»From the idea that the self is not given to us…«
On the Relevance of Comparative Approaches, the Importance of Narrative, and the Knowledge of Literature for Masculinity Studies*

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Most branches of Masculinity Studies agree that masculinity is best understood not as monolithic but as plural and changing over time. There is also a wide consensus that masculinity should not be considered as a given but as a performance, a task that has to be achieved, and a set of norms, differing according to regional, social, and historical contexts that society expects individuals to fulfil and to embody. Recent studies have discovered a multitude of social, historical, and local masculinities differing from each other in terms of race and class, of marginalization, hegemony, and sexual orientation, not to mention cyborg masculinities and transnational business masculinities. More often than not, the meaning of masculinity seems to differ from culture to culture, from location to location, and from historical era to historical era. It varies synchronically as well as diachronically, leading to a kind of contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*); it differs intersectionally according to age, religion, education, ethnicity etc., and it changes from academic discipline to academic discipline.

In addition to this, recent findings in Transgender and Intersex Studies have complicated the relationship of masculinity to gender division itself, arguing that masculinity is neither innate nor necessarily linked to a male body. Jack Halberstam even argues that masculinity becomes particularly »legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body« (Halberstam 1998, 2; see also Adams 2000, 468), a thesis which reduces traditional, that is to say male masculinity to a »counterexample to the kinds of masculinity that seem most informative about gender relations and most generative of social change« (Halberstam 1998, 3).

This emphasis on difference and plurality has led to the assumption of the incommensurability of masculinities—up to the point where the very concept of masculinity is not only put into question but about to become meaningless. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a common understanding of what we mean by using terms such as ›man‹, ›male‹, and ›masculine‹, of how they are interrelated and of

how they are related to terms such as ›woman‹, ›female‹, ›feminine‹, ›intersex‹, ›transgender‹ etc. As a matter of fact, Masculinity Studies seem to be in a sort of double-bind: While current research has shown that in post-modern societies the construction of a monolithic or ›singular‹ masculine (or male) gender identity[1] has become problematic and increasingly impossible, the construction of a masculine (or male) gender identity based on the premises of an unrestricted plurality has turned out to be problematic and crises-ridden as well.

Since the consequence of emphasizing plurality (which is so characteristic of current Masculinity Studies) is that the question of commonalities, shared features and similarities of these masculinities has been neglected, it seems necessary to rethink the relationship between masculinity as a relational concept and its plural forms or manifestations, that is to address this problem via theoretical and methodological approaches that put a new emphasis on commonalities without disregarding differences and without being essentialist. However, up to now, any sustained dialectical sense of simultaneous difference and commonality, any notion of persistent characteristics that cross these multiple, proliferating masculinities, has remained largely absent;[2] and this notwithstanding the fact that there are—even across the wide plurality of differentiated masculinities—important common denominators that should be taken into account, such as, to name but a few, masculinity's status as an identity that takes a particular narrative or textual form, as a specific subject position in relation to the symbolic order, as a psychic or mental structure, and as an enabling form or structure of experience and possibility that is culturally conditioned, situated in relation to power structures, distinctly embodied but that nonetheless cannot be essentialized (see Horlacher 2018).

Since the increasing fragmentation and partitioning[3] of the field of Masculinity Studies correspond and indirectly lead to the fact that numerous thematic, historical, national and transnational characteristics and potential connections have only been considered selectively and in isolation, if at all, and not in their interdependency, it is necessary to develop new criteria and frameworks for a comparative analysis with special regard to the linguistic structures, the revival, transformation and embodiment of cultural scripts, narratives, images, and practices held in common by diverging national and transnational masculinities. Here, as in other fields of the humanities, a shift in focus in many of the disciplines dealing with

1 ›Masculine gender identity‹ refers to persons who, on a biological level, can be male, female, intersex, transgender or other but who, on the level of gender, identify as masculine, whereas ›male gender identity‹ stresses the link with a biologically male body (though biomedicine still is at a loss of how to define this body). See: Combrink 2002, 213-214. In the following, the concept of ›masculine gender identity‹ is used in order to not limit masculinity to biology.

2 For a more substantial discussion of Comparative Masculinity Studies see: Horlacher and Floyd 2017; see also: Horlacher and Floyd 2013.

3 For a detailed analysis see: Horlacher and Erhart 2018.

masculinity and gender towards narrative modes and structures, i.e. to stories and genres as the paramount components of historical and current constructions of masculinities, should be taken into account. This shift is particularly important when masculinity is viewed as having a largely discursive, textual or narrative relational structure and as consisting of a complex, differentiated, and dynamic subject position (see Horlacher 2010, 217-224). In the last consequence, this leads to the question of whether masculinity (in all its plural manifestations) is not best understood as a performative and narrative concept.

1. Rethinking the Concept of Narrative and the Narrative of Crisis

Although the term ›narrative‹ is located at the heart of narratology, there is little consensus about its definition, given that it has been used differently depending on its narratological focus. If we regard the term as congruent with its German equivalent (*Erzählung*), or with the French version favored by Gérard Genette (*récit*), narrative encompasses at least two real or fictional events that stand in logical or causal relation which are relayed linguistically (see Prince 2003, 58). Apart from this basic formula, the views diverge decidedly on the other immanent properties of narrative, for example depending on whether the term is applied from a cognitive or structuralist perspective.

With reference to J. Hillis Miller, Julian Wolfreys argues that narrative

> »is that which produces a particular identity or meaning through the singular arrangement of a temporal and spatial series of incidents, figures, motifs and characters. Such a network will function and generate meaning according to repetition, emphasis, amplification and other rhetorical devices.« (Wolfreys 2004, 163)

By forcing events into a chronological or causal relation, narrative is granted a didactic as well as community-building function, among others (see Prince 2003, 60; Wolfreys 2004, 167), without there being agreement on whether narrative is uncovering an inherent meaning of things or whether narrative itself produces this meaning performatively (see Miller 1995, 69). In this context, Gerald Prince argues that narrative »does not merely represent changes of state; it constitutes and interprets them as signifying parts of signifying wholes (situations, practices, persons, societies)« (Prince 2003, 60). To sum up, we can say that over the last years and even decades, a shift from »representational to ontological narrativity« has taken place meaning that narratives are not representations of identity but constitute identity (see Fluck 2013, 50; Müller-Funk 2008; Koschorke 2012), that narratives bring forth communities, that »social life is itself *storied*« and that narrative can be regarded as »an *ontological condition of social life*« (Somers 1994, 613-614).

In the following, the concept of narrative is not restricted to literary and cultural artefacts but spans from the construction of individual gender identity via biographical, material and embodied social processes to collective national identities and contextualised images.[4] Such an understanding of narrative offers the possibility of overcoming the increasing fragmentation and partitioning of the field of Masculinity Studies as well as the widespread assumption of the incommensurability of masculinities alluded to above. Moreover, it allows for the conception of new theories relating to the narrative construction of masculinity and masculine (or male) gender identity as well as to the link between narrative, affect and embodiment, that is to say the question as to how scripts, narratives etc. become embodied and inform (not only) men's personal and institutional practices and gendered relations with other human beings.

One could further ask whether the heterogeneous, complex and sometimes contradicting concepts of masculinity we witness throughout 20th and 21st century Europe and beyond can be understood as surface manifestations of varying narratological deep structures which, depending upon context, take on different forms. Examples would be, among others, the narrative of fatherhood (ranging from ›uncaring father‹ via ›producer‹, ›provider/breadwinner‹ to ›super-dad‹ etc.), the narrative of risk (different modes of gender-specific risk behavior) or the narrative of crisis;[5] an almost ubiquitous narrative that characterizes so many scholarly as well as popular accounts of masculinity that it seems to link and probably even unify many of the dominant concepts of masculinity.

As Kevin Floyd and I have argued elsewhere, when ›crisis‹ is understood as embodied and individuated, it almost seems that masculinity is never *not* in crisis, never *not* open to corporeal slippages and failures of all kinds (see Horlacher/

4 As to the role of images for identity formation, Fluck concedes that they »play an important role« but then argues that »they cannot impose unity on identity, because identity is the result of an ongoing process or narration that is put together by an ›I‹ out of a range of choices drawn from the personal and the cultural imaginary. Although the claim may appear counterintuitive in view of the seemingly self-evident iconic facticity and strong immediate impact of images, they remain nevertheless subordinate to narrative, because they depend on narrative to become meaningful. . . . The meaning of the image is produced by the narrative context we bring to it. The same is true of bodily experiences. Although these may be ›direct‹ and may thus appear as ›unmediated,‹ they only become meaningful experiences as part of a self-narrative« (Fluck 2013, 49-50).

5 Questions to be asked here would include, among others, how these narratives fulfill different (sometimes ideological) functions at different times in different cultural contexts, how they shape individual, collective and national concepts of masculinity, which form they take in different media and to what extent and by whom they are—analogous to Freud's concept of screen memory—used as decoys to divert attention from underlying social problems such as transformations of the working society or the destruction of fixed frames of reference and a foreseeable future.

Floyd 2017, 4). Indeed, in these terms it is this defining capacity for failure, for ›crisis,‹ that drives the corporeal, performative reiteration[6] of masculinity in the first place—its repeated, embodied insistence upon itself. To paraphrase Judith Butler's well-known formulation about gender per se, masculinity is a performance defined fundamentally by its capacity to go awry, by weaknesses one has to ›work‹ over and over again (see Butler 1993, 237; Badinter 1993, 49-50). Though the concept of crisis is a powerful narrative that has created and sustained perceptions of masculinity throughout Europe and the US (see Yekani 2011; Tholen 2014), it does also have its weaknesses: the inflationary usage of the crisis-model has often made it useless, with crisis being a problematic critical concept in itself, given that in an almost perfidious and conservative turn, it reinforces the idea of a formerly ›strong‹ and ›normal‹ masculinity—a masculinity not in crisis—and thus tends to strengthen traditional hegemonic structures. Moreover, the crisis narrative is a problematical analytical tool insofar as it is sometimes considered to be part of masculinity itself (*Objektebene*) as well as of the disciplines dealing with it (*Beobachtungsebene*), given that it has dominated Masculinity Studies on many different levels for a very long time.

In the following chapters, I would like to narrow down the focus from the general or collective dimension of father, risk or crisis narratives to the personal and individual dimension of how narrative can be regarded as being constitutive of masculine (and this includes male) gender identity. I will also inquire whether narratological approaches, which are obviously the approaches which are usually linked to the concept of narrative, are sufficient to understand masculine gender identity formation or whether they have to be combined with other, mostly psychoanalytical perspectives. Finally, any approach that argues that masculinity is narratively constructed or that gender identity inheres in narrative has to face the question of language conditioning, of the freedom of the subject and of what Fredric Jameson has called the »prison-house« of language.

6 However, we also have to keep in mind that iteration or reiteration is not sufficient to characterize masculine (or any other) gender identity given that »[n]arration, including self-narration, is an interpretive activity that exceeds iteration, because it has to make sense of a constant flow of daily encounters and novel experiences. . . . In consequence of this constantly changing mix, the need for an ongoing reinterpretation and reconfiguration emerges.« (Fluck 2013, 51)

2. The Importance of Narrative for Masculinity and Masculine Gender Identity

As Walter Erhart has shown, research on the micro-structural level, using ›thick description‹ (Clifford Geertz), has demythologized the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) and brought about a multitude of ›small narratives‹ which stand in contrast to the relatively few dominant ›master narratives‹ on the macro-structural level.[7] This research has also highlighted that masculinity can neither be fully understood as an ›image of stereotypical attributes‹ nor as a ›bundle of male fantasies‹, so that masculinity appears as a historically contingent, variable narrative structure. Another result of this micro-structural diversity of masculinity is the recognition that

> »the multiplicity and variability of historical gender practices stand in stark contrast to the prescriptive norms, theories, images, and narratives which have so far formed the bases of interest in gender history. . . .Along with the image of a hegemonic masculinity that seeks domination, the gender order, too, seems to be dissolving into a patchwork of diverse and everyday life contexts.« (Erhart 2005, 190-191)[8]

With this approach, a strict differentiation between quasi-mythical narratives and empirical everyday practice is barely sustainable, since for a socio-historical approach empirical everyday practice or reality is mainly, if not only, accessible via narratives. Thus, from an everyday-historical perspective »the thickly described life-worlds of men and women form multifaceted stories and narratives which are barely distinguishable from their literary role-models or blueprints« (Erhart 2005, 193). Historical masculinity (and probably masculinity as such) can therefore be reconstructed »first and foremost as a narrative structure« which consists »of narrative methods . . . and processes with the help of which ›men‹ orient themselves toward a historically and socially given ›masculinity‹« (Erhart 2005, 207). Thereby gender appears to be

> »just as narratively constructed as . . . reality, or at least as many other components of our culturally and socially constructed knowledge. . . . Most significantly, it is not only the relation of the genders that is based on narrative stories and plots, but so is the ›internal‹ construction of gender itself. Due to this fact in particular, ›gender‹ may then be read as a text, and, furthermore, narratological studies focusing

7 The following paragraphs are based on Erhart 2005. All translations by Stefan Horlacher.

8 »Furthermore, the hereby employed historiographic model of ›thick description‹ threatens to relativize the efficacy and influence of the myths of the history of the sexes/genders along with all cultural gender norms.« (Erhart 2005, 190-191)

> on gender should concentrate especially on the different ›modes of narrativity‹ underlying the construction of both genders respectively.« (Erhart 2005, 215-216)

From this, Erhart concludes that masculinity can be regarded as consisting of a series of culturally codified scripts as much as »of the differently and individually formed stories that are based on them.« He argues that the

> »narratological reconstruction of masculinity as a narrative structure shifts the focus to those sequences, plots and scripts that actually make historical and literary masculinities readable: as a narrative order of sequential acts—from singular patterns of behavior within the masculine habitus [männlicher Habitus] to structures of stages in one's life—as well as components of narratively structured masculine gender identities [männliche Identitäten].« (Erhart 2005, 217)

As the German original and the translation of »männlicher Habitus« into »masculine habitus« and of »männliche Identitäten« into »masculine gender identities« in the last sentence show, Erhart does not differentiate between masculine and male gender identity. This might be due to the fact that German as a language does not differentiate between male and masculine and that the term *Geschlecht* can mean both, sex and gender; it might also be due to the fact that the micro and macro narratives Erhart analyzes are mostly, if not exclusively, taken from a clearly structured historical period and from spheres traditionally linked to biological masculinity so that there is an implicit focus on (but not necessarily a limitation to) male gender identity. However, as far as the role and functions of narrative are concerned, Erhart's insights are also valid for the construction of masculine gender identity and therefore at least theoretically open to what critics such as Halberstam have written about female masculinity (see above).

To sum up, we can say that an approach according to which ›men‹ acquire masculinity »by performing a narrative script, by being forced into a narrative script, by performatively acting out a narrative script,« that is an approach according to which masculine gender identity »predominantly works via imitation, performance and enactment,« and that »thus brings into play imaginary role models—examples, images, narrations, which circulate among individual ›men‹ and official images of ›masculinity‹,« such an approach effectively manages to combine literary, social and historical sciences (Erhart 2005, 203-204). Moreover, from this perspective one may describe masculine gender identity as a »narrative model that combines crises—initiations, threats, failures—as core elements and nodal points in narrative scripts to form more or less coherent masculine stories« (Erhart 2005, 222). The emphasis on coherence is in accordance with research on identity and memory that has shown that especially in situations in which frames of reference constantly change, coherent concepts of self can, over time, only be accomplished

through discourse and narrative forms.[9] Thereby, narrative identity is regarded as fluid, as »very much in-process and unfinished, continuously made and remade as episodes happen« (Ezzy 1998, 247) and as adapting to diachronic changes by constantly reinterpreting past events in view of the future. But what does this tell us about the veracity, ›truth‹ or ›truth value‹ of the diverse and manifold masculinities we find on the micro-structural level Erhart refers to?

If John R. Gillis argues that »[i]dentities and memories are not things we think about, but things we think with« (Gillis 1994, 5), it is important to realize that both are subject to unconscious narrative frames which do *not* answer to truth but primarily control the coherence of stories (see Rusch 1987, 374; Schmidt 1993, 388), making sure that these function as assurances of (more or less) consistent concepts of self. Thus, the cognitive system can always »become victim of its own powers of seduction« (Rusch 1987, 374). We fall prey to our own stories of masculinity (which are not even our own), so that the veracity not only of the historical and reconstructed but also of the actively lived masculine identity narrations remains problematic given that they are modelled after other narrations[10]—not to mention the danger of misrecognizing oneself in these narrative structures.

However, we should keep in mind that even if the concept of narrative is of prime importance for the construction of gender identity and masculinity, we should not limit ourselves to narratological approaches only but critically ask whether masculinity's supposed proneness to crisis can really be explained as a result of narrative schemata only, whether masculine identity formation can really be reduced to being a mere incorporation, imitation and performance of externally determined narrative schemata, or where there is a separation or difference between ›external‹ (more or less) hegemonial masculinities and an »›inner,‹ psychosocially or psychoanalytically rooted fragility« (Erhart 2005, 207), between external (clearly narrative) and internal structures of masculinity.

For Jonathan Rutherford, who focuses on ›male subjectivity‹ and on the processuality of male development from its maternal origin towards autonomy and independence, using approaches and theories by Wittgenstein, Winnicot, Bion and Klein, internal and external narratives mirror themselves. Rutherford argues that culturally highly codified master narratives of masculinity such as the self-made man or masculine achiever, the soldier or knight can be understood as the result of pre-oedipal fears and defence mechanisms (against what he calls the »maternal supplement«) and as structurally inherent to the male psyche. This, by implication,

9 Cf. Kimminich 2003, xv–xvi; Schmidt 1993; Fluck 2013.

10 »We come to *be* who we *are* (however ephemeral, multiple and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*.« (Somers 1994, 606)

explains the attractiveness and popularity of these models—at least for a male gender identity. Rutherford therefore argues that the proneness to crisis inherent in male narratives is based on a narratological concept that is not only (re)charged historically but also grounded in a psychological structure which it then reflects (Rutherford 1992; see also Erhart 2005, 223). While it is, of course, possible and even fashionable to argue with Judith Butler and others that narrative performativity is downright constitutive of identity, we should at least keep in mind that other critics are more cautious. Though Nancy Chodorow concedes that »[t]he particular sense of self and relationship and the particular relation to and fantasies about the body, arising in the individual family in which someone grows up and giving any individual's gender a unique feeling and fantasy animation,« are »familiar to us from biography, autobiography, and fiction« (Chodorow 1995, 541), she also points to the relevance of psychological processes which take place »in a different register from culture, language, and power relations« (Chodorow 1995, 517) and argues that language alone is not sufficient to understand the complexity of the creation and functioning of gender identities.

3. Language and the Question of Agency

If masculinity is no longer seen as a metaphysical, essentialist or biological constant, if masculine gender identities are, even from a psychoanalytic perspective, to a large part dependent on narrative—and this implies: on linguistic structures—, if language and narrative are really as important as the proponents of the linguistic and narrative turn claim and if, as Jacques Lacan argues, man speaks only »because the symbol has made him man« (Lacan 1977, 65), then the question arises as to the possibility of agency of the subject, be it masculine, feminine or other. If we accept that there is an important coincidence of language, narrative, literature and the construction of gender identity, that human beings are positioned within different fields of discourse and sign systems which—by creating and offering different narratives, that is subject positions, images and models of masculinity—foster the internalisation, imitation and performance of externally determined narrative schemata that actively shape gender identity, then it is important to conceive of language and its different forms or manifestations not as a »prison-house« but as a potential site of liberation from restrictions and as a major means for the creative construction of gender identity.

Of course, one can argue that »[i]n order to be able to construct a meaningful self-narrative« we must »draw on narratives handed down by culture, and in order to gain social and cultural recognition,« we must inscribe ourselves »into culturally accepted plots.« (Fluck 2013, 51) However, these narratives »are nevertheless not identical with the social narratives in which we inscribe ourselves. These social nar-

ratives,« as Winfried Fluck argues, »may provide cultural frames of interpretation and furnish genre and plot structures for self-narration, but we still have to turn these into the scripts of our own life.« (Fluck 2013, 52) So even if, according to Paul Ricoeur, we may probably never completely become the author of our own life we may still become the narrator of our own story.

In an endeavour to »open doors toward new constructions of subjectivity that allow for individuality and freedom« in terms consistent with what she calls »the discursive condition« (Ermarth 2000, 418), Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth argues that it is in the gap between the potential capacities of a differential code and any particular specification of it, that is between language (*langue*) and enunciation (*parole*), that the arena of subjectivity and freedom resides. For Ermarth, identity—and this implies gender identity and thus masculinity—has to be understood as kinetic, as

> »a process, an event, a particular expression of systemic value, ›above all, an accomplishment, a particular work, a particular act,‹ the ›very expression‹ of responsibility, not something independent of it. Identity in . . . [these] terms definitely has nothing to do with reducing difference. . . . Rather, identity appears only in the act of specifying sets of rules. And as we operate simultaneously in several sets at once, identity appears as the series of constantly multiplied specifications of the potential provided by those rule regimens.« (Ermarth 2000, 411)[11]

This concept of identity allows for what Ermarth calls »a kinetic subjectivity-in-multicoded-process« (Ermarth 2000, 412), that is for a subjectivity which is thought of as

> »the moving nexus or intersection at which a unique and unrepeatable sequence is constantly being specified from the potentials available in the discursive condition. Such a subjectivity is individual in its sequence, not in some irreducible core. Its uniqueness lies in its trajectory: the lifelong sequence, impossible to anticipate, within which an unpredictable series of specifications are made from among the languages available. The volatility of language—its resonance, its power of poetic, associative linkage—provides precisely the varied opportunities for selective specification that constitute the unique and unrepeatable poetry of a life.« (Ermarth 2000, 412)[12]

11 The inserted quotes are from Václav Havel.

12 Ermarth introduces the concepts of sequence and palimpsestousness since we occupy multiple subject positions simultaneously and since these configurations change over time. Without mentioning Ermarth, Fluck talks about identity positions such as gendered, class and national identity which »have to be meaningfully connected in narrative in order to allow for at least a minimal degree of continuity and consistency.« (Fluck 2013, 51)

Thus, even in the ›discursive condition‹ agency remains possible, with the advantage that, according to Ermarth, it is especially in literature that creative and new blueprints for this singular and »unrepeatable poetry of a life« are found. While Fluck argues that because of the factor of recognition (of the self in narrative), stories such as *Cinderella* and—as its »male equivalent« (Fluck 2013, 54)—the adventure story will be told »over and over again« (Fluck 2013, 52)[13], Ermarth focuses less on this continuity or conformity but stresses that »highly achieved literary writing opens new powers in our collective discursive potentials, in our power to revise social codes rather than merely to repeat the same old exclusions . . ., the same, same, old stories over and over again« (Ermarth 2000, 415).

What at first sight might look like a contradiction—the different connotations of »over and over again« as used by Ermarth and Fluck—is resolved when we keep in mind that Fluck stresses that the Cinderella story, just like the adventure story, has sparked off many different genres and subgenres. Though his »over and over again« stresses repetition, it most certainly is *repetition with a difference*! So what exactly is it that Masculinity Studies can learn from literature and the arts with respect to the construction of (gender) identities, that is to say masculinities, femininities etc., and how is this knowledge produced?

4. The Specific Knowledge of Literature or *savoir littéraire*

Though I would argue that the following line of reasoning works for gender identity in general, as it does for the arts, there are important differences between the way music, painting, sculpture, photography, film and literature construct, imagine and represent masculinity, femininity, intersex, transgender etc. so that—in accordance with the title of this essay—I will mainly limit myself to masculinity and literature.

On a rather prosaic level, Todd Reeser contends that in »nearly all cases, questions of identity—whether cultural or individual—are central to masculinity studies, meaning that approaches to flesh-and-blood human beings and approaches to literary representations are not fully distinct,« that »sociological or anthropological understandings of masculinity can be and were in many ways imported to literary studies,« and that »literary constructs of masculinity may validate conceptions

13 Both, the *Cinderella* and the adventure story exist in many different forms such as the fairy tale, the sentimental novel, the novel of manners and the gothic female novel on the one hand and »as action story, detective story, Western, war movie, pirate story, or classical journey into the unknown« on the other. Moreover, Fluck does not limit himself to the category of recognition but also includes literature of misrecognition which »has produced a wide spectrum of genres, ranging from tragedy and the melodrama of the nineteenth century to a tradition of social criticism focusing on the victim.« (Fluck 2013, 55)

of gender in the social sciences« (Reeser 2015, 13). We have also seen that according to Erhart, from an everyday-historical perspective, »the thickly described lifeworlds of men and women form multifaceted stories and narratives which are barely distinguishable from their literary role-models or blueprints« (Erhart 2005, 193). Erhart further argues that, in contrast to history and historiography, literature offers a »psychoanalytical knowledge about masculinity« and provides a »privileged access to the inner workings of modern masculinity« (Erhart 2005, 206).

Thus, literature holds a specific knowledge or, as with Roland Barthes, a *savoir littéraire*[14] which transcends any purely sociological, political, or historical analysis. Interpretations of literary texts make it possible not only to identify the mechanisms of construction and transformation of masculine gender identities within these works, understood as highly artificial, condensed, polysemous symbolic systems, but also to relate their internal logic or mechanisms to the artistic system itself, to the wider social and cultural context as well as to the construction of masculinity in everyday life. From this perspective, literature becomes an indispensable epistemological medium as well as an important object of research, so that analyses should include a strong focus on the complex interactions between ›real life‹ (*Lebenswelt*) and the novel, poem, short story etc. as well as on the important role these texts play in acquiring a knowledge of the lifeworld, that is, a knowledge *about* and *for* living *different* lives that renders *Überleben*, or survival, possible (Ette 2010, 986).

In accordance with Jill Matus, literature can be understood as a phenomenon that actively shapes our concepts of reality, constitutes a central part of that »larger symbolic order by which a culture imagines its relation to the conditions of its existence,« exposes as well as delineates »ideologies, opening the web of power

14 Barthes calls literature a »grand imposture« and »a permanent revolution of language« that cannot be reduced to something like an agglomeration of merely encyclopedic knowledge. Quite to the contrary, literature »accommodates many kinds of knowledge« and »is absolutely, categorically *realist*: it is reality, i.e., the very spark of the real. Yet literature, in this truly encyclopedic respect, displaces the various kinds of knowledge, does not fix or fetishize any of them; it gives them an indirect place, and this indirection is precious. On the one hand, it allows for the designation of possible areas of knowledge—unsuspected, unfulfilled. Literature works in the interstices of science. It is always behind or ahead of science. . . . Science is crude, life is subtle, and it is for the correction of this disparity that literature matters to us. The knowledge it marshals is, on the other hand, never complete or final. Literature does not say that it knows something, but that it knows *of* something, or better, that it knows *about* something—that it knows about men. What it knows about men is what we might call the great *mess* of language, upon which men work and which works upon them. . . . Because it *stages* language instead of simply using it, literature feeds knowledge into the machinery of infinite reflexivity. Through writing, knowledge ceaselessly reflects on knowledge, in terms of a discourse which is no longer epistemological, but dramatic.« (See Barthes and Howard 1979, 6-7)

relations for inspection,« and constitutes a space »in which shared anxieties and tensions are articulated and symbolically addressed« (Matus 1995, 7). This consideration of literature as well as its link to activist movements and politics is of special importance since it shows how spaces are created in which ludic, creative, and experimental thinking becomes possible, in which alternatives are offered, that is, »other images, other roles, other options for men and masculinity« (Murphy 1994, 1), and in which humankind can transcend itself and create new ways of understanding, imagining and rewriting their gender identity.

The value of literature, Jonathan Culler argues, has »long been linked to the vicarious experiences it gives readers, enabling them to know how it feels to be in particular situations and thus to acquire dispositions to act and feel in certain ways« (Culler 1997, 113).[15] Literary texts »address us in ways that demand identification, and identification works to create identity: we become who we are by identifying with figures we read about,« with figures we watch or contemplate; figures who create different, alternative, and novel identities (Culler 1997, 114). While from a ›naïve‹ perspective, this identification Culler talks about could be seen as another potential misrecognition substituting one ›external‹ narrative for another, things are more complicated.

First: It is important to note that the new and different masculinities created by literary texts do not remain unquestioned since, contrary to many other discourses, literature critically reflects upon its own strategies, procedures and modes of functioning.[16] Thus, in its allegories and ironies, literature is »never only the representation of extratextual reality or ›real life,‹ but also a practical linguistic analysis as well as the exposition of the formal conditions underlying this very analysis« (Hamacher 1988, 13). This implies that literary texts »are thoroughly cognitive processes that systematically challenge the potential epistemological value of linguistic statements and, thereby, their own« (Hamacher 1988, 9).[17] From this

15 Literary works but also other art forms such as film or theatre »encourage identification with characters by showing things from their point of view« (Culler 1997, 113).

16 Literary texts self-consciously take their contexts (in the sense of ›situated knowledge‹) into account since they do not make an illusory or imaginary claim for objectivity but possess a knowledge or self-awareness of their being linguistic constructs. Uwe C. Steiner regards literature as an »organon of knowledge about the reality of symbolic world creation« (Steiner 1997, 33) and a »genuine medium of reflection« that »operates while focusing on itself« (Steiner 1997, 34).

17 From this perspective, literary texts differ from objective facts in at least two respects: »[Firstly,] they do not merely articulate a particular understanding of the world and of language, but they also point to the problems inherent in this understanding and in every communication about it, which is why they may be regarded as being genuinely epistemological; and, secondly, the epistemological value of literary, and this always also means figurative statements, is being oddly suspended by the texts' admission of their figurative nature.« (Hamacher 1988, 9)

it follows that any identification of the reader with masculine gender identities created by the literary text is on the one hand wished for and on the other hand always already precarious and questioned by the text itself.

Second: We should be careful with the concept of identification as such. Though identification is still »considered a key mechanism for the production of identities« (Fluck 2013, 57), for example if identification is understood as the means by which a text »manages to create (the illusion of) a unified identity in the spectator and thereby fixes identity in an ideologically charged subject position« (ibid.)[18], we have to take into consideration that there are different forms of identification, that it does not necessarily result in a »unified identity« but that it »is usually partial and segmented« (Fluck 2013, 57; see Felski 2008, 35). For these reasons, Fluck argues »that reading and reception work by means of structural analogy« (Fluck 2013, 59) and that the concept of identification should be replaced by that of a transfer:

> »In reading, we establish analogies to those aspects that fit into our own narrative of identity or are especially meaningful or moving from the perspective of this narrative. In this sense, narrative can be meaningfully linked to the concept of identity: fictional texts and other aesthetic objects provide material that allows the reader to rewrite and extend the narrative of his own identity.
> The encounter with an aesthetic object holds the promise of self-extension, because I can attach imaginary elements of my own world to another world and become temporarily somebody else. This somebody else engages me, because, in bringing him or her to life by means of a transfer, I will draw on analogies (not always positive ones) to parts of myself. But these parts of myself are now placed in a new context and are thus reconfigured.« (Fluck 2013, 59-60)

This interaction between a specific text and its specific reader can lead to the coming into being of new, alternative and different masculinities but can also be reassuring, confirmative and soothing;[19] it can have affirmative and liberating but also defamiliarizing, frightening and alienating effects. »[H]ighly achieved literary writing,« to use Ermarth's expression, can free readers from habitual modes of perception, is characterized by its ability to defamiliarize and alienate, and subverts

18 Concerning this more traditional understanding of identification, one could argue that texts which are poetically less densely structured, which are less characterized by deautomatization/defamiliarization, the multiplication of connotative signifiers, polysemies, polyisotopies, the recurrent use of symbols etc. might—at least on the surface level—seem to be more influential than their more sophisticated counterparts because in their explicitness which stems from their lack of complexity and self-reflexivity etc. they make a relatively non-segmented identification with the (often conservative) images and role models they offer possible and very often do not confront the reader with the question of his or her own gender identity.

19 See above, footnote 18.

»the illusions on which our perception is based« by opening up »an unexpected view of the object« (as well as of the reading subject; see Marcel Proust; Horlacher 2002). By thus drawing »attention to the illusory nature of conventional modes of perception« (Iser 1966, 367),[20] literary texts generate acts of the imagination which involve ideation (*Vorstellung*) instead of perception (*Wahrnehmung*).

The fact that Fluck conceptualizes the act of reading as an act of imagining stresses the potential of the fictional text »to articulate something that is still unformulated« (Fluck 2002, 257) and to give »a determinate shape to imaginary elements, ranging from fantasy to affective dimensions, by linking these elements with a semblance of the real« (Fluck 2002, 261). The aesthetic experience can thereby be understood as »a state ›in-between‹ in which, as a result of the doubling structure of fictionality, we are . . . ›both ourselves and someone else at the same time‹« (Fluck 2002, 263). This ties in with Ottmar Ette's notion of »knowledge *about* and *for* living *different* lives« referred to above, that is a »knowledge for living« that can »be understood as an *imagined* form of living and as a process of imagining life (and lives), in which self-referentiality and self-reflexivity are critically important« (Ette 2010, 986).[21] Thus, as Brook Thomas contends, »[e]nabled by acts of fictionalization to move constantly between the imaginary and the real, readers . . . perpetually ›stage‹ themselves« (Thomas 2008, 626), fashion new identities, imagine new worlds and create other, more expressive versions of themselves and of their masculinity; versions of themselves which are not simple cases of self-aggrandizements »through wish-fulfilment but an extension of [their] . . . own interiority over a whole (made-up) world;« (Fluck 2002, 263-264) and this made-up world belongs to literature, is the product of language and consists of narrative:

> »Little attention has been paid to the sheer fact of literary language, its particular power to turn convention aside, to reform the act of attention, to ground and limit the very formulation that is prior to any discussion at all, philosophical or practical. Languages are our tools of thought, the essential precursors of practice. If . . . languages are above all systems, then literary texts are the most highly achieved specifications of those systems.« (Ermarth 2000, 406)

20 It is important to keep Iser's emphasis on reflexivity in mind: »Reflexivity is crucial, because only this can elevate the defamiliarization of convention beyond the level of a mere routine of making things new, so that defamiliarization will lead not only to new perceptions but also to increased self-awareness.« (Quoted in and translated by Fluck 2002, 256)

21 In this context, Ette rightly speaks of the »specific efficacy of literature . . ., which, as knowledge about life and knowledge in life, also offers knowledge for survival, spanning from the death cell and the concentration camp in fascist Europe to various forms of migratory knowledge and to a politically and philosophically reflected experiential knowledge about living in multicultural societies at the turn of the 21st century.« (Ette 2004, 13)

5. Towards an Intersectional and Relational Definition of Masculinity

Literature does not only possess a kind of knowledge about masculinity that is relevant for a better understanding of its construction or specific configuration, functioning, and supposed defects, but also features a co-constructive potential which enables readers to critically question and re-construct their own masculinity. By creating a fictional account of a diffuse imaginary without direct reference to extra-textual reality, literature can be regarded as a particularly effective medium for the creation of alternative masculinities beyond what is deemed acceptable within a specific culture. Given the millions and millions of narratives of masculinity we find in literary works and which—as a result of the doubling structure of fictionality—we actively co-construct and thus experience, we can argue that it is indeed the artistic use of language, that is to say the pushing of »the limits of systemic potential without ever exhausting it,« that opens up new possibilities for unique and unrepeatable ›poetries‹ of life and that, by making readers reconfigure their self-narrative(s),[22] »contributes so directly to social health« (Ermarth 2000, 411).

From D.H. Lawrence to Oscar Wilde, Geoffrey Eugenides and Shyam Selvadurai, from William Shakespeare to Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka and Manuel Puig, and from Marcel Proust to Virginia Woolf and Jacky Kay, to give but a few random examples, it is in literature that we find new, different and more innovative, less traditional modes and models for the (co-)construction of masculinity; narrative modes and models which ›speak through us,‹ interact with us, shape us, which—in partial analogy to Barthes's *scripteur* and Lévi-Strauss' *bricoleur*—can be combined in ever new and different configurations, are self-reflexive and can even be experienced as otherness. Literature does not only fulfil a diagnostic and self-reflexive analytical but also a performative function, allowing for a variety of new masculine gender identities that become available through their very conception in art[23] and that can actively change reality since »inhabiting a language means inhabiting a reality, and that so-called ›reality‹ . . . changes with the language« (Ermarth 2000, 410).

If narrative, literature, (gender) identity and masculinity are as intimately linked as has been suggested above, masculinity can probably best be conceived of as a historically contingent, variable narrative structure that is striving for coherence and characterized by fluidity and instability, by a precarious emplotment and a

22 If we understand the interaction between reader and text as an »imaginary transfer,« reading »may be described as a dialogue between two narratives: the narrative of the text and the narrative of the reader. Its result is a subject position of non-identity. . . . The other and the self interact to extend, and potentially reconfigure, the self-narrative« (Fluck 2013, 60-61).

23 For the performative function see Stein 2004; see also Horlacher 2011.

constant negotiation of change and mutability. The masculinists' postulation of a ›true‹ or ›stable‹ masculinity (based in biology) would then be nothing but a regulatory fiction; an illusion, a simplifying Lacanian misrecognition meant to conceal the dazzling plurality but also insecurity, mobility and fragility inherent in masculinity; »a prosthetic reality…that willy-nilly supplements and suspends a ›lack-in-being‹« (Bhabha 1995, 57). With reference to Homi Bhabha and Jacques Derrida, masculinity could then be understood »as an unending, ultimately un-definable phenomenon, composed not so much of social constructs per se but of an unending series of questions« (Reeser 2015, 34; see also Bhabha 1995, 58); questions surrounding a lack-in-being so profound that in a quasi-permanent act of disavowal we tend to produce our imaginary versions of stable and strong masculinities with which to identify in order to finally trade in our uncertainty and precariousness, our fundamental ›questionability,‹ for alienation and reification.

This, of course, brings back the aspect of comparison since in order to be a useful scientific category, and also a functioning identity category, some kind of definition of masculinity is necessary; a definition which is less based on its proliferating forms and manifestations (which, of course, should not be negated) but on their commonalities, shared features and structural similarities. In addition to what has just been stated about the narrative structure of masculinity and its ›quest‹ for coherence, research should therefore also focus on the persistent characteristics that cross these multiple, proliferating masculinities and try to identify common denominators that would allow us to define or categorize something as masculine. Masculinity could then be conceived of as the (temporary) overlap, intersection or configuration of attributes, forms of behavior and praxes which are considered ›masculine‹ at a certain point in time, in a given cultural context and at a specific geographical location; as an intersectional configuration which may differ according to age, ethnicity, health, religion, social stratum etc. and which—as Bhabha and Lacan would contend—is characterized by absence and lack at its center. Masculine gender identity, just as masculinity, could then be seen as a potentially unstable, contradictory and evolving cultural product dependent on language, that is to say on the narrative, creative and rhetorical operations which we find in literature. Thus, the literary text becomes an exemplificatory space of interdiscursivity and intersectionality as well as a privileged epistemological medium where this rhetorical writing of masculinity is rendered readable and—in the very act of reading—creatively re-writeable by the reader. Or, as with Michel Foucault: »From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art« (Foucault 1983, 237).

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