

Norbert Groeben

Biographische Real-Fiktion als Paradigma narrativer Erklärung (Abstract)

- Full-length article in: JLT 14/2 (2020), 287–310.

The two categories of »fiction« and »non-fiction« are most often conceived of – and treated as – disjointed and separate, not only in common sense but also in literary studies. This does not adequately reflect, however, the developmental trajectory of the non-fiction genre over the course of the twentieth century. After all, the popularization of expert knowledge has increasingly been effected with the help of narrative strategies which raise one crucial question: Just how much fiction can the factual nature – the dependence on facts – of non-fiction tolerate? However, as the more precise definition of the pertinent term, »fiction«, indicates, a distinction must be made between »fictionality«, on the one hand, and »fictivity«, on the other. »Fictionality«, that is to say, refers to *narrative strategies analogous to those of fiction*, but which relate to historical facts. »Fictivity«, by contrast, refers to the *representation of fictitious content*. More precisely, then, the question is this: Just what degree of fictivity can the factuality of non-fiction writing tolerate? Since this question cannot be answered constructively from a quantitative but only from a qualitative point of view, we are faced with the ultimately crucial question: Just *what kind of fictivity* can the factuality of non-fiction tolerate?

In trying to answer that question, it seems advisable to start from the structure of deductive-nomological explanation, in which a given phenomenon – the *explanandum* – is explained by deducing its description from regularities plus the antecedent conditions contained in them (the *explanans*). In the case of historical explanation, in particular, historical facts most often form the explanandum, while the antecedent conditions of the potentially explanatory regularity (i. e., of the explanans) are not historically documented. Even more specifically, the genre of biography presents a paradigmatic case of such historical explanations falling within the purview of literary studies as well. Not uncommonly, attempts to arrive at a coherent, psychologically convincing biographical portrayal are met with the problem that historically documented life events can be explained – as to their genesis or »coming about« – only by reference to ultimately fictitious – or, to take up the distinction introduced above, to ultimately *fictive* – assumptions regarding antecedent conditions. Literary biography may, therefore, be said to realize the desired combination of fictivity and factuality in the best possible way: namely, as fictivity in the service of factuality.

To find a paradigmatic example of such a combination, one need look no further than the biography of the German chemist Clara Immerwahr, wife of the professor of chemistry, Dr. Fritz Haber, who during the First World War was in charge of German efforts to develop and deploy chemical combat agents such as poison gases. Clara Immerwahr demonstrably saw her husband's work as a perversion of science but was completely isolated and powerless in her protest against it. Her suicide after the German gas attacks at Ypres in April and May 1915 may therefore be understood as a final and ultimate protest (attempt). There is no clear evidence for this, however, since Immerwahr's farewell letters no longer exist. Accordingly, the path leading towards her decision to end her life has to be reconstructed using fictive assumptions (about decisive life events). This implies the following, central hypothesis: »Once a person breaks away from a religiously motivated rejection of suicide as an inadmissible interference in God's plan, that person will, in a situation of hopeless, existential, despair, commit suicide.« In the

example of a literary biography presented here, Immerwahr's reaction to the papal encyclical of 1910 is posited as a fictive antecedent condition, for which no historical record exists. In particular, this involves the question whether Immerwahr was prompted by that experience to establish, in her own mind, the precedence of a scientific-humanistic ethos over any kind of religious ideology. That she *did* come to rank a scientist's morality of a shared humanity more highly than religious dogma – particularly where self-determination over one's own life (and the end of one's own life) was concerned –, is, however, a highly probable developmental condition of her life story, considering its actual culmination in a highly demonstrative suicide.

On the basis of this exemplary piece of biographical writing, the connection of fictivity and factuality may be considered in terms of its fundamental structures, and may be revealed as really a case of fictivity *in the service of* factuality. In fact, we are looking at an explanation of the »how it was possible that« type, in which the explanandum is a confirmed (historical) fact, while the antecedent condition of the explanatory regularity can only be postulated as a psychologically plausible, hermeneutically intelligible life event. It is this combination of factual effects (hence explained) and fictive conditions (thus explaining), or, otherwise put, of historical factuality and (psychologically) probable fictivity, which is meant to be captured by the term »real fiction«.

Biography as a genre is particularly suitable for the elaboration of this concept of »real fiction«, because it has been seen as »fundamentally caught between facts and fiction« – between factuality and fictivity – for quite some time now. To justify the introduction of a new genre, however, the level of detail chosen must be such that it, on the one hand, allows us to apprehend the differences, in terms of literary theory, between this new model and other, established models of factuality, while at the same time giving a nuanced, structured account – one that meets the requirements of the philosophy of science– of how precisely fictivity might be said to be »in the service of factuality«. With regard to genre concepts already established in literary theory, one will have to consider the historical novel and the writing of the New Objectivity movement as well as documentary literature. In the case of the historical novel, writers' »fictivity leeway« is much greater, since there is no requirement for a strict coherence with concrete factual explananda. As an antithesis to this, consider the writing of the New Objectivists, which is characterised by a predominance of factuality which is accompanied by a wholesale – if overgeneralised – rejection of aesthetic concerns and the demand for an unreserved critique of society and ideology. This same anti-ideological impulse also characterises documentary literature, in which the preferred narrative strategies are even fewer (being restricted to the modes of reportage, montage, etc.). The genre of »real fiction«, by contrast, is much more open and flexible, both in terms of (theoretical) content and narrative strategies. In return, however, it places significantly higher demands on the structural relation between fiction and factuality, insofar as an explanation of relevant historical facts has to be given. Thus, the concept of »real fiction« is characterised by a combination of openness (regarding its possible topics and content) with a formally concise explanatory structure. This is how »real fiction« particularizes the fictive in the service of the factual.

In the end, »real fiction« can be explicated as a form of narrative explanation in the sense proposed by Danto. It is concerned with the historical explanation of developments – and in the case of biography, more specifically, with the explanatory reconstruction of a life story in ontogenetic terms. Thus, the reconstruction of fictive life events in the form of a narrative does indeed provide a causal explanation, but it does so employing narrative strategies. This permits an epistemological differentiation between »real fiction« and both explanatory narration and thought experiments, at the same time effecting a marked pragmatization (through recourse to the criterion of relevance) and a heightened flexibility of narrative strategies available. If one

conceives of the combination of fictivity and narration as the source of literariness, we are ultimately confronted with a synthesis of (literary) art and science, of scientificity and literariness. Being, in the memorable phrase of Wilhelm Dilthey, a *wissenschaftliches Kunstwerk* (i.e., a »scientific« or »scholarly work of art«), »real fiction« is both: literature striving for the highest standards of scholarship – and scholarship given a literary form.

References

- Andress, Reinhard, *Protokolliteratur in der DDR. Der dokumentierte Alltag*, Bern 2000.
- Apel, Karl-Otto, *Die Erklären: Verstehen-Kontroverse in transzendental-pragmatischer Sicht*, Frankfurt a.M. 1979.
- Arnold, Heinz Ludwig/Stephan Reinhardt (Hg.), *Dokumentarliteratur*, München 1973.
- Becker, Sabine, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Bd. 1: *Die Ästhetik der neusachlichen Literatur (1920–1933)*, Köln 2000.
- Berghahn, Klaus L., Operative Ästhetik. Zur Theorie der dokumentarischen Literatur, in: Paul Michael Lützel/Egon Schwarz (Hg.), *Deutsche Literatur in der Bundesrepublik seit 1965*, Königstein 1980, 270–281.
- Bermeitinger, Christina/Markus Kiefer, Embodied concepts, in: Sabine C. Koch et al. (Hg.), *Body Memory, Metaphor and Movement*, Amsterdam 2012, 121–140.
- Biegon, Dominika/Frank Nullmeier, Narrationen über Narrationen. Stellenwert und Methodologie der Narrationsanalyse, in: Frank Gadinger/Sebastian Jarzebski/Taylan Yildiz (Hg.), *Politische Narrative. Konzepte – Analysen – Forschungspraxis*, Wiesbaden 2014, 39–65.
- Bokulich, Alisa, Distinguishing Explanatory from Nonexplanatory Fictions, *Philosophy of Science* 79:5 (2012), 725–737.
- Danto, Arthur C., *Analytische Philosophie der Geschichte*, Frankfurt a.M. 1974.
- Derbacher, Mark, *Fiktion, Konsens und Wirklichkeit. Dokumentarliteratur der Arbeitswelt in der BRD und der DDR*, Frankfurt a.M. 1995.
- Fähnders, Walter, *Avantgarde und Moderne 1890–1933*, Stuttgart 2010.
- Fetz, Bernhard, Die vielen Leben der Biographie, in: B.F./Hannes Schweiger (Hg.), *Die Biographie. Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*, Berlin 2009, 3–66.
- Fetz, Bernhard/Wilhelm Hemecker (Hg.), *Theorie der Biographie*, Berlin/New York 2011.
- Groeben, Norbert/Hans Westmeyer, *Kriterien psychologischer Forschung*, München 1981.
- Groeben, Norbert, Die metatheoretischen Merkmale einer sozialwissenschaftlichen Psychologie, in: N.G. (Hg.), *Zur Programmatik einer sozialwissenschaftlichen Psychologie*, Bd. 1: *Metatheoretische Perspektiven*, Münster 1999, 311–404.
- Groeben, Norbert, *Kreativität. Originalität diesseits des Genialen*, Darmstadt 2013.
- Harig, Maria, Beobachtungen zum historischen Sachbuch der Gegenwart, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 10:40 (1980), 82–106.
- Heinrichs, Hans-Jürgen, Dokumentarische Literatur – die Sache selbst?, in: Heinz Ludwig Arnold/Stephan Reinhardt (Hg.), *Dokumentarliteratur*, München 1973, 13–34.
- Hempel, Carl G./Paul Oppenheim, Studies in the Logic of Explanation, *Philosophy of Science* 15:2(1948), 135–175.
- Herrmann, Meike, Fiktionalität gegen den Strich lesen. Was kann die Fiktionstheorie zu einer Poetik des Sachbuchs beitragen?, *Arbeitsblätter für die Sachbuchforschung* 7 (2005), 1–22.
- Hoffmann, Dieter, *Arbeitsbuch Deutschsprachige Prosa seit 1945*, Bd. 1: *Von der Trümmerliteratur zur Dokumentarliteratur*, Tübingen 2006.
- Holdenried, Michaela, *Autobiographie*, Stuttgart 2000.
- Kehlmann, Daniel, *Die Vermessung der Welt*, Reinbek 2005.

- Klauk, Tobias, *Gedankenexperimente in der Philosophie. Eine Familie philosophischer Verfahren*, Diss. Göttingen 2007.
- Klauk, Tobias, Thought Experiments and Literature, in: Dorothee Birke/Michael Butter/Tilmann Köppe (Hg.), *Counterfactual Writing*, Berlin/New York 2011, 30–44.
- Klauk, Tobias, Is there such a Thing as Narrative Explanation?, *Journal of Literary Theory* 10:1 (2016), 110–138.
- Köppe, Tilmann/Tom Kindt, *Erzähltheorie. Eine Einführung*, Stuttgart 2014.
- Lämmert, Eberhard, *Bauformen des Erzählens*, Stuttgart 1955.
- Leitner, Gerit von, *Der Fall Immerwahr*, München 1993.
- Lorentz, Iny, *Die Wanderhure*, München 2004 ff.
- Pallowski, G. Katrin, Die dokumentarische Mode, in: Horst-Albert Glaser et al. (Hg.), *Literaturwissenschaft und Sozialwissenschaften*, Bd. 1: *Grundlagen und Modellanalysen*, Stuttgart 1971, 235–314.
- Pankau, Johannes G., *Einführung in die Literatur der Neuen Sachlichkeit*, Darmstadt 2010.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure, Toward a Definition of Narrative, in: David Herman (Hg.), *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, Cambridge 2007, 22–35.
- Salmon, Wesley C., *Four Decades of Scientific Explanation*, Minneapolis 1990.
- Scharang, Michael, Zur Technik der Dokumentation, in: Heinz Ludwig Arnold/Stephan Reinhardt (Hg.), *Dokumentarliteratur*, München 1973, 35–48.
- Schurz, Gerhard, *Erklären und Verstehen in der Wissenschaft*, München 1990.
- Stegmüller, Wolfgang, *Probleme und Resultate der Wissenschaftstheorie und Analytischen Philosophie*, Bd 1: *Erklärung und Begründung*, Berlin 1983.
- Straub, Jürgen, Geschichte erzählen, Geschichte bilden. Grundzüge einer narrativen Psychologie historischer Sinnbildung, in: J.S. (Hg.), *Erzählung, Identität und historisches Bewußtsein*, Frankfurt a.M. 1998, 81–169.
- Tippner, Anja/Christopher F. Laferl (Hg.), *Texte zur Theorie der Biographie und Autobiographie*, Ditzingen 2016.
- Tippner, Anja/Christopher F. Laferl, Einleitung, in A.T./C.F (Hg.), *Texte zur Theorie der Biographie und Autobiographie*, Ditzingen 2016, 9–41.
- Van Fraasen, Bas C., *The Scientific Image*, Oxford 1980.
- Van Fraasen, Bas C. Die Pragmatik des Erklärens: Warum-Fragen und ihre Antworten, in: Gerhard Schurz (Hg.), *Erklären und Verstehen in der Wissenschaft*, München 1990, 31–89.
- Welzer, Harald, Was ist autobiographische Wahrheit? Anmerkungen aus Sicht der Erinnerungsforschung, in: Tippner, Anja/Christopher F. Laferl (Hg.), *Texte zur Theorie der Biographie und Autobiographie*, Ditzingen 2016, 336–351.

2021-07-02

JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

Copyright © by the author. All rights reserved.

This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and JLTONline.

For other permission, please contact [JLTONline](#).

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Eva-Maria Konrad, On the History of the Practice of Fictionality – and the Recurring Problems in its Investigation.

In: JLTONline (02.07.2021)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-004517

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-004517>