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## Dynamical Experiments with Verbal, Generic, and Material Form in Literary Fiction

What do we mean when we talk about the form and the configuration of literature, when we ask questions about the relationship between content and form or when we talk about the change and the dynamics of forms in fiction? Prior to the presentation of our central argument and its analysis in recourse to different novels, namely Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759), Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), as well as J.J. Abrams' and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013), it is vital to answer these questions through defining the term 'form' in the context of literary fiction.<sup>1</sup> Only within the framework of such a definition is it possible to explain and explore what formal experiments are. This observation generates the central concern of the following sections.

### 1 Introduction: What is (literary) form?

For literary fiction, 'form' can possess three different meanings: Firstly, it refers to language, id est the verbal form of a narrative. Literary fiction can only exist in and through language – it is the mode through which its content is mediated. Therefore, in literary fictional contexts, language can only refer to itself, as Frank Zipfel explains in recourse to Saussure:

<sup>1</sup> We have consciously decided on a restriction to literary fiction because the term 'form' is realised in various manifestations within different kinds of media and the focus of our research is on its peculiarities in fictional literature.

Referenz auf die Wirklichkeit kommt in Saussures System aus zwei Gründen nicht vor: Zum einen sind das Bezeichnete und in gewisser Weise auch das Bezeichnende [...] als Vorstellungen gedacht, zum anderen folgt aus dem Prinzip der Beliebigkeit, daß die Bedeutung des Bezeichnenden sich nicht über seine Beziehung zum Bezeichneten, sondern über die Differenzrelationen innerhalb des Systems der Zeichen ergibt. [...] In dieser Konzeption scheinen sich Zeichen immer nur durch andere Zeichen zu erklären [...].<sup>2</sup>

Zipfel continues: “An der Textoberfläche sind fiktionale Texte [...] als Sachverhaltsdarstellungen zu bezeichnen, auch wenn die dargestellten Sachverhalte keine Entsprechung in der Wirklichkeit haben.”<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, form references the specific characteristics of different *genres*.<sup>4</sup> Literary fiction takes its shape not only in language and a given verbal style, but also in other ways that differ in length, content, and other genre-specific characteristics. Literary fiction usually

<sup>2</sup> Frank Zipfel: *Fiktion, Fiktivität, Fiktionalität. Analysen zur Fiktion in der Literatur und zum Fiktionsbegriff in der Literaturwissenschaft*, Berlin 2001, pp. 51–52. Quotations in German will be translated into English and presented in footnotes henceforth: “Reference to reality does not occur in the Saussurean system for two reasons: On the one hand, the signifier and, in some way, also the signified are thought of as conceptions. On the other hand, the principle of arbitrariness determines that the meaning of the signified does not result from its relationship to the signifier, but from its relation of difference within the system of signs. [...] In this conception, signs are always only determined through other signs [...]”

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57. “On the textual surface, fictional texts are [...] to be designated as exposition of the facts although the described facts do not have any correlation in reality.”

<sup>4</sup> In the context of our paper, ‘genre’ is to be understood not only as the main literary genres, but also as their various sub-genres. René Wellek and Austin Warren’s definition of genre is therefore appropriate in the context of our study: “Genre should be conceived [...] as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific metre or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose – more crudely, subject and audience).” René Wellek/Austin Warren: *Theory of Literature*, New York <sup>2</sup>1956, p. 221. Our paper focuses on outer form, while inner form is engaged with where appropriate.

takes the shape of a specific genre in order to be comprehensible. This recognisability of generic characteristics is important since during their readerly socialisation, recipients have learned about and familiarised themselves with various genres and what to expect from them in the reception process. Recipients therefore approach texts of various genres in a specific attitude of expectations; they expect different forms depending on whether they read a lyrical, a dramatic or an epic text. On a smaller scale, these expectations also differ depending on whether a novel or a short story is being read. This not only concerns the outer presentation either in form of stanzas and verses, dramatic dialogues or longer narrative texts, but also the content of the respective text. Readers have different expectations toward, for example, a romantic novel than toward a *Künstlerroman* because of their experience with literature.

Thirdly, form also refers to the *material shape* of literary fiction. It is thereby frequently used synonymously with form in the sense of ‘the shape of books.’

The term ‘form’ hence not only denotes the style of literary fiction, but also the conventions of different genres and the material configuration of a narrative. All three types of form have different functions, but all are necessary for fiction to be intelligible: style allows for verbal comprehension, generic characteristics allow for a tested and practiced engagement with literature, and materiality and mediality grant tangibility (also in the metaphorical sense of the word).

These preliminary considerations allow us to argue that all formal experiments can also realise themselves in three different variations: as stylistic changes, as a play with generic elements by breaking with conventional forms, and as a ludic engagement with the material conventions of fiction.

These playful changes of fictional forms are, essentially, variations of breaking with conventionalised norms, whereby form is inherently characterised as variable and dynamical because form, in all three variations of the term, has never stayed unchanged during the history of literary fiction. Style – as the first variation of the term ‘form’ – is never static, neither throughout the history of literary fiction nor within an author’s oeuvre or even one text. ‘Form’ in the

sense of language is per definitionem dynamical and in a continuous mode of change. The reason for this is that, on the one hand, the style of different authors is varied, and, on the other hand, authors can change their style constantly and ultimately styles can be representative of a specific era in literary history. Furthermore, the verbal form of a narrative changes in conjunction with the two other meanings of the term 'form.' However, genres are also subject to continuous change, wherefore they pose an enormous challenge for their area of research. This issue is expressed in Rüdiger Zymner's conclusion that genres are something made and not something given.<sup>5</sup> This idea is not only applicable to textual sub-genres such as the ballad, which cannot be unequivocally assigned to one of the three primary genres and which hence per se crosses generic boundaries. Rather, it also concerns the literary-historical change of genres like the novel, which unites an abundance of various texts, but also sub-genres like autofiction and the 'roman à clef,' which both cross the border between non-fiction and fiction. Finally, the materiality of literature changes as well – from parchment to the 'traditionally' printed book to those that only exist as virtual texts online.

These expositions lead to an observation: The three variations of the term 'form' are not flexible and dynamical to the same extent. While language and style often underlie rapid changes in individual cases, genres change over longer periods of time, while material changes can often only be observed throughout centuries and change at the slowest rate. The reason for this slower pace has to do with technological developments, such as the invention of the printing press and, more recently, the evolution of hypertextuality brought about by the world wide web as well as new, variable printing techniques. This claim holds true at least for material changes in previous centuries, yet nowadays more rapid (and radical) changes can be observed. Hence, the reason why changes in material form are

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rüdiger Zymner: *Zur Gattungstheorie des 'Handbuches', zur Theorie der Gattungstheorie und zum „Handbuch Gattungstheorie.“ Eine Einführung*, in: Rüdiger Zymner (ed.): *Handbuch Gattungstheorie*, Stuttgart/Weimar 2010, pp. 1–5, p. 4. Similar difficulties are emphasised throughout the study of genres. For a detailed discussion, cf. *ibid.*, p. 3.

much slower in comparison to those that occur with regards to verbal and generic forms is that changes concerning materiality are strongly bound to text-external developments.

Although this results in a deferral of established and hence static forms, such forms, which are artistic modes of expression, also always imply a dynamical process of shaping literary-fictional narratives. That is to say, any modification of form (in all three meanings of the term as defined above) always also creates form, albeit in a new and yet unprecedented mode. Formal changes are thus an integral part of the development of literature.

## 2 Hypothesis

As our analysis will show, these variations of fictional form as such as well as its characteristic of being an inherently dynamical process are not only possible but actually central and even necessary for the evolution of literary fiction. Experiments with form in literature (and in other art forms) have a long history. Even more so: The history of literature can be described as a dialectical process, which is constituted by an alternation between normativity and reflexivity, id est the change of norms. This idea bears a long tradition: Formalism and Structuralism, for example, have referred to this process by other terms, such as ‘defamiliarisation’ (Shklovsky). Accordingly, Shklovsky describes changes in literature with the term ‘art as technique’:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Victor Shklovsky: *Russian Formalist Criticism. Four Essays*, translated by Lee T. Lemon/Marion J. Reis, Lincoln/London 1965, p. 12. Original emphasis.

By doing so, a specific work of literary fiction becomes part of the canon: “The range of poetic (artistic) work extends from the sensory to the cognitive [...]. Art removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways.”<sup>7</sup> The term ‘defamiliarisation,’ which is only named here as an example because many other comparable terms exist, is connected to today’s commonly used criteria for the judgement of literature, such as polyvalence, complexity, deviation or a break with norms, respectively originality and innovation or development.<sup>8</sup>

This raises the question whether or not there is an invariable aspect to literary fiction that extends the three meanings of ‘form’ as elaborated above as well as what (or even if there) is a constant in literary fiction or if the three variations of the term ‘form’ are the only components of fiction. How can literary fiction be graspable if these three variations are indeed dynamical because they have to change for literary fiction to be perceived received as such and to develop?

In order for form to develop dynamically – and this generates the first part of our hypothesis –, it is essential that the fictional pact is still fulfilled. We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

Fiction is defined by one static component: the fictional pact. Besides this essential pact, fiction is determined by norms,<sup>9</sup> which not only can but have to change for fiction to evolve. The fictional pact is an abstract, unalterable constant, but since there are numerous alterable norms, fiction can assume a multitudinousness of forms without the recipient losing the ability to understand these texts (as fiction).

The fictional pact is defined by Wayne C. Booth as the “secret communion of the author and reader behind the narrator’s back”<sup>10</sup> that is entered in every reading of a fictional text. Booth holds that

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 12–13.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Renate von Heydebrand/Simone Winko: *Einführung in die Wertung von Literatur. Systematik – Geschichte – Legitimation*, München et al. 1996, pp. 116–123.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Norms’ are understood here as regulations that are followed conventionally, yet at the same time they are broken quite regularly. Norms are consequently changeable variables, whose presence is essential to determine underlying ‘rules’ of literature, yet which also need to be flexible.

<sup>10</sup> Wayne C. Booth: *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago 1961, p. 300.

[o]ur entire experience in reading fiction is based [...] on a tacit contract with the novelist, a contract granting him the right to know what he is writing about. It is this contract which makes fiction possible. To deny it would not only destroy all fiction, but all literature [...].<sup>11</sup>

That is to say, recipients are entirely aware that they are faced with invented stories, yet they ignore this knowledge in order to take part in the fiction. Or, in Patricia Waugh's words: "Of course we *know* that what we are reading is not 'real,' but we suppress the knowledge in order to increase our enjoyment."<sup>12</sup> For Werner Wolf, this implies that *Distanz* (distance) and *Partizipation* (participation) occur simultaneously. Distance denotes the idea that readers are aware of the difference between fact and fiction. Participation, on the other hand, denotes the reader's willingness to partake in the fictional illusion.<sup>13</sup> This means that, in the context of the fictional pact, readers move distance into the background for the sake of participation. It also means that without the fictional pact, fictions and the process of creating fictional illusion during the reception would not be successful, as Zipfel explains:

Der Autor produziert einen Erzähl-Text nicht-wirklichen Inhalts mit der [...] Intention, daß der Rezipient diesen Text mit der Haltung des *make-believe* aufnimmt, und der Rezipient erkennt diese Absicht des Autors und läßt sich aus diesem Grund darauf ein, den Erzähl-Text unter den Bedingungen eines *make-believe*-Spiels zu lesen.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 52–53.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Waugh: *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London 1984, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Werner Wolf: *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst. Theorie und Geschichte mit Schwerpunkt auf englischem illusionsstörenden Erzählen*, Tübingen 1993, p. 31–44.

<sup>14</sup> Zipfel: *Fiktion, Fiktivität, Fiktionalität*, op. cit., p. 281. Original emphasis. "The author produces a narrative text with non-real content with the intention that the reader receives this text with the attitude of *make-believe*, and the recipient realises the author's intention and hence agrees to read the narrative text within the conditions of a *make-believe* game." Original emphasis.

This pact, however, is very abstract: It is a contract between the two abstract entities ‘author’ and ‘reader’ that is not legally binding but belongs to a conscious or unconscious behavioural repertoire of the members of a community.<sup>15</sup> It persists tacitly and is almost implicitly learned in the context of the acquisition of a competence in engaging with fiction. At the same time, the fictional pact does not condition *how* fictions can or have to fulfil it, id est it does not determine other (formal) fictional norms:

Die Regeln der kulturellen Praxis Fiktion legen nur die allgemeinen Bedingungen des Fiktionsvertrags fest; die spezifischen Realisierungen dieser Bedingungen können für verschiedene Vertragssorten [...] unterschiedlich ausfallen. [...] Die Realisierungsmöglichkeiten von Fiktionsverträgen sind äußerst vielfältig. Der weite Bereich der Möglichkeiten ist zudem an seinen Rändern porös.<sup>16</sup>

Fiction may be bound to stylistic or generic norms or norms regarding the ways in which to present fiction materially. The difference between the fictional pact and these norms is that the latter are dynamical, while the former is not. The fictional pact is irrevocable,<sup>17</sup> while form is generated by alterable norms since it is possible to bend the rules of practice quite far and even to play with them to a certain degree.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284. “The rules of the cultural practice fiction only determine the general conditions of the fictional pact; the specific realisations of these conditions can be various in accordance to the different kinds of contracts. [...] The possibilities for realising fictional contracts are manifold. Furthermore, the vast field of possibilities is porous at its margins.”

<sup>17</sup> This statement might be contested since the boundaries between fact and fiction are somewhat unstable, which finds expression in literary genres such as autofiction and the *roman à clef*. Yet, the game opened by such texts only works because they are initially perceived as fictions – mostly because of the obligatory genre declaration on the cover – and its allocation is only questioned within the diegesis (which may already include the paratext).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Zipfel: *Fiktion, Fiktivität, Fiktionalität*, op. cit., p. 285.

In this context, reflexivity becomes a crucial mode since it leads to changes in fictional forms, breaks open the system of fictional literature from within itself, and subverts established conventions. Reflexivity is thus an inherent component of literary fiction as a system (as well as in any other art form). It leads to epochal changes, which allow us retrospectively to define sundry historical movements. In other words, besides the fictional pact, reflexivity is the only other constant of literature – and it shares with the former that both are abstract. Reflexivity thereby not only concerns topics engaged with within fiction and how they are presented, but also how these recurring topics are addressed formally in a deviation from older modes.

This ludic interrelationship, in which reflexivity results in norms that can subsequently be broken by reflexivity, is constitutive for fiction, particularly regarding form. Fiction has to be alterable in order to develop, which is why (formal) changes are an inherent component of fiction. The necessity for a dynamical development of fiction can solely be guaranteed through (formal) experiments.<sup>19</sup>

This allows us to argue that a self-reflexive engagement and the (potential) alteration of form lead to new norms through deviating from old ones. Therefore, we have to expand our hypothesis: *Besides the fictional pact, reflexivity is the only other additional constant of fiction.*

Not only the history of fiction, but also the way we perceive of it as a cultural good in the sense of its valorisation in the literary canon illustrates this hypothesis. Even more so, the canon contains, amongst others, fictional works that explore the boundaries of conventions – their experiments with form or discourses are the very reason why they are part of the canon.

The literary canon is a collection of works that are considered exceptional for a specific culture or sub-culture and hence possess a normative status in literary history. An experimental style that critically engages with normativity is thereby one of the features shared

<sup>19</sup> In the context of our research, only works that conduct formal experiments are relevant. This should not imply, however, that content-thematic or discursive reflexions are equally central for the development of literature.

by many canonical works. As Harold Bloom argues, “[g]reat styles are sufficient for canonicity because they possess the power of contamination, and contamination is the pragmatic test for canon formation.”<sup>20</sup> This ‘contamination,’ however, is not negatively connoted, but refers to a mode of going against a certain norm, of abandoning it, of replacing it with something else. It is an infiltration of the new into the already known. For Bloom, thus, works can only be canonical if they critically engage with the style of their predecessors. This style can be rendered in the topics thematised in a given text and how they are approached; or it refers to the formal configuration of a text, which is particularly interesting in the context of our research. In the discussion below, however, we solely focus on canonical texts that break formal norms.

The following three sections test our proposed hypothesis, namely that the fictional pact and reflexivity are the only constants necessary for literature to be perceived as such, while other normative aspects, especially formal ones, are dynamical. This interrelationship between normativity and reflexivity as well as the impact it has on the fictional pact are now researched with recourse to the three definitions of form as proposed above: verbal form, generic form, and material form. Each section draws on fictional narratives from varying literary epochs and written by different authors. They share that they (often radically) employ a moment of formal reflexivity to question normativity. In order to monitor the development of the three meanings of form over time, we take an eighteenth-century text as our reference point, which frequently has been discussed as a prime example for an engagement with its status as an artefact: Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. As our textual analysis below will illustrate, this novel is a prominent historical example of a text that plays with formal norms on all levels in a highly sophisticated mode and has been characterised by Wolfgang Iser as “an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination.”<sup>21</sup> This text is analysed in the three parts

<sup>20</sup> Harold Bloom: *The Western Canon. The Book and School of the Ages*, New York/San Diego/London 1994, p. 523.

<sup>21</sup> Wolfgang Iser: *The Implied Reader. Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, Baltimore 1974, p. 275.

below and the textual analyses of the other works is conducted in dialogic recourse to this work.

The first section considers verbal forms, id est how and through which devices a narrative communicates its content. After the analysis of our historical example, Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* will be engaged with in more detail. The different modes with which these two works overtly and covertly engage with verbal form in fictional literature allows us to discuss verbal form and the changes thereof from a variety of perspectives in order to research the relationship between the fictional pact, normativity, and reflexivity.

The second sub-chapter engages with works that question generic forms, particularly the novel. Intermediality and trans-generic intertextuality are thereby potent modes to unveil the normative mechanisms of individual genres and to test the boundaries of a specific genre. Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, which will contrast the analysis of genre in *Tristram Shandy*, is marked by mixed-genre utilisation to the effect that it raises questions regarding the normativity of generic forms, while simultaneously allowing its readers to enter the fictional pact.

The final part of the textual analysis is concerned with materiality. As has been argued above, books traditionally follow specific characteristics of presentation, such as black letters on bound white paper. Abrams and Dorst's *S.* radically breaks with the idea of the closed space of the book by adding additional planes of communication within the book itself, but also reaches out towards a materially disconnected fictive world and the reality of the reader, which are both only possible in today's digital and hypertextual world. These four texts thus call the conventional presentation of literature into question by profoundly undermining it.

## 2.1 Verbal Form

The verbal form utilised in *Tristram Shandy* is marked by a large degree of self-consciousness in the form of incomplete or elliptical sentences, pauses, and colloquialisms to the effect that literary realism in the general sense of the term is undermined while, paradoxically, a simultaneous increase in the language's authenticity is generated.

That is to say, while the novel breaks with the dominant verbal form, its language is actually more authentic. But Tristram, the text's narrator, does more than simply undoing the predominant verbal form: he consciously engages with it in recourse to philosophical research in language. The reason for this is that the linguistic discourse is a kind of remedy for Tristram, who is affected by "a thousand weaknesses both of body and mind, which no skill of the physician or the philosopher could ever afterwards have set thoroughly to rights."<sup>22</sup> His verbal form is not one that creates a fictive world in whose make-believe any reader can easily partake but one that over and over again emphasises its existence in and as language.

The centrality of the reader in the reflexivity regarding verbal form becomes particularly apparent in the dialogic nature of Tristram's speech. For D.R. Elloway, the narrator "plays on his reader's attitudes and assumptions by using deliberately self-conscious rhetoric which continually gives itself away to show the reader how his own mind has been working as it has been influenced by rhetorical innuendo."<sup>23</sup> One such kind of highly self-reflexive allusions to the dynamics of the verbal form are instances in which Tristram references the artefactuality of the text. An example is the discussion of the reading time in phrases such as "[i]t is about an hour and a half's tolerable good reading since my uncle *Toby* rung the bell"<sup>24</sup> or "[w]e are now going to enter upon a new scene of events,"<sup>25</sup> with which Tristram introduces shifts in the storyline. With recourse to Wolf's notion of distance and participation, such phrases would instigate a change from the acceptance of the playful make-believe established through the fictive world towards a rejection of this willingness. However, what the narrator in *Tristram Shandy* actually achieves with self-reflexive comments like these is that the normativity regarding the illusion-breaking potential of (formal) reflexivity is su-

<sup>22</sup> Laurence Sterne: *The Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, London 2013, vol. 1, ch. 2, pp. 3–4.

<sup>23</sup> D.R. Elloway: *Locke's Ideas in Tristram Shandy*, in: *Essays in Criticism* 6.3 (1956), pp. 326–334, p. 327.

<sup>24</sup> Sterne: *Tristram Shandy*, op. cit., vol. 1, ch. 33, p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, ch. 95, p. 221.

perannuated. In other words, while calling the normativity regarding the thematisation of the artefactual nature of the text into question is certainly a highly self-conscious device, the fictional pact is nevertheless intact due to the admission that the text presents an invented world, which is clearly recognisable by the reader.

(Self-)reflexivity regarding verbal forms has become a normalised literary mode in works that follow *Tristram Shandy*, but it is nevertheless still a potent device to reflect upon normativity. One work, in which self-consciousness regarding the dynamics of the verbal form is a particularly strong characteristic, is Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. The novel is narrated in first person by Alex – a rebellious young man, who is fascinated by a brutish violence and talks about it in a highly descriptive and direct fashion. In order to authentically construct Alex's eerie, yet fascinating worldview, language becomes a tool with which not only to communicate a content, but to actually appropriate it to the narrator: 'Nadsat' is born. The language, which is only used by Alex and his gang, consists of "[o]dd bits of old rhyming slang, a bit of gypsy talk too. But most of the roots are Slav,"<sup>26</sup> as the doctors 'treating' Alex remark. The Nadsat words, which make up approximately five per cent of the whole book, are not intended to be referenced in a glossary because, as Michael Adams notes, "[t]he reader was to experience a little of what Alex is subjected to in the conditioning that is applied to him."<sup>27</sup> *A Clockwork Orange*, then, utilises a language system that the reader has yet to learn in the process of reading the story. The following passage, in which Alex describes how he and his friends gang-rape a woman in her house, shall help to illustrate this claim:

So he did the strong-man on the devotchka, who was still creech creech creeching away in very horrorshow four-in-a-bar, locking her

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Burgess: *A Clockwork Orange*, London 1996, p. 86.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Adams: *From Elvish to Klingon. Exploring Invented Language*, Oxford 2011, p. 67; Stanley Edgar Hyman: *Nadsat Dictionary. Reprinted from the Novel A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess*, in: soomka.com, July 1963, <https://soomka.com/nadsat.html> (last accessed 02.05.2018).

rookers from the back, while I ripped away at this and that and the other, the others going haw haw haw still, and real good horrorshow groodies they were that then exhibited their pink glazzies, O my brothers, while I untrussed and got ready for the plunge.<sup>28</sup>

In a first step, a difference has to be made between Nadsat words and other linguistic elements, which deviate from standardised written language, but which are vicarious of spoken language. The “creech creech creeching” as well as the “haw haw haw” are not Nadsat terms, but they are onomatopoeic, putting into words the sounds made by the woman and by Alex’s friends. They hence form the “rhyming slang” as described in the passage above, while simultaneously being strongly reminiscent of Cockney phonetics. This has the effect that the expected verbal form of the written discourse is undermined in favour of a more intermediate use of language in this personalised account by Alex. To return to Nadsat, it becomes apparent that its terms mostly originate from Russian. ‘Devotchka’ renders Russian ‘dévochka,’ meaning ‘girl;’ ‘horrorshow’ is based on Russian ‘khoroshó’ (‘well,’ ‘good’); ‘rookers,’ from Russian ‘ruka,’ means ‘hand;’ ‘groodies’ resembles Russian ‘grud’ (‘breast’); and ‘glazzies’ is influenced by Russian ‘glaz,’ meaning ‘eyes,’ but it is also used for ‘nipples’ (as in this scene).<sup>29</sup>

The effect of using Nadsat instead of standard English words in the passage quoted above is to position Alex and his gang as a counter-culture, yet not only based on their actions that oppose the law, but particularly through their use of language. Even more so, the dynamics of verbal form in literature are overtly and radically laid bare because Burgess situates his story in a timeless frame that is not bound to a specific geographical location. Rather than using slang terms of Burgess’s Manchester in the 1960s, this translocation has the effect that language becomes a tool to undermine any notion of a specific time and space and instead to show what can be done with it. Unlike Sterne, who alters the then-normalised register and syntax of his novel, Burgess radicalises his use of language by extending

<sup>28</sup> Burgess: *A Clockwork Orange*, op. cit., pp. 19–20.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Adams: *From Elvish to Klingon*, op. cit., p. 68.

his lexis with invented words. These are, however, influenced by yet another real language with the consequence that a fictive story-world only exists in and as language is foregrounded, while simultaneously keeping the fictional pact intact.

## 2.2 *Generic Form*

Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* breaks with the dominant genre-specific novelistic conventions of its time on numerous levels, but the focus here is on the temporal sequentiality of the narrative structure since it so radically puts into practice the dynamics of generic forms. The eighteenth-century novel is marked by a strong realist framework, which is rendered in a plotting from beginning, to middle, and finally to end.<sup>30</sup> This traditional narrative progress is typical for the eighteenth-century novel, which sees the hero's birth as a natural starting point that need not be discussed any further.<sup>31</sup> For *Tristram*, however, the chance versus the teleology of his conception is of more interest than his life's actual beginning. The effect is that his narrative stance not only provides a deviation from tradition, but also enables a critical look onto it.

What *Tristram* achieves with his unconventional temporality is that he actually makes his readers aware of the world-creating potential of the linguistic system, which is mirrored in Enlightenment's philosophical engagement with language. This is particularly evident in John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1689), which was to become the central influence on English empiricism due to its focus on philosophy of language and the mind, metaphysics, and epistemology.<sup>32</sup> Locke's key argument is that human

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Iser: *Laurence Sterne. Tristram Shandy*, translated by David Henry Wilson, Cambridge 1988, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> The hero's heritage is discussed in works in which it forms a central theme of the narrative, such as in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), in which Tom's assumed inferior birth is later revealed as actually being noble.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. E.J. Lowe: *Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London 1995, p. 4.

beings are born with a blank mind, which is later filled by experience. This blank slate – the beginning of every human rationality – also forms the actual beginning of *Tristram Shandy*:

[Y]ou may take my word, that nine parts in ten of a man's sense or his nonsense, his successes and miscarriages in this world, depend upon their motions and activity, and the different tracts and trains you put them into, so that when they are once set a-going, whether right or wrong, 'tis not a half-penny matter, – away they go clattering like hey-go mad; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk, which, when they are once used to, the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it.<sup>33</sup>

Tristram's own beginning is thus the beginning of humanity in general: The vessel to be filled with experience and expressed in language. But it is also the beginning of a new consciousness in literature, which negotiates the value of beginnings and, on a larger scale, also generic conventions. Yet, his interest in the teleology of his being and the realisation that it is actually grounded in chance (and accidents) has the effect that the generic convention of the hero with a clear purpose in life, which was programmatic for the eighteenth-century novel, has been abandoned. For Iser,

[...] Tristram is without a function. Instead of demonstrating something, he himself becomes the object of scrutiny, thus causing a shift in the narrative tradition by opening up hitherto unexplored realms: the hero, having lost his various traditional functions, is now set free to become a subject in his own right; and being thrown back upon himself, as it were, he begins to discover himself in all his difficult complexity.<sup>34</sup>

The traditional eighteenth-century novelistic hero was schematised and often even archetypal. *Tristram Shandy*, however, breaks with this presentation: its central character is undoubtedly the hero of the

<sup>33</sup> Sterne: *Tristram Shandy*, op. cit., vol. 1, ch. 1, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Iser: *Laurence Sterne*, op. cit., p. 3.

story, yet his actions do not follow a teleological pattern. This deviation from the convention constitutes a break with the normalised generic form with the consequence that the effects of this new mode of presentation are tested in the process of generating them.

Arguably, the narrative mode of criticising generic forms from within the narrative has subsequently been normalised in the self-reflexive literature that followed *Tristram Shandy*. What is still in a dynamical process, however, are the different modes with which this critical self-consciousness regarding generic forms is generated. In order to illustrate this process over time, *Tristram Shandy* will now be compared to a post-modern text: Nabokov's *Pale Fire*.

*Pale Fire* combines various genres in one book. After an introduction by the fictive literary critic and academic Charles Kinbote, who claims to be the author of the book, a 999-line poem entitled 'Pale Fire,' written by the fictive poet John Shade, is presented. Following this, Kinbote, who is also Shade's neighbour, claims to present a critical analysis of Shade's poem. However, what soon becomes apparent is that Kinbote's interest does not centrally lie with the textual interpretation, but with the history and current political affairs of his home country, Zembla (apparently only existing in his mind), as well as his own personal concerns. The poem and the critical analysis hence share an autobiographical component, in the first instance in reference to Shade's life and in the second with regard to Kinbote. In the final pages of *Pale Fire*, an index is presented, which contains descriptions of characters figuring in the narrative, places, items, and concepts; these entries direct the reader to the given pages in Kinbote's critical discussion and the poem.

Each of these four sections of the book utilises the characteristics of the genre it is written in. The introduction is marked by a highly non-fictional and detailed tone, which does not vary much from authentic introductions to critical editions of poems apart from the strong presence of its author and his subjective views. Kinbote even explicitly comments on this conventionality, but also invites his readers to deviate from it:

Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, re-reading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture.<sup>35</sup>

The self-aware engagement with the conventions of critical analyses serves a twofold purpose: on the one hand, it draws attention to an accustomed mode of presentation and, thus, to the fact that the text is written by an author, namely Charles Kinbote, who self-consciously signs the introduction (again, in accordance with the expected convention). On the other hand, it also serves Kinbote's valorisation as the alleged author of the book, which breaks with the convention of the rather secondary status of the critic in comparison to the author of the text to be criticised. This ironic break with the conventions of introductions to academic texts has the effect that the appreciation of the whole text's status – namely that of a fictional narrative – is supported since it is contrasted to the alleged status.<sup>36</sup>

Following the introduction, the novel presents the primary text to its reader. The poem 'Pale Fire,' which consists of four cantos containing rhyming couplets in stanzas of varying length, has an autobiographical content. The first canto is concerned with nature and the supernatural, the second one with Hazel's (Shade's daughter's) suicide and the impact it has had on the family, the third dwells on questions regarding life after death, and the fourth canto concludes with a reflection on creative endeavours in day-to-day life. Thus, neither the form nor the content of the poem deviate much from conventions associated with poetry in the broader sense. What is notable, however, is the poem's relationship to the other sections of the book as well as the novel *Pale Fire* in itself. By constituting a difference to the other genres and the actual genre of the book, *id est* a novel,

<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Nabokov: *Pale Fire*, London 2011, pp. 22–23.

<sup>36</sup> The index at the end of the book, on the other hand, mainly follows conventions of indices, such as short definitions of the given term, stating the page number where this word can be found in the main text, and cross-references to other entries.

the peculiarities of poetry become apparent: its rhymes, extensive metaphors, and imagery.

This claim is further supported by the fact that Kinbote discusses these characteristics of the poem in his critical analysis. It certainly constitutes the most conspicuous deviation from the conventionalised and, hence, expected form of a critical reading of a poem. The reason for this is that it only marginally engages with the poem itself and overtly misinterprets stanzas in order to appropriate them to the story Kinbote actually wants to tell: the history of Zembla and its king Charles the Beloved. It thus contains three storylines: Shade's life and the connected analysis of the poem, Kinbote's life and the adventures he experiences, and the latter's attempt to track down Gradus, the alleged king's designated assassinator. The images presented in these three narratives resemble each other to the effect that the stories themselves increasingly blend. The fictionality of these three narrative threads is further emphasised by the fact that Kinbote's insanity generates unreliability with regard to the act of narration. Additionally, Kinbote often overtly discusses similarities between himself and King Charles, such as in the following example: "All brown-bearded, apple-cheeked, blue-eyed Zemblans look alike, and I who have not shaved now for a year, resemble my disguised king [...]."<sup>37</sup> This resemblance is further doubled because Kinbote, as argued by Brian Boyd, is also the "mirror-inversion"<sup>38</sup> of Shade. Blending the three characters of Kinbote, Shade, and King Charles into one further has the effect that the three narrative levels (the introduction, the poem, and the critical analysis) also merge to the consequence that the difference between the three genres is partly nullified. The connection between these three genres is further rendered in the overarching genre of the text: the novel. Although the narrative actually contains genres different from the fictional narrative, it is nevertheless read as such. The reason for this is that all of them are combined in a fiction written by Vladimir Nabokov. Despite the fact that the different

<sup>37</sup> Nabokov: *Pale Fire*, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Boyd: *Nabokov's Pale Fire. The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, Princeton 1999, p. 123.

genres presented in the book do not necessarily require entering the fictional pact, readers are nevertheless invited to do so because its overall genre is fiction.

As the analyses of generic form in *Tristram Shandy* and *Pale Fire* have illustrated, breaks with and deviations from conventionalised modes of presentation in accordance to generic characteristics constitute a critical awareness thereof. They simultaneously illustrate that genres are not clearly defined categorical concepts, but that they develop and alter due to a critical engagement with them. Generic form is thus per definitionem dynamical and open to changes.

### 2.3 *Material Form*

The final category, namely material form, is analysed again first by researching it with recourse to *Tristram Shandy*, which is followed by an in-depth engagement with material form in Abrams and Dorst's *S*. Broadly speaking, the idea of materiality mainly concerns typography in the context of Sterne's work. The reason for this is that it has been published in the eighteenth century, when material experiments in printing were rather limited due to the then-available printing technology. Nevertheless, experiments with the material presentation of the book have a long tradition.<sup>39</sup>

The second mode, namely allusions to the book's materiality and its status as an artefact, has to be researched in connection to reader-involvement because the narrator consciously establishes the implied reader as a listener, who pays attention to his story. Very often, this be-

<sup>39</sup> According to Christina Lupton, "[b]ook history and literary formalism have traditionally had very different objects in mind: one, the shapes made by inscription technologies, and the other, those made by language; one, the reading and reception of texts, and the other, their content. And yet both grant literature a dynamic that makes it possible to conceive of language as part of a larger physical or linguistic environment." Christina Lupton: *Contingency, Codex, the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, in: *ELH* 81.4 (2014), pp. 1173–1192, p. 1173. While the focus of critical engagement with literature largely lies on the latter two aspects of each pair, we want to focus on the first and how they are realised in *Tristram Shandy*.

comes apparent in scenes where Tristram adds an addendum to earlier sections, such as in the following chapter-beginning:

I have dropped the curtain over this scene for a minute – to remind you of one thing, – and to inform you of another.

What I have to inform you, comes, I own, a little out of its due course;—for it should have been told a hundred and fifty pages ago, but that I foresaw then ’twould come in pat hereafter, and be of more advantage here than elsewhere.—Writers had need look before them, to keep up the spirit and connection of what they have in hand.<sup>40</sup>

In this scene, the materiality of the book at hand is explicitly shown in two ways. Firstly, because the reader is addressed in the form of ‘you.’ Tristram thereby suggests that somebody is reading his story, somebody who has followed his narrative to this point, but who also has an interest that content-related blanks, of which they may or may not be aware, are filled by the narrator. Secondly, the narrator also overtly positions the story as a written text by commenting on what he failed to do “a hundred and fifty pages ago” and by employing theatre-specific language when talking about “dropp[ing] the curtain.” Sterne therefore metaphorically breaks with the sequentiality of the bound book by inviting his readers to skim back to the mentioned pages and look up the ‘scene’ alluded to. In this sense, he calls the normativity of the linear narration as dictated by the binding of books into question, while simultaneously emphasising that this material linearity has to be recognised as different from the narratological linearity, which is grounded in the narrative structure of the text, id est the chronological sequence in which a story is told. In Christina Lupton’s words, this means that “for the possibility of non-linear reading to arise at all, *Tristram Shandy* must first be seen as a book with a certain number of contiguously bound pages.”<sup>41</sup> The digressions strengthen the idea that the book has been facilitated as a defined environment, in which a world of its own has been created and which

<sup>40</sup> Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, op. cit., vol. 1, ch. 44, p. 160.

<sup>41</sup> Lupton: *Contingency, Codex, the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, op. cit., p. 1180.

the reader can access by navigating through its pages. That is to say, *Tristram Shandy* signposts the dynamical moment of material form through emphasising the narrative's materiality and its status as an artefact.

The next section focuses on the ludic, but critical engagement with material form in Abrams and Dorst's *S*. This novel radically breaks with conventionalised literary form on various levels, for which reason its formal characteristics have to be illustrated prior to a detailed analysis of its experimental nature.<sup>42</sup>

The outer appearance of *S* already differs from conventionally presented novels due to its ludic engagement with material form. The slipcase, on which a big 'S' is shown, names the novel's authors – Abrams and Dorst – only on a small, removable badge that has to be broken like a signet in order for the reader to be granted access to the book. This slipcase, however, contains a book with a different title and a different author: 'Ship of Theseus,' written by the fictive author V.M. Straka. This formal device already prepares the reader for the doubled narrative levels to be encountered within the book: the novel 'Ship of Theseus' written by the fictive author V.M. Straka and a dialogue between the two students Jen and Eric, which is to be found in the margins of Straka's novel. Furthermore, *S* contains numerous artefacts, which are not materially connected to the book, such as letters, maps, or postcards.

Within the fictional reality of *S*, 'Ship of Theseus' has been translated by the fictive F.X. Caldeira, who also penned the foreword. This pseudo-translator<sup>43</sup> has added footnotes to Straka's text, yet they do not primarily fulfil the function to provide elucidations on the text, but are used as a one-sided mode of communication between Caldei-

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Ilona Mader/Regina Seiwald: *Im Spannungsfeld von Tradition und Erneuerung. Wie J.J. Abrams' und Doug Dorst's S. den Leser auf Reisen schickt*, in: Hajo Diekmannshenke/Stefan Neuhaus/Uta Schaffers (eds.): *(Off) The Beaten Track. Normierungen und Kanonisierungen des Reisens*, Würzburg 2018, pp. 443–464, pp. 445–447.

<sup>43</sup> Mader defines pseudo-translations as texts that are presented as translations, while the assumed original text does not exist. Cf. Ilona Mader: *Metafiktionalität als Selbst-Dekonstruktion*, Würzburg 2017, p. 295.

ra and Straka. They contain a code, whose encryption becomes one of Jen and Eric's central concerns. Although Caldeira's editorship does not generate a separate narrative level, it nevertheless forms an additional narrative string, which stands in opposition to the actions in 'Ship of Theseus' and is thus located on the same level as the dialogue between Jen and Eric.

As this brief description has already indicated, *S.* utilises various formal experiments, which radically break with traditional conventions, and that are frequently constituted by explorations how and to what effect the static materiality of the novel as a genre can be altered and appropriated to its dynamical content. Alterations in the presentation of a text unavoidably also influence the reception process. In *S.*, this becomes particularly evident considering the fact that it cannot be read in a linear mode: a formal order, which the reader can follow in the reception, is not present in *S.*<sup>44</sup> The reader has to decide on one of the following processes, yet can alternate between them at any time: Either one page of 'Ship of Theseus' including the dialogue in the marginalia as well as possible artefacts and footnotes are read; or readers decide on a temporarily transposed reception mode, meaning that they, for example, begin with 'Ship of Theseus' followed by the dialogue and finally the artefacts and footnotes. In both cases it becomes apparent that *S.* breaks with the conventional reception mode due to its distinguished material conception to such an extreme degree that readers have to get used to this new mode and learn how to read this book in the process of reading it.<sup>45</sup>

The spatial jumps between the narrative thread of the marginalia and the story presented in form of 'Ship of Theseus' are complemented by a temporal component if the differing temporalities of the various fictional realities are considered.<sup>46</sup> That is to say, the individual parts of the dialogue are written down at different points in time within the fictional reality of the marginalia. On the one hand, this becomes apparent in the different colours of the pens used to write the

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Mader/Seiwald: *Im Spannungsfeld von Tradition und Erneuerung*, op. cit., p. 451.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 459–460.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 460.

dialogue parts, on the other hand they also contain foreshadowings to aspects that only appear later in the narrative. In addition to that, the quest for Straka's authorship and the secret order behind the 'S' that is initiated by Jen and Eric in the marginalia is continued online. On twitter, fans want to crack the secret code that is used by Caldeira in the footnotes as a means of communication with Straka. Thus, the conventional materiality of the artefact book is broken with.<sup>47</sup>

This is also the point where the fictional pact becomes crucial. As this example has shown, the fiction that has been generated in *S.* continues to have an effect in reality. This exertion of influence, however, does not have the effect that readers are not willing anymore to suspend their disbelief in the fictive world for the time of reading and accept the actions as presented in the narrative as true within the context of illusion. Rather, the extension of the fictive space into reality has the effect that it is made obvious that the novel has to be read as fiction.

What this all amounts to is that *S.* uses many rather conventionalised literary elements in such a way that their conventionality is emphasised. Historically speaking, slipcases are indeed unremarkable elements of books, yet since the titles and the authors differ between the slipcase and the book itself, an ironic break with this material convention is brought about. The three narrative threads, which have been analysed in more detail above, are solely feasible because of a dynamisation of the static form of books. Only positioning the three stories in one spatial unity allows to generate a critical engagement with the conventional linearity of literature, which is constituted by its materiality. Finally, the added artefacts undermine any notion of a closed unity of the object through breaking with the formal framing of the book as object. However, this does not revoke the fictional pact, but even enhances it: Only because *S.* continuously signposts its artefactuality and inventedness, the reader is constantly reminded that the book has to be read as a fictional text.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 464.

### 3 Conclusion

As our analysis has shown, formal experiments in fiction are made possible because the fictional pact is – next to reflexivity – the *only static norm* of fictional literature. The reason for this is that as long as the fictional pact is fulfilled, meaning that as long as fiction is recognised as fiction, it can assume every form possible – be it stylistic, genre-specific, or material. Due to their socialisation as readers, it can be expected that the recipients already know or at least find out in the reception process how to engage with this (potentially limitless) plethora of fictional forms that results from a critical engagement with them from within fiction itself.

At the same time, the analysed exemplary texts have demonstrated that this expectation is very often unfulfilled. New modes of production demand new modes of reception. However, not every recipient can enter into these modes, either because of the formal unconventionality presented in the text or the unwillingness to get involved with these new modes of presentation.

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