Narratology and Ethical Criticism: Strange Bed-Fellows or Natural Allies?*

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Abstract Exploring the relation between narratology and ethical criticism, this article argues that these two approaches to the study of narrative fiction are neither strange bed-fellows nor as incompatible as the fact that most of their respective practitioners tend to ignore each other's work may suggest. It is argued that narrative theory and ethical literary criticism could and should be seen as natural allies in that their respective concepts and perspectives present complementary and mutually illuminating approaches to an understanding of the ethics and politics of narrative form. The essay provides a brief overview of both the different trajectories of narratology and ethical literary criticism, and of recent attempts at reconciling and synthesising narratological and ethical approaches. Moreover, it attempts to sketch out some of the premises and concepts of an ethical narratology that puts the analytical toolkit developed by narrative theory to the service of context-sensitive interpretations of novels that focus on the question of how narratives serve to disseminate norms and values. An alliance between the two approaches could arguably be an important force in the current reconceptualisation of literary studies and the ongoing development of new forms of ethical literary criticism.

Key words classical and postclassical narratology; ethical criticism; narratives as cultural ways of worldmaking; dissemination of values; the ethics and politics of narrative forms

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1. Prologue: Strange Bed-Fellows or Natural Allies? Introducing the Aims and Scope

At first sight, narratology and ethical criticism seem to be strange bed-fellows at best, incompatible approaches to the study of narrative fiction at worst: While classical narratology largely ignored questions concerning context, history, interpretation, norms and values, mainly focussing on formal and structural features of narrative texts ever since its invention in the 1960s, ethical criticism has not been much concerned with formal issues or narrative technique. Practitioners of ethical literary criticism do not often avail themselves of narratological concepts and models, often skirting such formal issues involved in narrative representations as narration, focalisation, multiperspectivity, polyphony, and the dialogic orchestration of norms and values. Although we have recently witnessed a great revival of interest in the study of narratives across various disciplines and domains, narratology and ethical interpretations of narratives still seem to be oceans apart. This holds especially true for classical narratology, whereas rhetorical approaches to narrative like those championed by James Phelan and some of the more well-developed recent approaches in narrative theory, e.g. feminist narratology, are much more interested in interpretative concerns.

Against this backdrop, this essay will argue that narratology and ethical criticism, despite their contrary theoretical and methodological assumptions, are not as incompatible as the fact that most of the practitioners of the two approaches tend to ignore each other's work may suggest. I will argue that narrative theory and ethical literary criticism could and should be seen as natural allies rather than strange bedfellows in that their respective concepts and perspectives present complementary and mutually illuminating approaches to an understanding of the ethics and politics of narrative form. More specifically, the article pursues two goals: First, it will try to provide a brief overview of both the different trajectories of narratology and ethical literary criticism, and of recent attempts at reconciling and synthesising narratological and ethical approaches. Secondly, it will attempt to sketch out some of the premises and concepts of an ethical narratology that puts the

analytical toolkit developed by narrative theory to the service of context-sensitive interpretations of novels that focus on the ways in which narratives serve to represent, disseminate and critique norms and values (cf. Erll/Grabes/Nünning). By doing so, I hope to show how narratological categories can be used in order to tease out the ethical implications of narrative fiction, arguing that ethical interpretations of narratives would stand to gain a lot by actually applying the categories provided by narratology. By the same token, the toolkit of the latter could be put to the service of ethical and political concerns that are generally considered to be more vital for literary and cultural studies than structuralist analyses and taxonomies.

I should like to hasten to add, however, that this article is by no means the first attempt to align narratology and ethical criticism. On the contrary, as the next section will show, there have been a number of fruitful attempts at reconciling and synthesising narratological approaches and ethical criticism, and the present essay is, of course, very much indebted to the work of those colleagues whose contributions are briefly reviewed in section 2. Moreover, I neither intend to ignore the theoretical and methodological differences between them nor do I want to suggest that they have a similar agenda, because they obviously do not. The overarching objective and gist of the argument is rather very similar to the main goal of an excellent recent collection of articles on postclassical narratology: "This is not a call for a prescriptive unity of methods and models but an attempt to align the many disparate ways of doing postclassical narratology [...] and to check out their moments of overlap as well as the extent of their incompatibilities" (Alber/Fludernik, "Introduction" 5).

One of the main reasons why the project of an ethical narratology is arguably both desirable and promising is because narrative fiction is one of the most important means of disseminating norms and values. As Andrew Gibson, for example, shrewdly observed, "[i]t is literature and the novel [...] rather than philosophy, that best express contradictions between significant values or systems of values" (Gibson 8). As Barbara Herrnstein Smith observes at the beginning of her fine essay on the intricate and thorny topic of "Value/Evaluation," "[i]ssues of value and evaluation tend to recur whenever literature, art, and other forms of cultural activity become a focus of discussion, whether in informal or institutional context" (177). Debates about value(s) and evaluation, and the ethical dimension of literature have indeed been perennial issues in literary criticism and literary theory, even "central to Western critical theory for at least the past two hundred years" (ibid.).

The last two decades, however, have witnessed a renewed interest in the

relationship between literature and values and the ethical dimension of literature, culminating into what has been dubbed 'the ethical turn' and the reemergence of a reemergence of ethical criticism. While the developments and new perspectives subsumed under such umbrellas as 'the ethical turn' and 'ethical criticism' have been mapped by a number of fine surveys (cf. e.g. Eaglestone; Davis/Womack; Hadfield/Rainsford/Woods), the complex and reciprocal relationship between literature and value has not received as much attention as it arguably deserves: "the importance of literature and other media for the dissemination of ethical values within a culture has not yet been duly acknowledged and submitted to scrutiny" (Grabes 3-4). The development of a narratologically-grounded form of ethical literary criticism could thus be an important force in the current reconceptualisation of literary studies and the ongoing development of new forms of ethical literary criticism.

2. Why and Where Narratology and Ethical Criticism Have So Far Largely Failed and Occasionally Managed to Meet: Attempts at Reconciling Narratological and Ethical Approaches despite Different Agendas and Trajectories

To present the outlines of what I have provisionally called an ethical narratology, we need to at least briefly historicise and contextualise the debates in which I shall make a modest attempt to intervene. When narratology was invented in the late sixties, four of the things that were lost were context, history, interpretation, and ethics. Classical narratology was first and foremost geared towards the formalist analysis of narratives, providing a host of neologisms and ingenious typologies of narrative forms and techniques. Ethical criticism, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with content rather than form, focussing as it does on questions of morality and the norms and ethical values represented in, and disseminated by, works of literature.

As already observed above, narratology and ethical criticism, at least at first sight, therefore seem to be very strange bed-fellows that have hardly got anything in common. While narratologists largely eschew ethical and ideological issues, practitioners of ethical criticism and approaches that are considered to be mainly interested in ideological issues have not displayed much interest in either questions of representation or formalist or structuralist analysis: "Ideological critique often opposes itself to formalist narrative analysis, and this opposition filters into university English classes, where formalisms are like the slightly odd cousin no one

invites for holidays" (Elias 281).

By trying to align narratology and ethical criticism, I should like to argue that such dichotomies as the one between "the uncontaminated fields of 'classical' narratology" and the "contextualist dimensions of contemporary 'postclassical' narratological scholarship" should not be exaggerated (Darby 423). They arguably present us with a set of false choices: between text and context, between form and content as well as form and context, between formalism and contextualism, between bottom-up analysis and top-down synthesis, and between "neutral" description and "ideological" evaluation. The problem with such binarisms is not so much the ingrained structuralist fear that the formalist and descriptivist paradigm will inevitably be polluted by the invasion of ethical and ideological concerns, as the failure of such rigid distinctions to do justice to the aims and complexities of textual analysis, interpretation, and cultural history.

It is the attempt to address these complexities, to cross the border between textual formalism and historical contextualism, and to close the gap between narratological bottom-up analysis and cultural top-down synthesis that is the motivating and driving force behind such projects as an applied cultural narratology (cf. Nünning, "Where Historiographic Metafiction and Narratology Meet"), which is sensitive to the cultural contexts and ideological and epistemological implications of narratives, and the topic at hand, i.e. the development and refinement of an ethical narratology.

The refinement of an ethical narratology can follow in the footsteps of quite a number of the "new narratologies" (cf. Nünning, *New Narratologies*) that have demonstrated what the point of narratology might be by applying its insights and categories to the analysis and cultural interpretation of a broad range of texts. Cases in point include e.g. feminist narratology, intercultural narratology, and postcolonial narratology (cf. Sommer). Shifting their attention to the ways in which narrative functions as an active cognitive force in its own right which is involved in the actual generation of attitudes, discourses, ideologies, values, and ways of thinking, such cultural narratological approaches focus on what structuralist narratology ignored and left unanswered: the crucial question "of how literary production is engaged in the ongoing process of cultural construction" (Bender, *Imagining* xv). For want of a better term, I have elsewhere suggested that one might call such an approach "cultural and historical narratology" (see Nünning, "Towards"; "Surveying").

Like feminist narratology and gender-oriented narrative theory, such a cultural narratology could be a model for aligning narratology and ethical criticism. In the

clarion-call article for the development of what has by now become a blossoming and important approach, the founding mother of feminist narratology, Susan Lanser, delineated what the agenda and the main theoretical moves of such a narratology were:

> A narratology for feminist criticism [...] would be willing to look afresh at the question of gender and to re-form its theories on the basis of women's texts [...]. In both its concepts and its terminology, it would reflect the mimetic as well as the semiotic experience that is the reading of literature, and it would study narrative in relation to a referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social and political. (345)

With the benefit of hindsight, one can only admire both the vision delineated by Lanser and the impressive subsequent achievements of the approach she has championed and further refined ever since. What is more, the highly successful manner in which she managed to integrate seemingly incompatible, but actually complementary approaches to the study of narrative pointed and paved the way for analogous projects like postcolonial narratology.

The recent diversification of approaches in narratology has resulted in an increasing interest in the forms and functions of narrative worldmaking and a shift of attention towards the question of how narrative forms contribute to our understanding of such phenomena as gender, ideology and ethics. While the mere systematic and formalist analysis of narrative, once the central point of narratology, has largely gone out of fashion, narrative theorists have begun to turn their attention to cultural, ethical and ideological issues. Many practitioners of such new contextualist approaches as feminist narratology, intercultural narratology or postcolonial narratology have begun to apply the analytic tools of narratology to a broad range of narrative texts and media beyond literature in a narrow sense and to research questions associated with the domain of ethical literary criticism.

The main reason why I am drawing attention to such approaches as feminist narratology, cultural narratology and postcolonial narratology is that they demonstrate how the study of the mimetic and semiotic dimension of literary texts can be productively combined in the analysis of narratives. These approaches can thus provide models that scholars working in the fields of ethical literary criticism could fruitfully adapt and emulate. More specifically, they show how the respective blind spots and shortcomings of narratology and ethical criticism can be overcome. Although there are always exceptions that confirm the rule, ethical criticism has

largely failed to come to terms with questions of narrative form, as Gibson has rightly emphasised: "But the most crucial problem with the criticism I have been discussing is the extent to which it ignored all the various problematisations of narrative and narrative 'form' [...] in novel theory from the 1960s onwards" (11). He goes on to elaborate on how theorists and practitioners of ethical criticism have mainly been interested in the philosophical dimension of ethics, while largely eschewing the complex issues involved in literary representation:

> The theorists and critics avail themselves of the latter [i.e. philosophers like Rorty, MacIntyre and Nussbaum] — or of the debates as cast by the philosophers — to skirt a lot of the inconvenient problems that continue to haunt the theory of the novel in the wake of structuralism and post-structuralism. This is the case, above all, with regard to three issues: narration, representation and the unity of the work. (Gibson 12)

Other theorists have also noticed that ethical literary criticism has largely ignored or skirted what Hayden White and others have called "the content of the form." Terry Eagleton, for instance, wryly observes: "It is remarkable how often the philosophy of literature ignores the morality of form in its high-minded pursuit of ethical content" (Eagleton 46). It is only fair to add, however, that narratology has also got many blind spots, having largely failed to take into consideration questions of content, history, ethics and ideology.

However, there have been a number of interesting and successful attempts at reconciling and synthesising narratological approaches and ethical criticism. Although an all-too-brief account cannot do justice to their theoretical sophistication, at least four approaches deserve to be briefly reviewed because of their relevance for the topic at hand: James Phelan's rhetorical narrative theory, Andrew Gibson's postmodern ethics of the novel, Wolfgang G. Müller's ethical narratology, and, most recently, Nora Berning's project of a "critical ethical narratology. "

Exploring narrative as a rhetorical act, James Phelan's rhetorical narrative theory serves to shed new light on the ethics of reading and the treatment of ethical problems in narrative fiction. In contrast to most work in ethical literary criticism, Phelan's comprehensive approach not only takes into consideration a broad range of elements of any narrative, including characters, narrators, setting, plot structrure, and progression, it also manages to bridge the gap that has so far separated narratology from ethical criticism, to the detriment of both, one might

add. As Alber and Fludernik have pointed out, "[r]ecent rhetorical narratology [...] can be regarded as an important contextualising venture that opens the text to the real-world interaction of author and reader, and hence provides a perfect model for discussing the ethics of reading and the treatment of ethical problems in narrative fiction" ("Introduction" 11). Since Shang Biwu has provided a detailed account of Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative in his book *In Pursuit of Narrative Dynamics*, it may suffice to refer the reader to his excellent monograph.

Although it is not as much informed by the concepts of narrative theory as Phelan's approach, Andrew Gibson's postmodern ethics of the novel provides a stimulating attempt at aligning philosophy and contemporary literary theory. Gibson clearly delineates what the main concerns of his approach are: "For the ethics and the ethical temporality which interest me emerge from contemporary theory, and this study is precisely concerned with the elaboration of a postmodern or post-theoretical ethics of the novel" (5). Taking the philosophy of Levinas as a point of departure, Gibson not only delineates how an ethics of fiction has been emerging out of literary theory itself, he also develops an interesting approach for coming to terms with the "ethics in literature" (cf. also Hadfield/Rainsford/Woods).

In contrast to Gibson's abiding interest in literary theory and his notion of a postmodern ethics of the novel, Wolfgang G. Müller's ethical narratology is much more informed by the concepts and methods of classical narratology. Müller manages to align the study of point of view with an exploration of the ethics of storytelling: "The following attempt to lay a basis for an ethical narratology [...] is grounded on the hypothesis that the specific ways of telling a story and narrative point of view can have important ethical implications" (117). In doing so, he shows how useful narratological tools can be for coming to a better understanding of how narrative techniques serve to mould ethical concerns.

Drawing on Phelan's rhetorical narrative theory, Müller's ethical narratology and a host of other recent approaches in literary and cultural theory, Nora Berning's "critical ethical narratology" constitutes the most recent and detailed attempt at integrating structuralist narratology, postclassical narrative theory, mediality and the multi-level story ethics of narrative. Her project explicitly focuses on the ways in which a broad range of narrative techniques contributes to the dissemination of ethical and moral values: "In order to make sense of literary non-fiction as a genre that is heavily involved in the representation, construction, and dissemination of moral values, it is necessary to analyse the ways in which authors make use of narrative techniques and strategies in their narratives" (Berning 137). Berning's methodological framework for applying her "critical ethical narratology" includes

a broad range of analytical concepts from the narratological toolbox, ranging as it does from narrative situations and time to character-spaces and narrative bodies.

Despite its brevity this overview may suffice to show that there have been a number of very successful attempts at reconciling and synthesising narratological approaches and ethical criticism, on which an attempt to refine ethical narratology can fruitfully draw. Moreover, interest in ethical questions is also obvious in the case of approaches that are oriented to contexts, ideological issues, and norms and values like feminist narratology, gender oriented narratological theory, and intercultural and postcolonial narratology. The following attempt at delineating some of the main premises and concepts for an ethical narratology is thus indebted to, as well as informed by, the approaches briefly reviewed above. Let us now turn our attention to the question of how the interface between cultures, narratives, and norms and values can be conceptualised.

3. Cultures, Narratives, and Norms and Values: Premises for an Ethical Narratology and a Narratological Study of the Dissemination of Values

An ethical narratology proceeds from the general assumption that narratives are very important and powerful cultural ways of worldmaking (cf. Goodman; Nünning/Nünning/Neumann) in that they do not merely describe or represent a world but actually serve to generate events, stories and worlds, including endowing them with meaning and values. As Jerome Bruner observed, "narrative, including fictional narrative, gives shape to things in the real world and often bestows on them a title to reality" (Bruner 8). Using the insight into the performative, reality-constituting, or worldmaking function of narratives as a point of departure, this section will outline some of the most important concepts and building blocks that narratology can contribute to the development of an ethical literary criticism. Instead of giving a wide overview of the historical development of narrative theory or of the main differences between classical narratology and the new post-classical narratologies (see Herman; Nünning, *New Narratologies*), an attempt is made to clarify which premises, concepts and perspectives developed by narratology could benefit ethical literary criticism.

However, one of the many questions which was largely ignored by structuralist narratology but which deserves to occupy centre stage in both cultural and ethical narratology concerns the functions that narratives can fulfil in various contexts, discourses and domains. A central point of convergence shared by the different narrativist approaches which have been developed in many disciplines across the

humanities and social sciences is the insight that narratives are one of the most important cultural ways of meaning-making (see Bruner, *Acts*) and worldmaking (see Nünning/Nünning/Neumann). This basic insight, which goes some way to explain the broad interest that narratives and storytelling have had for some time in many different disciplines, emphasises the performative quality or power of narration, bringing the reality-constituting power of narratives and storytelling into focus. Elaborating on the title of his book, Jerome Bruner explains what is at issue: "I have called it *Acts of Meaning* in order to emphasise its major theme: the nature and cultural shaping of meaning-making, and the central place it plays in human action" (Bruner, *Acts* xii). If one understands narratives as a way of meaning-, value- and indeed worldmaking, then a question also has to be asked about the elements, processes, and practices which are involved in narrative worldmaking and by which meanings, norms and values are created and negotiated within a community. Since I have elsewhere provided a detailed account of how narratives serve to make events, stories and worlds (see Nünning, "Making"), it may suffice to refer the reader to this essay and to other recent accounts of narrative worldmaking (see Herman, "Narrative Ways of Worldmaking"; "Time"; "Principles") and the making of fictional worlds (see V. Nünning, "The Making").

While an ethical narratology proceeds from the general assumption that narratives fulfil a performative or worldmaking function, it also needs a more nuanced conceptualisation of the relation between the hierarchies of values that pertain in the real world and those that are projected in fictional storyworlds. The fundamental notion of the conception of the relation between literature and real-life values presented here is a three-dimensional model, which draws on Paul Ricœur's concept of a 'mimetic circle' with its three levels — prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration (cf. Ricœur 1984 [1983]). Literature is first of all related to and preformed out of a pre-existent, extra-literary reality, which Ricœur calls prefiguration: Literary works come into being in the context of cultures, in which symbolic orders already circulate certain versions of life, norms and values (manifested e.g. in social interaction, texts in the literary tradition, and media of other symbolic systems). Secondly, literary texts can represent alternative or different norms and values by textual means and literary techniques, something which Ricœur subsumes under the general umbrella term of configuration: Literary works often disseminate, generate or project socially unsanctioned, excluded and repressed forms of life as well as the values and norms that underpin them. In George Eliot's phrase, they can therefore be viewed as "experiments in life" (cf. Nünning, "George Eliot's Aesthetic Theory"), i.e. as models and test-cases that

generate possible worlds as well as alternative hierarchies of values through a series of specifically aesthetic procedures or literary forms. In turn, such literary productions of norms and values are, thirdly, able to have an effect on extra-literary reality (refiguration): Literature has contributed, to no insignificant degree, to forming norms and values, and social conceptions of the good life.

Ethical narratology and ethical literary criticism at large should try to take into consideration both the representation of cultural norms and values in literature, and the construction-aspect of literature as an active medium in the dissemination, generation or production of norms and values (cf. Baumbach, Grabes, and Nünning). What also needs to be emphasised is that the stages between prefiguration and configuration on the one hand, and between configuration and refiguration on the other are always inextricably intertwined. The first question to be addressed is of how, and with what literary methods or techniques, prevailing cultural notions of norms and values are represented in a given text. From this perspective, literature comes into view as a medium of the *representation* of extra-literary norms and values and as a medium that is capable of constructing or generating new or alternative hierarchies of norms and values. Secondly, literature has always served as a medium for the *dissemination* of norms and values, be it those generally accepted by society or alternative values. Thirdly, literature appears as a medium for the *construction* of norms and values. Another question to be addressed concerns the connections between configuration and refiguration: What functions can literature fulfil for the development, modelling, alteration, critique, and even destruction of norms and values?

Two dimensions of the relations of literary works to extra-literary norms and values — and thus also two fundamental directions for the special potential of literature in culture — should therefore come into focus: The first dimension concerns the specific potential of the medium of literature, through its aesthetic forms, to thematise, represent, and disseminate norms and values in their cultural contexts. Secondly, and deriving from the aesthetic form, the potential of the medium of literature to actively construct and generate norms and values, as well as to question and critique prevailing value-hierarchies and collective views of what constitutes the 'good life', is also of interest. In short, the focus is on exploring the role of literature as a medium of the representation and reflection, the dissemination and problematisation, and the modelling and construction of norms and values.

In order to avoid possible misunderstandings it should be stressed that my general understanding of "mimesis" in the present context is not restricted to a naïve concept of mere reflection, but emphasises the active creation of realities

or world-models, or of norms and values, through literary texts. Though literary narratives are simultaneously characterised by a reference to extra-literary reality, as emphasised unanimously, albeit with a basis in different concepts, by e.g. Paul Ricœur, Wolfgang Iser and Jürgen Link, they never merely reflect cultural models or norms and values (cf. Baumbach/Grabes/Nünning; Kövecsces, "Metaphor", *Language, Mind, and Culture*). Ricœur (1984 [1983] makes clear that the creation of world-models or versions of reality through literary works rests on dynamic transformation processes – on an interaction among the "prefiguration" of the text, that is, its reference to the pre-existent extra-textual world (*mimesis* I), the textual "configuration" that creates a fictional object (*mimesis* II) and the "refiguration" by the reader (*mimesis* III). The literary process thus appears as an active constructive process, in which cultural systems of meaning, literary processes of formal configuration and practices of reception are equally involved and in which reality is not merely reflected, but instead first poetically created (cf. 107) and then "iconically enriched" (cf. 127).

To sum up: The symbolic order of the extra-literary reality, e.g. of norms and values that actually exist in the real world, and the literary or possible worlds created within the medium of literature enter into a relationship of mutual influence and change. Ricœur's "circle of mimesis" can thus contribute to a differentiation among different levels of the relationship between literature and values: First, literary works are related to extra-literary norms and values (i.e. prefiguration); second, they represent norms and values, their content and functioning, in the medium of fiction (i.e. configuration); and third, they can help to form new norms and values (refiguration). What perspectives are opened up through such an examination for the analysis and interpretation of novels, plays and poetry from the point of view of a literary studies focussing on the value(s) and functions of literature? And how can we actually analyse, and come to terms with, the complex processes involved in the prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration of norms and values?

To begin with, there are several narratological axes of configuration and dimensions of narrative worldmaking that have to be taken into consideration if one wants to get to grips with the ways in which values are represented, constructed and disseminated through narratives. First of all, the selection and weighting of the narrated elements leads to a hierarchisation of values on the paradigmatic axis of selection. Secondly, the methods of plot configuration and emplotment on the syntagmatic axis, i.e. the arrangement, combination, and causal interconnections, are crucial for the processes of narrative worldmaking and the hierarchisation

of values through configuration, order and the privileging of narrated elements. Thirdly, the discursive axis of discourse and narrative mediation plays a pivotal role for narrative worldmaking because the explicit and implicit constitution of meaning and the hierarchisation of values also greatly depend on narrative mediation. Focalisation, point of view techniques, and the configuration and distribution of perspectives deserve special attention as important acts or procedures of narrative worldmaking in their own right because they all shape the dissemination of norms and values.

Shifting its attention to the ways in which narrative functions as a way of worldmaking, i.e. a cognitive force in its own right which is involved in the actual generation of attitudes, discourses, ideologies, hierarchies of norms and values, and structures of feeling and thinking, ethical narratology focuses on what structuralist narratology has ignored and left unanswered: the crucial question of how narratives, both literary and non-literary, are engaged in the ongoing cultural construction and negotiation of moral norms and ethical values. The ways in which narrative fiction serves to contribute to the dissemination of ethical and moral values is, of course, a crucial part of this process of cultural construction in that it serves to contribute to the formation of communities, and to the definition of what a given culture regards as good, bad, and normal. The following suggestions are offered as a means to sketch some conceptual, terminological and methodological premises for a context-sensitive and ethically informed approach to narratives that is still rooted in narratology but that is geared towards the analysis of the ways in which narratives serve to represent, disseminate and critique cultural, ethical and moral values.

By "ethical narratology" I mean an integrated interdisciplinary approach that puts the analytical tools provided by narratology to the service of ethical literary criticism and that goes far beyond the formalist or structuralist analysis of narrative fiction. Focussing on "the study of narrative forms in their relationship to the culture which generates them" (Onega/García Landa 12), such a culturally-oriented ethical narratology explores "cultural experiences translated into, and meanings produced by, particular formal narrative practices" (Helms 14). Interest in ethical narratology thus centres around the interfaces and mutual relations between the respective objects of study in both narrative theory and ethical literary criticism, i.e. the types, structures and functions of narrative phenomena, on the one hand, and the dissemination of ethical and moral values through literature, on the other hand.

Linking questions pertaining to narratology and the study of ethics, ethical narratology explores both the narrativity of cultures and the culturality of narratives. Focussing on the narrativity of cultures and on cultures as narrative communities,

such an approach is mainly concerned with theoretically conceptualising and empirically studying the functions that narratives can fulfil as a cultural way of worldmaking in general and as a medium for the dissemination of ethical and moral values in particular. It explores the roles that narratives play in the construction of cultural phenomena like ideologies, hierarchies of norms and values, structures of feeling and thinking, collective memory, and cultural identity and alterity. The premise of the culturality of narratives, however, also turns the attention of cultural and ethical narratologists to a question which structuralist narratology systematically ignored, viz. the question of how far narratives and the elements that constitute them (e.g. certain plot patterns, preferred narrative forms, linear or cyclic time structures) themselves depend on cultural norms and values and may thus be variable and specific to a given culture.

Ethical narratology can therefore be defined as a context-sensitive and diachronic theory and analysis of narrative that does justice to the cultural dependency and historical variability of both narrative forms and ethical and moral values. Not only is the category of 'gender' relevant for an analysis of all the elements that constitute narratives, but also other difference categories like "race," "class," "generation," "religion" and "nationality" that are imbued with ethical choices and moral values.

Unlike classical structuralist narratology, which was mainly concerned with the systematic formalist description of narrative techniques, the focus of ethical narratology is not only placed on using narratological categories of analysis to examine historically and culturally variable forms and functions of narrative as a means for disseminating norms and values. It is also on the expansion of the theoretical framework, the range of methods and the analytical tools of classical narratology to link up narrative theory to ethical literary criticism and its main research questions and concepts.

In order to explore the interfaces between narratives and culturally specific ethical values, and between narratology and ethical literary criticism, ethical narratology integrates the formalist analysis of narratives with the study of ethical choices and moral values in literature. Ethical narratology is particularly interested in generic repertoires and culturally available plots. Though it leaves the narrow confines of structuralist taxonomy, the contextual, cultural and historical narratological framework that provides the backbone of ethical narratology is informed by a critical practice that the toolbox of classical narratology and the training in the precise semiotic analysis of narratives can provide.

Moreover, questioning the traditional notion that the relationship between

narratives and reality is based on mimesis, ethical narratology proceeds from the assumption that it is more rewarding to conceptualise narrative as an active force in its own right which is involved in the actual generation of ways of thinking, of attitudes and of hierarchies of norms and values, thus, of something that stands behind historical developments. In his seminal work *Imagining the Penitentiary*, in which he argued that widespread attitudes toward prison were formulated in English fiction which facilitated the conception of the eighteenth-century penitentiary, Bender sums up this new understanding of the active and constitutive role that narrative fictions can play in the process of forming institutions and shaping mentalities: "I consider literature and the visual arts as advanced forms of knowledge, as cognitive instruments that anticipate and contribute to institutional formation. Novels as I describe them are primary historical and ideological documents; the vehicles, not the reflections, of social change" (Bender, *Imagining* 1). By the same token, narratives can also be conceptualised as ways of worldmaking that contribute to the formation of hierarchies of norms and values. Let us therefore turn our attention to the ways in which narratives are involved in the representation, dissemination and critique of norms and values.

4. Representation, Narrative Techniques, and Norms and Values: Concepts for an Ethical Narratology and a Narratological Study of the Dissemination of Values

Proceeding from the assumption that an analysis of narrative forms can shed new light on the ethical, ideological and epistemological implications of narrative, ethical narratology strives to cross the border between textual formalism and historical contextualism, and to close the gaps between narratological bottom-up analysis and cultural top-down synthesis. In doing so, it seeks to put the analytical toolkit developed by narratology to the service of context-sensitive interpretations of the ethical concerns negotiated in and by novels. Though the ubiquity of narratives makes it difficult to establish the boundaries of such a culture-oriented ethical narratology, it is possible to outline some of the conceptual and methodological consequences that it entails. First, though it leaves the narrow confines of structuralist taxonomy, it is informed by a critical practice that only the toolbox of classical narratology and the training in the precise semiotic analysis of narratives can provide. Denying or ignoring the many achievements of structuralist narratology would thus arguably be foolish, a way of throwing the analytical and conceptual babies out with the formalist bathwater. As the controversy between

Dorrit Cohn and John Bender ("Making") in *New Literary History* (1995) has shown, it *does* make a difference whether we can establish a consensus about textual features or not, and it is the descriptive toolkit of narratology that provides us with the terminological categories needed as the basis for rational argument. Other important premises and concepts of the kind of ethical narratology envisioned include the notions of the content of the form as delineated by Hayden White, the ideology of form (F. Jameson), and the ethics and politics of narrative forms (T. Eagleton), which will be briefly discussed below.

Some of the key concepts and insights of cultural narratology can also serve to further develop and refine the kind of ethical narratology that Phelan, Müller, and Berning have delineated. As Gabriele Helms has convincingly demonstrated in her brilliant monograph on dialogism and narrative technique in Canadian novels, the framework of a cultural narratology is arguably germane to both Bakhtin's intense concern with social norms and values and to his perceptive attempts to relate the dialogic structure of novels to the world views, ideologies and hierarchies of values of the societies from which they originated. The way in which Helms describes her project also serves to shed intersting light on the kind of ethical narratology that I am trying to delineate. She argues that the "term 'cultural narratology' describes the place where dialogism and narrative theory meet, allowing the analysis of formal structures to be combined with a consideration of their ideological implications" (Helms 10). In contrast to other narrative theorists who use the term 'cultural narratology' without developing or explaining it, Helms is one of the first narratologists to provide a conceptual and methodological outline of a cultural narratology and to actually test its usefulness (for an earlier attempt, see Nünning, "Towards"). The approach christened cultural narratology implies that formal narrative techniques are not just analysed as structural features of a text, but as narrative modes which are highly semanticised and engaged in the processes of cultural construction and worldmaking. As Helms emphasises, "a cultural narratology would enable us to recognise that narrative techniques are not neutral and transparent forms to be filled with content, and that dialogic relations in narrative structures are ideologically informed" (7).

The same holds true for an ethical narratology that is mainly concerned with exploring the role of narrative techniques for the representation, dissemination and critique of moral norms and ethical values. An analysis of narrative forms is key for getting to grips with how ethical choices and competing values are orchestrated in novels and short stories. In this respect the project of an ethical narratology can draw on Fredric Jameson's fruitful concept of the "ideology of the form" (Jameson

141), which implies that "form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right":

> What must now be stressed is that at this level 'form' is apprehended as content. The study of the ideology of form is no doubt grounded on a technical and formalistic analysis in the narrower sense, even though, unlike much traditional formal analysis, it seeks to reveal the active presence within the text of a number of discontinuous and heterogeneous formal processes. But at the level of analysis in question here, a dialectical reversal has taken place in which it has become possible to grasp such formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works. (Jameson 99)

If one accepts the idea of a semanticisation of narrative forms, any literary and cultural historian who wants to address ethical, ideological or political issues raised in or by narratives can profit from the application of the toolbox that narratology provides. Context and form, content and narrative technique, are, after all, more closely intertwined than structuralist narratologists, or most of the practitioners of ethical criticism, for that matter, have tried to make us believe. It is not only the problem of the reception of literary character that inevitably draws critics' attention to the interrelationship between ethics and aesthetics, but also key questions that ideological approaches like postcolonial, feminist and African-American studies are concerned with.

Conceptualising narratives as cognitive cultural forces, ethical narratology explores the ways in which the formal properties of narratives reflect, and influence, the unspoken mental assumptions and the prevailing norms and values of a given culture, community or period. It focuses on the power of narrative fictions "to represent a medley of voices engaged in a conversation and/or a struggle for cultural space" (Scholes 134). Such problems as the relationship between the polyphonic structure of novels, as well as complex narratives in other genres and media, and their challenge to dominant cultural discourses require narratological tools for their description and analysis.

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and polyphony, which has only recently been incorporated into feminist and cultural narratology (see e.g. Helms), provides useful conceptual and methodological tools for coming to terms with central issues of ethical literary criticism. To study the way in which narratives represent or orchestrate the ethical norms and values of a given culture, one could refer

to Bakhtin's notions of the novel "as a diversity of social speech types" and "a diversity of individual voices" (Bakhtin 262), to his remarks on discourse in the novel (see ibid. 259-422), and especially to his felicitous concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia and polyphony. Of particular relevance in the present context is Bakhtin's understanding of the ways in which novels orchestrate their themes, which also applies to moral norms and ethial values:

> The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types [...] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [...] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationsships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationsships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersions into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization — this is the basic distinguishing feature of the novel. (Bakhtin 263)

Such a cultural and social understanding of novelistic discourse provides a very fruitful framework for coming to terms with the interconnections between narratives, cultural contexts and ethical values, and for gaining insights into the complex ways in which narratives function as a cultural way of worldmaking and of disseminating norms and values. From a narratological point of view, however, Bakhtin's inspiring and suggestive, but also notoriously vague musical metaphors are in need of translation in order to gain the precision needed for textual analysis. As pertinent narratological work on the subject has shown, Bakhtins's metaphors can be translated into the terminology that narratology has developed for a study of the discourse level of narratives, viz. the various categories to analyse narration and focalisation as well as the forms and functions of multiperspectival narration (see Helms; Nünning/Nünning).

Proceeding from the assumption that content and narrative technique are closely intertwined, ethical narratology could show that the narratological concepts of multiperspectivity and perspective structure (see Nünning, "On the Perspective Structure") provide fruitful analytical tools and heuristic keys for coming to terms with ethical and ideological issues raised in narratives, and for analysing

both the relations between the different perspectives delineated in a novel and the narrative construction and negotiation of moral norms and ethical values. Such an ethical narratology explores the interfaces between a narratological model of the perspective structure of narrative texts and the ways in which ethical concerns and moral issues are negotiated in narrative fiction. A narratological analysis of the "perspective structure of a novel reveals above all — as a model, something in process, not laid down or fixed — how the novel envisages its handling of divergent viewpoints" (Bode 203), including the conflicting norms and values that each perspective and viewpoint represents.

Moreover, cultural and historical analyses of narratives require thicker descriptions than those offered by structuralist narratology, descriptions which take into account both thematic and formal features of texts. The main reason for this is that the ways in which epistemological, ethical, moral and social problems are articulated is inextricably linked with the forms of narrative representation. Scholes has done an excellent job at explaining why ideological and political approaches, and ethical literary criticism, one could just as well add, cannot afford to ignore a detailed analsis of all the issues involved in literary representation and narrative form: "The political enters the study of English primarily through questions of representation: who is represented, who does the representing, who is object, who is subject — and how do these representations connect to the values of groups, communities, classes, tribes, sects, and nations?" (153)

This is a very important insight for anyone interested in the development of an ethical narratology and for ethical literary criticism in general. Such questions as who the subjects or objects of narrative representations are have always been genuine concerns of narratology, whose categories and models for the analysis of narratives provide useful tools for getting to grips with such issues. Key narratological concepts like focalisation, unreliable narration and narrative perspective have proved very fine descriptive tools, but they need to be applied and further refined before they can yield insights considered vital for ethical literary criticism. As Monika Fludernik, Vera Nünning, Bruno Zerweck and other proponents of a cultural, diachronic or historical narratology have convincingly shown, the development of narrative forms (e.g. unreliable narration) can fruitfully be interpreted as a reflection of changing cultural discourses and shifts in the hierarchies of norms and values.

Another important insight that ethical narratology can derive from cultural and historical approaches is that narrative forms do not merely reflect cultural, ethical, ideological and social values, they are also active cultural forces in their own

right in that they serve to articulate, and negotiate between, conflicting voices and values. As Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck have demonstrated, ideology manifests itself not only on the level of the story (e.g. in the constellation of the characters or the actantial network, and in the semanticisation of space and movement within the narrated world), but also on the level of discourse, for example in the structure of narrative transmission, the choice of point of view or perspectives, the temporal organisation of narratives, and the ways in which events, characters and the setting are presented (cf. Herman/Vervaeck). Ethical literary criticism would be wise to remember that all of these as well as other narrative forms are more than just techniques in that they are explicit or implicit carriers of cultural meaning, ideology and moral values.

The application of narratological concepts can also serve to shed new light on other central concerns of ethical literary criticism like the representation, or rather construction, of those hierarchies of norms and values that shape identity and alterity in and by narratives. The narrative construction of social and cultural differences is not just one of the central issues in feminist and postcolonial studies, but also one of the key concerns and research fields of ethical literary criticism and the study of culture at large. Narratives are a powerful cultural way of worldmaking in that they not only construct images of selves and others, but also serve to disseminate the norms and values that a cultural formations lives by. Narratology thus provides important analytical tools for ethical literary criticism that allow such an approach to come to terms with key cultural issues like the ways in which prevailing notions of identity and alterity, or otherness, are created in and through narratives (see Fludernik, “Identity/Alterity”).

5. Epilogue: The Ethical Significance of Narratives and Narrative Techniques and the Promises and Potential Usefulness of (Classical and Postclassical) Narratology for Ethical Criticism — Some Suggestions for Further Research

What I hope to have shown is that it is pointless to belabour the old oppositions between form and content, between formalism and contextualism, or between formalist approaches like narratology and approaches that are mainly concerned with the manifest content of literary works like ethical criticism. Anyone who is genuinely interested in getting to grips with the complex ways in which narratives in general and narrative fiction in particular is engaged in the ongoing cultural conversation about, and dissemniation of, moral norms and ethical values, should rather avail her- or himself of the benefits that both narratology and ethical literary

criticism afford. The main reason for this is that, as Terry Eagleton recently emphasised, "moral value lies in the form of literary works as much as their content. [...] There is an ethics and politics of form at stake here, of which the philosophy of literature has been for the most part quite oblivious" (60). What Helms observed about the promises of a cultural narratology therefore applies just as much to the project of an ethical narratology as delineated above:

> A cultural narratological framework holds two distinct promises: (1) the semanticizing of narrative forms will move narratology beyond its notorious a-historicity; and (2) by providing adequate descriptive tools, it will enable cultural critics to attend to the specific tools and strategies that are characteristic of narratives in a wide range of media. (Helms 2003: 15)

Moreover, an ethical narratology can provide insight into the complex ways in which cultural norms and ethical values are represented in, and disseminated through, fictional and factual narratives. It can thus serve to illuminate what Jerome Bruner felicitously called a "culture's ongoing dialectic" (Bruner, *Making Stories* 100), i.e. "the dialectic between its norms and what is humanly possible" (ibid. 16). An ethical narratology can therefore not only throw new light on the ways in which narratives can represent cultural values and serve to confirm moral norms, it can also illuminate the equally complex ways in which stories can negotiate the dialectic between dominant hierarchies of values and deviations from them, e.g. in the form of broken narratives and the representation of disrupted lives: "The study of disrupted lives enables us to look at the disparity between cultural notions of how things are supposed to be and how they are, a disparity that is highlighted by disruption" (Becker 190).

In his seminal monograph *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, the renowned psychologist Dan P. McAdams has pointed out how important it is for any culture to learn more about the ways in which both the living of our lives and the telling of our stories (cf. Phelan 205) are framed and shaped by cultural models, moral norms and ethical values: "Beyond making vague references to things like 'my religious heritage' or 'the American Dream,' we tend to have remarkably little insight into the ways our lives are framed by cultural categories, values, and norms" (271). This is all the more deplorable because stories are arguably constitutive of cultures, largely moulding our understanding of good and bad behaviour and characters:

> 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 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. (McAdams 284)

A cultural and ethical narratology promises to provide the conceptual and methodological tools that neither classical narratology nor ethical criticism on their own have so far developed. It is thus arguably high time that ethical literary criticism began to acknowledge the great usefulness of the narratological toolbox and that narratology fully realised the need to move beyond a merely descriptive poetics of narrative. If we accept the ideas that "culture is constructed through ideological narratives, that there is no preexisting or universally accepted model for a cultural world, and that prose fiction uniquely raises questions about the interrelatedness of social and textual worldmaking" (Elias 281), then an integration of the analytical and interpretive tools of narratology and ethical literary criticism promises to provide rich insights into the complex ways in which literary and factual narratives can serve to represent, disseminate and critique moral norms and ethical values. In contrast to the purists who want to make "the world safe for narratology", as John Bender ("Making") aptly put it, ethical narratologists, just like practitioners of the various postclassical narratologies, should intrepidly rush in where structuralists fear to tread. Whether or not they would be fools in doing so, may be an open question, but the approach delineated above could arguably open up productive lines of research for literary and cultural studies. Putting it in a nutshell, one might thus conclude that the more narratological ethical literary criticism becomes, and the more interested in ethics and the dissmeniation of values narratology becomes, the better for both.

* For this article I have drawn on, and adapted, ideas and formulations developed in some previous publications (cf. Nünning, "Towards"; "Where Historiographic Metafiction"; "Surveying") and some passages that I contributed to the introduction of a collection of essays on

the topic of *Literature and Values* (cf. Baumbach, Grabes and Nünning).

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