

## How Literature Enters Life: An Introduction

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In 1994, a collection of articles was published under the title *Critical Reconstructions: The Relationship of Fiction and Life* (edited by Robert M. Polhemus and Roger B. Henkle) dealing with the relationship between works of fiction and historical “reality,” general “truth,” or an author’s personal life. In many of the chapters, questions of representation and interpretation of the (historical) world constitute the point of departure: how, for example, the composition of a work may reflect social reality or the author’s struggle for life. “Life” in this book is the historical or personal world from which a work derives or to which it refers. If we assume that there exist manifold relationships between “literature” and “life,” ranging from cases of “life” entering “literature” at the one end to cases of “literature” entering “life” at the other, then the subtitle of that book might have been “How Life Enters Literature.” The “relationship of fiction and life” is approached there from a sociohistorical or biographical perspective, and reception data are mentioned only

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as indications of a text's degree of realism, truth, or authenticity. The other extreme of "how literature enters life"—how works of fiction affect social or personal worlds—is thus marginalized.

To this more or less traditional approach, the current collection of articles forms a complement and counterpoint in several respects. It is complementary to the extent that it variously focuses on the real-life influence and effects of works of fiction. "How literature enters life" also forms a contrast because most of the contributions do not originate in traditional literary studies. Instead, they are interdisciplinary, lying at the crossroads of psychology, sociology, literary and media studies, with two of the contributions bringing in a historical dimension as well. Owing to this interdisciplinary orientation of the special issue, a number of different methodological approaches are brought to bear upon the question of "literature entering life." For the most part these approaches are empirical and adapted from the social sciences. They range from case studies, qualitative content analysis of written documents, statistical analysis of survey data, and experimental studies to the interpretation of social data and the interpretive reconstruction of historical material.

In line with this wide range of contributions, the key terms "life" and "literature" as they are employed in the various articles likewise cover a broad range of meanings. In regard to *life*, the focus of the issue is mostly on the individual, personal lives of readers and recipients of other media, on their emotions in engaging with the texts, on their thoughts, sometimes on the ways in which their lives are changed by encountering a particular work. Some of the contributions, however, go beyond the individual, discussing the ways in which literature has entered the lives of groups to affect society or even tracing the impact of a particular work on the "collective memory" of an entire culture over more than a century.

The term "literature" is likewise used in a broad sense. Especially in literary studies, "literature" has often been more or less equated with works of literature in the print media. Historically speaking, however, the close association of the literary with print is merely a temporary phenomenon. "Literature" has originated in the oral tradition, and with the rise of the audiovisual and, more recently still, the digital media during the twentieth century, "literature" has again loosened its ties to print and may equally be found in films and audioplays or on the Internet. The contributions to this special issue thus range over different genres in various media. Moreover (and this is again in line with research in disciplines such as media and communication studies), the use of the term is not restricted to "literature" in the normative, "highbrow" sense: the volume includes articles with a decidedly "lowbrow" orientation, dealing with "literature" as it manifests itself in, for

instance, fantasy fiction, pseudo-documentary products, and horror films. While the problem of literariness in terms of genre and canonicity will not be problematized in this volume, the question of how literary works relate to “real worlds” will be raised in particular under the perspective of whether and how audiences distinguish fiction from nonfiction and how this affects their perception and emotions.

The main question underlying this special issue is ultimately a very old one. Since ancient times philosophers and artists have discussed the paradox that stories of the imagination can evoke real emotions and have wondered what the effects of fiction and art could and should be. Early theories such as those offered in Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics* are still reinterpreted in connection with changing cultures and societies today. Although philosophical theories about the effects and functions of fiction date back to such ancient traditions and the conviction that literature and art have good or bad effects on the receiver has been firm throughout the ages, the amount of actual research has been and still is rather meager, especially in literary studies, where the benefits of literature have all too often been taken for granted.

To the extent that such research has been carried out at all, this has often taken place in disciplines other than literary studies in the narrow sense. Two such research traditions can be identified: research concerning the ways in which readers engage with a text in the course of the reception process and research concerning the changes effected by this reception. This latter line of research can be subdivided further, depending on whether it is the life of an individual that is changed or whether the change occurs on the sociocultural level. These three lines of research serve as themes or threads around which the contributions in this volume have been organized: *individual forms of engagement with literature*, *effects of “literature” on the individual*, and the *interplay of individual reception processes and sociocultural discourse*.

In literary studies, two types of the reader’s engagement with a text can be distinguished. There is, first of all, the general sense of becoming absorbed in a book: what has been conceptualized, for instance, as “transportation” (Gerrig 1993) or as a general feeling of happiness in the reading (“Leseglück” in Bellebaum and Muth 1996; cf. also Nell 1988). The second type of engagement with a text concerns the reader’s emotions with respect to certain fictional characters, especially identification (Jauss 1982; Wellershoff 1975) or empathy (Tan 1994; Zillmann 1991). With the advent of the electronic and the digital media, additional concepts have been suggested in the social sciences, as well as in media and communication studies, in order to describe the reception experience in these other media, such as involvement (with respect to audiovisual media: cf. Vorderer 1992) and pres-

ence (with respect to virtual reality environments: cf. Lombard and Ditton 1997). This interest of the social sciences in the reception experience has in turn sparked increasing efforts toward the empirical study of the ways in which readers or recipients engage with literature (for instance, Appel et al. 2002; Green and Brock 2000). A number of contributions in this volume are concerned with theoretical conceptualizations and in part with the empirical study of particular aspects of this emotional-affective side of the reception experience and the ways in which this experience can lay the ground for a personal transformation: with how literature enters life, in short.

The article by Don Kuiken, David S. Miall, and Shelley Sikora focuses on what they term “self-modifying feelings” in the reception of poetry. They start their study with a reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who believed that poetic symbols have a transformative power enabling the creative imagination to modify feelings and reshape the self. The authors pursue Coleridge’s idea by demonstrating how readers who are emotionally affected by the aesthetic form of a theme touching upon their personal lives enter into a process of “expressive enactment” during which they restructure their understanding of the text and simultaneously experience a change in their self-perceptions. These “self-modifying feelings” impel readers to view themselves in a different light and may lead to “an altered understanding of the reader’s own life-world.” Kuiken et al. call their theoretical approach “phenomenological,” but they investigate these processes experimentally in the second part of their article: there they discover that expressive enactment varies with readers’ mental circumstances, such as a personal life crisis or an ongoing depression after a significant loss suffered sometime before.

Processes of identification and the ways in which readers thereby relate their own world to a world of fiction are at the center of the contribution by Els Andringa. She distinguishes different types of identification, empathy, and dissimilarity as well as different objects of identification and different types of cognitive and emotional effects. The typology is followed by reflections upon the role of autobiographical memory. On this joint basis, she reports the results of a qualitative content analysis of twelve selected “reading autobiographies” written by student readers. After a characterization of how memories from different age periods are stored and reported, the results of an analytic comparison among the set of given documents are described. These show, *inter alia*, striking differences between female and male readers and indications of a developmental pattern. The latter accordingly raise questions about how the ways in which readers connect their world and the world of fiction change with age.

The above articles are based upon the assumption that the recipient’s

engagement with literature opens up, so to speak, an avenue for literature to enter life. In their contribution, Michael Charlton, Corinna Pette, and Christina Burbaum explore the notion that readers may well be aware of this transformative power of literature and accordingly make (more or less deliberate) use of reading strategies that utilize this power in order to help them cope with problematic life situations. In the first part of their article, a case study with six selected readers yields a description of a number of reading strategies that precede, accompany, and follow the actual reception process, illustrating how individual readers do indeed adapt their choices of both reading matter and reading strategies to their personal lives. The findings emerging from the case study informed a subsequent survey among more than a thousand readers concerning reading attitudes and strategies, in particular with respect to modes of identification and self-confrontation. In their presentation of selected results, the authors focus on differences between male and female readers as well as among sociocultural milieus.

While this first group of contributions concentrates on various processes of readers' engagement with a literary text, the sometimes long-lasting changes effected by this engagement, via the text's effects on the individual reader or recipient, are at the center of the second group of contributions assembled in this volume. Changes brought about by reading literary works and by exposure to other media have often been looked upon with more than a little apprehension. As novels and other reading material became available to the public during the eighteenth century, fears abounded that tales of love might turn the heads of young, inexperienced girls (Wilkending 2002). In more recent times, these fears have largely shifted to the potentially deleterious effects of the audiovisual media. The question whether the frequent watching of violent scenes exposes the viewer to the danger of imitating aggressive behavior has given rise to a particularly large number of studies (for instance, Groebel 2001; for an overview, see Bushman and Huesmann 2001; Sparks and Sparks 2000). More recently, potentially positive effects of television, such as an increase in prosocial behavior, have also come under investigation (on prosocial behavior, see Hearold 1986; on the effects of media use, see Singer and Singer 2001, pt. 1; Zillmann and Bryant 2002).

Change brought about as a function of reading—more specifically cognitive change—constitutes the focus of the article by Richard J. Gerrig and David N. Rapp. They start from an assumption that is directly opposed to the opinion encapsulated in Coleridge's famous dictum of the "willing suspension of disbelief," which has been prevalent in literary studies ever since. Rather than engaging in an effort to suspend initial disbelief when reading a fictional narrative, Gerrig and Rapp argue, readers operate "by default,"

so to speak: they start by taking everything they read at face value, be it fictional or nonfictional material. The empirical data that Gerrig and Rapp present in the first part of their article do indeed suggest that readers must invest cognitive effort in order to reject (even blatantly false) information they acquire from literary narratives. This effect increases with the degree to which the readers feel transported into the story world. This means that the more engrossing the story, the more inclined are readers to believe what they read. In the second part of their article, Gerrig and Rapp go on to present evidence that readers will derive from literary texts expectations concerning the consistency of character and the flexibility of outcomes. The authors suggest that such expectations, even if they are not necessarily well grounded, may be transferred to everyday life.

Joanne Cantor's contribution focuses on enduring emotional effects in the form of autobiographical memories of fright reactions to media products in childhood or adolescence. Over a period of three years, she asked more than five hundred students to report whether they remembered ever having had an enduring fright reaction to a media product and, if yes, what the media product was and what kinds of fright reactions were involved. When the reports were subjected to content analysis, it turned out that the large majority of the students (more than 90 percent) did remember such an experience. In most cases, the frightening material was of a fictional nature and the fright reaction occurred in response to having watched a film. For those five horror films (among them *Poltergeist* and *Jaws*) that evoked enduring fear in a number of students, Cantor then goes on to describe the fright reactions in greater detail. She ends the analysis by discussing a number of explanations for the enduring influence of such fright reactions and why these reactions occurred especially in response to fictional material.

Giving credence to information encountered in a fictional narrative or reacting with fear to a horror film constitute two ways in which the habitual distinction between fiction and nonfiction breaks down, thus permitting literature to enter life. Drawing upon literary theories of fictionality and on empirical research in media psychology, Margrit Schreier presents a theoretical model comprising three perspectives upon, or concepts of, the relationship between "fact" and "fiction." She then applies this model to the pseudo-documentary horror film *The Blair Witch Project* (whose effects are also discussed by Cantor), demonstrating how the film deliberately mixes elements of "fact" and "fiction" in a way that is designed to confuse the recipients with respect to the reality status of the film. In the last part of the article, the question whether the recipients of the film are in fact confused about whether it represents "fact" or "fiction" is addressed empirically, through a study involving the content analysis of e-mails sent to news-

group discussions of the film on the Internet. It emerges that the question of the film's reality status does indeed constitute an important topic of discussion and that approximately one-third of the discussants are at least temporarily confused as to whether the film is fictional or not.

The contributions surveyed so far deal with psychological processes and with literature entering the lives of individual readers or media recipients. Individuals, however, are in their turn embedded in a larger social structure and interact with a variety of sociocultural discourses. Our dealings with literature and fiction involve not only writing and reading, but also entering into discussions about books and films, sharing evaluations and interpretations with others, and being confronted with prevailing opinion makers. Traditionally, such discussions have been organized and coordinated in frameworks such as educational settings but also in reading groups and associations. Elizabeth Long has investigated women's reading clubs from the nineteenth century in comparison to recent equivalents, situating the clubs in their respective sociocultural and economical contexts. Although she points out some similarities, she also finds some salient differences that relate, in her view, to the changing contexts women live in. The early book clubs had a serious social function to fulfill, as reading and literary discourse were instruments toward improving women's education and to achieving an independent intellectual position, whereas nowadays the shared interest functions as a basis for social contacts and as an occasion for discussing a range of topics of personal interest. The change Long has detected is a change in the social function of literary discourse within developing historical sociocultural settings.

Ann Rigney's reconstruction of how a real-life story is transformed into a novel by Walter Scott and how this life story in its fictionalized form, as *The Heart of Midlothian*, is later again transformed into a symbol in public life brings us back to the central topic of change and transformative power. However, this time the processes of transformation do not occur in an individual's mind, or not there alone, but in a creative and historical process involving the collective reception and memory of a society. This case shows that literature can function to preserve an individual fate and to transmit it in a changed form to public life by virtue of its poetic power. In a way, Rigney's contribution loops back to the Polhemus and Henkle volume mentioned at the beginning of this introduction. By showing how "life entered literature" in a first transformative process, she starts with a more traditional attempt to reveal the sources of Scott's novel. By following the traces that the story within the novel left in public life, then and since, however, she extends the tale of historical change further into literature's effects on collective memory.

So these contributions range in subject matter from processes of emotional engagement with a literary text to both cognitive and emotional changes in the minds of readers and viewers and back to the ways in which these individuals are themselves part of a larger sociocultural whole. We therefore hope that our special issue offers a useful complement to the theoretical-philosophical approaches and to the traditional historical investigations of the manifold relationships between “literature” and “life.”

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