Narrative Concepts in the Study of Eighteenth-Century Literature

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
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Temporality, Subjectivity and the Representation of Characters in the Eighteenth-Century Novel

From Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* to Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*

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Introduction: Temporality and Subjectivity in Classical Narratology and in the Eighteenth-Century Novel

In the course of the eighteenth century, the experience of time – and, connected to this, the experience of human existence – underwent profound changes. Here I trace these changes as expressed in the eighteenth-century novel mainly on the basis of two examples, representing two different phases of temporalization of experience: Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) and Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-1796).

If we agree with Ian Watt’s view of the ‘rise’ of the modern novel in England in the first half of the eighteenth century, what we have here is the first radical temporalization of experience in that century. According to Watt, this turn was based on a change in our understanding of reality: the Platonic-Aristotelian and medieval view of the immutable, ideal essences of things as the primary reality was replaced by the conception of the primary reality consisting of particular things that we perceive. In contrast to general essences, a particular thing always appears in a certain place and time (Watt, 1981, pp. 12-35). This ‘formal realism’ of the new novel corresponds, according to Watt, to Locke’s empiricist philosophy. The literature of the classical period – extending from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to eighteenth-century neoclassicism – dealt with the eternal truths of life in the form of illustrative exempla (ibid., p. 25), and the characters were bearers of the common human lot or specimens of general character types. In contrast, in the new novel the focus of interest lies in a particular individual (or individuals) and his or her experience (cf. ibid., pp. 15-16). The individuation of characters also leads to a loss of credibility for traditional patterns of action, i.e. conventional plots, which are replaced by the narration of an individual’s experiences (ibid., p. 15). The importance assigned to the temporal dimension of events
is also manifested in a more accurate account of time compared to earlier
literature (ibid., pp. 26-28).

Watt claims that it is typical of the new novel to see the individual’s
life as ‘a historical process’, signifying that the ‘narrative is occurring at a
particular place and at a particular time’ (ibid., p. 26). However, the turn
to historicism proper – seeing things historically – takes place in a later
phase of Enlightenment thinking, namely in the last third of the century.
Contrary to the classical view of history deriving from the antiquity, history
is now no longer seen as a repetition of ahistorical patterns, but involves
the constant creation of something new. Reinhart Koselleck describes
this change in the perception of history as a change in understanding the
relationship between the experience of the past and the expectation of
the future: where in traditional society the world appeared immutable,
and the future was therefore expected to be similar to the past, in the new,
historicist thinking the experience of the past and the expectation of the
future fall apart: what happened in the past need not return in similar form
in the future (Koselleck, 1985, pp. 349-75). The French Revolution meant a
confirmation of this late-Enlightenment idea of the possibility of change: by
acting in the present, a future can be created which will be different from
the past, and which hopefully will be something that better meets human
needs and desires (cf. ibid., p. 54). And by creating history, humankind
by the same time creates itself: history is now understood as the endless
self-constitution of humanity, as described by Johann Gottfried Herder, one
153f). Moreover, the view of the historical constitution of humanity has a
counterpart in the new understanding of individuality that emerges towards
the end of the century. Individuals are no longer considered as instances
of general humanity or specimens of ahistorical character types, but an
individual now appears as a unique personality. Sociologically speaking,
this emphasis on individuality arises in a society in which one’s possibilities
are no longer automatically determined by one’s inherited rank or position
in the society. As Günter Saße contends (Saße, 2010, p. 241), the plurality
of functions which one had to occupy in modern society evoked the need
to find in oneself, in one’s individual personality, the integrating instance
which could counteract this pluralization. However, what a person is is not
a stable thing: just as humankind will recognize its potentialities only in
the process of history, the individual becomes him- or herself only through
a process of development.

In what follows, we shall examine how the temporalization of experience
affects the ‘story logic’, or the manner in which cohesion is built in the
narrative, and the representation of the experiencing and acting subject – the protagonist – and other characters. I apply the concepts ‘experiencing and acting subject’ and ‘character’ in a ‘naturalized’ way, as referring to something that we imagine to be fictional counterparts of real persons.’ The experiencing and acting subject refers to the person from whose perspective the fictive world (primarily) appears to the reader. The experiencing and acting subject of course has a ‘character’, too, but it may come to the fore in a different manner compared to other characters. While the vantage point in this study is in the history of the eighteenth-century novel and its intellectual background, we may ask how far narratology can provide us with a toolkit for the analysis.

The discussion of temporality in narratology has occurred basically within the framework set by Gérard Genette in his influential *Narrative Discourse* (1980; orig. ‘Discours du récit’, in *Figures III*, 1972; cf. e.g. Sternberg, 1990; 1992). Following the idea of the Russian formalists that the basic opposition in a narrative is that between the story told and the narration of it, the main questions of narrative time concern the order and duration of narration in relation to the order and duration of the events of the story. The order of narration can either adhere to the (chronological) order of events in the story or can deviate from it, and there is a varying relationship between the duration of the event and the duration (i.e., the number of pages) of its narration (Genette, 1980, Ch. 1 and 2). Thus ‘time’ here means physical, objectively measurable time, and the parameters of temporality that are taken into account have to do with location along the continuum of time and quantity. ‘Frequency’, which Genette takes up as a third dimension of narrative temporality, of course is a quantitative concept as well. For Genette, ‘frequency’ means comparing the number of events in the story and the number of their occurrences in the narration. It is possible to narrate a single event once or \( n \) times, and to narrate an event that occurs \( n \) times once or \( n \) times. The first of these possibilities Genette calls a singulative (ibid.,

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1 Structuralist narratology introduces the concept of the ‘actant’ as a functional unit of the action, or plot, to replace the ‘character’. Cf. e.g., Bal, 2002, p. 115: ‘[A]n actor is a structural position, while a character is a complex semantic unit. But as readers, we “see” characters [...] That no satisfying, coherent theory of character is available is probably precisely because of this human aspect’; Margolin, 1990, p. 844: ‘Character as actant is a purely functional category [...] actants may be invested with semantic features, turning them into acteurs’; Herman, 2002, p. 119: ‘[S]tructuralist narratologists began by underscoring the constructedness of characters, their irreducibly semiotic status, when viewed as nodes in a network of signs’, while James Phelan has studied ‘characters’ mimetic, synthetic (= semiotic), and thematic dimensions’. Cf. also Phelan (1989) and Jannidis (2004; 2009).
pp. 114-15), the third one is called iterative narration (ibid., p. 116). Genette’s striving for strict objectivity and exactness means cleansing the concepts of anything that refers to the subjective experience of time.²

Along with temporality, another basic aspect of narrative discourse for Genette is ‘mood’, defined as a phenomenon of focalization. The ‘focalizer’ is the one through whose perception events in the story world are seen (answering the question ‘who sees?’; ibid., p. 186). The focalizer is the closest that Genette’s narratology comes to the experiencing subject; another subject is the narrator, who in Genette’s theory is reduced to a narrative function, a ‘voice’ (answering the question ‘who speaks’; ibid. p. 186). The tendency to consider both the characters and the narrator of the story as abstract functions rather than as representations of human beings is characteristic of classical narratology (cf. e.g., Bal, 2002; Margolin, 1990). Just like temporality, focalization too is discussed in terms of location and quantity. For example, what is traditionally called ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ are, according to Genette (1980, p. 164), distinguished in terms of greater or smaller distance from the object, and consequently in different quantities of information. It is evident that the concept of focalization does not include any interpretative activity on the part of the perceiving subject: a focalizer is a mere optical point of observation and a neutral transmitter of information (cf. Steinby, 2016). We may question how far these abstract, quasi-physical concepts of time and focalization can serve the analysis of the temporalization of experience in the eighteenth-century novel.

Defoe’s Moll Flanders: Time, Subjectivity and Character Representation in a Survival Story

Watt describes the novelty of the rising novel, as represented by Defoe, Richardson and – with some reservations – Fielding against the backdrop of the seventeenth-century romance. Despite the fact that recent scholarship has demonstrated the existence of a great variety of fictional and non-fictional text types that flourished in England at the turn of the eighteenth century and formed the ground for the growth of the novel (cf. Davis, 1983; McKeon, 2002; Hunter, 1994; Richetti, 1999), a comparison between the

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² I have discussed Genette’s concepts of time, space, and subjectivity in more detail in Steinby (in press).

³ Bal, 2002, p. 16: ‘When […] I discuss the narrative agent, or narrator, I mean the linguistic subject, a function and not a person […]’.
romance of the previous century and the emerging novel serves well in carving out what is ‘new’ in the new novel. This is also valid for changes in ways of experiencing time.

The conventional pattern of action in a Baroque novel (romance) is the following: The protagonists are two young rulers, or a prince and a princess, from far-away countries and an indefinite past, who fall in love with each other; before they can marry, however, they are separated, and each of them has to undergo a great number of adversities and dangers. The virtue and fidelity of the lovers are tried in stereotypical adventures, including among others war, battle and shipwreck; being captured by pirates, sold on the slave market, or harassed by an obnoxious suitor; having a narrow escape from being burnt at the stake or sacrificed to a foreign god. The lovers remain unshakeable, and in the end their virtue is rewarded and their enemies punished: the infamous enemy who threatens their kingdom and possibly their lives is destroyed, the kingdom(s) is (are) restored to them, and they enter into matrimony.\(^4\) There is no inner connection between the events and the characters that experience them: their intentions and actions have nothing to do with what they encounter. Instead of ‘horizontal’ or causal connections between the adventures, there is a ‘vertical’ connection between the events and the transcendent world order: it is divine Providence, using Fortuna as its tool, that probes the virtue of the lovers (cf., e.g., Röder, 1968, pp. 27-36; Frick, 1988). Those temporal coordinates that are given are vague and punctual, such as ‘suddenly’, ‘the following day’. Temporality as the dimension in which things undergo development or inner change is in these novels completely lacking.\(^5\)

In Daniel Defoe’s second novel, *Moll Flanders*, the protagonist’s life is narrated by herself towards the end of her life. The events take place in contemporary, or almost contemporary, England and the British colonies, and the narration mainly follows the chronological order of events; at the end of the story, Molly mentions that she has completed her biography in 1683, when she is almost seventy, which means that her life is a couple of generations back from her first readers. Like a heroine in a Baroque novel, Moll experiences a great variety of adversities and adventures; but the world is the

\(^4\) The enormous size of these novels is a considerable hindrance for today’s curious readers. For example, Mme de Scudery’s *Artaméne ou Le Grand Cyrus* (1649-1653) comprises ten volumes and several thousand pages. A useful compilation of excerpts from the German representatives of the genre is Cholevius (1965).

\(^5\) On the Baroque novel, see e.g., Emrich (1981), Frick (1988). Mikhail Bakhtin’s (2008) account of the Greek adventure novel offers a good description of the Baroque novel (or romance) as well, since many of the distinctive features are the same.
recognizable, everyday English world. Several real names of places are given as the scene of events, including London, Hammersmith, Bath, Lancashire, York, Virginia and Maryland. However, contrary to what Watt says about the great amount of concrete details in the new novel – something that he refers to as a ‘commonplace view’ – there are no detailed descriptions of places, interiors, objects, or the characters’ attire. We are moving about in familiar places among familiar objects, which are not described but merely recognized as what they are: the aesthetic or picturesque values – or sociological implications – of places, interiors or particular objects are paid no attention to at all. Of Brickhill, for example, where she is going to marry her fifth husband, Moll writes: ‘After dinner we walked to see the town, to see the church, and to view the fields and the country, as is usual for strangers to do’ (MF, p. 154). A guest-house is merely a guest-house, a room a room, in which those pieces of furniture are mentioned which play a role in the action, as in the room where Moll will spend the night with the would-be (fifth) husband: ‘There was a bed in the room, and we were walking to and again, eager in the discourse; at last, he takes me by surprise in his arms, and threw me on the bed, but without the least offer of any indecency, courted me to consent [...]’ (MF, p. 155). Obviously, space and different objects are present only as the prerequisites of action.

There is, however, one particular aspect of objects to which Moll does pay attention: their monetary value. When Moll mentions, and possibly specifies with an adjective or two, valuable things such as jewels, precious cloths, watches or any other property, up to and including houses and estates, this always happens with a calculating eye: she is estimating the pecuniary value of these possessions. This manner of perceiving things follows naturally from her position in the world: she is the progeny of a Newgate convict mother and an unknown father, and from her earliest childhood was at the mercy of strangers. This determines what kind of story her life history is: the survival story of a girl and woman, without family or connections, who has nothing to rely on but her own resourcefulness. Thus, despite the many surprising turns and adventures, Moll’s life story – unlike those we find in Baroque novels – has an inner cohesion: it is her striving for security that determines her attitude to events and to other people, and even her experience of time.

6 Watt, 1981, p. 18: ‘particularity of description had always been considered typical of the narrative manner of Robinson Crusoe and Pamela’.

7 That this is the case in eighteenth-century English novels in general is demonstrated by Wall (2006).
In Moll’s story time is an important dimension, and the most relevant time-span is her lifetime. Moll keeps from the beginning the reader informed about her age: in connection with various life events, she mentions having been three, seventeen, twenty-five, forty-two, fifty, sixty-one or sixty-eight. The age is much more than mere neutral recording of the course of time: it is something which Moll’s prospects of success definitely depend on. At the age of three, she is completely dependent on those who are taking care of her; when she is seventeen and a beauty, she is seduced, but is saved by the marriage proposal of the brother of the deceitful seducer. When this husband dies only five years later, Molly survives by remarrying, repeatedly, till she is about fifty. She now realizes that she scarcely has a chance on the marriage market any longer, and for years she ‘earns’ her living as a thief. Thus, age is utterly important— not as a measure of anything like an inner maturing process, but because it is a highly relevant factor in Moll’s life project of securing for herself a safe, and if possible comfortable, existence.

In Moll’s account of events, the hour or the time of day when something happens is hardly ever mentioned; a watch, for Moll, is a precious object to be stolen, rather than an article of utility. Moll keeps however recording the duration of the different periods of her life: how many months or years had gone by, sometimes how many days, and particularly how long she lived with each of her five husbands. The specification of time is functionalized in relation to Moll’s main objective: to survive. There is a connection between the calculation of the value of her possessions and the counting of time: the question is always, for how long a time a certain sum of money will suffice, invested in property or liquid assets. Her struggle for survival is also the perspective from which she sees other persons, including – and particularly – her husbands, whom she may love dearly, but who represent for her primarily providers of security.

For example, of her second husband Moll writes that ‘[m]y husband had this excellence, that he valued nothing of expense. As his history, you may be sure, has very little weight in it, ‘tis enough to tell you that in about two years and a quarter he broke, got into a sponging-house, being arrested in an action too heavy for him to give bail to [...]’ (MF, p. 53). The husband leaves her, and what remains to Moll is to count her possessions and on this basis to assess her position: ‘I found, upon casting things up, my case was very much altered, and my fortune much lessened, for, including the hollands and a parcel of fine muslins, which I carried off before, and some plate and

See the discussion of ‘female time’ in Moll Flanders and Roxana in Mäkikalli, 2006, pp. 201-17.
other things, I found I could hardly muster up £500; and my condition was very odd [...]’ (MF, p. 55). She does not tell about her emotional but about her economic distress.

Moll does not depict her husbands, in the neoclassical manner, as different character types, nor does she employ black-and-white painting, like a Baroque novelist. For her there is no problem in recognizing what someone is like – once the possibility of deliberate deception is excluded, against which Moll knows enough to be on her guard; and this commonsense understanding of people, which takes no time to acquire, suffices very well for her in any of her relationships. Of some of her husbands, she mentions one or two characteristic features – for instance that her first husband was a great joker – but she sees no point in going into their characters more deeply. How little the husbands are individualized is indicated by the fact that most of them are not even mentioned by name. Moll therefore has to use other means of distinguishing them when she happens to speak of two of her husbands in the same sentence: ‘It must be observed that when the old wretch, my brother ([the third] husband) was dead, I then freely gave my husband [the fourth but also the final one, reinstated in this position towards the end of Moll’s life] an account of all that affair [...]’ (MF, p. 294).

Of her marriages, Moll tells us very little. For example, the five years of the first marriage are summed up in two sentences:

It concerns the story in hand very little to enter into the further particulars of the [husband’s] family, or of myself, for the five years that I lived with this husband, only to observe that I had two children by him, and that at the end of the five years he died. He had been really a very good husband to me, and we lived very agreeably together; but as he had not received much from them [his family], and had in the little time he lived acquired no great matters, so my circumstances were not great, nor was I much mended by the match (p. 50).

Moll’s attention is focused on the periods between the marriages, when she has to find new forms of livelihood. At first, for several decades, this means providing herself with a new, preferably prosperous husband. Each search for a new husband is an undertaking that requires great energy and wisdom, as well as often some cunning. For example, she tells us about the man who would become her third husband:

I picked out my man without much difficulty, by the judgment I made of his way of courting me. I had let him run on with his protestations that
he loved me above all the world; that if I would make him happy, that was enough; all which I knew was upon [the mistaken] supposition that I was very rich, though I never told him a word of it myself (MF, p. 67).

While the periods of dependence on a husband are recorded only briefly, Moll's narration of the dangerous period when she had to support herself by stealing contains much more detail: she describes several particular occasions when she narrowly escapes being caught, which would mean being hanged or transported as a convict to the colonies. Eventually, Moll is captured and transported to the New World; but she manages to secure her likewise convicted and transported fourth husband (a highwayman) a place in the same ship, and by investing cleverly the assets she had earned by stealing they establish a new, prosperous living on an estate in Maryland. The values of the different possessions, the yearly profit of the estate, and Moll's inheritance from her mother – who was also the mother of her third husband – are carefully specified.

Thus there is a clear rhythm to Moll's story of her life: it is the periods of insecurity, which are the times in which her life depends on her own initiative and inventiveness, that are described in detail, including the lively rendering of crucial scenes and dialogues, while the smooth periods, those of her relative security and her dependence on a husband, are recounted only very briefly. The narrative rhythm thus accentuates the phases when Moll appears as an independently acting subject. Defoe's Moll, like his Robinson Crusoe, is an individual left on her or his own to get along in the world, and time is an essential dimension in her struggle for subsistence. The passing of time is a threat when the means of livelihood are running out, but time is an asset when it offers an opportunity to gain property. For Moll, the intervals between her marriages are periods in which these ‘active’ aspects of time are accentuated, while within her marriages, the passing of time is relatively insignificant: Moll merely emerges from each marriage some years older. Thus in Moll's life, essentially the same problem – how to survive – as well as a temporary solution to this problem surface again and again; and the repetition of the pattern brings a feature of seriality to Moll's narrative of her life.9

9 Stuart Sherman has analysed the serial form in eighteenth-century diaries and the adoption of this form in the new novel (Sherman, 1996). Moll's autobiography is not in diary form but is presented as having been written 'afterwards', when she has lived through all the adversities of life and is now a prosperous estate owner; here it is the content of her life, the repetition of the very same distress, that entails the repetitive pattern of her life history.
At the end of the novel another time perspective comes to the fore: that of eternity. In the last sentence of the novel Moll writes that she and her husband have now returned to England, ‘where we resolve to spend the remainder of our years in sincere penitence for the wicked lives we have lived’ (MF, p. 295). Thus old Moll and her aged husband turn their faces from time to eternity (cf. Mäkikalli, 2006, pp. 95-113). The reader, however, cannot avoid the impression that Moll has not abandoned her previous life strategy in the first place: what she is now doing, in deciding to repent for the rest of her life, is securing comfort in her life hereafter.

In conclusion, we see that the essential story logic of Moll Flanders does not derive from the fact that Moll is the focalizer who registers events, offering information about events and characters (cf. Genette, 1980, pp. 75f., 160-64); what is decisive is rather that the information she gives us is strongly biased and conditioned by her struggle for subsistence. This is to say that in order to grasp the inherent logic in her story – including its temporal structure – we have to take into account the kind of person she is and the nature of her primary problem in life. That events and other characters are seen from her perspective means that anything she encounters she sees as either an opportunity or a hindrance in her struggle for subsistence and a comfortable life. The rhythm of her narrative, which is formed by the alternation of condensed and expanded narration, derives from her experience of the alternation between tranquil, relatively secure, passive periods – primarily those of her marriages – and turbulent, risky, active ones in which both the threatening and promising aspects of time come most clearly to the fore. This indicates that narrative duration and rhythm are phenomena that, in order to make sense, must be explicated in connection with the content, which again is dependent on the particular historical conditions: in this case, the insecure position of women without a fortune in eighteenth-century England.

Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre: Temporality, Character Representation, and the Experiencing and Acting Subject

In Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship), temporalization extends to the manner how characters are seen as well as to one’s way of understanding oneself. This is connected with the new understanding of human beings as unique and developing individuals. We have seen that in Moll Flanders, although the characters are not presented as representatives of general types, individuality does not play a great role
in their depiction. There is no problem of recognizing people as they are, and the characters are thinly if at all described and strongly functionalized as parts of Moll’s survival story. There is no issue of the identity of the protagonist, either. In contrast, in Goethe’s novel the individuals, including the protagonist, are not easily identified as what they are. In addition, while Defoe’s characters do not change except for aging, Goethe’s characters undergo changes, which further complicates their recognition. It is precisely the individual’s change or formation (Bildung) that is thematized in the Lehrjahre. Traditionally, a Bildungsroman, of which the Lehrjahre is considered to be both the earliest example and the paragon, is understood as the story of the development of a young person towards a fully developed personality (cf. Dilthey, 1965, p. 273). As I have argued elsewhere, however, the Lehrjahre is less the story of Wilhelm’s Bildung than a narrative of his disparate experiences, out of which he strives to construct the story of his Bildung (cf. Saariluoma [Steinby], 2004, esp. 310-16). The queries in what follows concern character representation and the role of Wilhelm as the experiencing and acting subject, approached from the viewpoint of the new temporalization of experience.

Individualization and Temporalization in Character Representation

To close the gap in character representation between Defoe and Goethe, a few remarks on two other authors may be appropriate. While Defoe does not pay much attention to the representation of characters, for Henry Fielding, another exponent of the new novel, the pertinent, insightful representation of characters is of primary importance: it is the field within which an author can display his skills in the ‘new province of writing’ which Fielding claims to have established with his Joseph Andrews (1742) and Tom Jones (1749).10 This new genre, which he calls ‘private history’,11 is about ‘morals and manners’. He assures us emphatically that ‘I describe not men, but manners; not an Individual, but a Species’.12 To be able to do so, he has studied human nature by observing men (and women) in contemporary life.13 Thus, while

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10 ‘For as I am, in reality, the founder of a new province of writing, so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein’. Tom Jones, Book II, Ch. 1.
11 Tom Jones, Book XIII, Ch. 1. However, despite proclaiming being free to invent whatever laws he wishes for the new province of writing, Fielding fits the new genre into the neoclassical frame, defining it as ‘prosai-comi-epic writing’ (Tom Jones, Book V, Ch. 1) or (in the Preface of Joseph Andrews) ‘a comic Epic-Poem in Prose’.
12 Joseph Andrews, Book III, Ch. 1.
13 See Tom Jones, the introductory chapters of Books I, IX and IV.
Fielding embraces the (neo)classical thinking of characters, seeing them in terms of human nature and different character types, these types are not borrowed as such from the literary tradition but are based on the author's own observations. This brings a flavour of particularity, empiricism and 'contemporaneity' to his otherwise atemporal neoclassicism. The characterization is also atemporal in the sense that Fielding, in the neoclassical manner, regards 'conservation of character' as an inescapable principle of character representation.

In contrast, the German novel in the latter part of the century was particularly interested in how human beings change: either through inner maturation or by their experiences of the world, or both. Christoph Martin Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathon* (Agathon's Story, 1766-1767) is considered to be the first novel of this type. The novel tells the story of the protagonist's development, which comprises the difficult choice, on the basis of his experiences of life, between Platonism and hedonism. The ample psychological analysis of the struggle in the protagonist's mind brings dynamism to the whole; what is at stake are however two philosophical positions, which can be exhaustively defined in general terms. Contributing to the sense of atemporality is the author's choice to set the psychodrama in the world of antiquity, as though to emphasize the ahistorical character of the problem. The characters represent, in the neoclassical manner, general human possibilities. Thus the main adversary of Agathon's Platonism, the sophist Hippias, is introduced to the reader using purely classificatory notions:

Der Mann, der sich für zwei Talenten das Recht erworben hatte, den Agathon als seinen Leibeignen zu behandeln, war einer von den merkwürdigen Leuten, die unter dem Namen der Sophisten in den griechischen Städten umherzogen [...]. Hippias [...] war einer von diesen glücklichen, dem die Kunst, sich die Torheiten anderer Leute zinsbar zu machen, ein Vermögen erworben hatte [...] (Wieland, 1986, p. 46).

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14 For the eighteenth-century author’s growing appetite for ‘contemporaneity’, see Sherman, 1996, p. 172 (Sherman is here referring to J. Paul Hunter).
15 *Tom Jones*, Book XVIII, Ch. 1
16 The German ‘Geschichte’ means both ‘story’ or ‘history’; the title is emphatically modelled in line with English novels, such as ‘The History of Tom Jones’.
18 ‘The man who had for two talents purchased the right to treat Agathon as his slave was one of those odd people who under the name of sophists traveled around in the Greek cities [...]’. Hippias [...] one of those lucky men who had made a fortune by the skill of profiting of others’ foolishness [...].
There is no need to describe the individual; the description is completed by defining the general class to which Hippias belongs.

Towards the end of the century, the replacement of human essence and character types by individual identities revolutionized the description of characters in the novel. The identity of a unique individual is something that has to be defined in each particular case separately. This unique individuality is formed in the course of one's life, and is recognized through reflecting upon that life. The search for an identity in one's life may be called the creation of a ‘narrative identity’ (cf. e.g., Taylor, 1989, p. 289; Schmidt, 1989, p. 92). In a seminal article, Verena Ehrich-Haefeli locates the emergence of the narrativization of character representation in Goethe’s \textit{Die Leiden des jungen Werther} (\textit{The Sorrows of Young Werther}, 1774). When Werther in a letter to his friend wants to give a description of his new acquaintance Lotte, he first looks for general attributes that would describe her aptly, but soon gives up the effort: all that, he says, is nothing but trash, miserable abstractions which cannot express her self (Werther, p. 19). Instead he narrates about his first meeting with her, which is the famous scene where Lotte divides up the bread among her younger sisters and brothers. Ehrich-Haefeli concludes that although the individuality cannot be expressed in general terms, it can be the object of narration (Ehrich-Haefeli, 1998, p. 818). This does not mean that Lotte’s life story is told; rather, she is shown in a number of situations of which she is a part. Ehrich-Haefeli points up that while in earlier (neoclassical) novels the characters are defined prior to the events and remain in their essence untouched by them, in \textit{Werther} characters and events are intertwined in a new, unprecedented way (ibid., p. 819). With this shift in characterization, the roles of narrator and reader have profoundly changed: instead of being described directly by the narrator’s authority, the character of a fictive person is something that can only be conjectured from the particular situations and events of the story.

\textit{Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre} was preceded by the manuscript entitled \textit{Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung} (Wilhelms Meister’s theatrical calling), written in the 1770s about the same time as \textit{Werther} and later reworked into the first five books of the \textit{Lehrjahre}. The narration in both novels is extra- and heterodiegetic (Genette) or auctorial (Stanzel), although it closely follows Wilhelm’s experiences. In the \textit{Sendung}, however, it is the

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19 As Odo Marquard remarks, the pre-modern concept of essence has in Modernity been replaced by the concept of identity (Marquard, 1979, p. 358).
20 The \textit{Sendung} was not published in Goethe’s life-time, and the manuscript was thought to be lost for good, until one copy was found in the early 1900s and published in 1911.
narrator who provides the reader with insight into the nature of events and characters, while in the *Lehrjahre* much more is left for Wilhelm and the reader to interpret and judge. This is connected with a difference in the protagonist’s character and his position in the novel. The *Sendung* is the story of the development of a theatrical genius, in which everything the protagonist encounters is related to his calling. In contrast, Wilhelm in the *Lehrjahre* is no genius, and his enthusiasm for the theatre proves to be a false path. The *Lehrjahre* thus lacks an organizing centre analogous to Wilhelm’s calling in the *Sendung*, and it is much more difficult to find any pattern in the events. What Goethe is here suggesting is that one’s experiences in life do not naturally form any coherent entity, since what we encounter is not easily deciphered – not to mention seeing everything as a meaningful element in our own life story.

Let us take as an example the introduction of the actress Philine. In the *Sendung* it goes as follows:

Sie war das gutherzigste Geschöpf von der Welt, naschte gerne, putzte sich und konnte nicht leben, ohne spazieren zu fahren oder sich sonst eine Veränderung zu machen; ganz allerliebst war sie aber, wenn sie ein Glas Wein im Kopfe hatte. Wer ihr diese Freuden verschaffen konnte, war ihr angenehm, und wenn sie einmal, welches doch selten geschah, einiges Geld übrig hatte, so vertat sie es auch wohl mit einem irrenden Ritter, der ihr leidlich gefiel und dessen starke Seite der Beutel nicht war. In reichlichen Tagen schien ihr nichts gut genug, und bald darauf nahm sie wieder mit allem vorlieb. Sie pflegte sich einem freigebigen Geliebten zu Ehren mit Milch, Wein und wohlrückenden Wassern zu waschen, bald tat ihr der gemeine Brunnen gleiche Dienste. Gegen Arme war sie sehr freigebig und überhaupt von Herzen mitleidig, nur nicht gegen die Klagen eines Liebhabers, den sie einmal abgedankt hatte (*Sendung*, pp. 729–30).

21 ‘She was the most good-hearted person of the world, who liked nibbling at delicacies and grooming herself, and could not live without going for a drive or in some other way entertaining herself; and most charming she was when she had imbibed a glass of wine. Whoever could offer her these pleasures was agreeable to her, and when she sometimes, which happened only seldom, had some money left, she spent it with an erring knight who pleased her reasonably, and whose purse was not his strong side. In prosperous days nothing seemed good enough for her, and soon afterwards she was again contented with everything. To honour a generous lover she used to wash herself with milk, wine and fragrant waters, but soon a common well served the same purpose. Towards the poor she was very generous, and in general she had a compassionate heart, except for the complaints of a lover whom she had once dismissed.’
The listing of Philine's habits goes on for another half a page. The characterization of Philine does not take place directly by categorizing her, let us say, as a ‘frivolous actress', but the description of her habits amounts unambiguously to something like that. The narrator approaches his topic as though he were a close acquaintance of hers, who has observed her for a long time and now sums up his singular observations in a portrait of her habits. This means that becoming acquainted with Philine's character is a temporal process, although what is given here are only the results of that process. (We note that it is necessary to 'naturalize' the narrator as someone who has a 'past' in which he has 'observed' a character). The lively portrait of the frivolous actress chimes in with Wilhelm's view of Philine: she represents for him the light pleasure-seeking that the theatre means for part of the public. This is something with which Wilhelm finds fault, and he therefore keeps at a distance from her.

In the Lehrjahre no description of Philine's character is given by the narrator, not even in the iterative form of describing her habits; she is presented only in particular situations which she shares with Wilhelm. His first encounter with her is reported as follows:


22 ‘A girl, with roses and other flowers for sale, coming by, held out her basket to him, and he purchased a beautiful nosegay; which, like one that had a taste for these things, he tied up in a different fashion, and was looking at it with a satisfied air, when the window of another inn on the opposite side of the square flew up, and a handsome young lady looked out from it.
The reader sees only the same particular events as Wilhelm, who sums up this encounter as a ‘pleasant adventure’ (artiges Abenteuer, ibid., p. 91). The reader may notice that Wilhelm is attracted to the cheerful-looking young woman. This is confirmed when Wilhelm is soon afterwards invited to her place, where she insists on combing his hair and in so doing ‘could not avoid’ touching his knees with hers and bringing her bosom so close to his lips ‘that he was more than once tempted to give it a kiss’. Undoubtedly, Philine is the same frivolous actress as in the Sendung; however, there is more ambiguity in her character in the Lehrjahre than in the Sendung. The momentary impressions of her the reader receives vary considerably. Wilhelm’s relationship to her is ambiguous as well: he is at the same time repelled by her frivolity and attracted by her. When she keeps Wilhelm sitting on a bench in front of a guesthouse and caresses and kisses him in that public place, he feels embarrassed and annoyed; when he sees her by the side of the beautiful countess with whom he is in love, the contrast is very much to her disadvantage; but after Wilhelm is wounded when the theatrical troupe with which he travels is attacked by highwaymen, it is she who stays back to take care of him; and when he sees her by the side of the beautiful countess with whom he is in love, the contrast is very much to her disadvantage; but after Wilhelm is wounded when the theatrical troupe with which he travels is attacked by highwaymen, it is she who stays back to take care of him; and when one morning he finds her with a book in her hand, sleeping innocently at the edge of his bed, he can scarcely resist the temptation to caress her. What Philine ‘is’, is a task for both Wilhelm and the reader to be solved in the course of time, but the question is never answered definitely – just as in real life we can never be quite sure that we know a person completely. All Wilhelm – like the reader – possesses are glimpses of her in different situations, out of which he can try to compose a portrait of her.

In the first five books of the Lehrjahre, the characters are not presented to either the protagonist or the reader through a continuous narrative of their lives, but through their acts in particular situations. Only through synthetic activity on the part of Wilhelm – and the reader – can coherence be created among these separate images. This recognition of what someone

Notwithstanding the distance, he observed that her face was animated by a pleasant cheerfulness: her fair hair fell carelessly streaming about her neck; she seemed to be looking at the stranger. In a short time afterwards, a boy with a white jacket, and a barber’s apron on, came out from the door of her house, towards Wilhelm; saluted him, and said: “The lady at the window bids me ask if you will not favour her with a share of your beautiful flowers.” — ”They are all at her service,” answered Wilhelm, giving the nosegay to this nimble messenger, and making a bow to the fair one, which she returned with a friendly courtesy, and then withdrew from the window’ Goethe, 1917, Book II, Ch. 4.

23 […] daß er mehr als einmal in Versuchung gesetzt war, einen Kuß darauf zu drücken’ (ibid., p. 94).
is like is a temporal process which is open towards the future: we can never be certain that the future will not reveal some new aspect of the person. In addition, a change in our general understanding of the world may change the way we see someone. This all comes very close to the manner in which, in Goethe’s opinion, we create a portrait for ourselves of real people in real life. Approaching the identity of a person through concrete acts and situations, rather than in abstract concepts, is part of Goethe’s ‘gegenständliches Denken’, his tendency of thinking in terms of concrete objects rather than abstractions (cf. e.g., Bollacher, 2001).

To sum up: in these eighteenth-century novels, we see how atemporal typology of characters, such as Fielding’s or Wieland’s, is replaced – in Goethe – either by the iterative description of the person’s habits or by a ‘singulative’ rendering of the person’s particular acts in particular situations. The Genettean categories of ‘iterative’ and ‘singulative’ are applicable here, but they are insufficient to provide a full account of the temporalization of character representation. This is because Genette’s categories of narrative time bear no relationship to the question of whether reality is seen as atemporally or temporally ordered. It is precisely this shift from atemporal to temporal thinking – the emergence of a historical view of the world and of human beings as unique individuals, identified by their particular acts and experiences – that brings about the fundamental change in character representation in the novel.

Temporary Identities: Attempts at Narrating Who One Is

The Bildungsroman, of which Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre is the paragon, may sound like the prototype of modern life narrative, since in the communis opinio it is a narrative of identity formation. However, if ‘narrative’ means that a ‘sets of events’ has been ‘transformed into stories with beginnings, middles, and ends’ (White, 2005, p. 137), ‘impos[ing] order on chaotic events, structuring amorphous, lived experience’ (Ritivoi, 2005, p. 231), or creating a ‘network of connections [which] gives events coherence, motivation, closure, and intelligibility and turns them into a plot’ (Ryan, 2005, p. 347), this is not what the Lehrjahre offers. Coherence, insight into

24 Goethe (1999, p. IX) writes in Farbenlehre: ‘Vergebens bemühen wir uns, den Charakter eines Menschen zu schildern; man stelle dagegen seine Handlungen, seine Thaten zusammen, und ein Bild des Charakters wird uns entgegentreten’ (‘It is a vain effort to try to describe the character of someone; you just have to assemble his acts and deeds, and a portrait of him is given to us’).
25 Cf. also Richardson, 2005, p. 353: ‘in this conception, plot makes events into a narrative’.
causal connections between events, and closure are lacking in the account of Wilhelm’s experiences in the *Lehrjahre*. Events are not emplotted so as to give a narrative of Wilhelm’s development. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere, it is the narrative of Wilhelm’s experiences over a certain period of time, and of his unsuccessful attempts to discern a plot in his life and define what he himself is (cf. Saariluoma [Steinby], 2004).

To make it clear to the reader that Wilhelm’s interpretations of himself, of others and of his situation are unreliable, the author of the *Lehrjahre* employs at the very beginning of the novel an exceptional narrative perspective. Before the reader catches sight of Wilhelm at all, the first chapter presents a discussion between his love, the actress Mariane and her old servant, which reveals that Mariane has another lover. This is a man whom Mariane does not care about, but whom she keeps, on her servant’s advice, for economic reasons, and who has now given notice of returning in a fortnight. Mariane says that despite this she will give herself to Wilhelm, whom she loves, hoping for some miraculous salvation from her distress: ‘Vierzehn Tage! Welche Ewigkeit! In Vierzehn Tagen, was kann da nicht vorfallen, was kann sich da nicht verändern!’ (Lehrjahre, p. 11). In the next chapter Wilhelm enters, and it turns out that he plans to leave his bourgeois family and the merchant’s trade for a career in the theatre, where together with his beloved he will work for the education of the public. He tells Mariane about the puppet theatre and other theatrical performances of his childhood, which he created and carried out more or less successfully with his friends, as compelling evidence that the theatre has always been his calling. Finally, he compares these reminiscences of his childhood with his present situation:

Es ist eine schöne Empfindung, liebe Mariane, [...] wenn wir uns alter Zeiten und alter unschädlicher Irrtümer erinnern, besonders wenn es in einem Augenblick geschieht, da wir eine Höhe glücklich erreicht haben, von welcher wir uns umsehen und den zurückgelegten Weg überschauen können. Es ist so angenehm, selbstzufrieden sich mancher Hindernisse zu erinnern, die wir oft mit einem peinlichen Gefühle für unüberwindlich hielten, und dasjenige, was wir jetzt, entwickelt, sind, mit dem zu vergleichen, was wir damals, unentwickelt, waren (Lehrjahre, pp. 16-17; emphasis in the original).

26 Cf. Ronen, 1990, p. 819: ‘It is commonly agreed that only events tied together by chronology and causality can form the basis for a narrative text’.
27 ‘A fortnight! What an eternity! What cannot all happen in a fortnight, what cannot change!’.
28 ‘It is a fine emotion, Mariane, [...] when we bethink ourselves of old times, and old harmless errors; especially if this is at a period when we have happily gained some elevation, from which we can look around us, and survey the path we have left behind. It is so pleasant to think, with
The passage is the first occasion when Wilhelm offers an overall interpretation of himself and his life, whose course he now believes himself to know with certainty: he tells us how his life story is to be emplotted, and describes this moment as the point in time when he has reached maturity. The reader, however, knows that Wilhelm is building his expectations of a future with Mariane on false presuppositions – and that his error in evaluating his situation is in fact much more grave than any of the mishaps in the theatrical performances of his childhood. Indeed, when Wilhelm a fortnight later detects Mariane's deception, all his dreams concerning his future life in the theatre are crushed. Mariane leaves town, and Wilhelm will never see her again. The fact that Wilhelm is shown initially as an unreliable interpreter of his own life affects the reader's attitude toward him throughout the novel: rather than accepting Wilhelm's interpretations, the reader has to interpret the events in the novel along with Wilhelm, but independently of him.

Later, when Wilhelm is sent on his travels to collect outstanding payments from his father's debtors, he comes across a number of actors and spends his time with them; among other things, he follows them into a count's residence, where he participates in entertaining the aristocratic society by theatrical performances. When after these experiences Wilhelm is offered a post as a professional actor, he accepts the proposal, although what he has seen of the theatre so far does not corroborate his youthful dreams of the educational function of the theatre. His decision is provoked by a letter from his brother-in-law, who is planning a future for him as a merchant, which he finds anything but attractive. He writes back that his goal from early on was the Bildung of himself as a many-sided personality, and that this goal can nowhere be realized better than in the theatre. Here Wilhelm proffers the second interpretation of himself and his life story – one which seemingly fits very well the idea of the Lehrjahre as a Bildungsroman. The reader, however, sees that Wilhelm is again mistaken: first of all, it is not true that Wilhelm has always pursued his own Bildung – originally he dreamt of a theatrical career with the goal of educating the theatre public; secondly, from Wilhelm's experiences so far it is clear that the theatre, even when favoured by high society, cannot offer him the kind of opportunity for Bildung that he now claims to be seeking. Indeed, after just a few performances his theatrical career ends with his final disappointment with the theatre.

Goethe, 1917, Book 1, Ch. 3.
After leaving the theatre, Wilhelm can no longer find any direction in life: everywhere, he sees only his own errors. In the last two books of the novel, Wilhelm is further away than ever from being able to tell a coherent story of his life. He becomes acquainted with members of the so-called Society of the Tower, an association of men (and women) who, in the spirit of the late Enlightenment, are active in the fields of education and in practical projects of general benefit. Wilhelm feels confused and distressed; when he realizes that he is desperately in love with the beautiful, saintly Natalie right after he has proposed marriage to another woman (Therese), this does not alleviate his agony. In this state of mind, he reads the account of his ‘apprentice years’, written by some of the educators in the Society of the Tower:

Er fand die umständliche Geschichte seines Lebens in großen, scharfen Zügen geschildert; weder einzelne Begebenheiten, noch beschränkte Empfindungen verwirrten seinen Blick, allgemeine liebevolle Betrachtungen gaben ihm Fingerzeige, ohne ihn zu schämen, und er sah zum erstenmal sein Bild außer sich, zwar nicht, wie im Spiegel, ein zweites Selbst, sondern wie im Portrat ein anderes Selbst: man bekennt sich zwar nicht zu allen Zügen, aber man freut sich, daß ein denkender Geist uns so hat fassen, ein großes Talent uns so hat darstellen wollen [...] (Lehrjahre, p. 505).

This life story is not presented to the reader, who of course would be very interested to hear how a ‘great talent’ emplots Wilhelm's life history. Most conspicuously, Wilhelm obviously does not benefit in the least of reading this story: whatever he thinks of it, he does not recognize in it any pattern that would bring him clarity. He is after the reading as confused as before and remains that till the very end of the novel. We can therefore say that the novel proceeds from the protagonist’s (false) certainty about his identity and the ‘plot’ of his life to a completely uncertainty of both; and it seems that even a ‘great talent’ succeeds only partially in this portraying task. The novel ends in a moment of bliss when Wilhelm learns that the woman whom he truly loves – the ‘beautiful amazon’ Natalie – offers him her hand. This does not mean however that Wilhelm’s confusion concerning his identity and his life is over.

29 ‘He found his life delineated with large sharp strokes; neither unconnected incidents, nor narrow sentiments perplexed his view; the most bland and general reflections taught without shaming him. For the first time, his own figure was presented to him; not indeed, as in a mirror, a second self; but as in a portrait, another self; we do not, it is true, recognise ourselves in every feature; but we are delighted that a thinking spirit has so understood us, that such gifts [great talent] have been employed in representing us [...]’ Goethe, 1917, Book VIII, Ch. 1.
Thus, although in the two last books the Society of the Tower shows great interest in the ‘apprentice years’ of individuals, and the life stories of many characters are displayed, Wilhelm's life story, which could reveal his identity, remains untold (cf. Saariluoma [Steinby], 2004, pp. 210-27; Petersdorff, 2006; Schöll, 2008). This is valid both within the world of the novel and to the reader. Replying to Schiller, who had read the manuscript and wished that Goethe would make the relationship between the different elements and the central idea of ‘apprentice years’ clearer, Goethe speaks of his ‘realistic tic’, which prevents him from creating such order.30 He seems to be suggesting that the inherent disparateness of one's experiences resists any clear patterning – a view in which we recognize Goethe’s modernity. The ‘objectivity’ (Gegenständlichkeit) of the representation which is characteristic of Goethe means that the author offers to his readers events and the actions of the characters in particular situations, but leaves their ‘meaning’ and their role in the protagonist’s development almost as opaque as events and characters are in real life. There is no ‘vertically’ given significance of events, as in Baroque novels, nor are events ‘horizontally’ interconnected in any way that might make their overall significance clear (as, for example, in Moll's story). It remains the task of both Wilhelm and the reader to search for coherence in Wilhelm’s apparently disparate experiences.

We can therefore say that the Lehrjahre does not present a life story that provides the protagonist with a narrative identity, and that the novel as a whole proceeds from the protagonist’s (false) certainty about his identity and about the ‘plot’ of his life to complete uncertainty about both. If in Werther narrative appeared as a means of capturing someone's individual identity, a task of which no general categories were capable, in the Lehrjahre ‘narrative identity’ appears as something difficult or impossible to achieve – although the search for it is a temporal process into which the reader is invited, along with Wilhelm.

Temporality in the Lehrjahre is a many-faceted phenomenon; here we have focused on Wilhelm’s experience of time.31 Wilhelm produces interpretations of his experiences, which, however, do not last; he interprets himself differently at different times, without coming to any conclusion; and – like other characters – he changes over the course of time. The overall dynamism of the novel suggests that what is at issue here is Wilhelm’s incessant activity itself, both participating in events and searching for their

31 Other aspects of time in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre are discussed in Saariluoma [Steinby], 2005.
meaning, rather than the outcome of these activities. The novel shows the complex experience of temporality of the modern individual, for whom everything, including oneself, is constantly changing and the understanding of things is a never-ending task.

Conclusion

The analysis of Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* has shown that there occurred a temporalization of experience and narration in the eighteenth-century novel, and that novelistic temporalities grew ever more complicated towards the end of the century. We have applied some of Genette’s categories in describing these temporalities, including order, duration and rhythm, along with iterative and singulative narration: however, these conceptualizations alone do not suffice in describing temporal experience and temporal structures in these novels. What is problematic in Genette’s conceptualization is its objectivistic, scientistic view of time, perception and narration (Steinby, 2016). When the questions asked concern merely the relationship between the order and duration of events and those of the narration, together with the amount of information gathered by the recorder of events (the focalizer), what is overlooked is the ambiguity of the modern world which is characteristic of the modern novel. ‘Gathering information’ is too simplistic a view of what takes place with the ‘focalizer’ as the central experiencing and acting subject of the novel, and the experience of time which structures the novels is not a matter of recording clock and calendar time.

What essentially determines the temporal experience and gives a coherence to the protagonist’s life story in *Moll Flanders* is her basic situation in life: being exposed all alone to the adversities of life and compelled to cope entirely on her own. She does not register the events ‘objectively’, but things, events and other people signify for her possible means of survival. The passing of time is likewise relevant in relation to the question of subsistence, to which even the question of her age is subordinate; and it is this question that determines the rhythm in her narrative of her life. In *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, the experience of time is much more complex than in *Moll Flanders*. This derives from the fact that the experiencing subject in this novel is a modern, autonomous subject of interpretation and action, for whom ‘common sense’ (or the religious view of the world) is no longer a reliable guide to understanding matters. Relying upon himself, he has to create for himself an understanding of events, of the persons he meets,
and of himself. It is difficult to recognize what others are like, and even more difficult to know oneself and to see one’s life as a meaningful whole. Wilhelm makes efforts to understand himself on the basis of his acts and experiences, but he fails to create for himself a stable narrative identity. The *Lehrjahre* presents the modern human condition: the uncertainty that characterizes one’s existence and one’s understanding of oneself and others, and a temporality in which the present is constantly bringing forth new material of experience, while at the same time it is necessary to further reflect upon past experiences and to take responsibility for one’s future. This is a temporal condition that resists capture by objectivistic concepts based on location and quantity.

**Works Cited**


