Introduction

What makes us smile and wonder in humorous moments? What makes us think and feel pleasure and pain at the same time when we read passages that echo some form of humor? What *touches* us in such instances of texts? How is humor involved in the evocation of such *touching spaces* in the text?

In this study, I proceed from a poetological insight I experienced while reading Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), when I thought I had encountered what might be called *touching spaces* within humorous instances of the text – and they have haunted me ever since. I felt that there was much more to the built-in humor of (con-)texts than we might assume at first or even second glance. In this study, then, I explore the poetological insights of such spaces that touch us in affective as well as epistemological ways. These spaces seem at once to touch different threads within the (literary) text as well as outside of it, building a texture within and beyond the text with the outside world, in discursive as well as material ways (Derrida [1967] 1974; Spivak 1989, 2012; Geisenhanslüke 2015). I am particularly interested in the conjunction of touch and humor and their technical and epistemological connections, as well as the poetological elements evoked in the text. I consider, on the one hand, philosophical and theoretical reflections on touch and its meanings, as well as on humor and its affective economy that emerge from this mélange. On the other hand, I focus on how exemplary contemporary novels induce such spaces of touch – and what they touch upon. Although some threads from Greek philosophy and mythology, Ovid's *Narcissus and Echo,* as well as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* will be discussed, in terms of the temporal and spatial configuration, the project limits itself in the reading section to two novels from the Western hemisphere, Canada and the UK, considering works in English and French. The novels are Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2001) and Dany Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (2008). Both novels transcend the limitations of their spatial confines and, through diasporic and migratory routes that also encompass the subjectivity of the authors and their narrators and characters, open up a much wider spatial network of exchange and encounter within the narrative discourses of the novels that hint at the fabric of the wider world. By exploring how normative, mainstream meanings inherent in language and discourse are addressed in different ways in the literary spaces, I examine the processes set in motion as a byproduct. The work is pursued through a thematic framework within a close reading and a critical

narratological analysis. It consists of two broad sections. The first section introduces the main concerns, addressing the question of humor, affectivity, and touch. The second part consists of a close reading of the thematic analysis, as well as the imagological and representational repertoire of the novels. Based on these two parts, the concluding part summarizes the findings and offers a view on the affectivity of humor and the poetics of its touch with regard to the ethical implications of this relation.

I begin by addressing the question of humor and by looking at the various understandings, definitions, and uses of humor in different theoretical and philosophical approaches in order to assess the terms, possibilities, limits, and limitations attached to its meaning and the angles from which it is discussed. This is necessary for two reasons: Firstly, it makes it possible to see how these terms and definitions are demarcated and circumscribed, and secondly, it also explains the wide range of debates and understandings of humor, the contradictory statements about it, as well as the derogatory status that humor still holds, to some extent, in literary and philosophical theorizations.

My conclusion is that humor is an *affective rhetoric of deconstruction*, generated within the poetology of the literary text and the literariness of texts more generally.

While humor is often looked down upon in more classical and modern Western philosophical texts, and even excluded from mainstream philosophy, some studies shed light on its ›benefits‹, ranging from philosophical insights to health issues.

Most scholars, especially in contemporary debates, agree on the incongruity theory of humor, whether this incongruity is seen in the different meanings of the said and the meant, or the said and a subsequent act. But how this incongruity emerges, remains unresolved, although some scholars, such as Sigmund Freud, emphasize the role of language as the medium through which it arises. In addition to these different approaches to humor, humor is often considered and used, sometimes consciously and sometimes implicitly, as a tool of critique, a quality of humor that is also addressed here from various angles. This aspect is important for the study because it sheds light on the ways in which humor is used as a praxis of resistance, for example within the interventionist politics of critical, intersectional, feminist, queer, Black, Jewish, postcolonial theory, as well as class-based critical approaches. Whereas tragedy is considered a significant and insightful form of expression and genre in literary theory, humor is mostly viewed as ridicule and mockery, or as nonsensical play, often for mere amusement. More recent and modernist texts adopt a more radical position of humor, challenging earlier positions as well as philosophy per se, even to the extent of discussing humor *as* philosophy, thus giving humor a greater significance. In these approaches, humor is considered part of an economy of tragedy, a direction in which this study also ventures.

Finally, based on such considerations, humor is understood here as a *tonality* that can capture different nuances, and thus as a specter of different and differently evoked humorous instances in the text. Such an understanding of humor raises the question of how humor works in language and how it generates those various traits. This question will be further explored in a fourfold discussion of humor within theories of performativity, within literary theory in a narrower sense with a special focus on ›irony‹, within a discussion of rhetoric, and, finally, within the poetics of texts as a kind of allegorical surplus of not-knowing (*NichtWissen*) and power-lessness (*OhnMacht*).

There are different theoretical strands of performativity. Here, I will consider theories of performativity that shed light on the work of language and humor. Mikhail Bakthin's approach to the grotesque and the carnivalesque is also discussed as a theory that combines the performing and performative sides of humorous tendencies in novels. The work of Shoshana Felman and J.L. Austin's speech act theory are addressed, as well as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's hitherto rather neglected understanding of performativity in relation to marginalized spaces, which Sedgwick calls *periperformatives*: instances of witnessing at the margins of actual performative acts, which give impetus to these centrings but also challenge them. Her attention to humor as a performative element that deals with affectivity and processes of transformation can be understood as retrospectively produced *re*arrangements of previous experiences.

In literary theory, in a narrower sense, there are other terms related to humor, such as ›irony‹, parody, satire, or pun. In order to situate my understanding of humor in this regard, I will also discuss humor in relation to such terms. ›Irony‹, as a figure of speech and a frequently discussed term in literary theory, is central to this discussion. Of particular importance in this context are the works of the literary theorist Paul de Man, whose approaches to ›irony‹ continue to occupy a dominant and influential position. Rather than following de Man's understanding of ›irony‹ as a superficial and inferior linguistic instance, Friedrich Schlegel's and, based on Schlegel, Peter Szondi's and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's approaches to ›irony‹ as *parabasis* are emphasized. This understanding of ›irony‹ aligns well with a view of humor as a phenomenon that plays with incongruity. In this way, ›irony‹ is perceived as an incongruous humorous tonality that, like the overall work of humorous inclinations, is an intervening, parabasic, performative intervention in thought and language with a pensive and epistemological amplitude. ›Irony‹ is thus perceived as a technical term and figure of speech that circumscribes the incongruous, allusive, and rapturous humorous work in (literary) texts. Humor is thereby also considered as a rhetorical device. With regard to the question of rhetoric, this study takes three interrelated approaches: Firstly, I discuss a more current situating of the modern(-ist) comeback and understanding of rhetoric (Bender/Wellbery 1990; Richards 2008; Geisenhanslüke 2003, 2018). Secondly, Paul de Man's postmodernist approach to rhetoric as a deconstructivist phenomenon, often referred to as *rhetoricality,* is discussed (de Man 1983, 1996; Bender/Wellbery 1990; Geisenhanslüke 2009). Other approaches have also emphasized the role of rhetoric in the making of meaning in texts. Eagleton, for example, understands rhetoric as a »discourse theory« interested in the »formal devices of language«. He relates the »enigma« of its meanings to a decipherable formalist semiotics (Eagleton 2000, 179). Eagleton also links rhetoric to the ways in which language and discourse produce effects on (implied) readers. Likewise, he also refers to power and desire in discourse and language within a historically determined »symbolic order« or »signifying practices« (Eagleton 2000, 180 ff.). In these understandings, rhetoric is seen as the inclination of a text, its drive, desire, and orientation, however subtle, toward stability or change and against the background of dominant, hitherto normalized understandings. Thirdly, I will consider Achim Geisenhanslüke's approach to rhetoric, which opens it up to questions of functionality within poetological concerns and links those postmodernist theoretical presuppositions back to classical understandings of rhetoric in literary studies. Geisenhanslüke elaborates on how rhetoric evokes different sentiments and senses, explicitly

linking the affective meaning of a text to rhetoricality (Geisenhanslüke 2018, 103 ff.). In this approach, rhetoric appears as the glue that binds the two instances of poetics – its aesthetic and epistemological qualities – in order to generate meanings.

Along these parameters, I understand humor as a rhetorically generated, *affective*, *deconstructive poetological tonality* that is performed within a (con)text.

This understanding of humor, however, does not clarify how humor relates to *affectivity*, especially since humor is often seen not only as an ›affect‹, but also as a phenomenon that arouses it (for example amusement, ridicule, empowerment, thoughtfulness, melancholy). Thus, while humor is often mentioned as an ›affect‹ or assumed to evoke ›affects‹, there is no further discussion of the ways in which this is the case. I address this question by looking at the various debates in affect studies and by considering the relationship between humor as a deconstructive rhetorical device to what I call *affectivity*. My understanding of *affectivity* is situated within a critical Spinozian framework and within feminist and constructivist approaches in literary theory and cultural studies (Ahmed 2004, 2006, 2010, 2014; Leys 2011, 2012, 2020; Ngai 2007, 2012; Sedgwick 1993, 2003; Geisenhanslüke 2018, 2019). The question for me, therefore, is not an ontological one; it is less about what ›affects‹ *are* or about assuming fixed and distinctive ›emotions‹ to be explored without any considerations of language, discourse, and the (discursive) functionality they may occupy. The main question for me is how *to relate* humor to what I call *affectivity*, a specter of different affective dynamics in the production of texts and in the sociopolitical texture, in such a way that it is not presumed as ›given‹ and taken for granted. Rather, the attempt is to take a critical look at how humor is generated in relation to *affectivity* in the text, what function it occupies, and what effect it has in a (con)text. *Affectivity* is understood as an interrelational, processual, subject-related and fluctuating, prelingual as well as discursive practice with material effects that also permeates (literary) texts. It is seen as an engaged intervention and contribution to stabilizing or destabilizing discourses and conventionalized symmetries of historically determined power structures. Furthermore, I see two other interrelated points regarding *affectivity*. Following a psychoanalytic approach, *affectivity* is seen as a mechanism of self-regulation (Hilgers 2012, 17; Sedgwick 2003; Geisenhanslüke 2008). Humorous tendencies in (literary) (con-)texts are then understood as sites and archives of multiple traces of affective nodal points, and in this respect as antidotes to the mechanisms of the signifying process of discursive power regulations (Sedgwick 1993, 8; 2003, 9; Geisenhanlüke 2019, 16 ff.).

From these discussions, humor is perceived as a complex rhetorical phenomenon that deconstructs meaning within an affective poetological endeavor, which also sets epistemological threads in motion. For the purposes of this study, therefore, humor is understood as *affective humor*.

In contrast to the established scholarly discourse on affectivity and humor, the poetics of humor in the rhetoric of language and the (de-)signification mechanism of discourse are key in this study.

Based on these reflections, I understand *affective humor* as an allusive form of non-knowledge *(NichtWissen)* and power-lessness *(OhnMacht)*.

Within its economy of non-knowledge and power-lessness, *affective humor*, it is argued, opens up *touching spaces* for pausing and thinking. It is a form of epistemology that

questions both ›knowledge‹ and ›power‹. It does so from an allegorical rather than a ›suspicious‹ insight that emerges from the poetics of the humorous work in (con-)texts. In doing so, *affective humor* makes room for the possibility of a different encounter and different ways of thinking. It is understood as an oscillating, implicitly evoked, unfinished insight into non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*) as ›the most elaborate form of knowledge‹ (Lacan 1966, quoted in Geisenhanslüke 2015, 82) – and the most effective form of powerlessness (*OhnMacht*).

Affective humor is thus seen as an epistemology in the making. Accordingly, it is argued that it has an indecisive, unfinished, dialogical form that derives from its interventionist, parabasic character. With its parabasic structure as well as its proposal for dialogicity, *affective humor* induces a space, an in-betweenness. However, because its form extends into an unconcluded, allegorical inclination, it is not a closed space, but one that, like a stitch, continually opens up other spaces as it intervenes in the text, giving it further texture.

In the third and final conceptual-theoretical part of this first section, I turn to the meanings of touch and its relation to *affective humor.*

After an introductory discussion, the focus here remains on Jacques Derrida's thorough elaborations. In particular, two of Derrida's works (Derrida 1993, [2002] 2005) that deal explicitly with touch are discussed and used as a basis for understanding its multiple meanings and poetological juncture.

Derrida opens up various aspects of touch that go far beyond a haptic as well as a sensual understanding. He also discloses the meaning of the term in relation to thought, to the psychic, to reading and writing, to the phenomenality of affectivity that nevertheless has epistemological and bodily effects. Derrida's discussion also includes other aspects that are only implicitly conceivable as forms of touch, such as ›thanking‹ as a loving and indebted relation to another. He also discusses touch as ›law‹, both in the narrow sense and in the sense of unwritten discursive and sociopolitical ›laws‹ that make it possible to touch at all upon an issue, or to make others untouchable. Derrida thus problematizes *touchability* as a function of written and unwritten ›laws‹ that are historically and sociopolitically produced, showing that some issues can be sanctioned or held sacred, abhorrent or dangerous, and thus rendered untouchable. Touch, then, has not only affectionate, caressing ›stroking‹ sides, but also more violent, ›striking‹ sides, which can sometimes be intermingled. On the one hand, Derrida situates his reflections within a philosophical question that comes in the form of a poetically induced everyday encounter. He touches on the boundaries of philosophy and literature (and disciplinary ›laws‹) as well as on everyday encounters and their implications. On the other hand, he also discusses various philosophical approaches to touch, from Aristotle to Jean-Luc Nancy, whom Derrida praises as ›the philosopher of touch‹ and reproaches for not sufficiently engaging with the ambiguity of the meanings and deconstructive considerations of touch. In this way, Derrida also performs touch as a form of (aporetic) critique, as well as a form of caring. He also reflects on the effects of humor and touch, particularly in the bodily experience of ›laughter‹, which he defines as a process of break and deconstruction. Furthermore, Derrida establishes a relation of alterity in the work of touch. According to Derrida, there is a primordial relation to an other in the economy of touch. It is, in a sense, an *ur*-touch, as it prefigures an event that has already occurred within a prior relationality; the possibil-

ity of sensing arises from such *ur*-modes of touch, which leave an imprint in the body to which subsequent forms are related. This primary touch, however, is not understood as a haptic touch, but as an *event*, an *a priori orientation* that comes from an other, but which takes place within the boundaries of a singular body and subject. In this fashion, the complex workings of *affective humor* are understood in relation to a responsive capacity of a primordial relation and to the various discursive threads that allow or forbid the touch of certain issues. *Affective humor* is thus a poetological device that, in a deconstructivist rhetoric, opens up a space in language, discourse, and the relation to an other in which it addresses different issues along various meanings of touch. These different aspects, which I trace in Derrida's problematization, make it possible to understand the entangled, interwoven structure of meaning and meaning production in the discursive and literary texture of humorous instances and tonalities as intimate, bodily felt dynamics of relational ties and dialogical processes that interweave outside and inside structures and experiences.

While an affective humorous rhetoric accompanies much of Derrida's work, as the readings of these two texts show, Derrida mainly problematizes touch around humor in a critical reading of Nancy's discussion of a poem, a literary work, where he especially highlights the bodily and dispersing effect of ›laughter‹. The touch of ›laughter‹ is seen as a bodily as well as an epistemological decomposition. However, Derrida does not limit ›laughter‹ to a specific bodily reaction. In his elaborations, ›laughter‹ can be perceived as the manifold effects and processes that the poetics of humorous tonalities, with its affective, pensive economy, can create in the body and the mind (Derrida 2005, 114). Behind this discussion of the (epistemological) function of ›laughter‹, humor can be conceived as a structuring and productive machinery of the rhetoric and poetics of the text. In this sense, humor can be understood as a deconstructive rhetorical process in the making, affectively charged and involving a disassembly that opens up a space for the possibility of other encounters and other forms of signification. Derrida's discussion of ›laughter‹ as an affective deconstruction with bodily and epistemological threads helps to scrutinize the signifying process of the humorous tonality, so that it can be considered in its fissured and diversely disordering effects – especially so in relation to close reading and the narratological elements of (literary) texts. These Derridean discussions shed light on the many different forms of engagement that the novels also open up in their different humorous tendencies. In this way, it can be shown that literature, while affectively touching different strands of meaning, creates space for further thought, and the manner in which it does so. The humorous poetics of the novels, rather than to be ›mere‹ amusement and entertainment, set in process possibilities for *re*thinking and negotiating epistemological and sociopolitical issues in affective ways.

This poetological and epistemological work, which literary texts and literariness as such contain in simple, subtle, and yet multiple ways, is shown and discussed in more detail in the second broad section of the study. In its ability to create such spaces of touch in thoughtful, but also empowering, playful, and pleasurable ways, I hope to show that *affective humor* expands the possibility of intervention and agency as well as the possibility of epistemological change. It is therefore equally important *who* has access to and *uses* humor, and in what ways it is used – questions of subjectivity as well as value. These are issues that are discussed throughout the study. Subjectivity is understood as an intersec-

tional, historically driven discursive formation with embodied and material meanings. It is also seen as a thread of discursive and material, (diegetic and extra-diegetic) traces immanent in (novelistic) texts, as well as an integral part of the evoked meanings of (these) texts. While this understanding determines a generalizable understanding of subjectivity, the conditional, singular, *auto-bio-graph*ical instances that shape and distinguish (the course of) lives are seen as the crucial moments and infinitely heterogeneous features of subject-formation that also shape meaning in significant ways, inside and outside texts and discourses. My consideration of subjectivity is informed by Michel Foucault's approach to the entanglement of ›knowledge‹ and power that emerges in discourse and the subject-positions that are consequently constructed, as well as Jacques Derrida's understanding of *autobiography* as a dynamic, resistant, and singular inscription of subject-formation in the experience of a historical time-space and the relation of a self to an other and to the world. It is also informed by the critical approaches of Stuart Hall, Edward W. Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Audre Lorde, which also emphasize the historical context and relations of domination in the production of meaning and the economy of representation (Foucault [1966] 1994, [1969] 1972, [1976] 1978; Derrida 1998; Said 1983, 179–225; Lorde [1984] 2007, 36; Spivak [1985] 1994, 66–111; Hall [1997] 2009). I also see it as key to understanding the different narrative levels and the narrative formations and processes of signification in the (literary) texts.[1] In reading the novels, the problem of subjectivity is discussed in combination with narratological textual instances. Narratological terms are used as analytical tools. These include the ›real author‹, the ›implied author‹, and the narrator, as well as possible, assumed ›implied readers‹ or an ›implied audience‹ evoked somewhere at the margins of the text, in addition to the subjectivity and subject-position of the characters and their relationship to each other. With regard to these narratological discussions and terms, I draw primarily on H. Porter Abbott (2010, 2021), as well as Gérard Genette ([1972] 1983), Wayne C. Booth (1983), Seymour Chatman (1978, 1990), Monika Fludernik (2008, 2009, 2015), Mieke Bal (2017), and James Phellan (2005, 2017). These narratological instances in the layers of the texts are significant because they can shed light on the angle and orientation of the meanings evoked and the spaces of touch that emerge. Such narratological concerns are further addressed here for two reasons. On the one hand, the reading of the novels can (ideally) be more easily traced and made more transparent. On the other hand, such traces of subjectivity reveal instances of subject-formation as well as aspects of subject-related counter-formations, which may not follow discourse but displace the signification-configurations in it. They can therefore be seen as relevant aspects of the processes of meaning production and processing that are set in play in the text. They not only point to invisible points of relatedness, but also transform them.

The term *texture* (Spivak 1999; Geisenhanslüke 2015) in the title of this study indicates a constructivist approach to language and discourse. Language and discourse are understood not as abstract entities, but as historically and ›culturally‹ shaped phenomena that are sociopolitically formative, have inscribed and continue to inscribe the material

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1   The question of the emergence of subjectivity and subject-constitution in (and *as*?) a poetic and poetological instance in/and ›the power of language‹ (*der Macht der Sprache in der Dichtung*), an important aspect of reading, I think, is also raised and tackled by Geisenhanslüke (2015, 44 ff.).

world, reach into our bodies, and that determine, at least to some extent, our perceptions of ›truth‹ and ›untruth‹ and ›right‹ and ›wrong‹. The term *texture* then emphasizes the connection between language, discourse, and texts in the narrower sense, as well as the material effects and interweaving of meanings with historical events and their linguistic, discursive, and fixating material impacts and tendencies. At the same time, the term allows us to think beyond these historically driven chains of meaning and to look for forms of resistance, subversion, and transformation that attempt to further interlace and weave this texture in new ways. Texts, especially literary narratives and novels, are understood as seams of sociopolitical discourses and their negotiations, and in this sense as texts that can also be or contain counter-discourses (of ›knowledge‹ and power) (Geisenhanslüke 2015, 41).

I follow a thematic close reading of the novels not only along the theoretical configurations, but also with a view to other epistemological aspects that complement and extend these reflections in the literary texts.

The two exemplary novels, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Dany Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (2008), share some similarities but are otherwise quite different. The similarities can be seen in some postmodernist features that both novels share, such as the idea of chance. Both novels also have a transnational thread and can be seen as narratives that also deal with diasporic experiences and postcolonial themes. Some threads in both novels include routes and attachments to the Caribbean, specifically to Jamaica and Haiti. Both novels negotiate sociopolitical images and values. The different writing styles of the authors are embedded in postcolonial epistemologies in the sense of and within a critical, I think, *humanist* »discursive critique in the making« (Mbembe 2008, 2) that transcends any fixation. This subtle critical angle makes it possible to distinguish different forms of signification in the novels, which either adhere to conventions, override them, or move beyond any known and binary understandings. In all these cases, the novels employ various tonalities of humor, which entail different and differently evoked affective and epistemological senses. These poetologically evoked meanings and allusions, however, shed light on the discursive texture and ideological tendencies that the novels speak from, have to deal with, and negotiate. Aside from such similarities, the two novels remain different. This also applies to their use and form of humor. *White Teeth* is written from the vantage point of a non-character, an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator, who thus does not belong to the storyworld. The novel has a distinctive story and plot, although it may not be linear. *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is written from the perspective of a homodiegetic narrator (character narrator), who is enmeshed in the narrative and storyworld, flitting in and out at a metaleptic level. Instead of following a plot, it questions it and the story it wants to tell. In both novels, however, the titles, as paratexts, are meaningful in a variety of ways and are therefore considered in this study as important parts of the analytical structure. Scholarly work on these authors has so far concentrated on the postmodernist and, to a lesser extent, postcolonial tendencies of their works, such as questions of ›identity‹, diaspora, metropolitan life, ›multiculturalism‹, border-crossing, and the bonding of different ›ethnicities‹. While some scholarly attention has been paid to ethics and ›race‹, humor, an important feature in both novels, is acknowledged incidentally, but not yet analyzed as a structuring component in either work. The evocations

of humor in both novels touch on the texture of our thinking, questioning it, and weaving it in other directions.

In this second, reading section of the study, I explore how imagological and stereotypical meanings inscribed in the representative regimes of language and discourse are dislocated in the humorous rhetoric of the two exemplary novels, what their affective work unleashes, and what can be seen and gained from the *touching spaces* they seem to create.

It is shown, I hope, how *affective humor* develops a performing and a performative role: On the one hand, humor is performed, *produced*, in the narrative. On the other hand, a conventionalized utterance or image is repeated and destabilized in the humorous repetition. The rhetoric of *affective humor* gives way to a space in the text in which different issues are touched upon simultaneously, which can be painful as well as pleasurable, joyful as well as tragic. By invoking incongruous images and conventionalized meanings within the poetics of the text, the deconstruction of humor's rhetoric allows for a different perception of the old, the seemingly familiar. Previously normalized notions are scrutinized and questioned. In this way, a conventionalized image is shown to be untenable, and a different, multiple understanding is signaled by the humorously evoked allusions. Simultaneously, fixed meanings are put on hold while an epistemological shift takes shape, which is where the political or even more so the ethical promise of the performative utterances of humor seems to lie (Butler 2003, 1999; Felman 2003). Reading the novels, I further argue how the repetition and representation of stereotypes and their simultaneous humorous destabilization unlock dialogical threads. These threads open up spaces in which different perceptions of the self and the other can emerge, as they touch on different relations in the inscribed textures in which images of the self and the other, as well as discursive significations and epistemological assumptions, can be challenged. In this way, I suggest, a poetological sphere of non-knowledge and power-lessness, of *NichtWissen* and *OhnMacht*, is invoked that is critical of conventional patterns and open for further elaborations, and that questions any straightforward understanding of ›knowledge‹ and power.

In these instances, touch occurs through *grasping* in a threefold Derridian sense: It encompasses an abstract touch of a subject-image in the text, a tactile touch in the sense of a (different) perception of self and other, and an affective touch that enables an epistemological *re*orientation.

While the reading of the two novels centralizes the diegetic level of the text, I also discuss other instances that shed light on the narratological meta-levels present in the text, especially with regard to a possible emergent relationship between an ›implied author‹ and an ›implied audience‹.

The study concludes with a prospective question about the ethics inherent in those *touching spaces* generated by *affective humor*. In this sense, I am particularly interested in considering *affective humor* as an iterative act with a difference. I relate this idea to the figure of Echo in Ovid's *Narcissus and Echo.* Claire Nouvet discusses Ovid's Narcissus as a »narrative about responsibility« and as »the duty of responding to the call of the other« (Nouvet 1991, 104) by alluding to Derrida's caution to attend to some form of ›ultraethicity‹ instead of presuming a preconceived self, other or ethics. Nouvet thus does not presuppose an ethics of literature per se – one that would give »a chance to the other« – but

rather, as one that is »at the risk of facing its own narrative impossibility« (Nouvet 1991, 104). The ›apparition of the ethical imperative‹ shines through as a form of ›thematic visibility‹ in the work of language (Nouvet 1991, 116). Following Maurice Blanchot and the ›desastrous‹ effects of the transformation of the ›I‹ by the call of the ›other‹, *Echo*, she continues, is »[t]he echo which answers my call by remarking my originary absence from ›my‹ call ›comes back‹ as a prayer addressed to ›me‹. An answer which is also a demand, it enigmatically addresses ›me‹, commands me to respond while, at the same time, condemning me to unresponsiveness« (Nouvet 1991, 116). However, it may not only be ›the work of language‹ that brings the ethical imperative to the fore, but the unenforced literariness, the literary, dialogical site that renders *the enunciation* and *the enunciated* (Benveniste 1966, 1974), and what foregrounds it, and the effect, and what comes after it, as ›duties‹ and ›prayers‹ in-between the o/Other, which determine the ›self‹, ›I‹, and ›me‹ as a potential possibility of openness – within specific, inner and outer readings, and experiences of subjectivity in an (intersectionally) hierarchized and divided, and yet shared wor(l)d. *Ethical imperatives* would then have to be always sought anew in-between the *enunciation* and the *enunciated* and their materialized after-effects. Both Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Derrida [2003] 2005; Spivak [1993] 2012) refer to implicit forms of knowing and speaking that are at work not only in Narcissus' but also in Echo's utterances. Following this image, the novel's negotiation of discursive traits and *re*significations through the performative work and affective economy of humor[2] is considered as a form of repetition that repeats specific discourses, utterances, and images, but may say something else.

Like Echo's distorted and disfiguring repetition of Narcissus' utterances, the humorous evocations of literature are regarded as forms of questioning, as ›ultraethicity‹, that challenge normative ›knowledge‹ and power, giving subjectivity to the repeating voices, which in the ›repetition‹ challenge meaning for *re*thinking. Conventionalized language is appropriated and (historically determined) meanings appear unhinged, signifying something different, maybe the unruly structure of signification itself? In this respect, the ethical implications of the novel's humorous work are discussed as unenforced and as *reparative readings and writing* in queering processes of healing (Sedgwick 2003). Although, according to the myth, Echo is cursed to repeat, unable to speak her own

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2   In *Rhetorik der Echo* (2003), Bettine Menke indeed discusses Echo as paranomasia and as *a trope*, linking it in particular to ›irony‹ and wit in configurations of resilience and powerlessness (*Ohnmacht*). However, in contrast to an automatism that would bind the figure of Echo to the (good) or repressed other, or to a call for an ethical response, Menke also problematizes Echo as a *NachRuf* (literally an obituary), as *fame* that mourns lost power and glory, and in this sense haunts the present, determining and orienting it to a certain extent. She also discusses echo both as a sign of absence that constitutes alleged presences and, in the sense of rumor, as a counter-model of *author*ship that is regarded as a thread to the exactitude and certainty of (cartisian) subjecthood (*intentionales Sprechen*) (153). Echo, relegated to the (female) other, is rejected and vulgarized, and yet it haunts discourse (and politics) with its ghostly presence. Therefore, as an important intervention in the discourse on the call of the o/Other and questions of spectrality – and quite striking in terms of regressive positions and *norm*alized discourses of power – I think her text is an approach to ›ultraethicity‹. It attempts not to presume an ethics, while at the same time searching for it, a direction in which this study also attempts to move.

voice, she nonetheless disobeys the rule she is subjected to, metaphorizing it into her own subjectivity, sense-making, and sensuality. In reusing the words she hears, she fills them, possibly, with other meanings. These may not sound so different, but they always remain to be deciphered anew. Echo then may resemble the always already sliding echo of literature – and literary meanings. The repetitive and reparative effects of its rhetorically evoked deconstructive poetics seem to be particularly palpable in the work of *affective humor*, which touches in different ways on discursively set images, opening up sensuous and epistemological avenues that allow for a different ›ethically‹ informed proximity of self and other, beyond discourse and beyond the limits and limitations of what is considered to be ›knowledge‹ and power.

What seems to emerge from this process may be the possibility of another wor(l)d, of what Derrida calls ›souvereignity‹ (Derrida 2005 a, xii), manifested in the powerless power and unknowing ›knowledge‹ of Echo as power-lessness and non-knowledge. In the process, an *other*, unconquerable, form of agency may unfold, one that emerges in the unenforcing speech and farewell of Echo, which does not affirm ›truths‹ but opens them up. *Affective humor* as such a poetics of literary imagination can be understood as a disruptive, dis/empowering, reparative rhetoric; it involves implicit ›knowledges‹ and powers that inadvertently question and transcend previous beliefs. The poetics of *affective humor* employed in the novels thus can overturn power (a-)symmetries and assumed ›knowledges‹, and make possible, at least for moments, an encounter on equal terms through charming, convivial, radical questioning. Humor appears as an affectively and sensually charged, essential, poetologically generated, deconstructive rhetoric that encompasses ›ultraethical‹ traits. In this sense, at the threshold of an oscillation of conscious and unconscious, discursive and affective economies that permeate the texture of the novelistic text and our material, bodily, and discursive wor(l)ds, humor reveals a multilayered notion of thought and reflection that we may have to take into account in the processes of reading and analysis in general (and of ›seeing‹, ›hearing‹, ›writing‹ ›ourselves‹, ›others‹).

This ethical difference, which Echo signifies as the other figure of dominance, normativity, and power, can be seen as the underlying relational condition between ›philosophy‹, as the narcissistic space of dominant epistemologies, and ›literature‹ as the echo-*khora* that possibly resonates power-lessness and non-knowledge in the larger (infinite) space of what could become language. These two institutionalized discourses and textures, which seem to be fundamentally dependent on each other while also encompassing each other, are parts of the same ›organ‹, albeit with different accents, one emphasizing ›knowledge‹ and power and the other non-knowledge and power-lessness in the space beyond the court of discourse (and even language – potential language maybe). It should come as no surprise that Derrida, in his mischievous sense of wonder, implicitly describes both instances, in an interview as part of the experience within the self (as other?) (Derrida 2007 a: 0.35 ff.). Especially in Derrida's *author*ial voice, this conjunction seems quite obvious – an intertwined *narcissechoism*? Such an approach can perhaps become a prescription for how to conceive of our wor(l)ds with all its ambiguities? One last thought concerning gender-sensitive writing: Throughout the work, I have used an asterisk with the pronouns ›she‹ and, occasionally, ›he‹. I have also employed ›they‹ for an unknown gender and as a singular non-binary pronoun to emphasize sensitivity to gender issues. I did this systematically – and also unsystematically wherever I felt it was

necessary to leave space for fluidity, and ambiguous references, and untotalizing meanings.

Let's begin, then, with some beginnings in discussing the touch of humor and its touching spaces, and what we can expect from them along such lines.