REAL

Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature

Volume 39

New Conjunctures and Directions in Literary and Cultural Studies

Edited by
Magdalena Pfalzgraf, Anna Sophia Tabouratzidis,
and Ansgar Nünning

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General Editors
Tobias Döring · Ansgar Nünning
Donald E. Pease · Johannes Voelz

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Hope As Form: Writing Hope in Twenty-First Century Fiction

Heidi Lucja Liedke

1 Introduction

According to the essayist and writer Joan Didion, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live" (this is the title of a collection of non-fiction essays from 2006); for Aristotle, who uses the etymologically complex expression *elpis* – "a strange Greek word" (Kantos 2020: 417) – hope is an attitude towards the future; hope is proactive and comes close to a (realistic) imagining of a possible outcome not yet there (see also Grethlein 2024 who uses 'hope' and 'Zuversicht', in English possibly best translated as 'outlook', in a nearly synonymous fashion). In Ali Smith's *Autumn*, one of the main protagonists, Daniel Gluck, who at the beginning of the narrative is a hundred years old, explains: "And whoever makes up the story makes up the world. [...] So always try to welcome people into the home of your story" (Smith 2017: 119).

To tell stories and to hope are inextricably related (creative) processes, I argue; both are practices, modes, and attitudes that characterise *homo sapiens* and distinguishes this species from other beings; both allow the narrating and/or hoping individual to posit a slightly removed stance towards the here and now, to imagine worlds and to create a future. The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us once more that societies without stories suffer. The internet, newspapers, and opinion pieces were overflowing with lists of things that would provide hope during lockdown – crucially, stories that are told in literary texts or on the dramatic stage were represented in all of those collections.

In psychology and in the therapeutic context there is the subdiscipline of *hope studies* and *hopeology*, or *hope theory*. Matthew W. Gallagher's and Shane J. Lopez' *Oxford Handbook of Hope* (2017) is devoted to a "comprehensive overview of current knowledge regarding the science and practice of hope" but solely takes into account philosophical and psychological perspectives and questions surrounding mental health. In philosophy, there are numerous studies on hope in antiquity, for instance in the works of Aristotle and Aquinas (see

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Nussbaum 1986; Gravlee 2000; Caston/Kaster 2016; Bobier 2017). In 2020, an edited collection was published on *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope* (van den Heuvel), which sets out to provide an interdisciplinary overview on the current research done on the concept of hope, yet interdisciplinarity in this case consists of perspectives from philosophy, theology, psychology, economics, sociology, health studies, ecology, and development studies and does not include literary studies. Adam Potkay's 2022 monograph *Hope. A Literary History* turns to the topic in chapters resembling spotlights, beginning with antiquity and ending with Modernism. In a related manner, the edited collection *The Transformative Power of Literature and Narrative: Promoting Positive Change* (Assmann et al. 2023) presents multiple perspectives on the role narrative has played for individuals and communities but in its insistence on 'change' seems to subscribe to a rather linear unilateral understanding of progress.

What is missing from the research presented here is a thorough and critical investigation of depictions of hope and hoping in literary texts. In particular, I am interested in an analysis of contemporary fiction that is also informed by a narratological and pragmatic impetus to conceptualise specific kinds of writing and fiction *as a formal expression* of hope and hoping as a motor for the chosen texts. To provide a clear distinction from the terminology used in other disciplines, I suggest the term *elpilogy* to define this new subdiscipline and address this research gap. With this contribution, I want to suggest the necessity for this field and open up a space to examine the topic of hope, on a content level, but also on a narratological, pragmatic, and semantic level, as part of literary and cultural studies.

For this reason, this chapter suggests the need for a new approach to literary texts that is focused on the hopeful and ethical potential of textual affordance. By privileging that which is *directly seen* over the latent, hidden, or underlying, this approach positions itself vis-à-vis several strands of thought which have been part of different 'turns' in the last thirty years: a) it is grounded in queer theory, in particular the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002) and her thoughts on reparative reading and on José Esteban Muñoz's (2019) concept of hope and queer utopia; b) it connects an interest in reparative reading to Stephen Best's and Sharon Marcus's 'surface reading' (2009) as well as to Rita Felski's ideas concerning the limits of critique (2015) and the importance of understanding reading and interpreting literature as forging a relation to it (ibid. 2020).

The two exemplary novels I have chosen for this contribution illustrate how hope as form works by opening up surfaces of possibility. In the case of Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021) it is the epistolary form that, while harking back to the eighteenth century, opens up a meshwork

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of possibilities and hope for the two protagonists of the novel to position themselves with regard to the questions of how to lead lives that are ethically responsible and personally satisfying. Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), similarly, relies on the interpersonal exchange of two main characters. This exchange does not happen via letters but through visits and memories when Elisabeth visits the much older Daniel Gluck, who is in a care facility. The novel mainly consists of flashbacks that are rendered in David's dreams and Elisabeth's recollections of her childhood and her conversations with Daniel. In *Autumn*, it is the fragmentary which suggests an unfinishedness of the stories that are told. While the two exemplary novels provide glimpses of how hope can be found and how it figures in texts, this contribution also touches on an existing debate especially surrounding the status of reading in the digital age (see Rubery and Price 2020; Benesch 2021; Griem 2021). It makes the case for hope as a vital component of the post-critique debate raised some twenty years ago by scholars such as Bruno Latour (2004) and Rita Felski (2008; 2015), who in turn built on Michael Polanyi (1958) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002), but also Susan Sontag (1966). A main reason, it seems, that there is hardly any research on hope in literary and cultural studies is what Muñoz has referred to as the vulnerability of the concept to be pilloried for its "naïveté, impracticality, or lack of rigor" (Muñoz 2019: 10). What better way to counter an accusation than to use the skills of a literary scholar? If naïveté refers to foolishness, lack of judgment and experience, a hopeful mode that excavates what is visible and confronts it to find directions for future actions can hardly be called naive. Crucially, accusations of a lack of rigor are precisely the kinds of doubts put forward by representatives of Freudo-Marxist symptomatic, suspicious, or resistant forms of reading that would never allow a text to be read without overcoming multiple obstacles. Yet there lies the second myopia: a hopeful stance towards texts or relationships does not romanticise obstacles but actually confronts them directly rather than evading them by recurring to the hidden or invisible. The following two sections will place my considerations within the relevant scholarly context and in particular turn to Ernst Bloch and José Esteban Muñoz to then provide some preliminary examples of making visible forms of hopes in contemporary fiction in the third and fourth section of the contribution.

2 (Re)turning, (Re)surfacing

As Vera and Ansgar Nünning have summarised succinctly, the last years have seen many 'turns' in the humanities, not all of which may have indeed turned out to be as programmatic as they first seemed to be (2020). Doris Bachmann-Medick

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identifies seven distinct cultural turns, among them the interpretative turn and the cultural turn (see 2020: 54). Among even more recent turns, the eudaimonic turn stands out as one that, more emphatically than the other turns, leaves the immediate sphere of textuality and literary studies behind and thinks about the responsibility of humanities scholarship as a whole to highlight the importance (to speak of 'benefits' would only be to succumb to neoliberal discursive logic) of interdisciplinary collaborations. 'Interdisciplinarity' is indeed a term that has acquired a rather bad reputation and lost its actual meaning in being reduced to a buzzword required of any successful grant application. This is unfortunate, as the idea itself is complex: As a scholar who has worked in several interdisciplinary networks, such as Centres for Advanced Studies, multi-disciplinary humanities departments and collaborative research centres, I am well aware of the joys of exchanging thoughts with fellow researchers of different backgrounds. However, when it comes to *specific outcomes* of such interdisciplinary collaborations, in my experience the conversations with colleagues from related disciplines usually – for better or worse – end up in footnotes. They may encourage one to phrase one's thoughts in a more precise manner, certainly, as one sometimes tends to employ shortcuts that assume the reader is familiar with a given reference. Through interdisciplinary conversations, I believe, one's own scholarship is forced to leave its comfort zone, avoid lazy truisms, and hone one's own standpoint. Yet, there is also a value in refocusing one's attention on one's own subject at hand, for instance, the study of literary texts, which is under constant threats and attacks of being outsourced at many universities around the world. This value, I would argue, lies in honing a scholar's field in concentrated description and a reflection on what language has the potential to portend – a skill necessary now more than ever in times of AI where especially students of literature seem to lose their awareness for how human expression is more nuanced and intricate than statements produced without any footing.

The discipline of literary studies has always-already needed to justify its position – in contrast to other disciplines such as classicism and history. This is reflected, for instance, in the lateness of English being accepted as an independent course of study at Oxbridge (Katz 2022: 13). I therefore agree with Ansgar and Vera Nünning that the term 'eudaimonic turn' and the idea behind it may be too unspecific or perhaps even too far-fetched to signal a feasible perspective. Further, I want to shift the focus from their interest in 'forms of good life' as they can be fostered by literature to asking instead how literary texts – as models of different forms of life – in their constructedness and use of language can become springboards to provide connection points for readers and

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a space that goes beyond the immediate diegesis. In this sense, I continue the calls expressed by scholars such as Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Rita Felski that I see as being closely interrelated in their impetus to bring to the surface the role of surfaces and through this revalue their meaning and deconstruct the dichotomy of surface(s) as 'shallow' or 'meaningless' versus depth(s) as 'complex' and 'meaningful'. This dichotomy has been reinforced in the course of the second half of the twentieth century with the rise of literary theories grounded in psychoanalysis and Marxism that would focus on the latent and hidden; Paul Ricœur aptly compared Freudian quests for the hidden meaning in the unconscious with the interpretative hunt of the literary reader to decode symbolic meaning, which was termed a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (in Best and Marcus 2009: 5). In 1981, Frederic Jameson emphatically described interpretation as "unmasking" (in ibid.: 5), thus further cementing the role of the textual surface as a mask and distortion that obscures 'something else'. Sedgwick, in reply to that, conceptualised reparative forms of reading that resist political pessimism and despair; they resist the urge to conclude that there is no point in loving, in caring for others, and in wanting more. To be engaged means to position oneself as a reparative reader – a reader who refuses to accept the seemingly knowing, anxious, 'paranoid' certainty that no unthinkable horrific event will ever take her by surprise. What follows from this is that for a reader who is thus positioned it is necessary and constitutive to experience surprises, some of them terrible, others positive.

In 2024 a renewed interest in the 'thing' – that which is perceptible, visible, and evident: the textual surface – is called for. There are multiple reasons for that but I want to only mention three that seem to be most pertinent: first, the aesthetics of social media are primarily propelled forward by surfaces, but of a very misleading kind; media such as TikTok and Instagram work qua the power of surfaces but only in a way that potentially misinforms or provides shortcuts to information; second, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about a renewed need for community and togetherness and, third, in 2025 more so than for a long time after the end of the Cold War, the world is in a state of wars and anxieties, not unlike what Bruno Latour – written under the impression of the terrorist attacks in the World Trade Center in 2001 – has described as an atmosphere of

> Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction?

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> More iconoclasm to iconoclasm? What has become of the critical spirit? Has it run out of steam? (2004: 225)

Latour's article is an intervention of a self-critical kind as he also questions the premises of his own profession. Arguably, for humanities scholars it is especially difficult to differentiate between their 'professional' and 'personal' selves as they mostly work and think outside of a nine-to-five regime. To ask the questions Latour asks, therefore, is not only to ask what kind of a scholar one is, but also what kind of an attitude one wants to take toward the world.

Latour's diagnosis is acutely relevant twenty years after the publication of his article. The now is characterised by an alarming amount of hidden, contradictory, and potentially fake news. Literature can provide a counter-space to that, especially when it is approached carefully and attentively. The surface of the literary text, when regarded as consisting of an "intricate verbal structure" (Best and Marcus 2009: 10) and embraced as "an affective and ethical stance" (ibid.) can project an attitude and relationality towards others and the world which can provide hope. In demarcating my understanding of hope and hoping, I want to turn to Ernst Bloch in particular but also Muñoz's reading of him, which is informed by queer theory.

3 "The most powerful telescope": Hope and Attachment

In *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (*The Principle of Hope*), Ernst Bloch provides a treatise on hope that takes on a perspective that is primarily grounded in Marxist theory but also affect theory. For Bloch,

> [t]he emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. (Bloch 1996: 3)

In other words, hope can awaken unexplored capacities in a person which do not stay immobile but actually constitute a movement forward. Fear, as Bloch points out, can also be anticipatory, but hope is taken "as a directing act of a cognitive kind" (Bloch 1996: 12). Consequently, the "imagination and the thoughts of future intention described in this way are utopian, this again not in a narrow sense of the word which only defines what is bad […], but rather in fact in the newly tenable sense of the forward dream, of anticipation in general" (Bloch 1996: 12). Here, the sense of a direction beyond the momentary, a movement to a – primarily temporal – beyond is crucial. Crucially, as if to counter any claims

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that such hopeful thinking may be akin to having one's 'head in the clouds' Bloch stresses that

> the contents of this most immediate nearness still ferment entirely in the darkness of the lived moment as the real word-knot, world-riddle. Utopian consciousness wants to look far into the distance, but ultimately only in order to penetrate the darkness so near it of the just lived moment, in which everything that is both drives and is hidden from itself. In other words: we need the most powerful telescope, that of polished utopian consciousness, in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness. (Bloch 1996: 12)

In Bloch's thinking, hope is still functional and grounded in the present, only leaving it momentarily in order to come back with an attitude that metaphorically resembles a telescope. Hope is "astonished contemplation" – and, as such, could as well be used to describe the main characteristic of a reader of literature and a literary scholar. Isn't it curiosity, restlessness, and the will to expand one's capacities that motivates these kinds of readers? Similarly, optimism, as Lauren Berlant describes it, is "the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept or scene" (2011: 1–2). Both Bloch and Berlant describe hope and optimism, respectively, as emotions and attachments that are supposed to compensate for a lack and the sense of loss and deferred arrival (as in a state of not-having-arrived); both scholars use the semantic fields of force, movement, and directionality. In the two case studies discussed below, this 'force' manifests itself primarily in the form of (playful) dialogue or in the special form of exchanged letters which are both dialogic but in the moment of their creation come closer to a soliloquy. Bloch uses two other specifications which are useful in unpacking the ways in which hope for him is not elusive: First, he differentiates between abstract hope, which would be similar to wishing or wishful thinking, and concrete or educated hope, which is "a mode of hoping that is cognizant of exactly what obstacles present themselves in the face of obstacles that so often feel insurmountable" (Muñoz 2019: 10). When faced with obstacles, disappointments are necessarily part of the equation: Political and historical situations turn out to be disappointing, lovers let one down. It is, however, out of that friction that hope thrives. Acts of imagination and of anticipation need disappointments and moments of astonishment.

In his *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz engages with Bloch in order to theorise his understanding of queerness, which, for him "is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing [...] Queerness

is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (2019: 1). It is noteworthy that Muñoz uses Bloch as one of his main trajectories even though, as he acknowledges, it is "a risky move because it has been rumoured that Bloch did not hold very progressive opinions on issues of gender and sexuality" (2019: 2). Rumours create suspicion create rejection – it seems apt that Muñoz then decides to use Bloch's theories as an opening in queer thought as well as if to pick up on the idealist impetus and reappropriate the framework for his own means. To reiterate: What Muñoz primarily picks up on is the anticipatory orientation and movement of hope, its embracing of complexity and obstacles (rather than banal optimism and daydreaming, which can potentially be unthinking and lack a proactive outlook towards a situation in the immediate present or near future), and the intersection of concrete utopias and educated hope, the latter being the realm of "historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential" (2019: 3). Muñoz is one of the few to assertively (dare to) utter hope as an attitude within the queer existence – as mentioned, such positions are often rejected, as queerness, as he himself acknowledges "is not yet here" (1); as long as queerness is still a target of hatred, othering, and marginalisation, it indeed takes a lot of hope to even exist. Yet looking at the potential of this *despiteness* there is something to be learned from these discussions of hope and queerness also for the study of literature: Is it not also a bold act to read stories *despite* their being relatively uneconomical, both in terms of usually not having a direct practical purpose and representing a rather impractical form of getting a 'message' across? Should literature not precisely be the space to practice and rehearse expressing concrete utopias, engaging with different literary forms as playgrounds for hopeful attachment towards a nearness not yet near?

Hauling this concept into the realm of literary studies from a queer perspective, Bloch's thoughts can be applied to the potentiality literary texts can afford. The term affordance itself has gained renewed traction through Caroline Levine's *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, where she begins her argument by extracting the common definition of the term 'form' as it has been used in both the social and aesthetic realm to denote "an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping" (2015: 3). In cataloguing how form can be both constraining, travelling, and involved in political work (when literary forms, in specific historical contexts, make certain kinds of expression possible, for instance), Levine points to how form can be understood as a link between the aesthetic and the sociocultural, or the fixed and the unfinished. In order to grasp these contradictions inherent in the functionality of form, she uses the term 'affordance', which in design theory describes "the potential uses

or actions latent in materials and designs" (2015: 6) – potential uses that can often be contradictory or unexpected (cotton, for instance, affords both softness and sturdiness). Turning to literature specifically, Levine writes that "[e]ach form can only do so much", yet encourages readers and scholars to "ask instead what potentialities lie latent – though not always obvious – in aesthetic and social arrangements" (6–7). What I do find useful in Levine's argumentation is her rebuttal of Marxist rejections of literary and aesthetic form as epiphenomenal. Such a rejection is limiting as it does not sufficiently acknowledge that reality, or in Hayden White's words, "social formations" (in Levine 2015: 14), are also organised by forms. Where Levine loses her potentiality is in her dwelling so much on the constraints of individual forms.

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus are more hopeful in this regard. They have coined the term 'surface reading' (2009) in order to dismantle the dichotomy between textual surfaces as being deceptive and in need of being torn away in order to reveal something that is 'true'. Written out of a similar historical urgency to that of Latour, Best and Marcus redirect scholars' and readers' attention to the surface as that "what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*" (2009: 9, original emphasis). They then define different characteristics of the surface, two of which are particularly salient in connection with my considerations on hope as form: First, they speak of the task of the reader to "embrace [...] the surface as an affective and ethical stance" (10) by which they mean a kind of attachment to texts that accepts and enjoys (?) them rather than using them as a means to achieve something else, especially perhaps perfect one's own mastery (as a particularly skilful reader, for instance). Chiming in with Susan Sontag, they also think of this stance as an "erotics of art" that resembles an attending more than (dominating) mastery. Second, they highlight the freedom of attention that can come into being if a reader attends to a text's surface. Such an attention "assumes that texts can reveal their own truths because texts mediate themselves" (11) – it can even be anti-capitalist, as, in a nod to New Criticism and modernist literature, the "accent on immersion in texts (without paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value)" (16) allows for an "immersion in texts [which] frees us from the apathy and instrumentality of capitalism by allowing us to bathe in the artwork's disinterested purposelessness" (14). This attentiveness can indeed take on the form of "a kind of freedom" (16). The case studies in the following sections illustrate in what ways form in the two selected novels does indeed constitute forms of hope and hoping that are always-already reflecting on obstacles and on how they can be expressed despite being seemingly naïve, ordinary, or "unnatural" (Smith 2016: 83).

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4 Invulnerable to the Presence of a Beautiful World

The Irish writer Sally Rooney polarises readers. As Merve Emre has summarised so astutely, Rooney's novels have been widely praised but at the same time criticised for their

> moral simplicity, their idle politics, their sexual naiveté, and their banal neuroses; for the slight touch of stupidity that attends their language of type, whether moral (good/bad), political (liberal/Marxist), economic (working-class/middle-class), psychological (normal/traumatized), or sexual (straight/queer). (2024: n.p.)

Rooney, indeed, plays with these types in all of her novels published until now, her debut *Conversations with Friends* (2017), her second novel *Normal People* (2018) and her third work *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021). Her first two novels are primarily coming-of-age-novels and focus on student life, (romantic) relationships, and trauma. Arguably, in *Beautiful World*, the characters, although in their early thirties, are still in the process of coming of age. However, they reflect more on their position within the world and how to relate to it rather than being engaged in significant events. Scholars such as Catherine Gallagher and Lisa Zunshine, respectively, speak about the novel genre as consisting of individuals who are "imaginary concoctions" (Gallagher 2005: 62) and that reading novels is keeping track of the characters' "unreality", of remembering "that literary characters are not real people at all" (Zunshine 2006: 17). For Gallagher, referents for character types are "the thing-in-the-world" (2005: 62) – always more, however, than 'just a thing'. As Emre comments, characters can be shape-shifters, and they are always in contact with their referents. Depending on their position in the novel or on what the reader (wants to) see(s), through character types, the novel can be either bound to the world or freed from it (2024: n. p.). The characters in Rooney's novel *Beautiful World* seem to be aware of the fact that they are constructions; Eileen and Alice also seem aware that they are extensions of their creator, Rooney.

As the novel goes on, the reader develops an understanding for, and perhaps even attachment to the characters, but not as individuals – rather, in their relationality to others. This is also mirrored in the enacting of distance when the two friends can only be intimate with one another (as friends) in emails they write while they are many kilometres apart.

Echoing the common motif of estrangement in Irish literature, they are out of touch with their lives. They are also, as is so often the case with Rooney's characters, Marxists, who struggle with the fact that they are benefiting from capitalism (at least in the case of Alice). Alice, a well-known and rich novelist, prefers the anonymity of Tinder and meeting a man, Felix, who has no idea who

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she is. He works in a warehouse and is not interested in literature. Eileen, once a brilliant student, now has a rather unsatisfying job at a literary magazine and considers herself working-class. She is in an on-off-romance with a man called Simon, who is engaged to another woman. Eileen and Alice have been friends since the first year of their studies of English and former roommates, engaged in a triangular friendship with Simon, who would visit them regularly, “standing with his back against the radiator, arguing with Alice about God [Simon is devoutly Catholic], and cheerfully criticizing their poor housekeeping skills” (2021: 30).

The plot is related in the uneven-numbered chapters, and readers are introduced to both female protagonists first via heterodiegetic narration and external focalisation as “A woman sat in a hotel bar, watching the door” (3) in chapter 1 and “At twenty past twelve on a Wednesday afternoon, a woman sat behind a desk in a shared office in Dublin city centre, scrolling through a text document” (19) in chapter 3. As each of the six chapters devoted to each of the characters’ storylines could, theoretically, stand on its own, it is telling that these first sentences do not provide any names – no names, no agency. Those first sentences achieve three things: they keep us at bay, at a distance; they anticipate different positionalities in terms of social status of the two women, different positions within the net of capitalist employment [sitting in a hotel bar vs. sharing an office]; conversely, they imply a certain comparability of a ‘female existence’ and, more specifically, address the question of the role of women in Irish fiction.

In the novel, it is the epistolary form that, while harking back to the eighteenth century, opens up a meshwork of possibilities for the two protagonists to position themselves with regard to the questions of how to lead lives that are ethically responsible and personally satisfying. Maria Löschnigg and Rebekka Schuh have recently argued that ‘epistolarity’ as a feature of novels and short stories seems to have been re-emerging since the late twentieth century (2018). They distinguish between “epistolary fiction” as “narrative literature which includes epistolary modes that propel the plot and are essential for the structural denotation of meaning” (2018: 16) and epistolary modes (ranging from letters to digital forms of communication) that are “integrated into the narrative” (ibid.). Contextualising the epistolary and thinking about reasons for its continuous popularity, Löschnigg and Schuh also point to Linda Kauffman’s 1992 study on the epistolary in modern fiction where she claims that the “very looseness of its [the epistolary mode’s] conventions has made it resilient, adaptable, and relevant in diverse historical epochs” (xiv). Notably, this characterisation in its exact form also can be used to refer to the essay, also usefully described as a

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mode, and its versatility and adaptability throughout the ages (see, for instance, Aldrich 2016).

In differentiation from Löschnigg's and Schuh's rather dichotomous classification of the epistolary, *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* presents a third category of uses of the epistolary: The emails do *not quite* propel the plot, but they are also *not quite* merely integrated into the narrative. They are also not set apart graphically from the rest of the text. They do indeed represent essayistic monologues uttered by Eileen and Alice that hover slightly above the narrative and function like meta-commentaries rather than actual plot devices. They are meta-narrative devices, constantly reflecting on the limitations and possibilities of fiction itself; they are also meta-authorial devices in that Rooney, too, may insert herself via the character of Alice, the over-aware and occasionally insecure successful young writer. In their distance from the text, however, they constitute textual spaces of hope and possibility: What the characters cannot or do not want to say as characters-in-the-plot they can express as characters-removed-from-the plot. They constitute, therefore, a force that enables the characters to move out of themselves, and try out moving towards different ideas, different considerations of their relationality toward others. As mentioned, the dialogic form and the soliloquy are the frames the characters use in which to 'play out' these thought processes. The passages themselves have a different tonality than the rest of the narrative. Such a temporary removal within the diegesis, that is both marked temporally (the letters both look back and to some extent fill the gaps between the plot-centred chapters) and spatially (they are separate chapters) creates intra-diegetic spaces of possibility, in that – similar to the essay – thoughts and worries can be 'tried out'.

Throughout the novel, the even-numbered chapters provide different perspectives on the uneven-numbered chapters and expand the glimpses one gets of the main characters. While Alice, in chapter 1, seems nondescript and closed-off while on her first date with Felix, chapter 2 begins with Alice's expression of worries and self-doubt: "You should know that our correspondence is my way of holding on to life, taking notes on it, and thereby preserving something of my – otherwise almost worthless, or even entirely worthless – existence of this rapidly degenerating planet…" (2021: 15). This is hyperbole, certainly, and Alice also includes this preamble to make her friend Eileen feel guilty for not writing back sooner; at the same time, however, the emails are just that: a communication by letters, co-responses. Deriving from medieval Latin *correspondentia*, the term denotes "congruity, harmony, agreement" (*OED*). This harmony cannot be interrupted by the plot, which is why chapter 4 then can directly pick up with chapter 2 and Alice's guilt on being dependent

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on a convenience store and the lifestyle it represents, from the relying on plastic-bottles and pre-packaged lunches. It then seems irrelevant that chapter 3 provides an introduction to Eileen's childhood and youth, her parents and her complicated relationship with Simon – in chapter 4, instead, Eileen posits – as if also aware of this incongruity and break in the narrative – that the "present has become discontinuous. Each day, even each hour of each day, replaces and makes irrelevant the time before, and the events of our lives make sense only in relation to a perpetually updating timeline of news content" (2021: 39). As this structure continues throughout *Beautiful World*, the characters emerge as characters who do not primarily act but write and read. It is telling, perhaps, that Rooney has spoken about the centrality of emails also in her own life as a means to converse with her own friends and how "the voice that I have when I'm writing emails feels like my voice" (in Nolan 2017: n.p.). It is for that reason that despite the necessary scepticism regarding the reliability of letters (or emails) since the inception of the epistolary novel in the eighteenth century, the letters seem 'truer' than the plot chapters. This is because in them, they rehearse how to apprehend people and situations, how to apprehend what it means to be a flawed human being – and to still hope for a chance to catch a glimpse of the beauty in the world, for instance in the shape of long-standing friendships.

Through the letters, the characters allow themselves to be vulnerable, to express the obstacles they are facing, especially concerning a mismatch between their ethical outlook on life and their actions, but also to come to terms with their hopes and worries. Letters, as is typical for epistolary fiction, are, of course, also performative, presenting crumbs leading the way towards how the characters want to be seen. But crucially, they are also like backstage passes, tickets granting a view of the characters' vulnerability. I agree with Emre, who argues that reading the novel is "like looking at a row of letters through lenses of an incrementally stronger resolution" (2024: n.p.), especially since in chapter 25, the friends finally reunite, when Eileen and Simon visit Alice and Felix and stay with them for a few days. The remaining six chapters of the novel seem to rush somewhat towards tentative, admittedly heteronormative, new phases in the characters' lives – engagement, starting a family, leading a committed relationship. After having exchanged emails for a long time, when they meet on the platform, they embrace, "unspeaking … for a second, two seconds, three" (Rooney 2021: 250). In this moment, words do not matter, nor does the mundane banality of the busy train station; in this moment, they are

> unaware, or something more than unaware – … [they are] somehow invulnerable to, untouched by, vulgarity and ugliness, glancing for a moment into something deeper,

> something concealed beneath the surface of life, not unreality but a hidden reality: the presence at all times, in all places, of a beautiful world. (250)

As if echoing the concerns of surface reading, this is an appeal to look closer beneath the immediate surface (as in distortions, lies people tell each other, pretences) to see that everywhere, potentially, there is hope for something like a virtuous life, one in which one's own vulgarity and ugliness (for this is what the characters in the novel grapple with) does not constitute an obstacle. There is hope, yet while being able to express it needs to be practiced in/with words, it is this embrace that captures it best – Bloch's "most powerful telescope".

Hope can be found in everyday scenes such as eating breakfast together "with clouds of steam from the kettle, clattering of plates and cups, sunlight billowing through the back window" (259), it can be found in watching their respective partners get acquainted with one another, talking to another "their shadows cast behind them on the sand, dappled blue" (266), it can be found when Felix answers Alice's question whether she loves him with "Jesus, God, yes" (274). Eileen is the one to end the novel in an email to Alice; looking ahead to what awaits her as she writes about her pregnancy, she seems aware of the effect such a collection of scenes as presented in the final chapters might have on (symptomatic?) readers. Her answer, pre-emptively countering accusations of naïveté, is: "And I want that – to prove that the most ordinary thing about human beings is not violence or greed but love and care. To prove it to whom, I wonder. Myself, maybe" (337). Crucially, violence and greed as characteristic for the world in which Eileen and the others live and the people they encounter, as obstacles they face, are pushed aside and reassigned a hopeful value: if only to themselves.

5 "Language is Like Poppies" – On Reading as a Constancy

Ali Smith's *Autumn*, the first novel in her *Seasonal Quartet*, is likewise structured around a friendship that is glued together by stories the characters tell each other and by mutual acts of hopeful imagination. Dubbed the first Brexit novel by Sarah Lyall (2017) and others, Laura Schmitz-Justen sums up the doubts regarding the importance of the topic in the novel by pointing to how the term Brexit is not even mentioned until *Spring*, the third novel (see 2022: 318; see also Crown 2016; Wally 2018: 77; Tönnies and Henneböhl 2019: 181). At the same time, descriptions such as the following are very context-specific, setting the stage for an atmosphere of doom and disinformation. The term Brexit is that-which-must-not-be-named because it does not have to be named, as it is on everyone's mind in the summer of 2016:

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> All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing. All across the country, what had happened whipped about by itself as if a live electric wire had snapped off a pylon in a storm and was whipping about in the air above the trees, the roofs, the traffic. All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. All across the country, people looked up Google: *what is EU*? All across the country, people looked up Google: *move to Scotland*. All across the country, people looked up Google: *Irish passport applications*. [...] All across the country, nobody spoke about it. All across the country, nobody spoke about anything else. (2016: 59–60, original emphasis)

The anaphoric sentence structure draws attention to the omnipresent worries on people's minds in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum; the whole three-page chapter is structured in that manner. The passage is a reference to the first sentence of the novel (which reads: "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature", 3), which is in turn a reference to the opening of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and furthermore evokes Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Two novels, written one hundred years apart, one about the time of the French Revolution, one about the violent impact of colonialism in Igboland (today's south-eastern Nigeria) in the late nineteenth century, constitute two foundational pillars, and serve as reminders of the cruelties humans have inflicted on one another from the beginning of time, in modernity in an even more rapid succession, as "That's the thing about things." *Autumn*, I argue, disrupts this repetitiveness and thing-ness of history manifesting itself in the present by recurring to a mode that is not focused on thing-ness but on hope. Centred on the intergenerational friendship of Elisabeth Demand and Daniel Gluck, who meet as next-door neighbours, the novel in particular puts forward the potential of interpersonal attachment and hope as a mode that enables people to expand their own capacities in Berlant's understanding of a 'force'. The novel also depicts acts of hope as forms of attention that allow the bearer of the gaze to see beyond the thing-ness of the here and now. More abstractly, this is enacted by numerous references to reading and the role of the imagination and, more specifically, to the ongoing impact of the pop artist Pauline Boty on Daniel as he looks back on his life and thinks about what brought him joy.

During one of their first encounters, when Elisabeth is eleven and Daniel around eighty, they strike up a conversation which is immediately concerned with play and puns:

> Hello, he said. What you reading?
> Elisabeth showed him her empty hands.
> Does it look like I'm reading anything? she said.
> Always be reading something, he said. Even when we're not physically reading. How else will we read the world? Think of it as a constant.
> A constant what? Elisabeth said.
> A constant constancy, Daniel said.
> [...]
> Words don't get grown, Elisabeth said.
> They do, Daniel said.
> Words aren't plants, Elisabeth said.
> Words are themselves organisms, Daniel said.
> Oregano-isms, Elisabeth said.
> Herbal and verbal, Daniel said. Language is like poppies. It just takes something to churn the earth round them up, and when it does up come the sleeping words, bright red, fresh, blowing about. (2016: 68–69)

When everything is potentially a story, it seems apt to never allow oneself to stop reading. Daniel's definition of words as organisms connects with notions of surface and reparative reading: Rather than digging to the roots of the plant, attention needs to be given to that which is visible. Later on, the two play a game together that is called "I tell you the first line of a story". Here Daniel's and Elisabeth's views on what can and cannot be made up clash:

> There is no point in making up a world, Elisabeth said, when there's already a real world. There's just the world, and there's the truth about the world.
> You mean, there's the truth, and there's the made-up version of it that we get told about the world, Daniel said.
> No. The *world* exists. *Stories* are made up, Elisabeth said.
> [...]
> And whoever makes up the story makes up the world, Daniel said. So always try to welcome people into the home of your story. That's my suggestion. (2016: 119)

This is an echo of Eileen's wish to prove to herself that it can be an ethical project to manifest love and care as the most ordinary features of human life. It also connects back to the ways in which literature can be approached and reading can be practised, namely as an attitude of hope. When Elisabeth's mother hears about how her daughter and the elderly neighbour spend their time – for instance, when he tells her "about a woman whose body is made up of pictures instead of body. It's perfectly clear" (82) – the mother's initial reaction is to call this "Unnatural. Unhealthy" (83). So the pair of friends face the

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obstacle of a friendship that is ‘forbidden’; Daniel throughout his life grapples with the obstacles his losses (of his sister, of his health) create. Daniel uses his imagination to recall those collages by Pauline Boty that have lingered on with him – when studying art history, Elisabeth later writes her dissertation on Boty and argues that “art like this examines and makes possible a reassessment of the outer appearances of things by transforming them into something other than themselves” (226). Since Boty’s collages have been lost for a long time, her artwork could not realise this potential, but only constituted renewed loss and “a process of renewed fragmentation” (Schmitz-Justen 2022: 325). Yet Daniel, through his imagination and his ability to verbalise his recollections of the paintings, has contributed to Boty’s becoming visible in another form: in Elisabeth’s attachment to her art in her dissertation. These are hopeful acts of connection that create counterworlds and counternarratives that always have one purpose: encourage people to focus on that which is visible and prevent it from being overlooked, erased, or forgotten. This is what Daniel’s sister has expressed to him in a letter (there it is again, the meta-narrative device used to deliver the necessary commentary):

> *It’s a question of how we regard our situation … how we look and see where we are, and how we choose, if we can, when we are seeing, undeceivedly, not to despair and, at the same time, how best to act. Hope is exactly that, that’s all it is, a matter of how we deal with the negative acts towards human beings by other human beings in the world … and that most important of all we’re here for a mere blink of the eyes, that’s all.* (189–190, original emphasis)

That’s all it is.

6 Preliminary Conclusion

It is all, but it also isn’t all. Hope does not need to be dismissed as representing a banal form of optimism – hope, as this chapter suggests, is everywhere and can be put to a creative mode in contemporary fiction. While hope as a mode and attitude connects with forms of reading such as reparative and surface reading, it can be found in contemporary fiction both as a topic that the characters grapple with but especially also on a formal level, when the texts themselves are bound together by structures that offer additional, telescopic views into their characters’ minds and allow them to express their uncertainties and worries. These structures are necessarily expressed within those spaces in the narratives that I have referred to as constituting the ‘not quite’: not quite belonging to the plot but at the same time creating opportunities for the characters to relate

themselves – to their dialogical partners and to themselves. Hope can also be found when the constitutive elements of literature – language and words – are played with to create less rigid forms of relating to the world. Elpilogy, then, can be the study of hoping as a relationality towards the stories one creates (also to oneself) and towards others. It is hardly surprising that such modes can gain new traction in a political and social environment that confronts the individual with an increasing number of obstacles. Crucially, however, without this awareness of obstacles, hope would not be possible. In this light, hope does not expand itself as a form into a void but needs a counterpoint in order to develop its force. Elpilogy, rather than constituting a study of forms of hope per se, should thus also be understood as a study of hope *despite* and in friction with other narrative modes and intradiegetically thematised affects.

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