The Affective Value of Fiction

Presenting and Evoking Emotions

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The study of emotions[1] is a fascinating topic not just for literary scholars[2] but also for philosophers, biologists, psychologists, and neuroscientists, who approach emotions from different angles.[3] This diversity testifies to the interest in and the importance of emotions in various fields; however, the plethora of modes defining and analysing emotions renders the choice of an approach which fits the requirements for exploring the connection between emotion and literature anything but straightforward. In the following, I will employ many insights from a cognitive approach to emotions – which is spelt out in more detail in the essay by Gesine Schiewer – and combine these with categories and observations from narrative studies. Moreover, instead of focusing on the author, I start from a premise that was of crucial importance to Virginia Woolf, and posit that "writing

1 This article draws on my book *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds* (2014), particularly chapter three. It is, however, adapted to the topic of the volume, revised, and supplemented by literary examples and insights from recent studies on emotions.

2 See, for instance, Knaller/Rieger 2016: 7-24; Anz 2006; Breger/Breithaupt 2010; Hillebrandt 2011. For cognitive narratological studies, cf., in particular, Keen 2006, 2007, 2011 and Schneider 2013.

3 For a good overview of different approaches to the emotions see, for instance, Hogan 2011: 42-54 (see also 30-41) and Palmier 2014, 49-66. Some well-known scientists distinguish emotions from feelings, with the former being characterised by physiological processes and their observable expressions, while the latter are characterised by the conscious awareness of feeling an emotion; cf., for instance, Damasio 1999: 42. In the following, I will use the terms interchangeably.

is a method of communication".[4] This process of communication is based on knowledge, conventions and experiences shared by writers and readers. In order to communicate emotion, authors have to inspire the imagination of readers, who have to become the author's "fellow-worker and accomplice"[5] and take an active part in the process of literary communication. According to Woolf, readers have to become co-creators, willing and able to apply their knowledge and their imagination in order to become immersed in the fictional world.[6] Woolf's notion of literature is thus based on an understanding of the reading process closely resembling the bi-active reading model, which presupposes an interplay between textual cues and the reader's attribution of meaning.[7]

According to this premise of the importance of readers, the study of 'writing emotions' should not be pursued in isolation and focus solely on the author and the act of writing, but also needs to take into account the nexus between the text and the reader, between the presenting, thematising or alluding to emotions in the text on the one hand, and the evoking of the reader's emotions on the other. To adopt such an approach to the topic has two advantages. First, it is possible to integrate the findings of emotion theorists, such as the psychologist Keith Oatley, who has focussed on the relation between the reading of literary texts and the evocation of emotions. In addition, it is possible to combine the results of empirical studies on the emotions raised by reading literary texts with narratological categories in order to gain a deeper insight into the nexus between emotions and literature.

4 Woolf 1984: 262.

5 Ibid.: 259.

6 In recent studies on Woolf's essays, her notion of readers is explicated in terms of 'reader-response' criticism and with reference to Wolfgang Iser's concept of the 'implied reader' and the process of filling of gaps or blanks in the text. See, for instance, Koutsantoni 2009: 58-59, 64-65, 69 et passim.

7 Bottom-up processes are stimulated by textual characteristics, while top-down processes involve the application of cognitive and generic schemata as well as the readers' knowledge and earlier emotional experiences. For this model, see, for instance, Holland 2009: 173-177 and Schreier 2009: 317: "It is one of the most robust results in psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology that the meaning that a reader assigns to a text is a function both of textual and of reader characteristics".

1. INTRODUCTION: INTERFACES BETWEEN NARRATIVE AND EMOTION

Since the term 'emotion' is understood in many different ways, it seems sensible to offer a working definition. The philosopher Jenefer Robinson provides a good starting point, since her definition is based on an analysis of common features of emotion definitions in biology and psychology. For Robinson, an

> emotion is a process at the core of which is a set of bodily responses activated by an affective appraisal that is "instinctive" and automatic. This automatic appraisal gives way to cognitive monitoring of the situation, which reflects back on the instinctive appraisal and modifies expressive, motor, and autonomic activity accordingly, as well as actions and action tendencies.[8]

According to Robinson, the process of experiencing an emotion starts with an automatic appraisal of a stimulus that is held to be important, and which involves, for instance, sweating or an accelerated heartbeat. This automatic response can be followed and changed by a cognitive reflection on the stimulus and one's own reaction, which can modify the automatic response and initiate verbal or non-verbal actions.

Even though the last stage of the process can involve verbal expressions, this definition is seemingly remote not only from works of literature but also from language or stories. However, both words and stories become important when one tries to understand what one feels. In order to identify an emotion, one cannot rely on the interpretation of physiological states of arousal alone: "No degree of bodily feeling can alone reveal to you what your emotion is about; […] if you do not know what your thoughts and feelings are directed towards, you cannot find out merely through introspection of your bodily feelings."[9] According to psychologists, this knowledge is important for making sense of one's emotions and for expressing them.[10] We need words and narratives when we try to understand our emotions.

In order to comprehend the relation between narrative and emotions, it is important to remember that one's emotions are shaped by the way the 'eliciting situation' is construed. What we feel depends not only on the stimulus but also on the situation in which we perceive this stimulus and on the causes which prompted the action or state evoking our emotions. As Patrick Hogan puts it,

8 Robinson 2010: 73.

9 Goldie 2000: 58.

10 Cf. Greenberg 2004: 4, 7.

referring to research in psychology, linguistics, and the neurosciences, "our affective response to a situation, real or fictional, is not a response to an isolated moment, but to the entire sequence of events in which that moment is located, whether explicitly or implicitly".[11] In an isolated moment, just seeing the expression of a sad face, one can automatically begin to share those feelings of sadness, but whether one continues to do so or not depends on the context and on the narrative of the preceding events. If the sadness and the tears of the other are caused by some anti-social impulse, such as a failed attempt to harm someone else, we might well react with anger rather than empathy. It is the construal and interpretation of the story preceding the situation that decides whether empathic feelings will be aroused and intensified or blocked and substituted by different responses.[12] Our emotions are regulated by the story we attach to the stimulus which provoked them. Research by Keith Oatley shows that a particularly arousing stimulus can involve extreme swings of emotions which may last for days and which depend on the retrospective interpretation of the stimulus.[13]

Since emotions are part of a sequence and dependent on interpretations, many thinkers share the view "that emotions are embedded in stories".[14] Due to their narrative structure, emotions are often embedded in and remembered as 'emotion scripts'.[15] Stimuli and emotions are not assessed and evaluated separately, but as part of narrative patterns, in which different slots can be filled by different types of agents and places. Such scripts resemble series of scenes following preordained plotlines. Anger, for instance, is closely related to specific kinds of narratives; what is interpreted as an insult or retribution depends on a particular constellation, in which the status of those who are involved in the action – including their knowledge about the possible offensiveness of their

11 Hogan 2003: 5.

12 This link between empathy and narrative is at least implicitly confirmed by a number of studies analysing empathic reactions under laboratory conditions, which emphasise the importance of 'contextual appraisal' and the personality – or history – of the object of empathy. Cf. Singer/Seymour/O'Doherty et al. 2006: 467 and Decety 2011: 101. By now the importance of the particular situation for the emergence (or blocking) of empathic sharing is well established.

13 Cf. Oatley 2010: 29-35.

14 Cf. Hogan 2003: 83: "the view shared by Oatley, Johnson-Laird, and the Sanskritists that emotions are embedded in stories".

15 Emotion scripts are defined as an "emotionally based sequence that guides actions" Angus/Greenberg 2011: 5; see also Greenberg 2006. For 'emotion scripts' see, for instance, Ekman 2003: 41.

behaviour – plays an important role.[16] Apparently, human beings need such narratives in order to make sense of their emotions and their lives.

This finding by Angus and Greenberg already suggests that literary narratives may help readers to become acquainted with unfamiliar and complex emotions (and 'emotion scripts') and to understand them. Before elaborating on the affective value of fiction, however, I would like to briefly sketch some major ways of presenting and evoking emotions in and by narrative texts. Though the terms may suggest that there is a clear dividing line between representation and evocation, I want to conceptualise these two as poles on a sliding scale, with some overlap in between, since emotions presented in texts may at the same time evoke readers' emotions. In addition, we should be aware of the fact that readers' inferences are necessary in order to imbue a given description with meaning.

2. PRESENTING EMOTIONS IN FICTION

The presentation of emotions in fictional texts seems to be a simple matter: an explicit description and/or thematisation of emotions should be easy enough to identify. However, if one acknowledges that biological processes and automatic responses are at the core of an emotion, then a description would, in a narrow sense, involve the description of these physiological processes – and this is probably not what most readers expect when they are reading an emotional narrative like a love story.

A straightforward representation of such physiological processes can be illustrated by a scene in Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* (2005). In this novel, the main focalizer, Henry Perowne, is a neuroscientist whose approach to the world is shaped by his scientific beliefs; he sees the world through the lens of the neurosciences. This perspective also guides his understanding of the emotions of other characters, which he sees in terms of physiological processes. The following quote shows how he perceives the aggression of a thug, Baxter, who is about to beat him. Perowne thinks that this man suffers from an incurable illness, Korea-Huntingdon-Syndrome, which is accompanied by extreme swings of emotions, and he hopes to escape a fight by offering medical help to the criminal. However, it turns out differently:

16 Cf. Sarbin 1990: 49-65. Just as there are some narrative texts which have a higher degree of narrativity than others, some emotions are more intricately tied to narrative than others.

Even as he turns back towards Baxter in surprise, and even as he sees, or senses, what's coming towards him at such speed, there remains in a portion of his thoughts a droning, pedestrian diagnostician who notes poor self-control, emotional liability, explosive temper, suggestive of reduced levels of GABA among the appropriate binding sites on striatal neurons. This in turn is bound to imply the diminished presence of two enzymes in the striatum and lateral pallidum – glutamic acid decarboxylase and choline acetyltransferase.[17]

On the one hand, this is a very adequate and precise description of an emotion. On the other hand, readers have to be very attentive or to have some background knowledge in order to make the correct inferences and recognise that this is the description of an emotion.

Interestingly, this focus on the physical symptoms at the core of an emotion was already present in eighteenth century novels. At the time, handbooks of medicine spread the beliefs that finer emotions were due to finer nerves, that a humane and tender personality was connected to a particular physical constitution.[18] It thus became fashionable to stress one's "nervous" disposition, which seemed to be a proof of one's finer feelings and virtue. In this vein, Yorick, the narrator of Laurence Sterne's novel *Sentimental Journey*, emphasises right at the beginning of the novel that he is disposed to give alms and expresses his tender disposition by remarking that he is in a state of mind in which a man "pulls out his purse, and holding it airily and uncompressed, looks round him, as if he sought for an object to share it with – In doing this, I felt every vessel in my frame dilate – the arteries beat all chearily together".[19] Rather than naming the emotion, Yorick describes his physiological symptoms.

Whereas McEwan and Sterne in these examples concentrate on the automatic physical response to a stimulus, other authors focus on the expression of emotions by means of behaviour or action. My next example is informed by a scientific understanding of emotion, but it also nods towards the importance of an awareness of and cognitive reflection on an emotion. In a dystopia by the renowned neuroscientist Susan Greenfield, one of the characters, who belongs to a class of people who act purely on account of conscious deliberations and logic, at one point finds himself in a situation where he experiences something unusual:

17 McEwan 2005: 91.

18 Cf. Mullan 1988; Rousseau 1976.

19 Sterne 1967: 28. This is the second page of the text.

[T]here was usually never anything to trouble my thought processes. But today was different. Today my palms were wet, my breathing difficult and shallow, my heartbeat banging through my ribcage. I had to admit that this unpleasant though obvious sensation could only be called anxiety.[20]

In the first part of this quote we find a common-sense description of some physiological symptoms of the emotion; instead of a precise representation in terms of scientific vocabulary there is a depiction of symptoms that are within the reach of human awareness, such as wet palms or a shallow respiration. In addition, there is a precise naming (a description)[21] of that "unpleasant" "sensation", which is called "anxiety".

Providing a name for an emotion is the most obvious and more usual way of presenting feelings in fiction. I do not think, however, that this is the most common or interesting mode of presenting emotions. Even if one looks at British eighteenth century sentimental novels, which focus on feelings and which are meant to evoke the feelings of readers, it seems that such explicit naming of emotions is less frequent than one might assume, and soon gives way to a description of the physical expressions of emotions, particularly with regard to body language.

The description of seemingly involuntary facial expressions and body language is a mode of representation that became very popular in the second half of the eighteenth century, in the British novel of sensibility. Such novels often refer to emotions by presenting the expression of these emotions, particularly in two modes: They describe the body language of the characters, their blushes, their tears, and their falling down on their knees on the one hand, and their verbal exclamations of surprise or joy on the other. The following examples, excerpts from one of the letters of the young servant girl Pamela to her parents, serve to illustrate the focus on the (allegedly) involuntary expression of emotions:

I screamed, ran to the bed, and Mrs. Jervis screamed too […].
I found his hand in my bosom, and when my fright let me know it, I was ready to die; I sighed, screamed and fainted away. And still he had his arms about my neck; […] I knew nothing more of the matter, one fit followed another, till about three hours after, I found myself in bed, and Mrs. Jervis sitting up on one side […].[22]

20 Greenfield 2013: 68-69.

21 For the difference between words describing emotions and words expressing them (i.e. words denoting the expressions of emotions such as body language or exclamations), see Schwarz-Friesel 2007, chapter five.

22 Richardson 1980: 49-50.

There is a mention of her "fright", but the expressions of her physical expressions of emotions (screamed, sighed, fainted, fit) are more predominant. Such implicit descriptions of emotions become more intricate in later novels.

In Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771), or in Sterne's novels, the focus is often on the description of the stimulus, such as a beautiful woman or a strange face, and on the effects this stimulus has on the character in question. This can be exemplified by the way Yorick, the narrator of Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768) and a typical and capricious man of feeling, reacts to an imagined blush of a woman:

> I thought she blushed – the idea of it made me blush myself – we were quite alone; and that super-induced a second blush, before the first could get off. […] There is a sort of a pleasing half-guilty blush, where the blood is more in fault than the man – 'tis sent impetuous from the heart, and virtue flies after it – not to call it back, but to make the sensation of it more delicious to the nerves – 'tis associated. –[23]

The body language and the physical processes are in the foreground of this quote, while there is no cognitive evaluation or interpretation of these processes. The sensitive "nerves", which were held to be the precondition of refined and tender feelings, and the blood that causes the blush seem to be more interesting to the narrator than any description or analysis of his emotions. This shying away from analysis is more pronounced in a second quote from this novel: "The poor monk blushed as red as scarlet […]. I blushed in my turn; but from what movements, I leave to the few who feel to analyse".[24] Which emotion gives rise to the blushes is deliberately left open; identifying and analysing the emotions is left to the reader.

A preliminary word count of the three exemplary novels mentioned above seems to indicate that in later novels, such as *The Sentimental Journey* and *The Man of Feeling,* there is a surprising rise in the use of the word "emotion" or "feeling", the exact meaning of which has to be gauged by the reader:[25]

23 Sterne 1967: 116.

24 Ibid.: 43.

25 The word count was conducted by Bernard Woodley and Marlene Günther: I want to thank both of them for this invaluable help. The numbers for the key words include all derivations (such as sad, sadly, sadness).

Key Word	***Pamela* (vol. I) (1740)** occurrence per 10.000 words	***Sentimental Journey* (1768)** occurrence per 10.000 words	***Man of Feeling* (1771)** occurrence per 10.000 words
Emotion	0,11	0,73	1,91
Feeling	0,32	10,73	9,81
Tear	4,84	0,49	3,82
Blush	0,63	3,17	1,64
Tremble	2,63	0,98	0,55
Anger	5,16	0,24	0,55
Sadness	8,32	1,22	1,91
Joy	2,42	2,2	2,18

There is no overall tendency with regard to the number of occurrences describing bodily expressions of emotions – that there are more blushes than tears in *The Sentimental Journey*, in contrast to the situation in *Pamela*, might well be due to the particularities of the story in the latter: the incarcerated Pamela, who is in danger of being raped by Mr. B., has more reason to tremble and weep than the characters of *The Sentimental Journey* and *The Man of Feeling*.[26] In spite of this, the word count seems to indicate two tendencies: comparing the earlier with the latter novels, there is a decline in the number of times emotions are explicitly named (as the numbers concerning the derivations of the terms 'Anger' and 'Sadness' indicate). In contrast, there is a significant rise in frequency of the terms 'emotion' and 'feeling', which do not refer to a particular state; instead, they are open to readers' inferences. A rather typical example of such a use of the term 'emotion' can be found when Yorick commiserates with the weeping Maria:

I sat down close by her; and Maria let me wipe [her tears] away as they fell, with my handkerchief. – I then steep'd it in my own, – and then in hers, – and then in mine, – and

26 These are, however, just preliminary observations, which would have to be checked and analysed more thoroughly.

then I wip'd hers again; – and as I did it, I felt such undescribable emotions within me, as I am sure could not be accounted for from any combinations of matter and motion.[27]

Arguably, the description of body language and gestures or the use of words like feeling or emotion allude to rather than describe particular emotions. The novels of sensibility also employ many other indirect modes of presenting emotions in fiction, such as interjections, exclamations, or the use of emotively valent words, images or symbols. There are, moreover, intertextual references to emotions of fictional characters or narrators; indeed, the name 'Yorick' is, as the narrator stresses, taken from *Hamlet* and the "grave-diggers scene".[28] Such indirect presentations of emotions leave a lot to the readers, who have to infer which feeling or emotion is alluded to. Even tears can, after all, be tears of joy as well as of misery.

3. EVOKING EMOTIONS

The importance of readers' emotions in the reading process has by now been amply recognised. Even before psychological empirical studies were conducted, authors such as Virginia Woolf asserted that, when dealing with novels, "'the book itself' is not form which you see, but emotion which you feel".[29] This importance of the emotions in the reading process can be understood quite literally: When readers engage with stories, be they factual or fictional, the body reacts.[30] Keith Oatley stresses, for instance, that "when people read words that indicate emotional expressions such as 'smile,' 'cry,' and 'frown,' they activate in themselves the facial muscles for making the corresponding expressions".[31] The same

27 Ibid.: 138. This example also shows that a mere word count can only provide a very tentative impression of the expression of emotions. The "tears" are referred to six times, but the word 'tears' is not explicitly mentioned in this quote. Since the novel encompasses roughly 40.000 words, the counting of these six times would raise the word count from 2,2 to 3,7. A similar use of emotion can be found in Sterne 1967: 83.

28 Sterne 1967: 109. For possible ways of implicitly referring to emotions see Winko 2003 and the overview of several typologies (including that of Winko) in Hillebrand 2011: 36-81.

29 Woolf 1947: 130.

30 Cf. Mar 2011.

31 Oatley 2011: 113; cf. also ibid.: 20 and Altmann et al. 2012.

results have been established with regard to sentences and even stories.[32] Readers' responses are often emotional and physiological, and the more emotional stories are, the more they are read in a state of immersion.[33]

Readers' emotions and feelings of empathy with the characters are closely connected to the degree of immersion. The degree of empathy is also a salient feature of perspective taking, which is crucial for fostering affective abilities, since it enables readers not only to learn about the emotions of others but also to share them, too. In the following I will try to point out a few aspects on the affective potential of literature, the functions of perceived realism, and its relation to empathy, perspective taking and persuasion.[34]

Gauging and responding to the characters' emotions is important for understanding the plots of novels, which are often driven by the conflicting desires of the characters. Readers' emotions are also evoked by reading works in which there is no explicit depiction of the characters' emotions. Empirical studies have demonstrated that readers supply the emotions implied in a story, irrespective of whether these are thematised or not.[35] This has, again, been recognised by authors and critics before it was empirically tested. Some of the short stories of Ernest Hemingway famously do not make any reference to the characters' emotions, but nonetheless succeed in evoking an atmosphere of danger and threat by focussing on the setting and the action. Hemingway himself apparently was aware of this: "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them."[36]

There are a number of different typologies of the emotions involved in the reading process.[37] One group is closely related to readers' responses to the char-

32 See also Jacobs 2013: 146 who stresses that the emotions raised by reading are based on the same neurological mechanisms as those activated in real life; those raised by reading may even be stronger.

33 Cf. Altmann et al. 2012: 2, 8. That emotional stories lead to "increased processing activity in emotion related structures" has already been shown by Gallagher/Hutto 2008: 32 and by other researchers.

34 Cf. Nünning 2014. In the following, I will draw closely on several passages of this book, particularly chapters 5 and 3.

35 Cf. Habermas/Diehl 2010.

36 Hemingway 1954: 183.

37 This rough typology draws on Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar, who created a typology of five different kinds of emotions activated when reading fiction (cf. Mar et al. 2011) and on Miall/Kuiken 2002. For a different classification, stressing 'sympathy'

acters and the story, such as empathy, sympathy and pity. These emotions can be regarded as narrative since they are intimately connected to the features of narrative, such as plot, conflict, the characters' attitudes and their experiences. Narrative emotions can also be new emotions which readers did not feel in that way before. Another group of emotions which can be evoked by fiction is characterised by readers' reliving of former (biographical) emotions, a process which can be therapeutically important and improve subsequent coping with these emotions. A third group consists of aesthetic emotions, i.e. affective responses to aesthetic features such as the style or rhythm of the language.

These aesthetic feelings are unique to the reading of literature and include "fascination, interest, or intrigue [as a response] to the formal components of literary texts (narrative, stylistic, or generic)".[38] Readers' emotions are not stimulated merely by the thoughts, emotions and actions of characters or narrators on the levels of plot and discourse, but also by the relationships of contrast and correspondence between different characters. In addition, readers' emotions can be stimulated by linguistic and narrative devices on the surface structure of literary texts, by formal features and the choice of words. Moreover, nonconventional metaphors and innovations of generic conventions can evoke aesthetic feelings. Such metaphors require an increased cognitive effort from readers, which is evaluated positively by readers, who feel "emotional-aesthetic pleasure" which is "the intended satisfactory result of the interpretation process".[39] Such aesthetic emotions often imply a loss of the sense of immediacy and immersion in the story and a higher degree of defamiliarisation or surprise.

The study of empathy and the means of inducing readers to feel empathy for – or even identify with – a protagonist is at the foreground of many literary studies.

Narratological studies focussing on techniques likely to evoke empathy usually concentrate on two aspects: The first mode of inducing readers to feel empathy includes narrative strategies which prompt readers to take the characters' perspective, for instance by presenting their thoughts, impressions, beliefs, feelings and opinions by means of techniques like free indirect discourse, interior monologue or psycho-narration, or the use of homodiegetic narrators. [40] The

in two groups, see Habermas/Diehl 2010, 313. For Ekman's initial conceptualisation of six 'universal' emotions, cf. Ekman/Friesen 1971, 124-129.

38 Miall/Kuiken 2002: 221.

39 Christmann/Wimmer/Groeben 2011: 206 (both quotes).

40 In earlier works, the empathic engagement of readers was often called 'identification', which is now recognised to be a particular feeling; for definitions of identification cf. Cohen 2001. For narrative empathy see, for instance, Keen 2006 and 2007. However,

second main mode of encouraging readers to see the events from the point of view of characters consists in various kinds of explicit comments by the (often 'omniscient') narrator, who addresses the reader, comments on and evaluates the events, and appeals to the sympathy and pity of readers. Cognitive literary studies also stress the importance of "situational empathy", which "involves an openness to putting oneself in the place of the other person".[41] This mode of writing reinforces the interest of readers in the fate of the characters by creating a situation of potential harm. Characters have to be in situations which allow for multiple endings, since the resulting uncertainty is believed to engage not only the cognitive, but also the affective responses of readers. As Richard Gerrig concludes: "To a large extent, a theory of suspense must include within it a theory of empathy: Under what circumstances do we care sufficiently about other people to engage in active thought about their fates?"[42]

In the following, I want to suggest some additional aspects which may serve to encourage readers' feelings of empathy, beginning with two examples taken from eighteenth century novels. One means of evoking readers' empathy and pity involves the presentation of stimuli that are believed to raise these emotions. Some of these responses to particular images and narratives may be universal, such as automatic reactions to seeing sad or happy faces. In the eighteenth century, tender feelings and pity – and their results, virtuous actions such as giving alms – were held to be very important, and sentimental novels not only present (the physiological expressions of) such emotions, they also show a host of stimuli for the feeling of those highly appreciated emotions. Both in *Sentimental Journey* and in Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling,* there are long descriptions of, for instance, the outward appearance of people who are to be pitied and who deserve charity and help, such as beggars or virtuous persons asking for contributions to worthy causes. On the third page of the *Sentimental Journey*, a poor monk enters the scene, only a few sentences after Yorick has claimed that his "arteries" and "frame" are disposed to give alms:

The monk [had a] break in his tonsure, a few scattered white hairs upon his temples […]. It was one of those heads, which Guido has often painted – mild, pale – penetrating, free

one should not forget other narrative emotions, such as suspense or surprise, anger at the behaviour of villains or dumbness of the protagonists, and satisfaction if desired results seem within reach or villains are punished.

41 Hogan 2003: 140 (first quote), 81 (second quote).

42 Gerrig 1993: 80. The phrase "engage in active thought about their fates" indicates that Gerrig works with a broad definition of empathy, which encompasses analytical cognitive processes.

from all commonplace ideas of fat contented ignorance looking downwards upon the earth – it looked forwards; but looked as if it looked at something beyond this world […]. The rest of his outline may be given in a few strokes […]: it was a thin, spare form, […] it was the attitude of Entreaty; and as it now stands presented to my imagination, it gained more than it lost by it […].[43]

Such a dignified and at the same time thin and pitiful being should evoke feelings of benevolence, of respect and pity, not only in Yorick but also in eighteenth century readers; especially when the monk then talks of the poverty of his order and, at least implicitly, asks for support. Passages such as these can encourage readers to feel the tender and refined emotions that were held in high esteem at the time.

A similar, but more moving description of a stimulus for encouraging readers' emotions can be found in *The Man of Feeling*, in which Harley incidentally meets an

old man, who from his dress seemed to have been a soldier […]. He was one of those figures which Salvator would have drawn [...]. His face had the marks of manly comeliness impaired by time; his forehead was not altogether bald, but its hairs might have been numbered; while a few white locks behind crossed the brown of his neck […].[44]

Again, there is an appeal to the reader to visually imagine the scene, by likening the face to the portraits of famous painters. Signs of age and poverty, attributed to respectable, dignified people, are present in both quotes and should, according to feeling rules of the late eighteenth century, evoke empathy and pity. In the latter quote, as in many others, readers are even shown how they should react to the description of such a figure. Harley, the protagonist, serves as a model recipient of the stimulus; he appraises the situation of the man correctly and in an exemplary way: "'Thou art old', said [Harley] to himself, 'but age has not brought thee rest for its infirmities; I fear those silver hairs have not found shelter from thy country, though that neck has been bronzed in its service'".[45]

43 Sterne 1967: 29-30.

44 Mackenzie 1970: 85.

45 Ibid. Later on the old man turns out to be an honest and upright victim of many villainous machinations and an object worthy of pity. Although Yorick himself does not always react in a model fashion, *The Sentimental Journey* contains many examples of such reactions, for instance with regard to "Santo's lamentation" for the death of his ass (cf. Sterne: 1967: 62-64).

Since cognitive narratological studies have demonstrated the importance of a mode of representation that relies on implicitness and suggestiveness, such descriptions of stimuli for or reactions to emotions may be more effective for raising readers' empathy than straightforward presentations or thematisations. Moreover, modes of evoking emotions can strengthen readers' feelings that the story corresponds to their own experiences and rings true. If a reader is invited to make his or her own inferences and to supply his or her own emotions and experiences, he or she gets the feeling that the story is convincing and lifelike. Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon have shown that readers identify with a character when they are able to make their own inferences about him or her. Bortolussi and Dixon stress that readers tend to relate to characters which leave enough room for readers to "use their own knowledge and experience".[46] This process depends on some blank spaces and ambivalence, which allow readers to project some of their own attitudes and behaviours onto the characters. This in turn makes them feel that they comprehend the characters on a more than just superficial basis.

Such a feeling of really understanding the characters, which can heighten empathic sharing of their emotions, is accompanied by a reduction of distance between reader and characters. It can also include feelings of what has been called 'symhedonia', which is an equivalent of the Spanish, Italian or German 'simpatía' or 'Sympathie', denoting a positive feeling for others, which leads to rejoicing in their good luck. This feeling is rather rare in real life; it is "more partial, selective, and, consequently, less wide ranging than sympathy proper [i.e. pity]" and "inherently biased toward those whom people especially care about".[47] In everyday situations, it is restricted to an interest in the good fortune of a few people who are close to us. By presenting likeable and attractive characters, fiction often provides stimuli for feeling this positive counterpart to pity. Fictional works thus serve to generate a feeling which is arguably ethically valuable and may make it easier for readers to generate it in everyday situations.

Although recent studies often highlight situations or narrative conventions which can initiate the reader's empathic feeling with the characters[48] and stress the positive aspects of empathy, the sharing of characters' thoughts and feelings involves rather complex and ambivalent processes. In contrast to scholars like Keith Oatley, I think that there is a dual process involved in the sharing of char-

46 Bortolussi/Dixon 2003: 94; for the relation to identification see ibid.: 91-94.

47 Rozyman/Rozin 2006: 83 (first quote), 91 (second quote).

48 See Breithaupt 2009 and Keen 2007, 2011. However, Keen as well as Hale 2007 and Nussbaum 1998 are wary of a kind of empathy that involves projections of one's own attitudes and does not appreciate the alterity of others.

acters' thoughts and feelings, which consists in an oscillation between two quite different cognitive activities on the part of readers: first, there is the process of "feeling like" the character in question.[49] Depending on the particular context, this process shifts between a more emotional and a more cognitive simulation of the character's thoughts and feelings; the latter would prevail, for instance, while following the thoughts of anti-heroes or villains. Second, empathic sharing is linked to the readers' own appraisal of the situation in question. This is influenced by their knowledge about the whole of the text they have read so far and can include information about events that is not available to the focalizer. It is also based on readers' general knowledge and their wishes for the further development of the story. This discrepant awareness can lead to a heightening of suspense, if readers see the hero unwittingly running into danger. The second process is intricately connected with an overall assessment of the situation, which involves questions of ethics. As James Phelan has pointed out with regard to the ethical positioning of readers, "[o]ur emotions and desires about both fictional and nonfictional characters are intimately tied to our judgments of them",[50] and according to recent psychological studies, inducing readers' moral reasoning is one of the aspects that heighten their fascination with a given text.[51]

Over and above this difference between an engaging and a detached mode of following the thoughts and feelings of characters, readers' empathy is linked to their own appraisal of the situation in question. This evaluation of lifelike characters is influenced by readers' attitudes, values and wishes for preferred outcomes. It is also informed by readers' superior knowledge or their own interpretations of the event, which can differ widely from that of the character whose perceptions and thoughts they follow. The affective value of fiction thus goes beyond the empathic sharing of characters' feelings.

49 For the raising of emotions of empathy and identification cf. Mar et al. 2011: 823-824. According to most theories (for an overview see Cohen 2001), identification "requires that we forget ourselves and become the other – that we assume for ourselves the identity of the target of our identification" (Ibid.: 247).

50 Phelan 2005: 160.

51 Cf. Raney 2002.

4. FICTION AS A TOOL FOR FEELING

The affective value of fiction is based on the assumption that what we do, think and feel has repercussions on our minds and our brains. The plasticity of the human brain makes it possible for the emotions evoked by reading to leave their trace and modify and refine emotional skills:

> The emotions evoked by literary fiction also have an influence on our cognitive processing after the reading experience has ended. Novels can act as a powerful emotional prime, and once an emotional state has been induced we would expect to see differences in cognitive processing associated with this new emotional state. Effects on cognition, perception, and action would be expected […].[52]

If the brain is a cultural, embedded organ shaped by the cognitive processes activated in the niches in which a human being lives, then the emotions raised by reading fiction can leave traces and shape readers' affective responses in their daily life.

There are several reasons for the potential of fictional stories to shed light on emotions and to serve as a privileged tool for feeling. The first is based on the specificity of the reading process. In a state of immersion and transportation, readers tend to temporarily forget their immediate surroundings and their own real-life concerns, goals and aims. Since the vicarious experiences offered by fiction do not pose any immediate threat to their goals or self-images, readers can come to know feelings, thoughts and experiences that they would be inclined to block off in real-life encounters.[53] They are more open to new experiences while reading fiction, which cannot pose any threat or entail possible negative consequences.

Secondly, reading a novel in a state of immersion fulfils conditions which, according to neurophysiologist Gerald Hüther, are ideal for establishing new synapses and for learning. Readers feel safe, they pay attention, spend time and cognitive effort, feel interest and even enthusiasm for what they encounter and discover in a work of fiction.[54] The willing, affective engagement with the expe-

52 Mar et al. 2011: 829. See also Robinson 2010: 74. As Tooby/Cosmides 2000: 24 claim, fictionally triggered emotion can induce us to "reweight" our "motivational system".

53 This 'safety argument' is recognised by many scholars. The first to use it were, to my knowledge, Batson et al. 1997.

54 Cf. Hüther 2006: 71, 80.

riences of characters offers the chance to learn and to change one's attitudes and dispositions. As Thomas Fuchs stresses, dispositions "are only accessible to change by new and repeated subjective experiences, i.e. emotional, verbal and interpersonal processes of learning that stabilize new attractors of perception and behaviour in the brain".[55] A great part of the affective value of fiction resides in the fact that it opens up such new and repeated subjective experiences in a de-contextualised space.

Thirdly, the affective value of fiction is enhanced by the fact that the feelings evoked by fictional narratives are relatively intense and pure. Several scholars have hypothesised that fiction can evoke a higher intensity of emotions than real-life situations, because the emotional experiences generated by reading fiction take place in safety. Readers do not have to worry about the potential impact of their emotions either with regard to themselves – for instance by feeling obliged to help victims in distress – or with regard to potentially negative consequences for others. While there seems to be no final answer concerning the differences in intensity between emotions evoked by fiction or by facts, Thalia Goldstein demonstrated that personal memories recalling very sad, or even traumatic events "were no greater than the levels felt when watching [fictional film] clips" depicting sad events.[56] Her findings suggest that the emotions raised by fiction are "unadulterated" by anxiety, or, indeed, any other emotions which do not pertain to the feelings experienced during the immersion in the story, and that they may therefore be cathartic.

Fourth, fiction can enable readers to make experiences which are beyond their reach in ordinary life. A life span is too short to make all the experiences that can broaden the mental horizon of readers – even disregarding the fact that many readers might not survive some of the more dangerous situations.[57] Especially for adults who are caught in their daily routines and have little incentive to spend the cognitive effort and time to engage with unfamiliar people in strange situations, fiction can extend the scope of available experiences and enrich their knowledge about the way (unfamiliar) human minds work. In addition, fictional stories can allow readers to become aware of, observe, and share nuances of the feelings of narrators and characters. This exceeds the observation of body lan-

55 Fuchs 2009: 231.

56 Goldstein 2009: 237. See also ibid.: 233: "we are more likely to allow ourselves to feel powerfully in response to fiction than in everyday life", where Goldstein refers to other studies supporting this hypothesis. For the phrase "unadulterated by anxiety", see ibid.: 237.

57 Tooby/Cosmides 2000: 21-22, 24 claim that art calibrates and improves individual mental organisation.

guage or exclamations, which can be observed in daily encounters. As the novelist Ian McEwan stressed in an interview, the "resilience [of the novel] has precisely to do with the fact that we have not yet invented another art form that allows us such access to the minds of others and to the nature of consciousness".[58] With access to the consciousness of characters, readers can also become aware of the simultaneity of different feelings within the same characters that are frequently torn between discrepant and even contradictory feelings. More often than not, readers get the chance to recognise feelings the respective characters are not even aware of. Fictional stories can shed light on feelings which, in daily life, remain obscure.

Fifth, reading fiction encourages perspective taking, which is similar to what the psychologist Daniel Batson calls "'sensitive' understanding",[59] i.e. an understanding that involves not only knowledge about the thoughts and feelings of others, but also an affective sharing of their emotions. Particularly valuable is the 'imagine-other' perspective, i.e. imagining how someone else thinks and feels at the moment. This kind of perspective taking has been linked to pro-social action. The imagine-other perspective has been shown to "reduce stereotyping and prejudice" and to enable readers "to know the other's thoughts, desires, and intentions" and "even to understand and evaluate – even to create – the self".[60] Arguably, this kind of perspective taking, i.e. imagining how the character or narrator feels at a given moment, is evoked by reading fictional stories. Reading fiction is valuable because it requires "spontaneous perspective taking".[61]

To set this process in motion is especially desirable because it is, unfortunately, comparatively rare in real life. In daily situations, the necessity, the impetus or even the time for taking the perspectives of others is often conspicuous by its absence. In many cases, we do not need it in order to act. In other cases, we might need it, but we do not know enough about the other in order to be able to accomplish it. And even if we could accomplish it, if we did know just how bad or hopeless the other feels at the moment, it might put us in an uncomfortable position: we might think that we should try to do something about it – and that is difficult and often impossible. There are many reasons why it is often easier not to invest too much cognitive effort in taking the perspectives of others.

In fiction, the situation is different: The pleasure of reading, the interest in stories, and the necessity to take the perspectives of characters in order to understand their actions provide incentives for readers to make this cognitive effort.

58 McEwan 2013: s.p.

59 Batson 2009: 267.

60 Ibid.: 267, 276-277.

61 Johnson et al. 2013: 593.

As a rule, some kind of suspense is raised, which keeps readers interested in engaging with the characters. This is important, since interest and attention are among the conditions which are of crucial importance for learning, for building new synapses and neural pathways. Moreover, there is no danger involved in immersing oneself in the minds and views of fictional characters; readers can try out new roles without having to fear negative consequences. In addition, fictional stories usually provide the knowledge that is needed to understand the major characters; even though the information may remain sketchy, salient facts are given – or at least expected to be given by readers. Possible barriers against perspective taking – particularly the lack of interest and the lack of knowledge – are therefore removed. Fictional stories which present unfamiliar, complex or extreme characters can thus serve to broaden readers' mental horizon, to refine their implicit knowledge about how the human mind works, and to practice perspective taking in a particular, safe situation.

Sixth, since fictional stories frequently stage the interconnections and conflicts between the respective emotions of several characters, they require a balanced and complex emotional response. In many novels, the 'stimulus' evoking emotions is not the state of mind of an isolated individual; rather, it consists of the personal interactions between several characters. The shift between focalizers often implies a shift between empathically following the characters' thoughts and actions on the one hand, and a critical distance to the character on the other. Especially in multiperspective novels which show the events from the point of view of several characters, readers are induced to alternately take several – often contradictory – perspectives on the same situation. Reading fiction practices the ability to recognise affiliations and contrasts between different perspectives and to relate them to each other. To make sense of mutually exclusive perspectives on the same situation often requires the modulation and modification of empathy. If a narrator compares and weighs the perspectives of others, ethically positions him- or herself towards others, and comes up with his or her own interpretation, readers can simulate these cognitive processes. If they do not get such guidance, they are encouraged to arrive at their own conclusions. Readers have to position themselves to the heterogeneous characters and to decide which traits, opinions, and attitudes they like best and which ones correspond to the requirements of the particular situation.

Seventh, complex fictional stories often highlight what Jerome Bruner calls breaches of the canonical expectations,[62] and such breaches with regard to culturally condoned ways of dealing with emotions may be helpful in a variety of ways. Since norms become more explicit when the consequences of their violations are

62 Bruner 1991: 15.

shown, fictional stories can disseminate cultural norms concerning the emotions – for instance with regard to how much emotion a child, girl, boy, man, woman is allowed to display in private or in public. What may be even more important is that they can also highlight the characters' struggles during such breaches of the canonical, delineating the problems of individuals who find themselves unable to conform to the rules and have to face the gap between what they should feel and want to feel on the one hand, and those annoying or frightening feelings they actually experience on the other hand.

Eighth, in stories, readers are not given propositional knowledge which can be learned in an abstract way; instead, they experience the characters' emotions, their origins, and the way they are regulated. This kind of learning can be of crucial importance as far as the understanding of emotions is concerned. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, claims that "emotions, unlike many of our beliefs, are not taught to us directly through propositional claims about the world, either abstract or concrete. They are taught, above all, through stories".[63] The same argument can be made with regard to ways of dealing with emotions, which readers are also taught through stories. By presenting a wide range of emotions and possible stories in which these can be embedded, fiction can enlarge readers' knowledge of ways of narrativising and coping with emotions. Fictional stories provide patterns of how to deal with 'unstoried emotions' and can then help readers to create stories that provide meaning to such feelings. They can enable readers to identify the emotion they feel and to integrate such feelings in a meaningful narrative.

5. CONCLUSION

Fictional stories can thus broaden our emotional horizon and expand the range of emotions which we can identify and understand. They can enable readers to empathically share feelings they have not experienced in their own lives and would not be able to identify in interactive encounters. By enlarging their feeling repertoire, fiction can also enhance readers' understanding of their own emotions and of possible means to regulate their emotions. As Marcel Proust explained, his readers would be "the readers of their own selves, my book being merely a

63 Nussbaum 1998: 226. For the link between emotion and narrative see Goldie who stresses that, while trying to understand an emotion, "we seek to locate the person's episodes of thought and feeling, which go to form part of his emotional experience, in the overall narrative which makes best sense of this part of his life"; Goldie 2000: 69; see also ibid.: 13, 102.

sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combray used to offer his customers – […] I would furnish them with the means of reading what lay inside themselves."[64] Being confronted with intense scenes and with characters' expressions of emotions that appear alien and strange at first can lead to moments of insight into one's own feelings.

At the basis of these opportunities that reading fictions may offer is a process which one could call a 'meta-affective' value of fiction. If we need to have words which allow us to identify and narrativise an emotion in order to be able to deal with it, an important part of the value of fiction lies in providing a nuanced language for understanding emotions and the complex scenarios in which they are embedded. Though many questions concerning the relation between emotions and the reading of particular literary genres and texts still remain open, there is overwhelming evidence that reading fiction can be a tool for feeling and important to our lives.

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64 Proust 1996: 432. See also Felski 2008: 24, 30.

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