

Learning Morality through Literary Mimesis

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Introduction

In Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* [*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*] (hereafter: KpV), Kant in the second book's second part "Methodology of Pure Practical Reason" ["Methodenlehre der reinen praktischen Vernunft"] wonders why "the educators of the youth" have not "made use of this propensity of reason to enter with pleasure upon the most subtle examination of the practical questions that are thrown up"¹. This could be done by teaching through

the biographies of ancient and modern times with the view of having at hand instances of duties laid down, in which, especially by comparison of similar actions under different circumstances, they might exercise the critical judgment of their scholars in remarking their greater or less moral significance² (KpV, AA:155).

In other words, Kant wonders why teachers do not use exemplary historical *narratives* in order to help students to form their latent practical reason—and hence morality—as this seems to be a self-evident possibility.

But why does he think so? How can these narratives contribute to the moral education of young people? How can comparisons and judgment of narratives turn into practical reason and not solely remain theoretical knowledge? And how can narratives from the past form students to act morally in both the present and the future? These are the questions this essay pursues.

This essay works with the hypothesis that the narrative to some extent functions as ethical habituation understood in an Aristotelian way, i.e. a habituation that through imitation takes place over time. Because the narrative is timely on an existential level, i.e., that it compresses time in the quasi-practical life represented by the narrative, a whole life from cradle to grave or extensive periods of life can be lived through in a relatively short period of physical time. If the reader is able to put her-

¹ "diesem Hange der Vernunft, in aufgeworfenen praktischen Fragen selbst die subtilste Prüfung mit Vergnügen einzuschlagen". The German quotes from KpV are translated from the e-book: Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, The Floating Press (2009)

² "die Biographien alter und neuer Zeiten in der Absicht durchsuchten, um Beläge zu den vorgelegten Pflichten bei der Hand zu haben, an denen sie vornemlich durch die Vergleichung ähnlicher Handlungen unter verschiedenen Umständen die Beurteilung ihrer Zöglinge in Tätigkeit setzten, um den mindern oder größeren moralischen Gehalt derselben zu bemerken."

or himself in the position of the narrative's characters the experiences of the protagonists will to some extent transfer to the percipient.

In order to examine the hypothesis, this article will firstly unfold the threefold mimesis developed by Paul Ricoeur in the first volume of his *Time and Narrative* [*Temps et récit*]³ (hereafter: TN) in order to investigate Kant's intuition of the importance of the narrative to moral education. It seems plausible that Ricoeur's threefold mimesis and his understanding of the narrative can function as a mediator between the past and the future and as a changing and formational element to human action.

However, secondly, this article will critically inquire into the formational character of the threefold mimesis by discussing works of Peter Kemp, Martha Nussbaum and others. The mimetic process and Ricoeur's rooting in the Aristotelian concept of mimesis seems to be problematic as the actions of a narrative's protagonists can be morally tainted and therefore might not be suited for imitation in the pursuit of moral education. Furthermore, it seems that an ontological imperative is presupposed in the theory.

Ricoeur's threefold mimesis

Ricoeur's threefold mimesis (mimesis I, II and III) is developed from the Greek understanding of mimesis which amongst others Aristotle introduces in *The Poetics*. Mimesis here is not solely a concept that describes the characteristics and structure of the tragedy but is an actual action. The action is to imitate—not to reproduce—the positive reality (matter/material/nature) in a composition that represents a fable, i.e. a narrative with a quasi-reality (Ricoeur, TN, 56ff). In other words, mimesis is a craftsmanship that through a medium as, for example, the metric language in Aristotle's works recreates human experiences in a new context and with artistic expression in order to show the world in a new and different way from the ordinary appearance.

In his article "La place de l'œuvre dans notre culture" from 1957 concerning not only literary artwork but art in its whole, Ricoeur very shortly and precisely explains the interconnection between the positive reality and the creative process of the artist in this way:

Everyone of these materials – from the rock to the clay – demands subjection and patience: "Obey nature in order to command it!" that is the motto of the craftsman and the artist.⁴ (103)

This means that the artist is subjected to nature, i.e. all things that can be experienced in the world, as a starting point for her or his art. Hereafter (s)he in the creative act processes and masters nature so that (s)he can give it a new expression and meaning. This creative act which the percipient is made

³ As I unfortunately do not read French, I have read the works of Ricoeur in German and the page numbers refer to *Zeit und Erzählung* and "Der Ort des Kunstwerks in unserer Kultur". The translations into English are made by me.

⁴ Jedes dieser Materialien – vom Stein angefangen bis hin zum Ton – erfordert Unterwerfung und Geduld: "Der Natur gehorchen, um ihr zu befehlen!", das ist die Devise des Handwerkers und des Künstlers.

part of by reading, listening to or looking at a piece of art illuminates the intimate and confidential grasp the artist has on her or his material when (s)he gives it a form that can express an idea (Ricoeur, "La place", 103), a theme or even a "thought" as Ricoeur calls it in *Time and Narrative* (110). Hence the artist, firstly, starts in the experienced world, secondly, imitates the experienced world and gives it surplus meaning and thirdly, shares the experienced world and the creative process with a percipient. Accordingly, in this article Ricoeur already anticipates the understanding of the threefold mimesis in the narrative which is thoroughly developed in *Time and Narrative*. The threefold mimesis unfolds in the three stages, mimesis I, II and III, which are interconnected.

Mimesis I

Mimesis I, the prefiguration, is a primary understanding of practical life—the world of actions—which delivers the material to a narrative. It is a necessary element in order for the percipient to understand the narrative. Without connection or without being subjected to the real world that carries strings of meaning, symbolic resources and a timely character the narrative would become meaningless (Kemp 35, Ricoeur, TN, 90). All narratives are in the end "doing" and "undergoing" (Ricoeur, TN, 92) which means an imitation of the partly active and partly passive experiences we have with and in the real world.

An understanding of the narrative presupposes the capability of realising the symbolic meaning of actions, i.e., a capability of realising the meaning of actions reaching beyond the merely physical expression, namely the meaning that connects the action and the actor with motives and circumstances. This capability is, according to Ricoeur, a *practical reason* shared by the author and her or his audience that presupposes an understanding of good and evil that creates sympathy or antipathy with the protagonists and their actions (Ricoeur, TN, 90ff). In Kant's words, it presupposes a *latent practical reason*—the seed to a practical reason.

This means that the narrative is not ethically neutral. It can't be, according to Ricoeur, as neutrality would terminate the ancient function of art which is "[...] to build a laboratory in which the artist in a fictional mode can perform an experiment with values"⁵ (Ricoeur, TN, 97). But although art is not ethically neutral it is without ethical judgment. The author creates and shows us a world of doing and undergoing in a certain form—the form of a narrative. (S)he communicates through a configuration but without judging.

Mimesis II

Mimesis II, the configuration, is the creative process, the activity and craftsmanship, that creates a quasi-reality in what is conceived as the real literary work, i.e. the palpable text in front of us. Mimesis II furthermore is the centre of gravity in Ricoeur's hermeneutic analysis of the "processes [...]" through which a work of art lifts itself away from the opaque background of life, doing and undergoing in order to be passed on by an author to a reader who assimilates it and hereby changes

⁵ "ein Laboratorium zu bilden, in dem der Künstler im Modus der Fiktion ein Experiment an den Werten vornimmt [...]"

[her/]his actions” (Ricoeur, TN, 88). Mimesis II, that is, has a communicative ability that can guide the reader from a *before* to an *after*, i.e. from mimesis I to mimesis III.

The communicative role of the configuration and the composition of a narrative is to be understood in three ways: firstly, it communicates the interconnection of singular events either *as* or *in* a narrative and hereby *changes* plurality *into* unity. A movement of changing something “from ... into” that characterises the communication between the plural events and the unified narrative (Ricoeur, TN, 105). According to Ricoeur this means that the narrative becomes an intelligible totality (TN, 106), i.e., has a theme or expresses an idea through a certain form. One might say that the narrative creates order in something that can seem random or chaotic and accordingly creates meaning as the events contribute to the unity of the narrative. Very much like this the composition, secondly, unites heterogenous factors like the protagonists (actors), intentions, means, interactions and unexpected results in one single plot and, thirdly, unites heterogenous time factors in a synthesis of chronological and non-chronological time.

The chronological time expresses itself through the consecutive events of the narrative whereas the non-chronological time is the connection between the events in the narrative and a timely totality. This is where the time of the narrative becomes a compressed time which Ricoeur expresses through a Heideggerian concept of *Innerzeitigkeit*, i.e., a kind of being-in-time as a break with the linear conception of time (TN, 101ff). Time in this sense does not mean to measure time from one point to another but being in a “now” (Kemp, TF, 40) where the “now” expresses the timely totality of the narrative that includes the percipient and therefore can affect her or him existentially.

The configuration is not a simple enumeration of events. Mimesis II on the contrary is a reflexive action that creates a significant and manageable totality that we do not meet in the real world. The composition of events gives the reader “the sense of an ending” as it is in the end of the literary work the totality of the narrative can be realised. This means that the end is already anticipated in the beginning or vice versa the beginning in the end (Ricoeur, TN, 108f). The linear time is “turned upside down” and the impossible coexistence of past, present and future is sublated.

The narrative is as aforementioned expressed through a certain *form* which is constituted in the configuration by schematisation and a tradition. Ricoeur compares the configurative action to Kant’s conception of the productive imagination as it is described in *Critique of Pure Reason* [*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*] (hereafter: KrV): imagination is a transcendental ability and in the same way as it is capable of connecting reason and perception in *a priori* synthetic judgments (Kant, KrV, AA:145) the composition of the narrative connects the theme or the “thought” and the perceivable version of circumstances, characters, events, revolutions etc., in a schema so that the percipients are made able to recognise the synthesis (Ricoeur, TN, 110).

The schematisation is expressed in the traditional characteristics of the narrative which means the living dissemination that happens in an interplay of innovation and sedimentation. The sedimentation consists amongst other things of the formal characteristics of the narrative that have survived generations through tradition whereas innovation happens through a renewal of the genres (Kemp, TF, 47f). Both schematisation and the traditional characteristics are significant to the reader

so that (s)he can follow the narrative and enable mimesis III. These certain features make the narrative both recognisable and realisable.

Mimesis III

Mimesis III, the refiguration, is the process wherein the narrative obtains its full meaning by stepping back into the time of doing and undergoing, i.e., into the time in which humans can have experiences. Hence mimesis III is the intersection of the configurative world of the text and the actual world of the reader which is to be entered through the act of reading (Ricoeur, TN, 112ff).

Refiguration is in its own way a resume of configuration as the reader follows the creative process of the author whilst reading but is at the same time a fulfilment of the configuration and the text. The reader adds the necessary judgment that synthesises the plurality of the narrative into unity by playing with narrative limitations and building inferences between text and reality. Hereby the reader becomes the last bearer of the refiguration and recreation of the world of “emplotment” (Ricoeur, TN, 121f).

The act of reading therefore becomes a creative activity—or even a joyful play. In the aforementioned article “La place de l’œuvre dans notre culture”, Ricoeur calls the creative process (mimesis II) a “play” in which the percipient is invited to play along when the created work is read (mimesis III). The play is a cost-free moment where the percipient can devote her- or himself to the moment—(s)he simply is “freed from calculations of usefulness for a while”⁶ (Ricoeur, “La place”, 106).

As the function of art is “[...] to build a laboratory in which the artist in a fictional mode can perform an experiment with values” (Ricoeur, TN, 97) it means that we in the act of playing or reading can experiment with values cost-free as we are located in a quasi-reality and not in the real world. Hence the creative act of reading becomes a “learning game” where the emotions and passions evoked by our experiments are translated into imaginary actions that let us get to know our real emotions and passions without having to experience them in reality. In fact, “[w]e can die for our heroes without dying”⁷ (Ricoeur, “La place”, 106).

In mimesis III we thus get closer to the hypothesis that the narrative is a habituation and that the narrative, using a term invented by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, can be called a *transitional object* in *potential space* (40ff). Potential space is a concept that describes the fictional world that lies in between an individuals’ inner and personal subject world and the surrounding and outer object world. Potential space is a kind of sanctuary wherein the individual can maintain and process experiences in a symbolic form in order to subsequently be able to master experiences in a better way in the outer world (Austring & Sørensen, 108). In this way mimesis III reminds of a *katharsis*—a cleansing of feelings—which is what mimesis, according to Aristotle, aims towards (Aristotle 1449b; Kemp, “Tid og fortælling” 125).

⁶ “eine Zeitlang vom Nützenkalkül befreit”

⁷ “Wir können sterben für unseren Helden, ohne selbst zu sterben”

We must assume that physical time is sublated in the potential space and solely consists of existential time; i.e., an *Innerzeitigkeit* and a “now”. The linear time in mimesis II was sublated in a similar way which means that a fusion of *before* and *after* can happen—a fusion of mimesis I and III. The linearity is furthermore blurred out by the fact that the mimetic process is to be understood as a spiral process so that experiences pass through the same “point” of consciousness many times but on higher and higher levels so that the reader’s realisations are increased and processed on every level—this is one of the explanations why it can be satisfying to read a novel more than once.

Moral Education—Ethical Habituation?

“Reading for life” by Martha Nussbaum is written as a review of W.C. Booth’s *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* but besides relating to the concepts of Booth Nussbaum includes her own attitudes and reflections towards how literature can be understood in an ethical critique of it.⁸ She questions if and how literature can actually be ethically or morally guiding.

Nussbaum recognises Booth’s understanding that the relation between a book and its reader is a kind of friendship defined in an Aristotelian way, i.e., “a relationship based on trust and affection, in which we pursue our ends in a social way, sharing to a large extent, the friend’s activities, desires and values” (Nussbaum, 235). But exactly this affection or sympathy can contribute to the fact that we forget to judge ethically when confronted with controversial content as we surrender ourselves to a work and sympathise with protagonists who might be morally tainted. We are, so to speak, lured away from the moral world (Nussbaum, 237ff).

Nussbaum’s views put, on one hand, focus on the fact that moral education and hence moral judgment does not emerge as a result of friendly literature reading alone. On the other hand, Nussbaum recognises that it is possible to speak of ethical habituation through literature if we recognise the Aristotelian concept of ethics wherein friendship plays a major part in the formation of character (Nussbaum, 234).

According to Kemp in *The World Citizen* [Verdensborgeren] (hereafter: TWC) ethics in an Aristotelian and hence character-building understanding is both “a given setting and a task that has to be solved – both practical reality and an ideal that hasn’t yet been realised” (Kemp, TWC, 129).⁹ This means that literature provides accumulated examples of the end and ideal of ethics, i.e. “the good life”. The task of the reader becomes to judge which of these examples can lead to actions that strive towards the ideal. In this way, the narrative becomes an *experience ethics* that makes the reader realise which actions “work” and (s)he thus can acquire and habituate through imitation. Therefore, one could say that literature is formational in that sense that it changes the individual by giving her or him new perspectives, firstly, of her- or himself through the play with values, and secondly, of the world through the composition of a quasi-reality. Hence the individual acquires a new ground for her or his actions in practical life and reality.

⁸ Booth, W.C., *The Company We Keep: an Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988

⁹ ”en given indstilling og en opgave, der skal løses – både praktisk virkelighed og et ideal, der endnu ikke er blevet virkeliggjort”

Kemp furthermore states “that the creation of a narrative is based on the experience of an already realised ethics”¹⁰ (TWC, 132) which Ricoeur emphasises in his assertion that the narrative is never ethically neutral but builds on an interhuman practical reason without necessarily judging the actions it presents. But this does not solve the problem that the reader according to Nussbaum can be lured away from the moral world exactly because the narrative does *not* judge. Couldn’t we easily be intrigued by and wish to imitate the morally tainted lifestyle of a protagonist? The judgment and assessment of the work seems to presuppose that the reader is already ethically habituated in the practical world (Kemp, TWC, 148ff) or presuppose that, as Ricoeur thinks, an ontological imperative “one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself” does exist (Kemp, *ibid.*, 157). Therefore, if the mimetic process should influence practical life in an ethical sense it is presupposed that the moral law or a conception of “the good life” is already present, i.e., that it is not something that has yet to be developed.

Exactly because of this presupposition there is a weakness in Ricoeur’s thesis of the threefold mimesis if we compare it to modern literature. The thesis remains, despite its further development from Aristotle’s mimesis, still deeply rooted in the conception of mimesis as the creator of *mythos*. This creation is not the creation of a random narrative but of the *tragedy*. The tragedy is, according to Karsten Friis Johansen’s article “About Aristotle’s Poetics” [“Om Aristoteles’ Poetik”], defined as a narrative about “elevated themes – *spoudaia*” (42) wherein the author describes “the significant actions of good people” (42) in an idealised form that imitates the actions in a densified quasi-reality that is supposed to resemble *praxis*.

Praxis is according to Aristotle a targeted action that defines human existence where the end is “the good life”. By imitating “the significant actions of good people” the tragedy is definitely not morally indifferent (Friis Johansen, 43) but lays out guidelines for how one should act and judge—it “gives us insight into how specific kinds of moral agents act” (Schweiker, 29)—and hence has a preconceived attitude towards what the outcome of acquiring the tragedy should be.

Nussbaum quotes Booth for writing that in some cases the act of reading involves “loss of life [...] in deciding to spend several hours that way” (234), because the content of a literary work can be so limited that it cannot contribute to the development of the individual either morally or in other ways (234f). This means that we cannot assume that the intention of modern literature is to communicate either the conception of “the good life” or that it contains an implicit categorical imperative. This complicates the assumption that a percipient gains an ability to act and judge from literature. It seems that we once again run aground in a circular reasoning where the premise is that a minimum of ethical habituation, moral education or development of the practical reason is necessary *before* the act of reading.

Although we might not solve the *aporia* it does not mean that the ability to judge morally is not *refined* through the act of reading. Even though a work does not explicitly lay out moral guidelines it can still have a changing effect on its readers. In her memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* Azar Nafisi

¹⁰ “at fortællingen bliver til på basis af erfaringen af en allerede virkeliggjort etik”

expresses it quite clearly: “[...] a novel is not moral in the usual sense of the word. It can be called moral when it shakes us out of our stupor and makes us confront the absolutes we believe in” (129). A well composed and well written literary work can, despite morally tainted protagonists, provide perspectives, reason and judgement that society and its habits do not provide. In contrast to society, the work creates a universality that transcends both geographic and cultural borders. Hence it opens to a perspective that understands humans as part of a meta-sociality created exclusively from being human. As the material for the narrative is provided by the experienced world of the author neither the reader nor the work loses its rooting in the real world. On the contrary, in mimesis III both can maintain the rooting and re-establish the connection to practical life.

The acquisition of this kind of literature is a pedagogical task that develops judgment over time—however shortened and compressed in the narrative—and requires teachers who take the role as “wise elders” who choose suitable literature and teach a reflexive reading of it. Exactly this role is what Kant misses in the “educators of the youth” who should develop and refine the practical reason of their students through *exemplary* narratives and hence ensure their moral education.

The Pedagogical Task

As we cannot find an ethical ground zero, we must—whether we think of it as an empirically or metaphysically founded phenomenon—accept the idea that all human praxis already contains practical reason. This means that also teaching praxis is influenced by it and that the teacher, in other words, is subject to tradition and habit.

That teaching literature does not become mere affirmation, or a passing of certain norms and rules, however, is supported by Ricoeur’s emphasis on the fact that tradition is *living* innovative communication (TN, 110). Hence, teaching the process of reading and acquiring is supposed to open to the possibility that norms and rules are changeable. In this way teaching, education and formation can be perceived as mimetic processes in themselves. The teacher represents prefiguration (mimesis I) because of her or his prior understanding of the world and the narrative, instruction represents the configuration (mimesis II) by showing the world and the qualities of the narrative in a certain form whereas the students represent refiguration (mimesis III) by participating and co-creating in the tuition. In *The World Citizen* Kemp describes how the mimetic process happens or ought to happen in the relation between teachers and students. He emphasises the innovative element in that “the teacher has something to offer the student, something (s)he can imitate” but that the teacher by involving and making demands on the student is also capable of “making the student an independent successor” (Kemp, TWC, 217) that in the future is able to read and judge literature on her or his own.

Hence, teaching literature means teaching dialogically where the teacher and the narrative present *possible* interpretations of the world that the students can acquire in cooperation with their own perspectives and hence create and communicate new possible perspectives on how to act and how to renew the world. In this process it is the responsibility of the teacher to choose literature that through dialogue can make students reflect on what “a good life” is or on how individuals can take part in creating “the good life”.

The objective moral law—the categorical imperative—is without doubt what Kant considers the touchstone in a narrative of the moral value of the human actions presented in it. A verification of them is supposed to refine the ability of the students to reflect and judge (Kant, KpV, AA:159f). But development and refinement of judgement alone is, according to Kant, not enough in order to integrate morality in experiences and actions in practical life. The real integration does not occur before the individual has realised her or his *duty* to obey the moral law. A duty that is completely freed from human drives and inclinations (Kant, *ibid.*, AA:160). Put differently it means morality is integrated when the individual realises that (s)he is not subjected to external determination but has the internal *freedom* to act morally.

Precisely this realisation of freedom and authority might be exactly the experience that can transcend to practical life and therefore be the most important experience the individual can make through the literary work. When we engage in the act of reading, we follow the plot, place ourselves in the circumstances of the protagonists, and at the same time reflect on the possible good or bad actions (s)he could/should have chosen. Therefore, we realise the freedom we have to assess and judge our own possible actions in both the present and future practical life. This freedom of will is essential to our decisions about what kind of persons we want to be—*which character we want to have*—whatever circumstances we are placed in. And that is what teaching literature can communicate.

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