Read Matters: The Role of Fiction Genre in Predicting Interpersonal Sensitivity,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts* 7.4 (2013), 374.

These insights about how the power and value of literature can foster mental processes crucial for social cognition have been substantiated by recent research in narrative theory, especially the branch known as ‘cognitive narratology.’ This area of study provides a link between the cognitive sciences and literary studies, proceeding from the assumption that there is a reciprocal relation between reader and text: Readers use their cognitive schemata in order to make sense of the features of the text and to generate a mental model of its content. In addition, these schemata can be practised and refined during reading. Cognitive narratologists frequently analyse how the potential of literature can instigate specific cognitive processes.<sup>37</sup> More recently, there has been a pronounced interest in the empirical study of readers’ reactions to specific books or passages from books. In this volume, Jan Alber delineates the extent to which empirical studies can validate the hypotheses that literature can help readers to try out possible self-images and serve as a laboratory for the modification of their identities.

Another aspect of the cognitive value of literature that deserves to be mentioned is the persuasive power that literary works can exert on readers’ attitudes and beliefs. Melanie C. Green and her colleagues have demonstrated in a host of experiments that fictional stories can – if read in a state of immersion – change readers’ beliefs. Far from merely ‘suspending their disbelief,’ readers tend to accept what they read when they are immersed in a work of fiction, thus tacitly acquiring a kind of ‘knowledge’ and unconsciously integrating it into their cultural encyclopaedia. While the value of literature has often been conceptualised as a kind of subversion, as the disruption, disorientation, and challenge of common beliefs and practices, reading fiction can just as well be a means of reinforcing ideologies, propaganda, or stereotypes. Although we need much more research before we can really get to grips with the persuasive potential of literature, there can be little doubt that the cognitive value of literature and its impact on readers’ beliefs is even more pervasive than is usually assumed.

Moreover, a great part of the cognitive value of literature resides in the fact that reading literary fiction can foster empathy and hone readers’ skills of understanding other human beings. As Suzanne Keen has shown in her monograph *Empathy and the Novel*, the immersion in literary fiction can have a wide range of empathetic effects on readers, inducing in them the feeling of narrative empathy.<sup>38</sup> By inviting readers to take the perspective of characters,

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37 See e.g. Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2006). Zunshine focuses on the potential of literature to practice “theory of mind”-abilities.

38 See Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

literary works enhance people's abilities to understand the beliefs, feelings, wishes, and intentions of others. In order to understand the complex constellation of characters and the rich storyworlds delineated in novels, readers have to use cognitive abilities necessary for making sense of social relations and human interaction.<sup>39</sup> More specifically, novels offer ideal conditions for practising perspective taking because they often not only juxtapose a broad range of characters and their perspectives, but are also often told from different points of view. Therefore, readers inevitably engage in shifting perspectives and adopting the points of view of fictional individuals, whether they are aware of it or not.

Summing up the cognitive value of literature, one could go so far as to argue that reading fiction is one of the most powerful ways of changing human minds, in a positive rather than a harmful direction, one might add. While the renowned British neuroscientist Susan Greenfield has provided a detailed account of how digital technologies are leaving their mark on our brains and changing (especially young) people's minds,<sup>40</sup> recent research in literary studies has shown that reading literary works can have a wide range of salutary effects and benefits: Reading fiction can change readers' beliefs, foster their empathic feelings, hone their skills at perspective taking, and thus improve their abilities in understanding others.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4 Literary Works as 'Valorisation Laboratories': Exploring the Ethical Value of Literature

No less important than its potential for fostering readers' cognitive abilities is literature's ethical value, the more so because these two dimensions are closely intertwined. The fact that readers can acquire non-propositional knowledge and enhance their social cognitive skills through reading already points to the close relation between the cognitive and ethical value of literature. Advanced

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39 For similar results for the improvement of empathy, see Raymond A. Mar/ Keith Oatley/ Jordan B. Peterson, "Exploring the Link between Reading Fiction and Empathy: Ruling Out Individual Differences and Examining Outcomes," *Communications* 34 (2009), 407-428, especially 407-408; for theory-of-mind abilities, see David C. Kidd/ Emanuele Castano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," *Science* 342 (2013), 377-381.

40 See Susan Greenfield, *Mind Change: How Digital Technologies Are Leaving Their Mark on Our Brains* (London: Penguin, 2014).

41 For a detailed account based on research in neuroscience and psychology, see Vera Nünning, *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds: The Cognitive Value of Fiction* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014).

cognitive and social skills are, after all, preconditions for making sound ethical deliberations and for moral actions. Since literature offers insights into the working of the human mind and allows readers to have vicarious experiences of the complexity of human behaviour in various situations, reading fiction can invite readers to exercise their ethical dispositions. Conceptualisations of the value of literature can thus be located on a scale between the poles of cognition and ethics.

Some of the most pertinent definitions of the functions of literature are based on a combination of its cognitive value and the ethical value of reading: The conceptualisation of literature as a thought experiment, the power of literature to create possible worlds, its potential to stimulate readers' imagination, and its ability to foster their sense of possibility. We should like to take a brief look at these four notions of literature in order to shed additional light on the value of literary works and the cultural work they do.

The conception of literature as "a vast laboratory for thought experiments,"<sup>42</sup> proposed by eminent philosophers like Catherine Elgin and Paul Ricoeur, among others, is situated squarely between a cognitive and ethical understanding of the value of literature. This conceptualisation of fiction has a long tradition, and it has been criticised just as fervently by some scholars as it has been defended by others. Claims for the relevance of fiction as a thought experiment are built on the insight that literature provides non-propositional knowledge, which defies abstract definition, and deals with the specific. Catherine Z. Elgin describes a thought experiment as "an imaginative exercise designed to determine what would happen if certain conditions were met."<sup>43</sup> Literary works can be understood as aesthetically created thought experiments which project complex storyworlds with a wide range of characters, thus testing different models of viable or good forms of life. This is what makes literature so valuable, since it is exactly the kind of knowledge necessary for ethical reasoning in daily life. Literary works enable the reader to have new experiences and to acquire non-propositional knowledge, which is tied to specific circumstances, while also allowing insights into other perspectives and into the perspectivity inherent in all perception. Moreover, it is worthwhile remembering that "adopting an alien perspective can be epistemically rewarding even if the adopted perspective is not accurate."<sup>44</sup> As thought experiments, fictional works "advance understanding by exemplify-

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42 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (1990; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), 148.

43 Catherine Z. Elgin, "The Laboratory of the Mind," *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge*, eds. John Gibson et al. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 47.

44 *Ibid.*, 52.

ing features and playing out their consequences. They constitute imaginative settings in which particular constellations of features are salient and display their significance. They thus afford reason to think that we would do well [...] to consider such features salient elsewhere."<sup>45</sup>

The fact that literature has the power of creating possible worlds also shows the close connection between the cognitive and ethical value of literary works. The capacity of literature to make possible worlds is crucial, for instance, for Umberto Eco's notion of the novel as "*a machine for producing possible worlds*."<sup>46</sup> Engaging with the possible storyworlds of fictions, readers are induced to imagine alternatives to the real world. The novelist Ali Smith may have this in mind when she claims that literature "allows us not just to imagine an unreal different world but also a real different world."<sup>47</sup>

As testified by its ability to generate possible worlds, literature is one of the most important means of stimulating readers' imagination. A great part of the value of literature resides in the fact that it cultivates the imagination, encouraging human beings to make full use of their creative abilities. Writers as different as Virginia Woolf and Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, concur in the belief that reading literary works is characterised by a surprisingly high degree of freedom.<sup>48</sup> In her essays, Woolf insisted again and again that the highest task of authors is to inspire the imagination of readers and to "lay an egg" in their minds, an egg that will develop into something which writers cannot control.<sup>49</sup> In this volume, the value of literature for stimulating readers' imagination and inciting them to change their attitudes and actions is discussed by Susan Arndt, who emphasises the importance of dreams for envisioning and bringing about alternative futures.

By fostering and refining readers' imagination, literary works also boost their sense of possibility. Literary works do not merely depict the real world as it is, but rather delineate emergent forms of life and imagine alternative life-forms, thus raising important questions about which forms of life and world-models can be regarded as desirable or valuable.<sup>50</sup> By doing so, literary

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45 Ibid., 47.

46 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1984), 246 (italics in the original).

47 Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Penguin, 2013), 188.

48 Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* Trans. Bernard Frechtman (1949; London: Routledge, 2001), 37.

49 Virginia Woolf, "Fishing," *The Moment and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1947), 176.

50 For a detailed exploration of these issues, see the articles in Michael Basseler/ Daniel Hartley/ Ansgar Nünning, eds., *Emergent Forms of Life in Anglophone Literature: Conceptual Frameworks and Critical Analyses* (Trier: WVT, 2015).

fiction extends and fosters what the German novelist Robert Musil called the 'sense of possibility,' which he pitted against the sense of reality. According to Musil, the sense of possibility is a creative disposition that allows human beings to imagine alternative possibilities and scenarios to what is really the case in the real world: "So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not."<sup>51</sup> Fostering readers' imagination, the value of literature thus resides in its power to turn readers into a new kind of species that Musil calls "possibilitarians" (*Möglichkeitsmenschen*), human beings who show appreciation and respect for possible, albeit as yet not realised, states of affairs.

The cultivation of this sense of possibility is closely related to ethics in a book devoted to the ethical and cognitive value of narratives written by the Finnish narrative theorist Hanna Meretoja. She reaches a number of conclusions which are pertinent not only to narratives, but also to the understanding of the value of literary works. For Meretoja, the potential of narratives "to cultivate and expand our sense of the possible is ethically crucial."<sup>52</sup> According to Meretoja, this expansion of the sense of the possible is of vital importance for a number of other properties and functions of narratives, which can

(2) contribute to personal and cultural self-understanding; (3) provide an ethical mode of understanding other lives and experiences non-subsumptively in their singularity; (4) create, challenge, and transform narrative in-betweens; (5) develop our perspective-awareness and our capacity for perspective-taking; and (6) function as a mode of ethical inquiry.<sup>53</sup>

All of these functions can similarly be fulfilled by non-narrative literary works such as poems or plays, which serves to underscore the great value of literature in general and not just of narrative fiction.

The ethical value of literary works has also been defined in more general terms, emphasising e.g. literature's potential to provide insights into moral (and immoral) human behaviour and its power to foster the abilities and knowledge that readers need in order to act as responsible citizens in a democracy. In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth, one of the founding fathers of ethical criticism and narrative theory (*avant la lettre*), for instance cogently argued that literature disseminates ethically valuable

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51 Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins (1930-43; London: Picador, 2017), 11.

52 Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 35.

53 *Ibid.*, 35; see also *ibid.* 90.



ideas as a form of “moral guidance” or “moral education.”<sup>54</sup> Although such claims might sound a bit old-fashioned in this day and age, they should not be dismissed too lightly, since literature arguably still plays a prominent role in the dissemination of ethical values and moral norms.<sup>55</sup>

The full potential of the ethical value of literature is probably most pertinently explored in many influential publications by the eminent philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who argues that the inherent properties of literature are of crucial importance for ethical knowledge and reasoning. What is more, Nussbaum makes explicit what, in many other conceptualisations, is merely tacitly presupposed but usually not discussed in detail: The fact that not every literary work has great value, while some novels written in the nineteenth century have an outstanding ethical value. The latter depends not only on the way of reading, but also on the aesthetic and formal features of the work in question. For Nussbaum, “certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist.”<sup>56</sup> According to Nussbaum, ethical questions are explored in fictional narratives that convey distinct non-propositional knowledge and negotiate morally salient particulars. The realm of literature thus serves as a medium of thought and exploration, which engages the full range of readers’ affective and cognitive faculties. Nussbaum maintains that certain realist novels can thus “cultivate and reinforce valuable moral abilities” which are necessary for “public deliberations in democracy.”<sup>57</sup> Key among these moral abilities is the capacity to feel not just empathy, but also compassion: Focusing “on the role of the imagination in promoting compassion, I argue that certain specific literary works develop those imaginative abilities in a valuable way.”<sup>58</sup>

Many of Nussbaum’s insights anticipate major tenets of the psychological exploration of the value of literature for enhancing social cognition. The latter includes e.g. the potential of literature to offer vicarious experiences which go beyond what readers are likely to encounter in their everyday lives, the concern with particulars of daily experience, and the importance of an immersive reading process that not only includes affective processes but also testifies to

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54 Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1988), 211.

55 Cf. Astrid Erll/ Herbert Grabe/ Ansgar Nünning, eds., *The Dissemination of Values through Literature and other Media* (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 2008).

56 Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: OUP, 1990), 5.

57 Martha Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1988), 346.

58 *Ibid.*, 350. In this volume, the affective value of fiction for fostering readers’ sympathy and compassion is explored by Vera Nünning.

the simultaneity of engagement (and intimacy) on the one hand, and aesthetic distance on the other.<sup>59</sup> While some of the insights of the psychological study of the cognitive value of literature can be mapped onto Nussbaum's exploration of its ethical value, Nussbaum is not only highly aware of, but even bases her argument on the uniqueness of literary narratives, which are treated in the same vein as factual stories by most psychologists, who largely neglect the formal features of fiction.

If one wanted to put the ethical value of literature and of aesthetic experiences in a nutshell, one could hardly find a better shorthand for it than the phrase 'valorisation laboratories' coined by the French literary historian Yves Citton in his brilliant book *The Ecology of Attention*. Citton emphasises that "*the immersion in an aesthetic experience leads to the valorization of previously unexpected sensations and feelings, and/or the modification of associated valorizations.*"<sup>60</sup> Literary works can indeed be fruitfully conceptualised as laboratories of cultural, ethical, and moral revalorisations. Such aesthetic laboratories not only encourage us to question and reflect on our modes of valorisation, they also serve to challenge the hegemonic mode in capitalist societies, viz. "CAPITALISTIC VALORIZATION, which measure the value of a good or activity based only on its capacity for maximizing the profits of an investor."<sup>61</sup> The notions of literature as valorisation laboratories and modes of revalorisation thus lead on to the question of what the cultural, social, and economic value of literature might reside in.

## 5 Literature as a Cultural Resource of Resilience: Outlining the Cultural, Social, and Ecological Value of Literary Works

There is, however, more that needs to be reckoned with concerning the extrinsic value of literature than what we have outlined in the sections above about the cognitive and ethical value of literary works. Nonetheless, the cognitive and ethical benefits delineated in the last two sections provide the basis for a range of more encompassing dimensions involved in the broader cultural value of literary works. We will briefly sketch out how the cultural, ecological, and social value of literature can be conceptualised by singling out one approach and example for each of the approaches and facets we will explore.

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59 For a discussion of the major tenets of the cognitive value of literature, see Vera Nünning, *Reading Fiction, Changing Minds*, especially chapters 2, 3, and 5.

60 Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge/ Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2018), 150, original emphasis.

61 *Ibid.*, original emphasis.

One of the most comprehensive approaches for coming to terms with the cultural functions and thus the extrinsic value of literature was developed by Hubert Zapf in his important work on 'literature as cultural ecology.' Zapf proposed a sophisticated "functional theory of imaginative text."<sup>62</sup> According to his tripartite model, the subtleties of which defy any attempt at summarising it briefly, the "cultural-ecological function of literature can be described as a combination of three main procedures." First, literature not only represents but also balances, lays bare, and critiques typical contradictions, deficits, and deformations displayed by the economic, political, and social systems of a given society. By doing so, literature fulfils "the function of a *cultural-critical metadiscourse*." Secondly, literature often focuses on those dimensions of the real world and the "collective unconscious" (*sensu* Jameson) that are marginalised, neglected, or repressed by the hegemonic discourse, thus confronting society with alternative models or possible storyworlds that serve to put the dominant world-models into perspective. Zapf's term for this is "the function of an *imaginative counter-discourse*." Thirdly, literature serves to confront that which is marginalised or repressed in a given system with the hegemonic worldview and to synthesise or reintegrate the various discourses that are usually separated in society (e.g. the discourses of the systems of politics, economics, law, education, etc.), thus fulfilling "the function of a *reintegrative inter-discourse*."

In addition to, and closely linked to these three cultural functions, literature also fulfils important normative functions because it often serves to represent, disseminate, critique, and generate norms and values. The relationship between the values widely accepted in any given society and those projected by literary texts may again vary dramatically. On the one hand, literature can authorise and subscribe to hegemonic values and norms, e.g. propagating ideologically charged views of colonialism or imperialism. Late-Victorian fictions and poetry of empire, for instance, projected norms of behaviour associated with Victorian family life onto the relationship between England and her colonies, mapping the feelings, norms, and values of the private sphere of the family onto the relationship between England and her colonies. By doing so, literary texts can fulfil ideological and even propagandistic functions, serving as a means of nurturing the culture's dominant fictions. On the other hand, however, literature can also fulfil critical functions vis-à-vis the norms and values generally accepted by society. Instead of supporting dominant

62 Hubert Zapf, "Literature as Cultural Ecology: Notes Towards a Functional Theory of Imaginative Texts, with Examples from American Literature," *Literary History/Cultural History: Force-Fields and Tensions* (REAL 17), ed. Herbert Grabes (Tübingen: Narr, 2001), 85; for the following quotes in this paragraph from this article, see *ibid.*, 93.

ideological fictions and that culturally sanctioned system of ideas, beliefs, pre-suppositions, and convictions which constitutes hegemonic mentalities and world-views, literature can just as well critique the prevailing norms and values, clichés, and the discourses of power, confronting them with alternative systems of thought and new hierarchies of values, thus revalorising norms.

The main reason for the fundamental cultural value of literature concerns the creation of communities of interpretation and of narrative communities. As Jerome Bruner already observed, narratives (and one can extend this to literary works) offer much more than just stories or fictional characters: "Stories, finally, provide models of the world [...]. To tell a story was to issue an invitation not to be as the story is but to see the world as embodied in the story. In time, the sharing of common stories creates an interpretive community, a matter of great moment [...] for promoting cultural cohesion."<sup>63</sup> Although Bruner was not concerned with literature per se, fictional stories and literature in general can also create 'interpretive communities' and 'cultural cohesion.' Such interpretive and narrative communities are united by more than just the norms and values embodied in the texts, or the kind of heroes and villains presented. They also provide people with what Bruner felicitously called "a community's stored narrative resources and its equally precious toolkit of interpretive techniques: its myths, its typology of human plights, but also its traditions for locating and resolving divergent narratives."<sup>64</sup> Literary works thus offer interpretations and evaluations of experience, providing a common ground and shared framework for readers. Works of literature also offer scripts and patterns for the interpretation of experiences, thus fostering the cohesion of communities bound together by a common way of understanding life. Perhaps this value of literature adds fuel to canon debates, which, though they purport to be about (aesthetic) values and identity, can also be regarded as negotiations of ways of understanding lives and the creation of specific kinds of community. The American cultural psychologist Dan P. McAdams has further illuminated the cultural value of literature by explaining how narratives and cultures mutually reflect and shape each other:

I would submit that life stories are more reflective of and shaped by culture than any other aspect of personality. Stories are at the centre of culture. More than favored goals and values, I believe, stories differentiate one culture from the next. I have argued throughout this book that the stories people live by say as much about culture as they do about the people who live and tell them. Our own life stories draw

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63 Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (2002; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), 25.

64 Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA/ London: Harvard UP, 1990), 67-68.

on the stories we learn as active participants in culture – stories about childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and aging. Stories capture and elaborate metaphors and images that are especially resonant in a given culture. Stories distinguish between what culture glorifies as good characters and vilifies as bad characters.<sup>65</sup>

The cultural value of literature thus resides in its capacity to create interpretive communities, to disseminate communal values, and to foster social cohesion between the members of a community. In his contribution to this volume, Frederik Tygstrup sheds additional light on the relation between literature and the community, arguing that communities are at the very root of artistic creativity. Embedded in communal activities, the creation and reception of literary works also fosters attitudes and practices which are at the core of democracies, as Tygstrup shows. Moreover, literary works often have an impact on the way in which topics of cultural debate – e.g. infectious diseases, ghetto life, treatment of animals – are understood by the population. One of the founders of modern sociology, Robert E. Park, stressed that people learn more about how to understand society and communicate with each other “from literature and the arts” than “from experience,” and that the symbolic communication via literature “profoundly influences sentiment and attitudes”<sup>66</sup> which form the basis of our actions.

Another important dimension of the cultural value of fiction concerns its formative role for leading a good life. This topic is not only at the core of Martha Nussbaum’s reflections; such an understanding of the role of literature also builds on the capacity of works of fiction to provide non-propositional knowledge, engage readers’ affections, and incite ethical reflection and self-clarification. As proponents of the so-called ‘eudaimonic turn’ (James O. Pawelski and D.J. Moores) have argued,<sup>67</sup> literary studies has good reasons to involve itself more strongly than previously in the interdisciplinary discussion on what constitutes a good life in that literature itself creates important life-knowledge and cultural models of what a good life could look like. Literary works delineate aesthetically created thought experiments that test different models of viable or good forms of life (section 2). The knowledge of literature, however, does not entail explicit or normative recommendations

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65 Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 284.

66 Robert E. Park, qtd. from Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008), 143.

67 See e.g. James O. Pawelski/ D.J. Moores, eds., *The Eudaimonic Turn: Well-Being in Literary Studies* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2014).

on how to lead one's life, but is based more on the aesthetic modes and literary techniques used for representing forms of life.<sup>68</sup>

As we have elsewhere tried to show, one could even go further and argue one of the most important aspects of the value of literature is its capacity to foster well-being and to help human beings to stay healthy.<sup>69</sup> In the wake of such approaches as the medical humanities and narrative medicine there have been quite a few research projects and publications that seem to support such a hypothesis. Autobiographies and other literary narratives, for instance, foster readers' 'sense of coherence,' which is Aaron Antonovsky's key term for the definition and understanding of salutogenesis. A person's sense of coherence is not only one of the most crucial factors for people's sense of mental and physical well-being; it is also almost certainly connected to narrative competence and the reading of fictional, and factual, narratives. One study has even demonstrated that "book readers experienced a 20% reduction in risk of mortality over the 12 years of follow up compared to non-book readers."<sup>70</sup>

Other innovative approaches that have been developed since the turn of the millennium have also underscored the value of literature by redirecting scholarly attention towards broader ecological concerns. Particularly interesting cases in point include, for instance, such recent approaches as ecocriticism and cultural ecology, both of which open up new horizons for conceptualising the value of literature in interesting ways. Both are concerned with the relation between literature and the environment. Cultural ecology is interested in the role that aesthetic forms of narratives play in shaping our views of the environment, the natural world, and the planet at large. During the last two decades, ecocritics have drawn attention to the potential of literature in depicting endangered species and environmental crises and catastrophes, making readers aware of such looming threats as deforestation, the destruction of natural habitats, and global warming. Literary works about climate change, for instance, do not only reflect processes of slow change that occur in the real world; they also shape public perception of a large variety of phenomena involved in such global phenomena. Moreover, since literary works engage

68 Vera Nünning/ Ansgar Nünning, "Literaturwissenschaft und der *eudaimonic turn*: Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen zum Lebenswissen der Literatur und zu Axel Hackes *Wozu wir da sind* als literarisches Gedankenexperiment für ein gelungenes Leben," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 70,1 (2020), 53-83.

69 Ansgar Nünning/ Vera Nünning, "How to Stay Healthy and Foster Well-Being with Narratives, or: Where Narratology and Salutogenesis Could Meet," *How to Do Things with Narrative: Cognitive and Diachronic Perspectives*, eds. Jan Alber/ Greta Olson (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 2017), 157-186.

70 Avni Bavishi/ Martin D. Slade/ Becca R. Levy, "A Chapter a Day: Association of Book Reading with Longevity," *Social Science & Medicine* 164 (2016), 44.

readers' emotions, they are more likely to prompt a change in people's attitudes towards the environment and incite them to action than sober factual accounts or statistics. Instead of examining only complex literary works, ecocritical researchers have also demonstrated the value of genres that were not deemed to be worthy of scholarly attention such as science fiction or "cli-fi," genres which frequently evoke a future after a climate catastrophe.<sup>71</sup>

For an understanding of the value of literature, the approach that has come to be known as 'cultural ecology' is particularly illuminating. In his conceptualisation of literature as cultural ecology, Hubert Zapf goes beyond traditional ecocritical approaches to emphasise the unique potential of cultural forms of expression, particularly of literature,

to continually restore the richness, diversity, and complexity of those inner landscapes of the mind, the imagination, the psyche, and of interpersonal communication which make up the cultural ecosystems of modern humans, but are threatened with impoverishment by an increasingly overeconomised, standardised, and de-personalised contemporary culture.<sup>72</sup>

Literature can imagine and explore alternative value systems and attitudes that have been marginalised and repressed, but which are necessary "for an adequately complex account of humanity's existence within the fundamental culture–nature relationship." Literary works can also serve as an "imaginative sounding board for hidden problems, deficits and imbalances of the larger culture." Through narrative techniques like multiperspectivity or fragmentation, novels can capture part of the complexity of the entangled relationships between (non)human lives and diverse environments. Zapf's conception of the ecological force of literature integrates central tenets of the cognitive and ethical value of literature, which are enriched by ecological deliberations. In his article in this volume, Zapf continues his explorations by focusing on the value of literature for survival.

We should like to conclude this section by venturing the hypothesis that literature, just like other artifacts and fictions, is one of the most important, albeit often neglected cultural resources of resilience. This arguably holds true both for the individual and the collective level of society. As especially Heta Pyrhönen's essay, but also some of the other articles in this volume show,

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71 See e.g. Astrid Bracke, *Climate Crisis and the 21st-Century British Novel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

72 Hubert Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 3; the quotes in the next paragraph are from this book, *ibid.*, 4. See also Hubert Zapf, ed., *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* (Berlin/ Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2016).

literary works can serve as a powerful resource of resilience in that they help people to come to terms with, and possibly even to master, crises. As the editors of, and contributors to, a recent volume on the topic of *Europe's Crises and Cultural Resources of Resilience* have demonstrated, Europe's literary traditions do not only constitute one of the most important connecting elements of the various European cultures and nations; they have also served as powerful resources of resilience that Europe has at its disposal in order to respond creatively to the series of challenges and crises that we have witnessed during recent decades.<sup>73</sup>

## 6 The Value of Literature in Relation to 'Concepts of the Desirable'

The cultural value of literature for health and well-being or for gaining a better understanding of environmental concerns are just two instances of why literary works are not just worth bothering with but what makes them so valuable. Just like the financial and market value of works of art, these cultural and ecological considerations are intricately related to value judgements made by individuals and institutional acts of valorisation. In the context of public debates about such fundamental values as justice, benevolence, or liberty, however, a different definition of the term 'value' comes to the fore. In this sense, values always refer to abstract "concepts of the desirable,"<sup>74</sup> which guide people's attitudes, thoughts and behaviour. In a famous definition, Clyde Kluckhohn posits that a "value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection of available modes, means and ends of action." Values serve as guiding principles of individual (and collective) behaviour. This conceptualisation of value, too, can fruitfully be applied to explore additional facets of the value of literature.

According to this definition, values are characterised by affective and cognitive elements. Values do not only "refer to desirable goals that motivate action," they are also "linked inextricably to affect."<sup>75</sup> They engage the emo-

73 See Michael, Basseler/ Imke Polland/ Sandro Moraldo/ Ansgar Nünning, eds., *Europe's Crises and Cultural Resources of Resilience: Conceptual Explorations and Literary Negotiations* (Trier: WVT, 2020).

74 Clyde Kluckhohn, "Values and Value-Orientations in the Theory of Action," *Toward a General Theory of Action*, eds. Talcott Parsons/ Edward Shields (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1951), 395; the other quote in this paragraph is from the same page.

75 Shalom H. Schwarz, "An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2.1 (2012), 3.



tions and can even motivate people to perform actions which may not serve their own interests. Values are thus broad desirable goals that apply to human behaviour at a middle level of abstraction. They are related to attitudes, which concern the positive or negative evaluation of particular entities and are thus more specific than values, since they “can evaluate people, behaviors, events, or any object, whether specific (ice cream) or abstract (progress).”<sup>76</sup> Values, in contrast, form the basis of the evaluation of specific objects; they are not tied to specific entities, but instead guide our behaviour across various domains and situations. Moreover, values “motivate people’s action and serve as guiding principles in their lives.”<sup>77</sup>

A prominent dimension of the extrinsic value of literature is based on this general notion of values as abstract ‘concepts of the desirable’: Literary works can serve to shape, negotiate and disseminate such fundamental values as autonomy, benevolence, or loyalty. It is not yet quite clear, however, how the literary representation of such values, which are embedded in particular works, can be explored by textual analysis, because they are inextricably intertwined with both the text and the storyworld as a whole and specific aspects of non-propositional knowledge that defy conceptualisation. Since values are ‘trans-situational’ and can be applied (or ignored) in specific situations, it is difficult to tease them out of literary works, a task which requires sophisticated methods of textual analysis to get to grips with the complex ways in which they are represented in narrative fiction.

Notwithstanding these problems, it is acknowledged that literature is an important means of representing, negotiating, and even generating cultural values. An important extrinsic value of literary works resides in their ability to disseminate or popularise prevailing values, but also of course to challenge, modify, question, and subvert hegemonic hierarchies of values, including constructing and disseminating new values. Literature can also serve an important means of reflecting on concepts of the desirable which guide moral conduct. Since the importance of literature for the distribution or critique of values has been dealt with in other publications already,<sup>78</sup> it will not be one of the key concerns explored in this volume.

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76 Ibid., 16.

77 Lilach Sagiv/ Sonia Roccas/ Jan Ciecuch/ Shalom H. Schwartz, “Personal Values in Human Life,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 1.9 (2017), 630.

78 See e.g. Sibylle Baumbach/ Herbert Grabes/ Ansgar Nünning, eds., *Literature and Values. Literature as a Medium for Representing, Disseminating and Constructing Norms and Values* (Trier: WVT, 2009); Astrid Erll/ Herbert Grabes/ Ansgar Nünning, eds., *The Dissemination of Values through Literature and other Media* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008); Hanna Meretoja et al., eds., *Values of Literature* (London: Rodopi, 2015).

In its capacity as a laboratory for reframing the concepts of value and values,<sup>79</sup> and for revalorising prevailing hierarchies of cultural norms and values, literature could become an important force in the ongoing attempts to reinvent value as a key concept, and to talk and think about values in a way that is fit for the emerging new challenges of the 21st century. Literary studies could certainly do worse than taking some inspiration from Kate Raworth's brilliant book *Doughnut Economics*, in which the innovative Oxford economist delineates "Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist," as the felicitous subtitle succinctly puts it. Focusing on the unique ecological, economic, and social challenges of the 21st century, Raworth develops a comprehensive model for reframing the economy, changing its main concepts and goals, and redirecting our attention from the hitherto prevailing master narrative of relentless growth and profit to the central question of "what enables human beings to thrive?"<sup>80</sup> As we have tried to show in this introduction, that is a question about which literature has a lot to say, and it is high time for literary studies to engage in these debates about value(s).

As far as rethinking the concept of value is concerned, Mariana Mazzucato's book *The Value of Everything* provides particularly thought-provoking suggestions. The radical economist Mazzucato not only questions the conventional values and wisdom of her discipline; she also offers nothing less than a new vision of what constitutes real values in our society. Convincingly explaining "why value theory matters,"<sup>81</sup> Mazzucato demonstrates that there is much more to value and value creation than either "MSV" (i.e. maximising shareholder value) or maximising the rate of GDP growth. Part of the great value of literature consists in offering alternative visions of what constitutes real value and what makes life worth living. If Raworth is right that "talking about values and goals is a lost art waiting to be revived," literary works could well be among the most important means of reviving that art and showing how we could get from prioritising metrics, quantity, and statistics to appreciating values that really matter for humans and their well-being. Anyone looking for a "twenty-first-century compass" and interested in how we can achieve

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79 On the processes involved in reframing, see Nora Berning/ Ansgar Nünning/ Christine Schwanecke, eds., *Reframing Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies: Theorizing and Analyzing Conceptual Transfers* (Trier: WVT, 2014).

80 Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 43; for the second quote, see *ibid.*, 42.

81 Mariana Mazzucato, *The Value of Everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy* (London: Random House, 2018), 11; for "MSV," see *ibid.*, 17, 165-174.

“A BETTER FUTURE FOR ALL,”<sup>82</sup> is unlikely to find better, richer and more thought-provoking models than those offered by great works of literature.

## 7 Introducing the Structure and Articles of the Volume: A Brief Overview

This volume explores a broad range of ways in which the value of literature can be freshly conceptualised for the challenges and concerns of the 21st century, where an unprecedented conglomeration of crises and the urgent need to cope with them provide new challenges to the relevance of literary studies. The articles in this volume show that the study of literature is anything but a luxury or a nice-to-have in that it can help us come to terms with some of the key current challenges and concerns, and to develop literary and cultural studies into a problem-solving paradigm rather than just disciplines revolving around critique.<sup>83</sup> Highlighting the value of literary works, the editors of and contributors to this volume attempt to show not only why literature and literary studies still matter, but why literary works and their scholarly analysis may be more important than ever before. Literary works can help us to understand multiple viewpoints, competing logics and divergent attitudes, and they can create interpretive communities, disseminate knowledge, change prevailing perceptions of current crises, and imagine alternative forms and ways of life. Exploring and illuminating literary ways of worldmaking can thus help us to challenge the hegemonic master narratives and economic fictions that capitalist societies live by, and to reframe the ways in which we deal with the most challenging concerns and conjunctures of the new millennium.

In the light of the plethora of crises occurring in the 21st century, above all in the face of the epistemological crisis of truth, the cognitive, ethical, cultural, and ecological value of literature as delineated in the respective sections above are of crucial importance. Focusing on the value of literature is arguably one of the most promising ways of re-aligning literary studies with current challenging and emerging concerns. Recalibrating the notions of value and values as key concepts for literary studies, the articles in this volume move beyond the paradigm of critique by focusing on the question of what

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82 Raworth, *Doughnut Economics*, 43; Mazzucato, *The Value of Everything*, 279 (capital letters in the original).

83 For an attempt at sketching a blueprint for the study of culture, see Ansgar Nünning, “Taking Responsibility for the Future: Ten Modest Proposals for Shaping the Future of the Study of Culture as a Problem-Solving Paradigm,” *Futures of the Study of Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Global Challenges*, eds. Doris Bachmann-Medick/ Jens Kugele/ Ansgar Nünning (Berlin/ Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2020), 29-65.

exactly makes literary works so valuable for readers and society at large, while at the same time enriching our conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Anchored in different traditions of literary studies, the contributors adopt a wide range of angles, approaches, and methods, but they all revolve around the positive uses and value of literature, asking what we can gain by reading literary works. Although the breadth and scope of arguments, texts, and topics that the essays cover is so wide that any neat division into categories will be somewhat artificial, the articles can be loosely grouped under three major umbrellas. Therefore, the volume is divided into three parts, concluding with an epilogue.

The articles in the first part are all devoted to various aspects of what can be called “The Cognitive Value of Literature,” which has attracted quite a lot of attention in literary studies in the wake of what has been dubbed ‘the cognitive turn,’ especially by scholars working in fields like cognitive narratology, cognitive poetics, and cognitive literary studies in general. The section begins with two essays that can be located in the field of cognitive narratology. Jan Alber explores the role of “Literature as Identity Laboratory: Storyworld Possible Selves and Boundary Expansions.” Joining insights from narrative theory and psychology, Alber adopts an empirical perspective and sketches how one can verify the cognitive value of literature as a testing ground for trying out new self-images and identities. Redirecting attention from the cognitive to the affective dimension, Vera Nünning is concerned with a specific affective value,<sup>84</sup> viz. with the “Value of Literature for the ‘Extension of our Sympathies.’” Building on findings from philosophy, psychology, and narratology, she identifies twelve narrative conventions that have the potential to direct and extend readers’ sympathies, inciting them to affectively engage with the perspectives of particular characters, while also appreciating new ideas and values. Her argument not only draws on George Eliot’s poetics and Martha Nussbaum’s work; it also refers to premises of the role of the reader in the ‘new sincerity,’ discussed by Michael Basseler in section three.

The next two essays are concerned with issues related to the knowledge of literature. In her article “On the Epistemic Value of Literature for Philosophy: William James’ Pluralism and the Knowledge of Literary Narratives,” Alexandra Strohmaier asks to what extent and in which way literature influenced the philosophy of William James. Focusing on a German tradition so far neglected by James scholarship, she argues that “James’s commitment to

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84 See also Vera Nünning, “The Affective Value of Fiction: Presenting and Evoking Emotions,” *Writing Emotions: Theoretical Concepts and Selected Case Studies in Literature*, eds. Ingeborg Jandl et al. (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 29-54.

plurality as one of the reigning features of his ontology and epistemology entails an appreciation of particularity, of temporality, change, contingency, processuality, and multiperspectivity," thus identifying a range of features of the form of literary narratives that influenced the content of James' pluralist philosophy. In her essay "Literature as an Ecological Space of Self-Awareness and Perspective-Taking," Angela Locatelli expands her wide-ranging work on the knowledge of literature by concentrating on cognitive abilities (such as empathy, theory of mind, and perspective-taking) which are fostered by the reading of literary works. She relates these skills to the irreducible quality of literature, using Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* as an example to illustrate and support her theses.

The last contribution to the first section extends the purview of previous work on the cognitive value of literature to the burgeoning field of literature and law. Susanne Knaller's article "When Law Meets Literature: The Emotional Value of Literary Texts" focuses on the relations between the emotions, law, and literature. Doing full justice to the complexity of each of these phenomena, ranging from problems of language and representation to institutional issues, Knaller not only analyses literary texts from the middle of the 19th to the early 20th century, but also provides a "short methodological proposal of how to deal with the triad law, literature, and emotion followed by an example of legal practice." This essay therefore provides a bridge between the cognitive value of literature and broader social, cultural, and ethical concerns, which are examined in the following section.

The articles in the second part of the volume explore the social, cultural, ethical, and ecological value of literature, mainly focusing on concerns that have emerged in the 21st century. Some of the essays in this section are inspired by insights of what has been dubbed the 'institutional turn,' which has ushered in "a departure from thinking about literature *as* a social institution, toward a sociological approach that examines the many and varied organisations and institutions in and through which literature and its value are produced, distributed, and consumed."<sup>85</sup> Building on recent insights about the importance of the institutional framings of literature and the many layers and complex interactions between literary texts and the huge social infrastructures that surround them, Frederic Tygstrup explores the value of literature as a specific mode of existence and way of worldmaking that turns literary works into a source for democratic citizenship. In his wide-ranging,

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85 Jeremy Rosen, "The Institutional Turn," *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature*, 25 June 2019, <https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-1028>, n.p.

yet cogently argued and coherent essay “Literature and Democracy,” he also shows how literary works can be understood in their relations to this social and institutional infrastructure, and how they can, as textual constructs, “produc[e] a potential common language of sense-making.”

The next two essays also approach works of literature in the wider context of their complex social and institutional framings, relations, and interdependencies. The title of Isabel Gil’s essay, “The Risky NPV of Literature in Dos Passos and Pessoa,” already highlights her focus on, in managerial terms, the question how “a creative cash flow of sorts defines literature’s NPV (Net Present Value).” Her interest in the wider question implied in this ambivalent metaphor, viz the nature of the relation between literature and the economy, is geared towards the representational power of a hegemonic discourse “that uses the language and the tropes of the economy to articulate the shape of our common forms of living together.” Using the specific problem of financial risk in John dos Passos’ *The Big Money* (1936) and Fernando Pessoa’s *The Anarchist Banker* (1922) as case studies, she analyses how literature “as a system and a structure of exchange aggregates the vocabulary and the images of money culture to understand the rhetoric and interpret the narratives of neo-liberalism or socialism, welfare, crisis, austerity, growth, and risk.” In her essay “Collapsing the Economic and Creative Values of Contemporary Literature,” Elizabeth Kovach also addresses the relations between the institutional and economic structures in which literature is embedded. In addition, she focuses on the ways in which two categories or conceptualisations of value – economic value vs. cultural or ideational value – are negotiated in a specific genre, contemporary ‘novels of commission,’ which highlight “a consideration of the value of literature as something that is at once economic and creative.”

Marion Gymnich and Jan Rupp pursue a more specific approach to the social and cultural value of literature in their respective articles. Exploring “The Value of Literature in an Aging Society,” Gymnich’s essay proceeds from the insight that the demographic changes in Western societies and the new predominance of people over 65 warrants a new take on fields as various as health care, employment and social insurance, retirement, and the economy. Gymnich shows that literary works can play an important role in fostering a better understanding of the perception of old age and the complex processes of aging, something that is arguably a crucial premise for designing new public policies. Using a wide definition of literature, Jan Rupp explores the importance of storytelling for migrants who employ narratives as a means of restoring their sense of human dignity. In his felicitously entitled piece “Telling Stories, Saving Lives,” he analyses the value of a diverse body of recent narratives which he calls ‘new refugee writing,’ an emerging corpus

of diverse genres which includes testimonial and fictional narratives. Rupp shows that such texts can fulfil the function of an ‘art of survival,’ thereby introducing the notion of storytelling and literature as a “lifeline” that Heta Pyrhönen develops and elaborates in the last essay of this volume.

The last two articles in the second part of this book open up additional new perspectives on the social and cultural value of literature, reframing the central topic in significant ways: Susan Arndt is mainly concerned with the ethical, but also political value of literature as an imaginary intervention, while Hubert Zapf provides a new look at the ecological value of literature. In “P(r)oEthics: Imaginary In(ter)vention, FutureS and the Agency of Dream\*Hopes,” Arndt focuses on a very “precious value of literature [that] imagines invention in order to intervene, while displaying the agency of dream\* hopes that are nourished by emotions and empathy, while reflecting moralities, p(r)o-Ethically.” Duly highlighting the role of the imagination and relating it to the creation of hopeful dreams, Arndt convincingly delineates the potential of literary works to transport readers to unknown territories and to visit the impossible. In “Literature, Sustainability, and Survival,” Hubert Zapf builds on his well-known theory of the ecology of literature and its great, but often unacknowledged value for re-imagining the environment and for potentially changing readers’ perception of, and relation to, the environment. Moreover, he manages to bridge the apparent gap between literature (often held to be part of culture) and survival (usually perceived as part of nature or a biological mode). Citing scientists who have shown the importance of the arts for the evolution and well-being of humans, Zapf goes on to focus on the importance of the ecological dimension of literature in the face of environmental crises, while also exploring the value of works of literature for cultural and ecological sustainability, and thus for the survival of human and non-human species.

The third and last section of this volume, which we have entitled “The Value of Literature and the Reader in Recent Approaches in Literary Studies,” comprises four articles which, even more so than the articles in section two, stress that the value of literature is inextricably intertwined with, and the result of, valorisation processes. The first two essays are situated in what may be called ‘post-critique,’ since they build on Rita Felski’s exposure of the shortcomings of the prevailing paradigm of ‘critique’ and the hermeneutics of suspicion, and on her insights into what kinds of responses art and literature can elicit. Moreover, like Felski, Michael Basseler and Alexander Scherr also make good use of Bruno Latour’s rethinking of the importance of networks consisting of human and non-human agents, which leads them to emphasise the agency of the reader (Basseler) and the text (Scherr), respectively. In his article “The Value of Literature and the Role of the Reader in 21st-Century

Fiction," Basseler explores the question of the role of the reader in the "conceptualisation of the project of new literary-aesthetic movements such as the new sincerity," which he exemplifies with an enlightening interpretation of George Saunders's Booker-Prize-winning novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Alexander Scherr's essay "Towards a Postcritical Understanding of Literary Value: The Proleptic Agency of Texts" proceeds from similar premises and focuses on the communicative agency of texts, which Scherr identifies as 'proleptic.' Examining processes of 'self-canonisation' in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, he argues that the novel authorises a discourse of its own future reception which rhetorically activates a Romantic framework of aesthetic judgment and valorisation.

Christine Schwanecke takes up contemporary challenges to the value of literature and the very process of reading in her essay "Revalorising Literature in the Digital Age: Internet-Related Fiction and the Ecology of Attention." She discusses entanglements between literature and the economy as well as other factors shaping the literary environment in new ways, focusing on the co-presence of two diametrically opposed ways of reading (viz. immersive reading vs. 'skim-reading') and on the changing conditions for authors and readers who struggle with a lack of time often associated with digitalisation. In particular, she explores internet-related fictions in order to analyse in how far they represent and criticise new channels of communication and media formats, laying specific stress on their revalorisation of literature "as a medium that both demands and deserves immersion and deep attention."

In the last contribution to this section, Jürgen Schlaeger critically evaluates and questions "The Eudaimonic Turn in Literary Studies," a turn which explores the value of literature for the health and well-being of its readers. While Hubert Zapf mentions in passing a statistical study at Yale which asserts that readers live significantly longer than non-readers, Jürgen Schlaeger pursues an in-depth appreciation and critique of this extrinsic value of literature which might burn down to "yet another effort to re-focus critical attention away from analysing texts systematically to using them for specific, time-bound and as such limited and limiting purposes," therefore losing sight of the intrinsic value of literature.

The volume closes with an epilogue that goes beyond a mere scholarly investigation of literary value. In her essay "Literature as a Lifeline: The Value of Literature for a Cognitively Non-Typical Reader," Heta Pyrhönen, a renowned literary scholar from Finland, approaches the value of literature from a different, experiential perspective, which Jürgen Schlaeger might call 'praxeological.' Rather than taking the stance of the academic who explores the value of literature by employing abstract concepts and categories, Heta



Pyrhönen allows us a unique insight into her personal experience as a temporally cognitively impaired, hospitalised, and thus non-typical reader. Her gripping account of how literature quite literally served ‘as a lifeline’ for her during that critical period, a lifeline that enabled her to fight her way back into her health and profession, should give anyone who questions the value of literature reason to pause. Her essay clearly demonstrates the existential value and life-saving quality that literature can have for an avid reader at a very critical phase in her life.

Taken together, the articles in this volume demonstrate that reading and studying literary works not only continues to matter; they also show that the value of literature consists in enabling us to imagine new world-models and alternative futures, and thus to tell better future narratives. Instead of accepting the stories disseminated either in the realms of politics and the media or the largely apocalyptic and dystopian visions of the future in popular culture, we should bear in mind Grossberg’s wise and witty reminder that “*Bad Stories Make Bad Politics!*”<sup>86</sup> Our final and overarching point in arguing for the value of literature is thus that literary works not only scrutinise the hegemonic master narratives of unlimited growth and technological progress that no longer make sense of the world as it is and that cannot cope with the crises and concerns of the 21st century; they also encourage us to invent much better future narratives. We in literary studies will only have a future if the scholars working in the field are prepared to take full responsibility for it and take Tegmark’s wise words that “we need more mindful optimists” to heart.<sup>87</sup> It is certainly imperative that we “**re-orientate ourselves from an exclusive pre-occupation with retrospectively making meaning(s) to the creative activity of making future(s), prospectively.**”<sup>88</sup>

In his best-selling book *Homo Deus*, the historian Yuval Noah Harari observes that in the 21st century, “fiction might [...] become the most potent force on earth, surpassing even wayward asteroids and natural selection. Hence, if we want to understand our future, cracking genomes and crunching numbers is hardly enough. We must also decipher the fictions that give meaning to the world.”<sup>89</sup> Taking our cue from Harari and heeding his clarion-call,

86 Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham, NC/ London: Duke UP, 2010), 64, original emphasis.

87 Max Tegmark, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (London/ New York: Penguin, 2017), 334.

88 Christoph Bode/ Rainer Dietrich, *Future Narratives: Theory, Poetics, and Media-Historical Moment* (Berlin/ Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2013), 107 (bold-print emphasis in the original).

89 Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Harvill Secker, 2016), 151.

we should like to suggest that it is high time we begin putting the examination of the fictions that cultures live by onto the research agenda of literary and cultural studies. We should like to leave the second but last word (or rather paragraph) to Harari, whose argument about the great importance of fictions in an age that has been associated with ‘post-truth’ and that is permeated by ‘fake news’ and fictions of all sorts (e.g. economic, legal, political, social, and technological fictions) also pertains to the value of literature, whose forms and functions as immaterial cultural resources have not received the amount of scholarly attention that they deserve:

In fact, humans have always lived in the age of post-truth. *Homo sapiens* is a post-truth species, whose power depends on creating and believing fictions. Ever since the Stone Age, self-reinforcing myths have served to unite human collectives. Indeed, *Homo sapiens* conquered this planet thanks above all to the unique human ability to create and spread fictions. [...] As long as everybody believes in the same fictions, we all obey the same laws, and can thereby cooperate effectively.<sup>90</sup>

The proliferation of various kinds of fictions that Harari and others have observed is also a great challenge and opportunity for the study of literature in that it opens up important new fields of research. As we have tried to show above, literary fictions do not only serve as important ways of meaning-, sense- and world-making; they are also among the most powerful laboratories for revalorising our hierarchies of values and for fostering cultural resources of resilience. The articles in this volume explore a wide range of aspects and dimensions that together constitute the value of literature and that we have merely tried to sketch out in this introductory overview. We very much hope that they will show why literature is still worth bothering with and why it is also worthwhile to study literary texts. Being experts in the critical analysis of fictions and in cultural ways of worldmaking, students and professors of literature would be well-advised to extend their research to non-literary fictions and to apply their conceptual expertise, methodological know-how, and analytical research techniques to understand how economic, ideological, legal, and political fictions are constructed and disseminated. By doing so, literary and cultural studies could not only develop clear-cut notions of *why* it is worthwhile to read literary texts; they would also be much better equipped to engage in interdisciplinary research on some of the most important challenges and concerns of the 21st century.

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90 Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018), 233.

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