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# Literature, Recognition, Ethics: Struggles for Recognition and the Search for Ethical Principles

Winfried Fluck

How can American Studies, and more specifically, American literary and cultural studies, remain relevant as a field? Can a turn to ethics be helpful? Literary texts and aesthetic objects may be effective in dramatizing injustice but in what way can they contribute to the formulation of ethical principles? Questions about the possibility of ethical foundations have not been restricted to fictional texts and aesthetic objects but have become a central philosophical topic in the wake of postmodernism and poststructuralism. In each case, theories of the subject have provided the point of departure. In its first part, this essay focuses on narratives of self-alienation, ranging from Marxism to poststructuralism, but also including some unexpected protagonists like British cultural studies and reception aesthetics, and discusses the ethical principles derived from the assumption of the subject's self-alienation. In the second part, theories that see the subject constituted by intersubjective relations are discussed as a possible alternative. In this context, the concept of recognition may open up a new perspective on the search for ethical principles in literature and art.

## I

How can American Studies, and more specifically, American literary and cultural studies, remain relevant as a field? Can an ethical turn provide the solution? To be sure, this turn has by now produced an impressive body of work. For literary studies, one problem remains, however: critics often make the case for a particular ethics first and then look for ways

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to apply it to literature. One result is that only certain literary texts qualify as being relevant for ethical considerations, ranging from Henry James for Martha Nussbaum to Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* for deconstruction. In this way the ethical turn must become prescriptive: if literary studies want to remain relevant and aim at an ethical function, they should focus on a particular kind of literature – one, for example, that is useful as a training ground for ethically desirable attitudes like empathy or one that can help to deconstruct stable moral dichotomies.

In this essay I want to take another direction. In order to discuss an ethical function of literature we do not have to move into philosophical discussions of ethics, where we may not be firmly at home anyway. Instead, we may turn towards the ethical foundations of our interpretive frameworks in literary and cultural studies, since no approach can be without (an explicit or implicit) moral vision. It is thus, in the final analysis, ethically constituted. This is my starting point in the present essay. Ethics is our word for a philosophy to determine right or wrong moral behavior, and for such a philosophy we need to presuppose a theory of the subject, that is, a view of how free the subject is to determine its actions or whether we see significant constraints on the subject's potential for self-determination and agency. If so, we need a theory of what these constraints are and whether and how they can be overcome. All influential approaches in literary and cultural studies have been generated by such (often tacitly held) assumptions about the state of the subject; in fact, one may argue that these subject-theories have been the starting premise for literary and cultural studies throughout the twentieth century. Going one step further, one may even claim that literary and cultural studies, as well as other fields in the humanities, have been created with the intention to help the subject overcome the constraints to which it is still subjected. This is their ethical project: they want to help the individual realize its potential as a subject.

## II

Once one focuses on the question of underlying premises, it is striking to realize to what extent modern literary and cultural studies have been dominated and shaped by one theory of the subject in particular. I am referring here to narratives of self-alienation. These narratives see the subject in a state in which it is kept from fully knowing itself and determining its own fate, frequently with the result of a damaged sense of self or an inner division. It is fitting to speak of these theories in the plural,

because self-alienation, just like any other theoretical concept – such as, for example at present, transnationalism or the other – is not a stable signifier but can be used in different contexts for different purposes.<sup>1</sup> In an essay on “Philosophical Premises in Literary and Cultural Theory: Narratives of Self-Alienation,” I have traced different uses of the idea of self-alienation in four especially influential approaches in literary and cultural studies: the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, as it manifests itself most forcefully in the chapter on the culture industry in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, British cultural studies as it has been envisioned by its founder Raymond Williams, Wolfgang Iser’s reception aesthetics, and an exemplary poststructuralist position articulated by Judith Butler.<sup>2</sup>

At first blush, it may come as a surprise that all of these very different approaches should be grounded in the starting premise of self-alienation. But the common point of departure can be helpful in pinpointing the differences. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the self-alienation of the subject is the result of a long-drawn historical process in which reason has been reduced to instrumental rationality, and instrumental rationality has gained an ever increasing hold over the subject – reaching, in their view, almost totalitarian dimensions in the American society they encountered in the 1940s. This development must also affect literature and culture. In those philosophies of history in which the idea of a growing instrumental rationality has provided the central narrative, (high) culture has usually been considered one of the few remaining counter-realms in which instrumental rationality had not yet taken hold. The exposure to culture, understood as the highest manifestation of the human mind, was thus seen as a crucial antidote, if not the only remaining hope. The sense of shock pervading Horkheimer and Adorno’s chapter on the culture industry is caused by the fear that this last bastion of resistance may now also have been invaded by instrumental rationality. In the form of American mass culture, culture has become merely another industry with standardized production processes in which even Culture is now instrumentalized for profit purposes. For Raymond Williams, on the other hand, it is not instrumental rationality but industrialization that provides the key for understanding the self-alienation produced by modern society. Industrialization has led to class societies and

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<sup>1</sup> For helpful recent overviews, see Rahel Jaeggi, *Entfremdung* and Peter Zima, *Entfremdung*.

<sup>2</sup> See Fluck, “Philosophical Premises” (forthcoming). The present essay draws on arguments developed in greater detail there.



thus to a seemingly insurmountable distance between the classes that threatens democracy and its promise of equality. In contrast to Frankfurt School critical theory, however, the social misrecognition (and, hence, self-alienation) resulting from class society is not yet seen as the result of an irreversible historical process. It is still reversible. Once culture and society are redefined as a whole way of life, as British cultural studies have done programmatically, and interpretations focus on structures of feeling as key manifestation of a culture (and not on standardized mass culture), the working-class subject may still be successfully reconstituted as non-alienated.

Somewhat surprisingly, Wolfgang Iser's reception aesthetics also has its starting point in the premise of human self-alienation, in this case derived, however, not from Max Weber's theory of instrumental rationality or a Marxist analysis of the dehumanizing consequences of industrialization, but from Helmut Plessner's anthropological claim that human beings are constituted by a lack.<sup>3</sup> We therefore need fictions to make up for what we are lacking (and can never fully recover). In this context, self-alienation, defined as an anthropological condition, can, paradoxically, become a source of creativity, because our efforts to overcome our lack of self-knowledge can never be entirely successful and will thus stimulate ever new attempts. In poststructuralism, finally, identity is, following Jacques Lacan, formed by misrecognition, so that the subject is arrested in a permanent state of self-alienation. Not dissimilar to Iser's reception aesthetics, the starting point is a lack, an incompleteness, but in contrast to Iser, this lack does not become a source of creativity through which the subject tries to fill the gap. Rather, it leads to a state of illusionary self-perception that prevents the subject from ever knowing itself. Consequently, in poststructuralism self-alienation has reached the point where the subject is alienated from itself, not merely by forces like industrialization or instrumental rationality, but, much more fundamentally, as the paradoxical result of identity-formation. Without identity, the subject cannot know who it is, but the search for self-knowledge will inevitably lead to misrecognition and, hence, to renewed self-alienation.

There is an inextricable link in literary and cultural theory between a founding theory of the subject and an ethics of literature. Thus, the different narratives of self-alienation I have traced must also lead to very

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<sup>3</sup> There is hardly an essay or book by Iser in which he does not refer to Plessner's key claim about the human condition, summarized in the words: "Ich bin, aber ich habe mich nicht," a sentence that is translated in *The Fictive and Imaginary* as "our existence is incontestable, but at the same time inaccessible to us" (81).

different views on what the ethical function of literature can and should be. If we start from the assumption that self-alienation is caused by the relentless progression of instrumental rationality, then literature can hope to have an ethically desirable function only where it keeps the possibility of a non-instrumentalized counter-realm alive; however, literature can preserve a utopia of non-alienated existence only where it is organized by certain aesthetic principles that negate instrumentalization and can thus be defined as an aesthetics of negation. It is thus important to distinguish between a culture of affirmation and a culture of negation, for only then can we identify the kind of literature that will be able to set up barriers against instrumental rationality.<sup>4</sup> If, on the other hand, we understand self-alienation as the result of a process of industrialization that divides social worlds into classes and thus establishes new, commercially-based status orders, then the challenge must be to reverse this development. By treating literature as part of a whole way of life, one will have to pay attention to the cultural practices of other classes and learn how to read these practices as manifestation of particular structures of feeling. The goal must be to prevent culture from replicating industrialization's division of labor and becoming a separate sphere of its own.<sup>5</sup> One way to do this is to extend literary studies into cultural studies. British cultural studies was, in the final analysis, an ethically motivated new approach to the interpretation of literature and culture. Some may prefer to call it a politically motivated new approach, because it clearly had the intention of strengthening working-class identity. But this support of the working-class was an ethical imperative for Williams and provided the key motivation for his reconceptualization of literary studies as cultural studies.

If, to move on to our third example, we attribute the self-alienation of the subject to an anthropological lack that can, unexpectedly, also stimulate human creativity, because it pushes the subject to engage in ever new attempts to overcome this lack, then literature can become a privileged medium for a transformation of self-alienation into creativity. From Iser's point of view, this can be most effectively done by texts

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<sup>4</sup> On the different uses of the terms "negation" and "negativity" in this context, see my essay "The Search for Distance."

<sup>5</sup> In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams characterizes aesthetic theory as a form of evasion, that is, an instrument of obfuscation: "Art and thinking about art have to separate themselves, by ever more absolute abstraction, from the social processes within which they are still contained. Aesthetic theory is the main instrument of this evasion. [. . .] Thus we have to reject 'the aesthetic' both as a separate abstract dimension and as a separate abstract function" (154-56).

structured by blanks and suspended connectivities, that is, by modernist or proto-modernist texts that use aesthetic strategies to defamiliarize or negate realistic modes of representation, because these prevent us from becoming aware of what we are lacking as human subjects. But modernism now has a function different from that in Frankfurt School critical theory, namely to keep the channels of creativity open, and Iser therefore replaces an aesthetics of negation by an aesthetics of negativity. (Fluck, "Search"). Again, it is important to realize how aesthetic choices are inextricably linked to an ethical function in the context of this argument. Reception aesthetics focuses on modernism, not because modernism is an avant-garde movement. Modernism is of special importance because its aesthetic strategies challenge readers to exercise their own creativity and thus help to make readers aware of their own creative potential. The distinction between high and low remains crucial, but not because Iser was an incurable snob, but because only a particular kind of literature can transform self-alienation into a productive force.

If we ask what possibilities a poststructuralist theory of the subject opens up for the formulation of an ethical function, Judith Butler's essay "Giving an Account of Oneself" can provide an instructive answer. At first sight, one might assume that there can no longer be any ethical function, since Lacanian self-alienation cannot be overcome by any means. But, ironically, the assumption of a permanent state of self-alienation leads to exactly the opposite conclusion. For if a singularity that can never be fully expressed (and is therefore always misrecognized) is my tacit premise, it becomes even more important to keep that singularity alive by accounting for it through narratives (for example in the form of life-stories). These accounts will be incomplete and, in the final analysis, they will be failed accounts in terms of self-knowledge. But if a subject gave up accounting for itself, then it would be doomed to exist only in the form of cultural narratives that are imposed on its identity by others.

Hence the emergence of a deeply paradoxical constellation. On the one hand, accounting for oneself will lead to misrecognition and contribute to its constant reinforcement. On the other hand, this situation of being trapped in an imposed identity can only get worse if I do not give any accounts of myself. Aesthetics is not of special importance in this context, although some poststructuralists would argue that certain formal features or aesthetic qualities are more effective in deconstructing an imposition of identity than others. However, the main reference points are no longer fictional texts or aesthetic objects but narratives, and these narratives can be of all kinds and genres; at the end of the day,

they will all enact the same dilemma. The main sources of insight are thus not the narratives themselves but readings that reveal to what extent misrecognition is at work and draw attention to the rhetorical means and narrative devices through which this misrecognition is established. However, these readings cannot but create another misrecognition and this process will continue ad infinitum. In fact, there is only one way out and that would be to give up the founding premise of self-alienation altogether. And indeed, if we turn to another influential body of work in critical theory, this is precisely what has happened.

Theories of the self-alienation of the subject are directed against the idealist claim that the use of reason will open up a realm of freedom for the subject. Few would argue that we can go back to this claim. But what are the alternatives, then, to the premise of a self-alienated subject, and what are the consequences for a discussion of the ethical function of literature, since, as we have seen, claims for an ethical function can be seen as a logical consequence of a priori assumptions about the state of the subject. This prior assumption will determine what role literature can play in subject-formation, what ethical function it can have, and, in some cases, even what aesthetic forms are needed to realize that potential.

### III

The central claim of this essay is that there exists an inextricable link between a theory of the subject and an ethics of literature. Narratives of self-alienation have been the dominant theory of the subject in literary and cultural studies in the twentieth century. It is therefore notable to realize that scholars of the second and third generation of Frankfurt School critical theory such as Jürgen Habermas and in the following generation Axel Honneth, have taken their point of departure from a rejection of theories of self-alienation and have replaced them by a different theory of subject-constitution. Indeed, this repositioning is different to such a degree that the term paradigm shift may be appropriate here. For example, the second volume of Habermas's major study *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (*Theory of Communicative Interaction*) begins with an explicit rejection of the premise of self-alienation, here evoked in its Lukácsian version of reification (*Verdinglichung*):

A look at the reception of Weber's theory of rationalization shows that the social consequences of rationalization are always conceptualized in terms of

reification; the many paradoxes resulting from such a conceptualization indicate that the issue cannot be discussed satisfactorily in the context of a philosophy of consciousness [*Bewusstseinsphilosophie*]” (9; my translation).

Following this line of argument, Honneth has provided an in-depth discussion of the concept of reification in his Tanner Lectures at the University of California in Berkeley. The goal of his discussion is “to reformulate a significant issue in Western Marxism” (91) that, in the wake of Lukács’s seminal study *History and Class Consciousness*, “moved an entire generation of philosophers and sociologists to analyze the forms of life under the then prevailing circumstances as being the result of social reification” (92).

In both of these cases, Habermas as well as Honneth, a programmatic rejection of theories of self-alienation is designed to pave the way for an alternative theory of subject-formation: the shift is one from self-alienation to intersubjectivity, from a theoretical framework in which the subject is cut off from self-knowledge, either by forces of modernity or by an anthropological lack, to a theory of subject-formation in which the subject is constituted through intersubjective relations. The theoretical gain is obvious. In a state of self-alienation we cannot fully know each other. In theories of intersubjectivity, we cannot possibly not know each other because we only learn who we are in interaction with others. Where a sense of self is formed in ongoing acts of communication and social interaction, subjects thus can no longer be defined by being helplessly exposed to outside forces. The social nature of subject-formation requires the subject to continually respond and hence to act; it is, in other words, a source of quasi-inbuilt agency, however limited, because subjects have to define situations and adapt their definitions in an ongoing flow of interactions in order to be able to act. Hans Joas, who played a crucial role in establishing the paradigm of intersubjectivity in German social theory, can thus speak of an inherent creativity of action and entitle one of his major studies *Die Kreativität des Handelns* (*The Creativity of Action*). Habermas links communicative exchange and action in programmatic fashion already in the title of his study *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Honneth, offering still another version of a critical theory based on the premise of intersubjectivity, has moved to a theory of subject-formation in which the formation of a non-alienated sense of self is dependent on successfully achieved intersubjective relations for which Honneth uses the term “recognition.”

In the literature on recognition, Honneth’s position is thus classified as an intersubjective theory of recognition, in contrast to an intercultural



concept of recognition, as it has been most influentially propagated in Charles Taylor's multicultural politics of recognition. From a different theoretical position, influential contributions to discussions of the concept are also provided by poststructuralists like Butler or, in the field of American Studies, by New Americanists who consider recognition as a form of subjection and continue to base their arguments on premises of misrecognition and self-alienation. I will return to this challenge at the end of this essay. At this point it is important to note that different concepts of recognition also imply different ethical consequences. From a poststructuralist perspective, the subject cannot know itself because its identity is based on misrecognition. This means that it cannot really know the other either, so that the recognition of others cannot be based – and made dependent – on particular ethical principles, since we can never be certain whether we understand the other adequately or not. Recognition, this is the central ethical imperative of poststructuralism, thus has to be unconditional. From the point of view of an intercultural politics of recognition, on the other hand, we “know” the other as a member of an ethnic group or gender-based community, and since we postulate that this membership is a key constituent of subject formation, groups constituted by cultural difference have to be recognized in their difference in order to keep the subject from being damaged or humiliated. From the point of view of an intersubjective concept of recognition, this argument is valid but tells only half of the story since membership in a group is not the only and often not the main constituent of subject-formation. Even if my cultural difference is fully acknowledged, I may still lack sufficient recognition as a subject. Groups constituted by cultural difference may present a united front to the outside world, but internally they are also characterized by status orders and struggles over status, that is, by struggles for a full recognition as a subject. An intercultural concept of recognition, important as it may be, thus refers us back to an intersubjective concept of recognition and hence to the crucial role intersubjectivity plays in the process of subject-formation.

#### IV

Thus, we have to return to the premise of intersubjectivity which Habermas and to a certain extent Honneth have derived from the work of George Herbert Mead. Joas, who has played a crucial role in the rediscovery of Mead, has called Mead “the most important theorist of

intersubjectivity between Feuerbach and Habermas” (*G. H. Mead 2*).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Joas has entitled his own dissertation *Praktische Intersubjektivität (Practical Intersubjectivity)*. Mead’s starting assumption is eminently plausible: without the interaction with others, we could not possibly know who we are. In Mead’s theory, the subject can only be formed in social interaction. It can only gain a sense of self by looking through the perspective of others unto itself.<sup>7</sup> As an inherently social being, the self is not something that exists first (for example, in a state of self-alienation) and then enters (or fails to enter) into relationships with others. It is, on the contrary, only realized in relationship to others.

It is important to note, however, that this interaction can take place on two different levels and that the term interaction can therefore refer to two different kinds of interaction. One level is that of the direct face-to-face encounter with others which can be conceptualized as an ongoing interactive process: “It is the social process of influencing others in a social act and then taking the attitude of the others aroused by the stimulus, and then reacting in turn to this response, which constitutes a self” (Mead 171). As Habermas points out, the organism does not simply react to the other in behavioristic fashion. It acts in anticipation of what the reaction of the other will be (*Theorie 13*). This is most likely the type of interaction that we have in mind when we regard the subject as constituted by intersubjective relations.

However, a comprehensive social theory cannot be based solely on face-to-face encounters. Mead therefore adds a second kind of interaction to his theory of self-formation which he calls interaction with a generalized other. This generalized other is not a person but something like a social consensus; in this case, the self, in order to anticipate the

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<sup>6</sup> Mead’s intersubjective model of self-formation became relevant for critical theory because it promised to show a way out of the dead-end of subject philosophy with its focus on the autonomy of the subject, without, on the other hand, giving up an idea of rational agency. Concepts like communicative action and intersubjectivity could thus become the normative basis for a non-radical, non-Marxist progressive vision of democracy. Interesting discussions of the challenges that poststructuralist thought poses to Mead’s theory can be found in Robert Dunn, “Self, Identity, and Difference” and Hans Joas, “The Autonomy of the Self.”

<sup>7</sup> To describe the phases of the self’s interaction with the other more precisely, Mead introduces the concepts of “I” and “Me” as two different components: “The ‘I’ is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the ‘me’ is the organized set of attitudes of others which one self assumes. The attitude of the others constitutes the organized ‘me,’ and then one reacts toward that as an ‘I’” (175). In order to emphasize this social dimension of self-reference by taking the attitude of the other, theories of intersubjectivity often replace the concept of the subject by that of the self.



other's response, looks at itself through the perspective of society's values and norms. Since the self cannot first take a poll before it acts in order to find out what these values and norms are, it must have incorporated or internalized them. To be sure, the "I"-component of the self provides a spontaneous, often unpredictable response to the attitudes of others, including that of the generalized other. But the claims of the "I" are evaluated and channeled by the "Me," that is, the set of social and cultural attitudes that have been incorporated into the self. This is the point where minorities raise the question whether an intersubjective theory of selfhood does not imply that identity is defined by a "repressive sameness" that may be used to justify exclusion. Thus, Markus Verweyst speaks of a "me," as "the sum total of internalized social norms" and thus the product of interpellation [*übernommene Fremdzuschreibungen*] (378; my translation).

As far as I can see, Habermas and Honneth have responded differently to this problem – Habermas by insisting on the ultimate rationality of a public process of communicative interaction, Honneth by concentrating almost exclusively on forms of personal interaction as the constitutive basis for selfhood. The self is constituted in intersubjective relations of recognition, and only personal encounters can provide an experience of genuine intersubjectivity. Moreover, these personal relations have to have a certain quality in order to be normatively significant. In his Tanner lectures on reification, Honneth speaks of an empathetic engagement, defined by affective sympathy and existential care towards other persons. This explains why almost all of the examples with which he wants to establish the constituent role of intersubjectivity are taken from studies of infant-parent relations, that is, from a phase in life in which close affective relations are indeed formative and indispensable. The fact that children soon afterward enter a phase where other influences, including cultural values, practices, and representations become more and more important in the process of socialization and subject-formation seems to have been forgotten at this point. It is of course true that the small child needs recognition by parent-figures in order to develop a positive self-reference. But what sense of self it develops once it has grown older and begins to search for independence will depend on a whole array of social and cultural influences, including literary texts and cultural representations, that can play an increasingly important role as sources of self-definition and identity.

## V

This brings us to an important point: in the case of Honneth (but in the final analysis also Habermas) the price for exchanging a narrative of self-alienation by a narrative of intersubjectivity is to analytically disregard the realm of culture (in the sense of cultural practices and cultural representations) as a sphere of subject-formation. In Honneth's intersubjective theory of recognition, culture plays hardly any role at all. This is indeed a striking reversal in the development of critical theory. While culture is of central importance for Horkheimer and Adorno, both as a key source of self-alienation, but also as one of the few remaining realms that may still have the power to resist the forces of instrumental rationality, literature and culture are now relegated to occasional footnote references. In a way, one may consider this a logical consequence of Honneth's starting premise. For if intersubjective relations are constitutive of the subject (so that they can keep the subject from self-alienation), then it must be of central importance to focus on instances of fully achieved intersubjectivity and make them the normative basis of one's social theory. And intersubjectivity is most successfully achieved when it is based on mutuality and relations are reciprocal. From the perspective of literary and cultural studies, this creates a major problem, however, since literature is regarded, by definition, as non-reciprocal. Many descriptions of the act of reading have described the pleasures of being completely absorbed in a book and forgetting about the rest of the world. In reading literature, we do not encounter others who actively respond.

What role can literature have, then, in theories of intersubjectivity? In his own scattered references to literature, Honneth is of little help. In his major books and essays on recognition, these references remain limited almost entirely to Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, which has been used on several occasions, albeit only in short references, as an illustration of the damaging consequences of invisibility (Honneth and Margolit; Honneth, *Unsichtbarkeit*). In his more recent study *Das Recht der Freiheit*, which aims at a comprehensive social theory, references have become more frequent, and include a number of well-known authors, ranging from Henry James, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Émile Zola, and Victor Hugo to contemporary writers like Philip Roth and Jonathan Franzen. However, these references are scattered in unsystematic fashion over the 600-page volume and obviously have the function to provide additional anecdotal evidence for particular points of

social analysis.<sup>8</sup> From the perspective of literary studies, this outdated “illustration of”-model of literature is disappointing; it certainly cannot help us understand what role literature could play in intersubjective relations.

Interestingly, however, there is a passage at the end of Honneth’s Tanner lectures where he grapples with the question of how his “recognition-theoretical” perspective can be extended to include “nonhuman objects” (134), for example in nature. Similar to literature, these objects cannot “talk back,” so that genuine reciprocity is not possible. This raises the interesting problem for Honneth how the idea of intersubjectivity can still be applied, “if, until now I have demonstrated only that we must preserve the priority of recognition in our relations toward other persons” (132). The question is important for Honneth’s argument because if an empathetic intersubjective recognition is crucial for moral development, then the development of a morally responsible attitude toward nonhuman objects would have the best prospects if it could be grounded in intersubjective relations. But how is that possible if the object cannot respond and intersubjective relations therefore seem impossible?

This problem can be tied to an even more basic question: if recognition is essential for preventing self-alienation, and if recognition is seen as “a kind of antecedent interaction that bears the characteristic features of existential care” (114), constituted by an “emotional attachment or identification with another concrete person” (118), then this definition departs from Mead’s concept of intersubjectivity. Indeed, as Honneth puts it, “what is notable about all these development–psychological theories – which like either G. H. Mead or Donald Davidson emphasize the necessity of taking over another’s perspective for the emergence of symbolic thought – is the extent to which they ignore the emotional side of the relationship between children and their figures of attachment” (*Reification* 115). In order to introduce a normative dimension, Honneth takes recognition – and thus the formative powers of intersubjectivity – back to a “primordial” level of existential care and emotional attachment in the relation between an infant and “a loved figure of attachment” (117).

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<sup>8</sup> The same can be said for a footnote reference in *Reification* where a number of authors and literary texts are mentioned in support of the topicality of the theme of reification (93n5).

How can the concept of recognition then be applied to “nonhuman” objects? Only by extending our attachment to a loved figure to an object in order to endow it “with additional components of meaning that the loved figure of attachment perceives in the object” (133). In other words: for the relation to a nonhuman object to become intersubjective, the subject has to identify first, not with an object (such as a literary text), but with a loved figure, so that the relation is not merely one to an object but to a person-mediated object. In this case, the object does not have to be able to talk back. The loved person has already spoken on its behalf! The relation to a nonhuman object can thus gain a moral dimension if a figure of attachment suggests that the nonhuman object should be made an object of recognition. However, this also means that our relation to literature would be dependent on the perspective of another person with whom we identify – that is, that it would be dependent on “childish” uses of literature. Facetiously, one could argue at this point that it is one of the advantages of literature that it can cut out the middle man.

Honneth’s concept of recognition has often been misunderstood (I include myself here). Along the lines of a politics of recognition, it has been seen as a correction of a liberal concept of justice which argues that criteria of justice have to go beyond legally guaranteed individual rights. From this perspective, the difference between an intercultural and an intersubjective concept of recognition seemed to lie merely in the extent and focus of recognition. But as Honneth points out at the end of his Tanner lectures, his attempt “to reformulate Lukács’s concept of reification from a recognition-theoretical perspective” is designed to establish a new normative basis for judging society (135). As he argues, “violating generally valid principles of justice is not the only way in which a society can show itself to be normatively deficient” (135). A society is normatively deficient when it produces social practices that are pathological. Social practices will become pathological when the origins of subject-formation in empathetic recognition and the existential primacy of care are forgotten or denied. Reification is the result of such forgetfulness, it is failed intersubjectivity, so to speak.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Honneth’s reorientation of critical theory towards the analysis of social pathologies may also explain why he focuses on reification within the larger Marxist narrative of alienation. As a rule, discussions of alienation are embedded in larger theories of social development or in a philosophy of history; in contrast, pathology is not a general condition produced by a historical process but a breakdown in particular social constellations.

However, if intersubjectivity is defined by recognition and recognition, in turn, is defined by the primacy of care, then literature cannot contribute to recognition. All it can do – and this is where its ethical function may be seen from Honneth’s point of view – is to register the failure of fully achieved recognition. In other words, it can serve – as Honneth’s own use of literary examples also indicates – as a barometer of social pathologies.<sup>10</sup> Literature cannot constitute a fully achieved intersubjectivity, and, hence, it also does not function as an important element in the constitution of the subject. At best, it seems, it can have the function of registering the failure of intersubjectivity where it has occurred in society.

## VI

For literary and cultural studies this cannot be a satisfactory solution. How can we then meaningfully discuss literary texts within the paradigm of intersubjectivity? One way to liberate the concept of recognition from the narrow normative focus to which Honneth has relegated the term is to go back to the concept of intersubjectivity and to Mead’s understanding of it. In contrast to Honneth’s use of intersubjectivity as antecedent empathetic engagement with a loved person, Mead uses the term in the much more neutral sense of any interaction with others. Moreover, by introducing the concept of the generalized other, he also concedes that the perspective through which we look at ourselves is not always that of a real person. It can also be a perspective provided by cultural norms or attitudes. Since we cannot possibly meet all of the other others who form society, we have to mentally construct their perspective. One may even go one step further and argue that the difference between face-to-face encounters with “real” persons and abstract others is not that clear-cut either: although we may see a person directly in front of us and may be able to observe its responses, there will nevertheless also be a certain degree of imaginary construction at work

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<sup>10</sup> Somewhat surprisingly and unexpectedly, in a recent essay, “Organisierte Selbstverwirklichung,” Honneth at one point goes beyond the “illustration-of”-model when he concedes that the emergence of cultural ideals of self-realization “may have been influenced by the reception of certain novels, for example by Hermann Hesse or Henry Miller and the rock music that was emerging just at that time” (212; my translation). In Honneth’s essay, this footnote remains an isolated observation made in passing, but it is significant, because it inverts the relation between reality and culture and thereby assigns cultural representations a different function. However, so far no conclusions seem to have been drawn from this seemingly casual comment.



through which we try to make sense of the thoughts, feelings, and motivation of this other person. We “take the attitude of the other” in an imaginary anticipation of his or her response, and the image to which we respond already presents an interpretation and not simply an encounter with a “real” person. In the final analysis, we act on the basis of a mental image of the other person. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Honneth takes interaction back to the infant/parent-level where emotional attachment does indeed precede cognition, as he claims.

However, as I have argued, we do not remain at this infantile level. Subsequent forms of interaction will not be limited to relations with loved ones, and the affective dimension will be spread out to others the older we get. Our development as a person will then also include the search for other sources of recognition and these sources have increased and multiplied in modern societies. Literature is one of these possible sources of recognition – at least if we do not reduce it to the status of being merely another “nonhuman object.” Rather, the growing importance fictional texts and aesthetic objects have gained in modernity can be attributed to the fact that literature (and art more generally) have established their own characteristic mode of interaction.

In an essay on literary representation, Iser provides a helpful suggestion by using the example of reading *Hamlet*. Since we have never met Hamlet and do in fact know that he never existed, we have to come up with our own mental images of him. This mental construct will follow textual guidance but, in the act of doing so, it will also have to draw on our own associations, feelings, and bodily sensations in order to bring the abstract letters on the page to life and to provide the text with meaning. If a character is said to be melancholic, this characterization will not make any sense to us, unless we can draw on our own knowledge, or our own feelings, of melancholia. In the act of reading, the literary text thus comes to represent two things at once: the world of the text and imaginary elements added to it by the reader in the process of reading. Our characteristic mode of reading will therefore be a constant movement back and forth between the world of the text and our own world, since we will continuously have to reconcile our own construct of the figure of Hamlet with its representation in the text – and vice versa. This ongoing interaction puts us in a position “in-between” two worlds. And it is exactly this double positioning of the reader that can be seen as an important source of aesthetic experience, because it allows us to do two things at the same time: we can, in the words of Iser, be “both ourselves and someone else at the same time” (“Representation” 244). The literary text allows us to enter a character’s perspective and perhaps even

his or her body; on the other hand, we cannot and do not want to completely give up our own identity. In reading, we thus create other, more expressive versions of ourselves.

This is achieved, however, in a much more complex way than suggested by the term “identification.”<sup>11</sup> One may assume for the sake of the argument that it may be possible to “identify” with a character, but one cannot identify with a whole text. It is the text, however, that provides the reading experience, not just single characters in it. In actualizing the text in the act of reading, all aspects of the text have to be brought to life by means of a transfer from our own life-world, including the text’s language, its plot, mood, and structural features. The “more expressive version of ourselves” is thus not a simple case of self-aggrandizement through wish-fulfillment but an extension of our own interiority over a whole (made-up) world.

Such a model conceptualizes reading as a process of making selections through which readers create meaning and significance by transfers between the world of the text and their own world. Since we cannot possibly relate to all aspects of the text in equal measure, we will focus on aspects to which we can relate in one way or another. The explanation why there will always be new readings of any given literary text, not only in different historical periods but also among readers or viewers of the same period, society, or class, lies in the fact that readings (including professional interpretations) work by means of structural or affective analogies. This is, in fact, one of the reasons why in reading literature we can relate to figures like outlaws or misfits, or even criminals and murderers from which we would shy away in real life – that is, characters who meet Honneth’s definition of the pathological. We do not identify with such a character but establish analogies to those aspects of his persona that we want to incorporate. We take the defiance or heroism of the gangster and ignore the criminal context.<sup>12</sup> Depictions of pathologi-

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<sup>11</sup> On the confusions surrounding the term “identification” in the interpretation of literary texts, see Rita Felski:

Identification can denote a formal *alignment* with a character, as encouraged by techniques of focalization, point of view, or narrative structure, while also referencing an experiential allegiance with a character, as manifested in a felt sense of affinity or attachment. Critiques of identification tend to conflate these issues, assuming that readers formerly aligned with a fictional persona cannot help but swallow the ideologies represented by that persona wholesale. (34)

<sup>12</sup> Using the term “analogy” to grasp the relations that can be set up between reader and text means to go beyond mimetic assumptions of direct likeness or resemblance, but even beyond metaphorical affinity. Thus, readers’ responses can be unpredictable:



cal behavior in fictional texts can thus not be taken literally, and therefore its representation in literature cannot be read in literal fashion as a barometer of social conditions. A sinking ship and the representation of a sinking ship in literature or painting are two very different things; what may be tragic in reality, can be a source of altogether different aesthetic experiences in the reception of art. Representations of pathologies can have very different functions in literature. It would therefore be reductive to locate the ethical function of literature in the depiction of social pathologies, that is, in the illustration of instances of failed intersubjectivity.

But in what way can the term “intersubjectivity” be applied in the context of a discussion of the ethical function of literature? As we have seen in the case of Honneth, the link to a theory of intersubjectivity can be provided by the concept of recognition as a form of subject-formation that is inherently dependent on interaction with others. But in contrast to Honneth, the use of the concept of “recognition” should not be restricted to forms of an antecedent empathetic engagement. On the contrary, such a reduction fails to take into account the central role recognition plays in modern life and the different forms it can take. Recognition can mean respecting others (*Achtung*), but it can also mean merely paying attention to others (*Beachtung*), for example in social and professional contexts. Finally, recognition can also be used as a word for a positive self-reference (*Selbst-Achtung*). I therefore suggest a use of the concept of recognition in which our understanding is broadened so that the plurality of possibilities can be included. The transfers that are at work in our reception of literary texts could then be seen as a form of intersubjective relations that offers particular possibilities in the search for recognition (Fluck, “Reading”).

To understand the reading process as a form of intersubjectivity (in the sense of Mead), two aspects have to be kept in mind. One is to acknowledge the inherently interactive nature of the reading process constituted by the need to create meaning by means of transfers. The result is a complex interaction of perspectives in which we construct another world by drawing on our own world, and then look at our own world through the perspective of our imaginary construct. Seen this way – and following Mead – the reading subject is thus intersubjectively consti-

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*Antigone* has intrigued straight men and lesbians, Norwegians and South Africans; you do not need to be an Irishman to admire James Joyce. [. . .] We all seek in various ways to have our particularity recognized, to find echoes of ourselves in the world around us. The patent asymmetry and unevenness of structures of recognition ensure that books will often function as lifelines for those deprived of other forms of public acknowledgment. (Felski 43)

tuted in the act of reading: we can be both ourselves and somebody else at the same time. Secondly, what is important to stress in this context is that this interactive process will not leave the two perspectives unaffected that intersect. Our construct of the text will not be identical with the literary text itself; it will already provide an interpretation and extension of it. At the same time, looking at our self through the perspective of our reading experience will affect and possibly change our own self-reference. The reading process thus brings a dimension to our self that we have been lacking, and this self-extension can be seen as a call for recognition on new grounds.

## VII

Still, we should add that this literary call for recognition has a particular status. This qualification can draw our attention to a special role literature plays in the ethical world. I think its special contribution does not lie so much in the formulation or legitimation of ethical principles – in that sense, literature is rarely a philosophical genre – but in the articulation of individual claims for recognition. Its starting point are often experiences of misrecognition, of inferiority, weakness, injustice; and its plots consist in the struggle against these experiences, a struggle that can be either successful – often, in fact, triumphantly successful – or end in defeat, which, in a paradox typical of aesthetic experience, can nevertheless provide strong experiences of recognition. But the key point here is that these claims for recognition can be – some would even say should be – radically subjective, self-centered, and partisan.

One of the main challenges for social theories, for example of theories of justice or recognition, consists in the task of integrating different claims into generally acceptable norms of equality, fairness, and justice. The search for recognition in literature, on the other hand, may often be highly effective in dramatizing severe cases of social injustice, but their depiction represents the views of an individual or group that want to call attention to their own, often highly subjective experiences of misrecognition. In contrast to philosophical or social theories, literature can articulate individual claims for recognition that need not necessarily be reconciled with other claims and need not be normatively justified (Fluck, “Fiction”). Hence, one of the major differences between literary texts and normative accounts is that literary texts can base the legitimacy of their claims on the power of aesthetic experience and its seemingly self-evident authority. If a novel is skillfully crafted, we may even find

ourselves on the side of a killer, as, for example, in Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*, because Dreiser claims that what goes on in Clyde Griffiths gives us insights into the human condition that are normally repressed. This unashamed and unrepentant partisanship is actually one of the strengths of literature because literary texts can articulate aspects of individual experience that are erased by broad social classifications, so that new dimensions of subjectivity can be revealed.

Thus, while normative accounts try to integrate different claims in order to arrive at a convincing normative principle, the subjective accounts of literature go exactly in the other direction by producing an ever expanding plurality of claims. We encounter normative accounts on the one side, open, and often unashamedly subjective calls for recognition on the other. It would be a mistake, however, to posit one side against the other. Both operate on different levels and are, in the final analysis, complementary. As a form that encourages individual expression, often of a transgressive nature, literature is a social institution with a special potential and privilege to articulate individual claims for recognition. As an institution, it has played a crucial role in introducing such claims into culture. Philosophical and social theories, on the other hand, are involved in an ongoing debate about the legitimacy and normative implications of such claims. In a time of pluralization, fictional texts constantly introduce new claims; in doing so, they put pressure on philosophical and social theories to reconsider and, where necessary, extend their normative accounts. Thus, both discourses can be seen to nourish each other. Literature is an important medium in which new claims for recognition can be articulated, just as, on the other hand, the concept of recognition provides a perspective on literature that can provide new and better explanations of its potential and imaginary power.

But what about the poststructuralist claim that this articulation effect is only possible at the price of an imposition of identity? It is true that cultural narratives position us in culturally prefigured plots and norms, and that these are often the only forms in which we can articulate ourselves. But these cultural plots have to be adjusted and re-written to fit a person's self-narrative, so that his or her own narrative identity can be provided with a certain, at least minimal, degree of continuity and coherence. This appropriation is more than a mere reiteration of always the same subject-position. Inevitably, it leads to a re-writing, and re-writing also opens up the possibility of a reconfiguration in which norms can become subject to resignification. That which constantly puts constraints on our particularity, the stories that connect us, can thus also become a valuable resource for the assertion of singularity. On the one

hand, then, recognition is one of the stabilizing forces of the social system since it is based on certain norms of recognizability, but, on the other hand, it is also a continuous threat to the stability of a social system, because it constantly revives and refuels individual claims. The poststructuralist argument that rejects recognition as an identity imposition and, hence, another constraint on the subject, is thus at a closer look an argument in which claims for individual recognition (in this case of the singularity of the subject, its “difference”) are further radicalized.

### VIII

Let me end on a personal note: When I was active in the student movement in the Sixties, one of the questions with which we were constantly confronted as students of literature was that about the relevance of literature and, by implication, what we were studying and why we were studying it. I did not realize at the time that I could have provided an easy answer taken from my own childhood in a working-class household in what was then a mean working-class district in Berlin called Kreuzberg. Five people lived in two rooms with no bathroom and an outdoor toilet. I spent most of my days on the streets and played soccer but what really saved me at the time was the discovery of literature, that is, the possibility to encounter the individual claims and lives of others that helped me get a sense of the possibilities of the world. Simply put, it is this articulation effect in which the ethical function of literature lies. Of course, with one caveat: these claims then have to become part of a cultural conversation in which their merits are being discussed and assessed. But they can only be meaningfully discussed if this discussion takes the specific function and potential of literature into account.

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