LITERATURE – NARRATIVE – FORMS OF LIFE

VERA NÜNNING

At first sight, the connection seems to be obvious: Literature, particularly narrative fiction, is closely intertwined with forms of life.[1] After all, fictional narratives are taken to present stories in which human or human-like characters act, in which they think and feel as well as engage with others. Surely this means that literary stories feature forms of life? What else should they feature, if not forms of life? A closer look reveals, however, that things may be a bit more complex. While it seems plausible to assume that fictional stories do present forms of life, I want to argue that other factors also have to be taken into consideration if one wants to understand the connection between fiction and forms of life. Moreover, it seems necessary to disentangle some of the premises implied in the hypothesis stating that literary stories present forms of life.[2] In the following, I want to begin with a brief exploration of the relationship between life and narrative, which will disclose the more than merely close connection between the two; they are, in addition, intricately linked to modes of perception which are a significant part of forms of life. I will then zoom in on the question of the association between literary stories and forms of life, before examining one example of a rather unlikely novel, which can help to demonstrate that the potential of literature extends that of merely presenting or imitating forms of life. Instead, fiction can induce readers to question prevalent – as well as their own – implicit assumptions concerning these forms and thus provide a precondition for changing them.

1. Life and Narrative

The connection between life and narrative has long occupied the minds of historians, psychologists, philosophers and, more recently, narratologists; the groundbreaking and in many ways still essential work of Jerome Bruner paved the way for the emergence of narrative psychology as a (sub)discipline in its own right. There are two basic hy-

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1 This essay is based on one of my earlier articles, which was translated by Michael Doron Hill: "Literatur – Erzählen – ZusammenLeben." In: Ottmar Ette (ed.). *Wissensformen und Wissensnormen des ZusammenLebens: Literatur – Kultur – Geschichte – Medien.* Berlin: de Gruyter. 2012: 35-62. Rather than merely providing an English version, however, the argument has been abbreviated, revised, and enriched by myself as well as stylistically revised by Bernard Woodley.

2 In the following, I use the concept 'forms of life' in the way in which it was defined in Rahel Jaeggi's (2013) brilliant book. See, for instance, Jaeggi (2013: 20f., 26, 43f., 77f., 89).

potheses on the association of life and narrative. The first, which has been called the 'strong' narrative hypothesis, presupposes that life has a narrative structure which is merely elucidated or spelled out by means of narratives. The second, 'weak' narrative hypothesis, denies any continuity between life and narration; it rather supposes that life is given a different, new structure through narrative.[3]

So far, so good. A problem arises, however, when we consider the different definitions that scholars have given for 'life' – or at least what they implicitly assume 'life' to be. Psychologists and cognitive scientists suppose that perceptions are already selected and shaped in order to allow human beings to orient themselves in their environment; if we paid equal attention to all of the millions of stimuli that are processed in order to form an image of the room we have just entered, we would be lost. Hence we need patterns to make sense of our experiences, perceptions and feelings. On a higher level of abstraction, narratives play a vital role in our understanding of life, and our ability to remember and communicate. We have to identify units and patterns (such as 'a person' an 'intention,' an 'action') in order to comprehend and memorise them. However, proponents of the 'strong' narrative hypothesis appear to have a fundamentally different understanding of life: Theodore Sarbin (1990), for instance, focuses on the narrative quality of actions (and feelings), which already imply a narrative structure: there is the interpretation of something that happened before; this is followed by an emotion or an action, which again has consequences and changes the given situation. Moreover, people often use narrative patterns or characters they came to know by means of (fictional) stories, and model their own actions and experiences according to those. Like David Carr (2001), who claims that there is a continuity between life and narrative, however, Sarbin refers to human experiences. These already imply complex 'top-down'-processing, which in turn involves the use of narrative patterns.[4] Consequently, the prevalent juxtaposition of the two dominant hypotheses is by no means unproblematic; the striking, opposing statements on whether stories are found or created, and lived or narrated, seem to be misleading. Even Donald Polkinghorne's position (1998), which mediates between the two allegedly contradictory hypotheses, does not resolve or simplify these issues, as he does not clarify what he means precisely by those 'pre-narrative' experiences that become explicit in subsequent narratives.

These contradictory theses are at the core of definitions of what 'life' is held to be. In the 'strong' narrative hypothesis life is sometimes implicitly assumed to be something we might call 'interpreted life,' an interpretation of events which is already influenced by narrative patterns. This definition, however, appears a bit too reductive. I would rather propose that life be conceptualised in a way that encompasses two different facets: (narratively) interpreted life and a wide range of experiences. If we include

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3 For a juxtaposition of both hypotheses, cf. Hyvärinen 2006: 22-27; cf. also Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2002: 54, and Widdershoven 1993: 3-5.

4 In an article co-written with Mancuso (Mancuso/Sarbin 1986: 234-235), Sarbin proposes that human beings need to make sense of their chaotic perceptions, and that this is achieved by narrative structures.

perceptions, images, "bare sensations, particular images, disconnected slices of life, 'spots of time'"[5] in our conception of life, we cannot equate experience with interpretation. The distinction between experience and interpretation becomes more visible when we consider traumatic experiences, which have an overpowering effect on individuals because they are not yet 'interpreted' in any meaningful way. Such experiences cannot be told before coming to terms with them through and with narratives.

Stories and the understanding of narratives therefore play a crucial role in our comprehension of life; their importance can hardly be overestimated. Only through reflection and interpretation do pre-narrative perceptions, transcendental experiences and experiences of the sublime become 'interpreted life.' This process involves the use of forms that are picked up and transformed time and again – according to the rules of narration. These narrative conventions shape life; they interpret it and attribute meaning to it. As not only psychotherapists stress, each experience can be narrated, and therefore interpreted, in a myriad of ways (cf. Schafer 1980: 20, 40-41; Lucius-Hoene/ Deppermann 2002: 60). The way in which we make sense of our experiences is influenced by different factors – and it changes with time, adapts to changing self-conceptions, to each given situation, and to our present aims. Above all it is both shaped by the narrative conventions which we use in order to understand an initially diffuse event in the first place, thus rendering it memorable and encodable, as well as influenced by the overarching life story into which we integrate any given scene.

What is often called the 'weak narrative hypothesis,' according to which events and life do not *per se* have a narrative structure, thus becomes a very strong hypothesis when we want to assess the importance of narratives for the understanding of our lives. Whatever may characterise life on the 'pre-narrative' level of experience, the meaning of life can only be understood and construed by using narrative patterns.[6] Narratives are our means of positioning ourselves in relation to experience, of making sense of our lives and of guaranteeing survival. Narrative is fundamentally different from experience; narrative creates life.[7]

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5 Hinchman/Hinchman (1997: xvi) define these perceptions as 'pre-narrative experiences,' similarly to Polkinghorne. However, perceptions are already filtered, despite the fact that they seem to be relatively uninfluenced by active imagination and interpretation (cf. Kerr 2008: 210). Kerr also points out that even those perceptions with which we are being confronted every second require a high rate of selection, of 'filters' (*bayesian filters*) and composition in order to create a sense of direction in the first place. For an outline of different scholarly approaches which examine how salient features are selected for perceptions, cf. ibid.: 210ff.

6 See, for instance, Widdershoven (1993: 2). There also exist opposing points of view, with Strawson (2004) postulating that some people are "episodic" in that they do not create fully fledged, encompassing life stories. I think, however, that narrative means play an important role even in our understanding of episodes. However, though narrative does play a crucial role, other means (such as images) should also be taken into account.

7 According to previous scholarship narrative is universal in the sense that it can be found in all cultures; its shapes, however, are dependent on cultural and historical variables. At

The significance of narrative has already been highlighted by Jerome Bruner, who argued that narrative is a mode of thinking, a way of accessing reality that shapes our view and model of reality – and thus our actions. Bruner, building on the work of Nelson Goodman, stresses that we have very sophisticated approaches to comprehending the physical world, but that our understanding of everyday life and our experiences remains largely implicit. While we take pains to acquire the essential theories and methods of scientific, argumentative and 'propositional' thinking, the 'narrative thinking' through which we arrange and understand our lives is so ubiquitous that we remain unconscious of its importance. We learn to employ narratives implicitly, as children, and we are as little aware of the regularity and importance of narrative conventions as we are of the rules governing our native language. We are thus prone to overlook the significance narrative has, for instance, for the construction of a coherent structure of time and space, the identification of characters and characterization, the attribution of intentions to actors, and the corresponding construction of events; and these are only some of the most important functions that narrative fulfils (cf. Pethes 2008: 124f.).

From a narratological point of view, there are at least seven characteristics of narrative which shape our thinking – although I must admit that most scholarly literature only mentions the first four: (1) situating narrative in a specific communicative situation (orientation towards a specific addressee); (2) constructing a world that involves changes (a 'story' with a beginning, middle and ending); (3) a linear form (sequentiality); (4) an attribution of 'what it is like' or experientiality (instead of a depiction of abstract states) (cf. Herman 2009: 73-75); (5) perspectivisation; (6) the shaping power of genre conventions; and (7) an inherent moral positioning (a narrative communicates values).[8]

All of these characteristics influence the attribution of meaning. Psychotherapists in particular have stressed that the starting point, the choice of where to begin a story, is of considerable significance. The way in which 'narrative thinking' creates meaning can be illustrated by comparing the following two sentences:

He bought a burglar alarm, and his house was broken into.
His house was broken into, and he bought a burglar alarm.

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any rate, narrative conventions shape and limit what can be said (and thought). On the cultural and social specificity of narrative forms, cf. Nelson (2003: 19-21). Different disciplines (and discourses) also use different narrative conventions. Cf. Klein/Martínez 2009.

[8] This characteristic is often overlooked in the narratological literature. Cf., however, Bruner (1991: 1-21, 15f.); Hinchman/Hinchman (1997: xxviii), Nünning (2010: 223-236), and Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann (2002: 43).

Even such minimal narratives underline the principle first stressed by Roland Barthes: 'post hoc' is usually mixed up with and interpreted as 'propter hoc';[9] what follows is regarded as a consequence of the previous. We hear a sequence and construct a temporal and causal link between the facts or episodes. In the case of the example given above, the first sentence conveys a sense of irony, implying that the house was broken into just after a burglar alarm, meant to prevent this event, was installed. The second sentence is interpreted as a logical sequence of events, in which the burglary leads to the attempt to improve the security of the property. The conjunction 'and,' however, does not signify temporal connection, much less causality. We merely presume or imply these links; we interpret experience according to narrative conventions.

Narrative is therefore not a neutral form that experience can be 'poured' into; narrations shape our understanding of life, the way we see ourselves, our attitudes and actions. We can narrate the same event as either comedy or tragedy, turning ourselves into either victims or agents. One aspect seems to be of particular importance, though it has (as far as I am aware) so far escaped scholarly attention: the influence of genre conventions. These narrative conventions may be equally unknown to narrators and listeners; nevertheless, they give form to their expectations and actions in the same way that the choice of an explanatory schema does for micro- or macro-biology. At the same time narrative allows us to shape our lives in creative ways: "Narrative [...] emphasizes the active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the power of stories to create and refashion personal identity" (Hinchman/Hinchman 1997: xiv.).

This already characterises a function of narrative that is essential to our lives – we establish our identities through narrative; we construct and reconstruct our lives anew every day: "A self is probably the most impressive work of art we ever produce, surely the most intricate" (Bruner 2003 [2002]: 14). We create our identities and understanding of life by narrating experiences to ourselves and to others in a way that allows for a more or less stable balance between continuity with regard to the past and adaptation to the present situation.[10] Life cannot be grasped by trying to recapture former events; it is constructed through a continuous process of interpretation by way of narration. In creating our own identities, we are all artists.[11]

But what does narrative achieve, apart from those functions of providing orientation and contributing to constructing identities, which have been examined by psychologists (cf. Straub 1998: 126-142)? Etymology may help us to gain a better under-

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9 Cf. Barthes (1977 [1966]: 94): "the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read in narrative as what is *caused* by." I owe this example to David Herman (2003: 176).

10 On the impact of narrative connectivity on the encoding of experience and memory, and on the balance between 'adaptive correspondence and self-coherence,' cf. Conway/Singer/Tagini (2004: 522). Bruner claims that "[s]elf-making is a narrative art" (2003 [2002]: 64-65).

11 We are not entirely free in this creative process, since we think and act within cultural frameworks; cf. McAdams 2003: 196.

standing of narrative. The German word for narrate, '*erzählen,*' is derived from the verb *zählen*, meaning to count by way of numbers instead of words. Originally, *erzählen* referred to an ordered way of listing and re-counting events, rather than 'just' telling a story. This link between telling and computing is more obvious in the Spanish '*contar*' which, depending on the context, can refer to the acts of both calculating and narrating. The connection between rationality and providing form to experiences by narrating them is even more than apparent in the Latin noun '*narratio*' – although this noun has been used in ways implying that it lacked *ratio*. Similar to the tension between interpreted life and experience, there exists a tension between a rational, regulated aspect in narration (which is apparent in the inherent order of beginning, middle part and ending, in different genre conventions and patterns of causality), and an opposing force driven by experientiality, which stresses the disorderly complexity and dynamics of experiences.

So far I have focused mainly on narrative as a form and mode of thinking; however, one should also consider the product of narration, the story resulting from the act of telling. Narration not only embodies values, habits and 'canonical scripts,' it is also an important means of distributing them within a given culture. These values and patterns of sense-making circulate within a culture; narratives play a significant role in spreading central cultural beliefs, attitudes and evaluations.[12] Through this popularisation of values which are shared in a given culture, they also strengthen the imaginative community of its members. Narratives are both a means of interpreting and forming the meaning that we give to our lives, and a pool of patterns and models which we can use in order to interpret events.

Whether as process or product, narrative conveys values, facilitates understanding and gives form to our ideas of life. Life 'as such' is inaccessible: we need sign systems to approach it, and narrative plays a pivotal part in this process. Narrative thinking "reconciles categories that are often thought incompatible: identity and diversity, unity and deviation, continuity and discontinuity" (Straub 2000: 173, translated by Hill). Just like literary texts, narratives usually feature some kind of coherence. They are particularly suited to a life "marked by contradictions and the clash of diverse logics" (Ette 2005: 69, translated by Hill). In order to attribute meaning to life – and to negotiate contradictions between contradictory logics and conceptions of the world – we can choose from a myriad of narratives and reshape them for our own purposes. In a world marked by fragmentation, acceleration and the advance of deontological thinking, narrative can provide an anchor which enables individuals to make sense of incoherent and contingent events. It provides a 'sense of coherence,' which is, according to Aaron Antonovsky, of crucial importance for health as well as well-being: a sense that different experiences are in some way related to each other, which in turn fosters a sense

[12] Cf. Novitz (1989: 66); Herman (2003: 182) also stresses "narrative provides templates for behaviour in physical as well as moral-cultural worlds."

of agency and the belief that one can master the vicissitudes of life.[13] Narrative is vital to human existence.

2. Literature – Narrative – Forms of Life

But what happens if, instead of exploring the importance of narrative in general, we take literature and fictional stories into account? There are many answers to this question, some of which I would like to consider in the following. Let me begin with a hypothesis: all possible benefits of narration as a mode of thinking, as a means of constructing identity and as a tool for interpreting life, can also be realised by narrative fiction. Psychologists such as Theodore Sarbin and Jerome Bruner seem to proceed from the same premise, since they do not differentiate between fictional and non-fictional stories in their attempts to examine the cognitive functions of narrative (cf. Sarbin 1990; Bruner 1991; 2003 [2002]). This assumption is not uncontested; Guy Widdershoven, for instance, criticised Paul Ricœur for overestimating the importance of literature, arguing that it lacked the necessary ties to life: "stories have to have a foundation in life, if they are to be effective" (Widdershoven 1993: 8). In the following, I want to argue that this is not the case; one can just as well turn the thesis on its head and propose that literature's greater distance to life is a prerequisite for its closer link to it.

This does not imply that literary narratives have the same relationship to life as everyday stories; doing so would mean ignoring the obvious differences between fictional and referential interpretations of life. However, the very fact that literature is not part of everyday communication offers some noteworthy benefit. Readers do not have to obey situational norms, deal with the expectations of others, and guard their own interests. They do not have to concern themselves with the degree to which the story impinges upon the interpretation of their own lives, upon their present aims and the justification of their behaviour. According to Immanuel Kant we perceive art in a state of pleasure which is divorced from our usual interests: on the one hand literature engages all human faculties; it makes us use our minds, feelings and imagination. On the other hand we are freed from the constraints and patterns operating in everyday life: we can imaginatively pursue alternative forms of life and try out roles that may be dangerous or harmful in 'real' communicative situations. While in everyday life we have to use our time economically and rely on familiar patterns of interpretation, literature allows

[13] Cf. Antonovsky 1997: 34-36. This 'sense of coherence' involves "comprehensibility," i.e. the degree to which internal and external stimuli can be interpreted in ways which not only provide sense for the time being but also allow making plans for the future, "manageability," and "meaningfulness," referring to the ability to experience life as emotionally meaningful, and to regard problems as challenges, which are worthy of attention. Antonovsky has described the feeling of purpose in life as an essential health-enhancing factor.

us to leisurely and intimately imagine alternative (fictional) worlds – we can see the situation as it appears to characters and narrators. Readers can come to know characters' interpretations of life, which offer new ways of making sense of the world. Instead of making sure to guard their own interest and protect the necessary distance to others, readers can immerse themselves in fictional worlds, and have experiences which are out of reach in everyday life. The alleged greater distance between literature and life thus creates closer proximity, enhancing the effects of literary narratives.

Apart from this advantage there are several other characteristics of literature which are worthy of exploration. One is the possibility of transgressing boundaries, and literature enables us to cross more than one border. By reading fictional stories we can transcend our own life spans: we gain insight into what happened before us and what might happen in the future. We can embed our actions within a wider temporal frame and take into account possible consequences that might otherwise have been concealed from us. Additionally, temporal boundaries can become mobile; memories of the past and projections into the future can overlap (cf. Ette 2005: 10). Daniel Schacter (2012) has shown that memory is part of a 'prospective brain' and plays a vital role in making plans for the future; he and his colleagues have also drawn attention to the similarities between processes of remembering and imagining. By imagining fictional alternative worlds we transcend boundaries, we can travel into multiple pasts as well as futures. Similar rules apply to boundaries of space. Immersing oneself in the fictional worlds of strange cultures and foreign lands, one can transgress spatial borders. At the same time, one can experience these spaces in a way that renders the unfamiliar familiar and evokes familiarity; readers can realise that characters belonging to ethnic minorities or social outgroups have many similarities to themselves, that alleged 'others' are subject to similar fears, desires and emotions. Boundaries can shift or become permeable. When absorbed in fictional worlds, one can experience different forms of life, different patterns of evaluation, different hierarchies of values, and different modes of interpreting the world.

Possibly the most characteristic transgression of boundaries in literature, however, is overcoming the barrier separating us from other people's thoughts and emotions. Though the minds of other human beings are less 'separate,' 'opaque' and 'hidden' than is often assumed, an intimate and differentiated knowledge of intricate mental processes of others is still inaccessible to us in most everyday interactions. The ability to perceive other people as similar to oneself, as intentionally acting individuals whose minds work in ways similar to our own, is of crucial importance for individuals as well as society at large. It has been regarded as the beginning of human culture and is essential to both human communication and cultural learning (cf. Tomasello 2000: 39). Psychologists deem this form of 'socio-cultural cognition' central to the evolution of intelligence. Interpersonal relations require the faculty to gauge other people's beliefs, wishes and behaviour and to develop "cognitive skills for understanding psychological states such as goals and perceptions" (Herrmann et al. 2007: 1,361). For children, parents and caretakers are the first mediators in their development of cognitive and emo-

tional abilities; for adults, literature provides an invaluable – and so far widely neglected – means of refining and improving these capacities.

'Socio-cultural cognition' and interpersonal relations provide an important foundation for forms of life. Conventions of perceiving and interpreting events as well as modes of evaluation are parts of forms of life; they are at the very basis of individual and collective attitudes and habitualised behaviour. If reading literature can modify, refine and enhance one's skills of social cognition, it can also influence the emerging of new forms of life. This potential for enhancing one's faculties through literary works is particularly apparent with regard to 'theory of mind,' which, according to neuroscientists, allows us to understand the thoughts, feelings and intentions of other human beings. It has recently been demonstrated that reading literary fictional stories (as opposed to popular fiction) can improve theory-of-mind abilities (cf. Kidd/Castano 2013). Literature is a privileged, perhaps unique, means of gaining seemingly immediate insights into the mental processes of others. We are not restricted to observing their actions, and hearing their explanations of the causes of their behaviour; instead, we often gain access to their emotions and thought processes, making it possible to come to know personalities that are very different from our own and that we would be unlikely to meet – let alone become familiar with – in our everyday lives. In addition, readers can experience rare as well as dangerous (or at least unpleasant) situations, and feel extreme feelings, for instance when confronted with characters contemplating suicide. Fiction thus broadens readers' mental horizons; they can become aware of constellations they would do everything to avoid in real-life scenarios. Fiction enables us to see the consequences of other people's actions as well as their misjudgements. For centuries, the gap between appearance and reality has been a central topic of literary works providing insight into the motives that lie behind such deceptive behaviour and usually remain hidden to all but the most acute observers. Moreover, particularly modernist fiction pushes readers to the limits of their imagination as far as different layers of abstraction are concerned. Novelists such as Virginia Woolf require us to grasp as many as seven different layers of observation and to recreate complex networks of relationships between characters engaged in interpreting their own position within the reciprocal evaluations of others.[14] In this way, literature can extend the boundaries of what appears to be familiar to us.

Even more important than the addition to our store of knowledge concerning the intricacies of the human mind is the possibility of temporarily taking someone else's perspective. Narrative fiction allows us to perceive both familiar and unfamiliar scenarios from other people's points of view and to understand how they experience

[14] Up to the fourth level of observation (e.g., what A thinks about B's attitude on A's view on event X) it is relatively easy for us to follow events, according to empirical data; cf. Zunshine (2006: 29); for a sample analysis of an extract of Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* with regard to eight levels of abstraction, cf. ibid.: 31-34.

them.[15] We can empathise with characters and follow as well as share their interpretations of the fictional world, and we do not even have to fear that this will entail negative consequences – such as having to help a victim in distress, or having to discard one's own attitudes or even publicly admit to doing so. Feeling with and for the characters, readers may come to realise what it means, for example, to experience violence. Literature can encourage readers to develop what the psychologist Paul Ekman picked out as the great challenge of the beginning of the twenty-first century: empathy as well as sympathy, the ability to sensitively – and not just rationally – understand others. When reading fiction, we can empathise with characters in distress; we can share their feelings, and – in contrast to theoretical instructions on the effects of violence – develop emotional resonances. We are, and at the same time are not, directly involved; we retain a certain distance that allows us to engage with our feelings in a self-reflexive manner, which means that we can become aware of it instead of just being lost in our emotions (cf. Eldridge 2009; Rosenberg/Ekman 1994: 224; Ekman 2009). In short: we enhance our emotional and moral sensitivity; we develop empathy and lay the cognitive and emotional basis for the ability to understand the unfamiliar and the unknown.

Such an improvement of one's abilities to empathise with and comprehend human beings not only influences our attitudes and behaviour towards others, but also our understanding of our own thoughts, emotions and actions. Reading fiction can encourage self-reflexivity and modify our conceptions of ourselves (cf. Djikic et al. 2009). It can make us aware of unconscious habits and values, change our interpretation and evaluation of them, and therefore initiate subtle changes in forms of life. Taking the perspectives of fictional characters and narrators plays an important role in this process. Since we usually unquestioningly adopt those attitudes and forms of life that are embedded in our (sub)culture and supported by social or political institutions, it is perhaps one of literature's greatest merits that it encourages us to spontaneously adopt a different perspective on and interpretation of what is ethically valuable. We can see the world through different eyes – and thus even gain a new and fresh view of our own values and modes of behaviour.

Every immersion into an interesting fictional world bears the promise of encountering a new form of life and of enriching one's own perspective. Fictional stories allow us to empathise with characters that experience the world in ways which were previously unknown or unfamiliar to us. Readers can not only become aware of, but even experience – via taking the characters' perspectives – different modes of interpreting familiar relations. This process of adjusting to the unknown in turn makes it possible to see one's own forms of life as they would appear to a stranger, and to be-

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[15] This thesis is based on the assumption that we understand fictional characters in ways which resemble those we employ to understand human beings. Psychologists have stressed that this is the case; cf., for instance, Mar/Oatley 2008: 180. There are, of course, differences, especially with regard to the functions of defamiliarising devices. However, these differences can be interpreted as enhancing rather than reducing the cognitive potential of fiction.

come aware of their contingencies as well as of their presuppositions and consequences. This awareness of attitudes which were heretofore taken to be 'natural' makes it possible to re-evaluate ingrained modes of perceptions and attitudes.[16] Reading a broad range of novels embodying different logics and forms of life can make one aware of one's own implicit preconceptions. It can open a space outside one's own modes of interpretation and enable us to gain a critical distance allowing us to recognise previously unquestioned assumptions. It can even enable us to revise these assumptions in the light of new insights into familiar practices. The greater distance created by literature therefore turns out to be an advantage making it possible to become aware of one's own dispositions – as well as reflecting on them and changing them.

This potential may be particularly pronounced in multi-perspective texts featuring heterogeneous characters with different values, preferring different forms of life. This makes it possible to both adopt unfamiliar perspectives on familiar objects, as well as to identify with some of them and dismissing others. Many texts even invite us to adopt contradictory stances towards the characters – the feeling of alterity for some of them may give way to fleeting moments of identification, which are followed by a more distanced attitude towards the forms of life they embody. Irreconcilable differences between characters that appear to be life-like as well as attractive, acting in rather understandable ways and still at odds with each other, may lead readers to recognise that there is no easy way of weighing, evaluating and typologising heterogeneous attitudes and values, and to resist the desire for cognitive closure. The complexity of literary texts often requires a tolerance for ambiguity which is also necessary for dealing with polyvalence, contradiction and open endings in real-life situations.

The potential for allowing readers to gain distance from their own perceptions and patterns of interpretation may be the central aesthetic quality of art. It encompasses the use of aesthetic devices, of non-conventional images and language. According to the Russian formalists, this aesthetic use of language is one of the defining features of literature. To make the familiar appear strange, to change ingrained paths of perception and to enhance the cognitive effort of understanding the represented elements is a major asset of reading literature. Victor Shklovsky had good reason to argue that literature can enable readers to break out of routines, to see – and appreciate as well as evaluate – things anew. Defamiliarising devices, which slow down the reading process and enhance the distance of what is described to the reader, require readers to see familiar events or objects in new ways, to notice and evaluate them in a fresh way (cf. Shklovsky 1965 [1917]: 12-13). Taking different perspectives can reshape the familiar and gives us the chance to modify established patterns of thought and perception.

The importance of literature's potential for inducing readers to adopt strange (even erroneous) perspectives of fictional characters is stressed by the philosopher Catherine Elgin (2007) who conceptualises fiction as a kind of thought experiment. However, an additional advantage may be just as important: literary stories induce readers to expe-

[16] For the importance of modes of perceptions and attitudes for (the naturalization of) forms of life, cf. Jaeggi 2013: 43-45.

rience ethical issues which are usually beyond the pale of philosophical deliberations. As Rahel Jaeggi has shown – as well as criticised –, philosophers are reluctant to deal with forms of life below the threshold of what can be explored with reference to Immanuel Kant: They make important contributions to the conceptualisation of justice, and thus lay the foundations for debates on human rights. However, the values and beliefs which give rise to particular forms of behaviour are often thought to be a private matter, and not worthy of philosophical enquiry. Scholars refrain from scrutinising, let alone critically evaluating different (sub)cultural beliefs and practices, even if they are closely intertwined with practices which result in violations of human rights. The same holds true for many human beings: As a rule, modern Western observers would feel that they have to take some course of action when they see that a child is physically punished or even sexually abused in public. They would, however, tend to look away when confronted with the values which give rise to such behaviour, such as the expression of attitudes implying a lack of appreciation for vulnerable others or relating to the preference for video games or films celebrating aggressiveness and violence (cf. Jaeggi 2013: 18-51). Fictional stories negotiate such values and their intricate relations to attitudes and behaviour; they require readers to deal with the 'private' values and preferences of a wide range of characters, to engage with the ways the characters deal with ethical and cultural values in their daily lives, and to position themselves towards them.

3. Literary Negotiations of Forms of Life: An Example

This praise of the cognitive as well as ethical potential of fictional narration, however, has to be taken with more than just a little grain of salt: On the one hand, many works of fiction do provide insight into strange characters and enable readers to enlarge their store of knowledge as well as adopt new perspectives on familiar occurrences. What we usually think of as 'good' or 'substantial' literature offers the opportunity to become immersed in alternative, interesting and rewarding worlds, of experiencing different forms of life, and of questioning attitudes heretofore taken for granted. On the other hand, the example of films endorsing male aggressiveness – unfortunately a common feature of Western television (cf. Shrum/Burroughs/Rindfleisch 2005) – already shows that there are different kinds of stories to be considered. Many novels, particularly format fiction, serve rather to engrain and petrify common attitudes; they circulate materialist values and stereotypes of strong heroes as well as beautiful heroines. The argument presented here highlights fiction's power to acquaint readers with strange characters and unfamiliar views of the situation; but this is not meant to deny that, in practice, every fictional work realises this potential.

In the following, I will try to show, however, that even works often presumed to 'conform to cultural values' and which have a 'didactic' intent can broaden readers' mental horizons and confront them with perspectives which do not (wholly) conform

to cultural ideals. My example is one of the 'lesser,' for a long time neglected, eighteenth century novelists, Eliza Haywood. At first glance the situation might appear fairly straightforward: In the eighteenth century literature was expected to entertain as well as to instruct; novels were viewed with suspicion and novelists were under continuous pressure to justify their existence. Fictional works were not only expected to be 'truthful' but also to convey moral principles, Christian values and good manners. Prefaces reflect this insistence on the educational value of fiction; they advertise these stories by stressing that the novels were meant to illustrate principles that would have a beneficial influence on the minds of young female readers, whose morals were held to be dubious, fragile and in need of improvement.

It has been duly noted that stories about young female heroines largely conformed to the 'conduct books' that were so popular at the time, and resemble self-help manuals (cf., for instance, Mergenthal 1997). These novels ostensibly served a civilising purpose: They were aimed at controlling the easily corruptible minds, emotions and actions of a young female readership. Since virtually all middle-class women were denied access to even vaguely dubious, let alone potentially corrupting situations, novels were a means of allowing young female readers to recognise the potential dangerousness of many seemingly harmless happenings, opinions and behaviours. Sharing the heroine's thoughts and feelings in such potentially damaging situations, readers were encouraged to avoid these in their own lives and keep to the narrow path of virtue. Novels teaching by means of the example of the 'reformed heroine,' who recognises the importance of chastity and prudence before it is too late, were meant to reinforce existing cultural hierarchies of values. They prepared young women to fulfil their role in British society.

Female readers were thus introduced to imaginative worlds which allegedly resembled British contemporary society in all relevant aspects. The texts presented a more or less homogenous community whose norms had to be accepted by the fictional heroines as well as by female readers. The affirmative objective of the novels had to be in the foreground in order to get them published. Literature served the purpose of preparing young girls for their future functioning in a patriarchal, restrictive context, and heroines had to provide models for the behaviour of future wives. What might have happened if a young woman, instead of offering kind words, immeasurable cups of tea and unstinting support to her husband, had thrown the tea pot out of the window and left him? This did not happen, however, and even initially strong-headed heroines became compliant, gratefully accepted their dependence on their husbands, whom they promised to treat with all due obedience.

Nevertheless, I will argue, many texts from this particular genre cannot simply be classified as supportive of the status quo. Even though female authors had to comply with the predominant norms, many of these novels are more than just blueprints of female dependence and obedience. The forms of life they construct may adhere to these cultural norms on the story level; on the level of narration or discourse, however, they are much more complex.

A marvellous example of this ambivalence, of the potential to not merely present prevailing norms but at the same time to undermine them and implicitly foreground other forms of life, is Eliza Haywood's novel *Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751). Haywood, who made a living by writing after divorcing her husband, had initially made her name in the 1720s and 1730s as a writer of erotic fiction; despite some surprising twists she succeeded in presenting herself, in the style of Mary Delarivière Manley, as an 'omniscient' narrator whose primary authority stemmed from her intimate knowledge of love. With the advancing moralisation of English society this type of writing became increasingly less profitable; after a decade of silence Haywood returned as a newly redeemed writer who – at least on the level of the plot – satisfied the expectations of literature as 'self-help books.' *Miss Betsy Thoughtless* can easily be summarised: Following the death of her parents Betsy lives in London with her guardian and his superficial and hedonistic wife. There, she enjoys the company of a circle of suitors and repeatedly gets herself into dangerous situations until she is forced to marry, and is subsequently ill-treated by her husband. After a period of suffering, during which her most candid suitor seems to forget about her and becomes more than just intimately acquainted with other young women, everything changes for the better: After the deaths of their respective spouses, the reformed heroine can marry her former suitor 'Mr. Trueworth.' The plot thus seems fairly straightforward: Betsy enters the story as a vain 'coquette,' is punished with an unhappy marriage, learns to obey her tyrannical husband, comes to accept social norms and is then rewarded with a 'good' marriage. This seems to be a novel endorsing and even petrifying culturally dominant forms of life.

At second glance, however, other elements might attract our attention. The mere fact that a young middle-class woman is at the centre of this story, that her daily habits, her pleasures and relationships are followed over several hundred pages, represents a positive evaluation of female experience. The economically and politically insignificant actions, even the feelings of a young woman without a high social status are, as the novel shows, apparently worthy of attention. The many mistakes that Betsy makes are persistently portrayed as understandable; the use of narrative conventions encourages readers to feel with and for her. In this respect the novel is similar to a wide range of other texts: It has repeatedly been noted that while heroines generally appear remorseful and conformist by the end, those passages in which they are in opposition to cultural norms are prevalent throughout hundreds of pages (Spencer 1986: 140-180). Winfried Fluck has argued this case clearly with respect to the American novel: Nonconforming attitudes and values first have to be approved of by some kind of authority within the fictional work, since only then do they gain the weight which in turn justifies and necessitates the efforts to contain and restrict them (Fluck 1997: 54, 129).

Precisely this kind of explicit justification of non-conforming views is missing in Haywood's novel. In fact, the very opposite seems to be the case: The voice of the 'omniscient' narrator reinforces social conventions; it continually acts against the heroine. This is an interesting departure from existing traditions, since many novels

written by female writers make use of covert 'omniscient' narrators, which refrain from comments. In most works, the narrator does not take a stand against the protagonist. Despite the widespread claim that female English writers of the eighteenth century predominantly use homodiegetic narration, since it corresponds to the confinement of women to the domestic sphere and to their lack of authority, the majority of British novels are written from a heterodiegetic, 'omniscient' perspective (Nünning 2014: 35). The reasons for this choice of narration are understandable: The use of a female homodiegetic (character-)narrator would inevitably entail the renunciation of any claim to authority from the start. The mere voice of a woman lacked any significance; it could generate neither public interest nor authority. Moreover, a female first-person narrator – possibly in the tradition of the practice initiated in England by Daniel Defoe – would have had to criticise her own behaviour retrospectively from the perspective of the 'matured' narrating I in order not to defy social norms. Most female writers therefore chose a form of 'omniscient' narrating which withholds comments or value judgements and encourages readers to focus on the present state of the heroine.

Eliza Haywood did quite the opposite. She constructed an 'omniscient' narrator which, already on the first pages, addresses the reader on several occasions and fiercely criticises the female sex: Women are said to be too quick to judge and too critical of the others' weaknesses, and are advised to use less time for their 'toilette,' and instead criticise their own actions and attitudes (cf. Haywood 1997 [1751]: 9).[17] In the course of the novel the narrator – who occasionally exhibits male traits – does not refrain from further judgements and comments; he or she advises women to marry young and enforces a double standard: On the one hand, he or she regards it as entirely normal for men like Mr. Trueworth to seduce several young women; on the other, he or she acerbically criticises women for doing similar things. Even if the young girls love their seducer, were deceived by him and would like to marry him, the narrator, in full accordance with predominant social norms, castigates them as 'disgraced women':

> as few women who have once lost the sense of honour, ever recover it again, but [...] devote themselves to vice [...]; Miss Forward could not content herself with the embraces nor allowances of her keeper, but received both the presents and caresses of as many as she had charms to attract. (Ibid.: 191-192; cf. also 409-410)

Nevertheless, the narrative remains highly ambivalent towards the position of women and their duties to men. Though the heroine's weaknesses are foregrounded and explicitly criticised by the 'omniscient,' 'authorial' narrator, other narrative techniques work against this bias. One can identify no less than ten conventions which depict the heroine as a loveable woman suffering from unjust social power relations, and which engage the readers' sympathies.[18] At the basis is a very simple strategy: The heroine is

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17 Backscheider (2005: 514-515) stresses that the narrator heavily criticises Betsy. However, she also argues that there is a vaguely defined 'author-function' creating a dialogue with the narrator (cf. ibid.: 515). In the following, I aim to to show more clearly why readers can develop sympathy for Betsy, though the narrator criticises her.

18 These techniques are further outlined in Nünning (2014).

at the centre of the story; she is the focus of the attention while the other characters play minor parts (1). A range of minor characters (from virtuous but powerless wives to 'fallen women' and prostitutes) mirror and contrast her actions so as to highlight the fact that there is no better way of life for women within the existing society (2; cf. also Augustin 2005: 48). The reasons for Betsy's misbehaviour are explained: She does not have a mother, she is exposed to negative influences right from the start, and she is unable to assess most situations appropriately, stumbling into them rather than actively seeking to become involved in dubious adventures (3). Judged by eighteenth-century standards Betsy is a likeable and attractive young woman; she is almost perfect, good-natured, kind, lively, compassionate, loyal and supportive, while only showing a few and minor (though nearly disastrous) imperfections: Her vanity and taste for being surrounded by suitors (4). Since the focus remains on Betsy, the damage she inflicts on others through her carelessness is conveniently ignored (5). The 'best' character within the character constellation, the aptly named Mr. Trueworth, falls in love with Betsy; his perspective and authority serve to highlight her positive traits (6). Correspondingly, she is criticised mainly by despicable characters, particularly her husband-to-be, Mr. Munden, who is deprecatingly termed a 'courtier' (7). Betsy's behaviour is punished severely, as well as grossly out of proportion; she is forced to marry a brutal, immoral and unscrupulous man who tries everything to harm and humiliate her (8). The dire consequences of female powerlessness are highlighted in many scenes of conflict between her and her husband: Though Betsy is, according to cultural moral standards, undoubtedly right (she is assured thereof by the ideal Lady Trusty), she has no chance of achieving her (moral) right; her legal position and powerlessness as a wife clash with the moral authority of her views (9). There is also a relatively subtle early form of representation of consciousness in the use of free indirect discourse, which highlights Betsy's critical perspective on the inevitability of her own situation. Adhering to Lady Trusty's advice that she should obey her husband is no longer possible after Mr. Munden's mean and brutal attacks (10):

> How utterly impossible was it for her now to observe the rules laid down to her by Lady Trusty! Could she, after this, submit to put in practice any softening arts she had been advised, to win her lordly tyrant into temper? Could she, I say, have done this, without being guilty of a meanness, which all wives must have condemned her for? (1997 [1751]: 448)

Here the narrator's language and that of the protagonist are fused in a way which – reinforced by the narrator's interjection 'I say' – highlights how Betsy would demean herself if she gave in to her husband's demands. Such scenes, which emphasise the injustice done to Betsy, and the hopelessness of her situation, contrast with Munden's brutality: Shortly after this, out of sheer spite, he kills Betsy's pet, a little squirrel. Betsy suffers, and readers are encouraged to feel for her plight. Betsy's final conversion, in which she renounces all her earlier views and acts, appears relatively unconvincing. The discrepancy between the experiences readers undergo during the bulk of the book and the final twist of the heroine's being reformed and meekly complying with the cultural norms, is enhanced by the way it is told. In a long monologue, Betsy,

who had stubbornly refused all her former mentors' attempts to influence her, rejects everything she has hitherto stood for. Instead of fighting for her rights she now proclaims herself her husband's property: "'Good God!' cried she, 'what infatuation possessed me! Am I not married? Is not all I am the property of Mr. Munden?'" (Haywood 1997 [1751]: 495).[19] However, even this phrase can be interpreted in different ways. In calling herself the 'property' of her husband, Betsy does not accurately present the legal situation of the wife's 'couverture,' which does not amount to legal ownership. Instead, she voices a feeling of enslavement that dramatically clashes with the English ideal of liberty, and which shows the political potential of the novel.[20] Using a metaphor which highlights her plight and is geared towards evoking the sympathies of a contemporary English readership, she simultaneously embraces and endorses her powerlessness.

This fictional narrative, which at first appears to be an instrument of discipline, makes it possible for readers to attribute new meaning to well-known situations. Foregrounding the perspective of the powerless, unjustly suffering heroine gives rise to the question of alternative forms of life, in which such plights are not inherent in the structure of the community. In Haywood's novel, this mainly concerns a critical view of the institution of marriage, in which women are exposed to 'lordly tyrants,' who can kill pets, bring home their mistresses, and spend their wife's money with the full backing of the law as well as of public opinion. Adopting the loveable, lively and innocent heroine's point of view throughout the main part of the book, readers are encouraged to try out an unfamiliar – or at least publically repressed – perspective on the institution of marriage, which is part of and upholds existing power relations.

Instead of wholly endorsing culturally dominant forms of life, the novel features contradictory views and employs contradictory narrative conventions, allowing readers to both recognise and distance themselves from implicit cultural values. On the one hand, there is a personalised 'authorial' narrator most of whose comments reinforce social hierarchies and attitudes – anything else would have been nearly impossible at the time.[21] These comments, however, are counteracted by the narrative techniques

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19 This long passage, reminiscent of a sermon, contrasts strongly with some of Betsy's earlier statements. Cf., for example: "[T]o what have I reduced myself? Is this to be a wife! [...] Call it rather an Egyptian bondage!" (Haywood 1997 [1751]: 442). However, the narrator tries to convey that Betsy's change of heart, "great and sudden as it was" (ibid.: 496), was permanent.

20 Feminists also used the metaphor of 'slavery' in order to raise sympathy with the lack of rights for women. Cf. Wollstonecraft, who points out that uneducated women "may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent" (1982 [1791]: 23).

21 Every now and then, however, the narrator's comments can be interpreted in different ways, such as in the following excerpt praising the heroine for her choice to remain silent in a difficult situation and juxtaposing the two roles of 'wives' and sensible women: "not uttering a single word unbecoming of her character, either as the woman of good understanding, or the wife" (Haywood 1997 [1751]: 448). Other aspects on the character level

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