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# Philosophical underpinnings of the narrative turn in theory and fiction

Hanna Meretoja

I argue here that the narrative turn does not pertain only to theoretical discourse but is a broader cultural phenomenon, particularly perceptible in twentieth-century French literature but not exclusive to it. It is characterized by acknowledging not only the cognitive but also the existential relevance of narrative for our being in the world; I hence propose conceptualizing it as a shift towards a hermeneutically-oriented understanding of narrative's ontological significance and of subjectivity as being constituted in a process of narrative interpretation that takes shape in a dialogical relation to socio-culturally mediated models of sense-making. By analyzing the epistemological, ontological and ethical aspects of this turn, I attempt to provide an overview of its main philosophical dimensions.

The “narrative turn” has already been narrated in different ways, with reference to several parallel and intersecting developments that have taken place in the humanities and social sciences during the past few decades. Broadly speaking, however, the expression is used to denote the general acceptance, across a wide range of critical discourse, of narrativity as fundamental not only to literature but to human reality in general.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will suggest that the narrative turn is not only a phenomenon pertaining to theoretical discourse but a broader cultural phenomenon, particularly perceptible in twentieth-century French literature but not exclusive to it. In general, it appears to me that the interconnections between theoretical views of narrative and the evolution of narrative forms in

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1. For accounts of the narrative turn, see, e.g., Hinchman & Hinchman, 2001; Kreiswirth, 2005; Fludernik, 2006, pp. 46–48; Herman, 2007, pp. 4–5; Hyvärinen, 2006, 2010; Alber & Fludernik, 2010. In my dissertation and forthcoming book on the French narrative turn, I discuss the theoretical narrative turn in relation to a similar development in French fiction; in it I develop in more detail some of the arguments of this article.

literary history have not yet received adequate attention.<sup>2</sup> I will argue that crucial to the narrative turn both in theory and fiction is a turn towards acknowledging not only the cognitive but also the existential relevance of narrative for our being in the world. I propose that this aspect of the turn can be conceptualized as a shift towards a hermeneutically-oriented understanding of the ontological significance of narratives: a(n often implicit) view of narratives as essential for human existence and of subjectivity as being constituted in a process of narrative interpretation that takes shape in a dialogical relation to socially and culturally mediated models of sense-making.

The roots of the narrative turn have often been traced back to the general interest that emerged in France in the mid-1960s, under the influence of Russian formalism and structuralist linguistics, in the study of “narrative-in-general,” that is, in narrative as not only an essential aspect of literature but as a more general cross-cultural phenomenon (see, e.g., Barthes, 1966/1982; Ryan, 2005, p. 344; Herman, 2007, p. 4). Another important contribution to the narrative turn was the debate, launched roughly during the same period (and partly under the influence of the French debate) by philosophers of history, from Arthur Danto to Hayden White, on the relation between narrative fiction and historiography. This debate led to a burgeoning awareness of the way in which explanations offered by the human sciences involve a narrative dimension, undermining their pretensions to neutrality and objectivity.<sup>3</sup> It was not until the 1980s, however, that the study of narrative was brought into connection with the problematics of subjectivity and identity, and attention was drawn to the way in which narratives shape our relation to the world and to ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

What accounts of the narrative turn tend to ignore, however, is that the initial interest in narrative-in-general (as exemplified by Barthes) was coupled with a thoroughgoing suspicion towards narrative, often seen as a form of ideology, and with a powerful problematization, by the novels of the time, of narrativity

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2. I believe this is still true, although several theorists have lamented the way in which narrative theory has remained separate from the study of narrative in literary history (see Phelan & Rabinowitz, 1994; Fludernik, 2003; Nünning, 2009).

3. For an overview of this debate, which largely took place in the pages of the journal *History and Theory* in the 1960s, see Roberts, 2001, pp. 1–22; Clark, 2004, pp. 86–105.

4. Important landmarks in this development were MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981), Ricoeur’s *Temps et récit* (1983–1985, *Time and Narrative*) and Bruner’s (e.g. 1987) work in narrative psychology. The connection between narrative and identity had already been presented by Hannah Arendt (1958/1998), but her ideas on narrative were not widely circulated before Ricoeur drew upon and elaborated them.

as well as of representationality in general.<sup>5</sup> I would like to suggest that although the critical debate on narrativity was crucial in preparing the ground for the narrative turn, it was only later, when narratives were accepted as crucial to human existence – in its various social and cultural manifestations – that it makes more sense to talk about a narrative turn. Moreover, I will argue that both the antinarrativist movement and the narrative turn were perceptible in narrative fiction significantly before they found formulation in theoretical discourse. In what follows, I will analyze the narrative turn by differentiating between its three philosophical dimensions: epistemological (concerned with questions such as how we know and understand), ontological (concerned with questions of being, existence and reality, such as what is real and how we exist) and ethical (concerned with questions such as what is right and how we act in the world with others). While it is important to acknowledge the interconnections between these dimensions, the analytic distinction between them allows us to see more clearly different aspects of the turn.<sup>6</sup>

### The epistemological dimension

The narrative turn has been commonly depicted in epistemological terms, as a turn towards recognizing the significance of narrative as a cognitive instrument, a vehicle of organizing experiences and making sense of the world.<sup>7</sup> I endeavor to elucidate this epistemological shift by showing that although in the late modern spiritual climate, both before and after the narrative turn, the intellectually predominant epistemological position has been one that stresses the fundamental limitations of our capacity to know and understand the world and ourselves, after the turn narrative sense-making processes have been considered not so much as intrinsically distortive (i.e. a means of falsifying reality) but rather as integral to the way in which we orient ourselves in the world.

A crucial starting-point for the rejection of narrative, from the modernist and avant-garde movements of the beginning of the twentieth century to the

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5. For example, one of the “fathers” of narratology, Genette (1969/1976, p. 1), demands, as late as 1969, that it is necessary to pay greater attention to the “problematic aspect of the narrative act.” On the poststructuralist suspicion of narrative, see, e.g., Kellner, 1987 and Davis, 2004 (particularly pp. 103–128).

6. For my analysis of the interconnections between these dimensions, in relation to different philosophical positions on narrative, see Meretoja (in press).

7. On scholars who see narrative as a cognitive instrument, as opposed to those for whom narrative has ontological significance, see Ritivoi, 2005, p. 231; Hinchman & Hinchman, 2001, pp. xix–xx.

experimental literature of the 1960s, was skepticism towards the human ability to comprehend and make sense of the world. For example, the antinarrativist critique presented by such thinkers as Sartre and Barthes was rooted in the experience that reality is no longer apprehended in a way that would justify the ideal of objectivity underlying the self-understanding – and typical plot-constructions – of literary realism. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947, *What is Literature?*), Sartre asserts that contemporary literature, by contrast, depicts the world in a certain situation, in the uncertainty of the present moment: It has no “all-knowing witnesses,” no characters with “a privileged point of view either upon the event or upon itself” (Sartre, 1947/1950, pp. 166–167). As is often the case, such theoretical insights were formulated after the fact, when this development had already taken place in narrative fiction. It can be seen, for example, in modernist, non-linear narrative techniques or in Sartre’s own novel *La Nausée* (1938, *Nausea*), whose protagonist, Antonin Roquentin, suggests that there is something fundamentally false about the narrativization of life: “you have to choose: to live or to recount” (Sartre, 1938/1965, p. 61; “il faut choisir: vivre ou raconter,” Sartre, 1938/1978, pp. 61–62). In the 1950s, the theoretical critique of narrative became sharper, for example in the writings of Barthes, who, in *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953, *Writing Degree Zero*), analyzes the use of the preterite (*le passé simple*) as the cornerstone of realist narrative fiction, which pretends to provide a causal explanation of the narrated events and to present them as part of the intelligible order of the world (Barthes, 1953/1984, pp. 26–27).

Continuing and radicalizing this legacy, the *nouveau roman*, as its leading figure and spokesman, Alain Robbe-Grillet (1963/1989), puts it, questions the “intelligibility of the world” and depicts how the world “refuses to conform to our habits of apprehension and to our classification” (p. 21, 32). Robbe-Grillet reproaches the Balzacian novel for relying on an outmoded epistemology, that is, for according the narrator a God-like, omniscient position, and celebrates Camus’s *L'Étranger* (1942, *The Stranger*) for making non-comprehension the starting-point of narration. Whereas Balzac or Dickens wrote novels to express a certain understanding of the world, for Camus and the *nouveaux romanciers*, it is rather the *inability to understand* that functions as “the motor of narration” (Robbe-Grillet, 2005, pp. 24–26; Robbe-Grillet, 2001, p. 316). The *nouveaux romanciers* agreed on this point. As Claude Simon (1986) puts it, what most importantly unites them is “a common feeling that one can never be entirely sure of anything” (p. 86). Following Sartre and Barthes, they blamed narrative form – “systematic use of the past tense and the third person, unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots” (Robbe-Grillet, 1963/1989, p. 32) – for pretending to explain the world by presenting it in the form of a series of causally and logically connected events.

The *nouveaux romans* explicitly thematize the experience of having only “a very fragmentary idea of the things surrounding us” (“une idée très fragmentaire des choses qui nous entourent,” Robbe-Grillet, 1978, pp. 197–198), an experience encapsulated in the repeated assertions of non-comprehension by the anonymous soldier in *Dans le labyrinthe* (1959, *In the Labyrinth*): “I don’t know” (“Je ne sais pas”). Most importantly, however, this experience is rendered through the narrative organization of the novels. In *Dans le labyrinthe*, not only the protagonist but also the reader and the narrator are unable to relate their perceptions to each other so as to orient themselves in the space projected by the text; instead of being able to draw narrative connections between their experiences, they go through the experience of being in a disorienting labyrinth in which it is always uncertain in what sense something is the same or different in relation to something encountered earlier. The way in which the text is constructed as a series of more or less disconnected fragments, questions the principle of representationality, in terms of which narrativity has usually been conceptualized. This applies to the textualist strand of postmodernist literature in general, which claims that the text refers only to itself (see, e.g., Simon, 1972; Federman, 1984). It thereby problematizes the traditional epistemological claim of narrative, which is based on the idea that narrative represents a series of events that supposedly pre-exist and are ontologically prior to their narration.

It has been crucial to fiction that can be associated with the “narrative turn,” from the 1970s onwards, and to “post-postmodernist” literature in general, that the emphasis has shifted from the impossibility of literature to refer to reality and from its tendency to distort reality to the way in which literature takes part in and continues the process whereby we encounter the world through the mediation of cultural interpretations or representations. At that time, a plethora of French novelists, such as Michel Tournier, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, Patrick Modiano, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Dominique Fernandez, Annie Ernaux and Danièle Sallenave, began to question the way in which the *nouveau roman* had banned storytelling.<sup>8</sup> They not only reject the then-fashionable rhetoric of self-referentiality but also

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8. The “return of narrative” in the French novel after the experimental phase of the 1950s and 1960s is a well-known phenomenon (see, e.g., Kibédi Varga, 1988; Davis & Fallaize, 2000), and “narrative as theme” in French fiction has also been studied (Prince, 1992), but these phenomena have not been related to the “narrative turn” that has taken place in the humanities and social sciences since the late 1970s (which I endeavor to do in my dissertation and in my forthcoming book on the topic). It is worth noting that the narrative turn also takes place in the thinking of many theorists and novelists who represented “antinarrative” thinking in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the *nouveaux romanciers*, who began to publish autobiographical novels in the 1980s, or post-structuralists such as Kristeva (1999; cf. Davis, 2004, pp. 129–151).

suggest that narratives are indispensable for the way in which we orient ourselves in the world. They share the view that we make sense of our experiences by telling stories about them and by interpreting them in relation to cultural narratives. Generally, however, these novelists lacked a common vocabulary to voice such a view. Tournier was one of the first to give it an explicit articulation. In his intellectual autobiography *Le vent Paraclét* (1977, *The Wind Spirit*), he characterizes myths as “fundamental stories” that provide us “models through whom we give shape, form and feature” to our experiences and aspirations (Tournier, 1977/1988, p. 156, 158). Tournier’s novels abound with such cultural narratives that function as models of sense-making, affecting the way in which people perceive the world and themselves, and hence display the cognitive and orienting significance of narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Tournier (1977/1988, pp. 159–160) considers the significance of literature to lie in its very ability to tell stories that transform our ways of experiencing. He stresses, however, that the novelist does not create new narratives in a vacuum but by engaging in a critical dialogue with cultural tradition. In his novels, this dialogue takes the form of rewriting and reinterpreting old stories, often well-known canonical texts, from the perspective of the present. For example, *Vendredi* (1967, *Friday*) is a critical rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). It depicts the process whereby Robinson, through encountering Friday and learning to relate to him as to his “brother,” gradually leaves behind the Western manipulative, colonialist life-form that Robinson replicates in Defoe’s novel.<sup>10</sup> *Le Roi des Aulnes* (1970, *The Erl-King*), in turn, retells the legend of the Erl-King, best known from Goethe’s poem “Der Erlkönig” through which the novel deals with the historical phenomenon of Nazi Germany. It is also a novel about the narrative constitution of identity and about the way in which the moderns, too, experience a need for identity and meaning. Its protagonist finds in ancient legends and works of art models for shaping his experiences and for orienting himself in the world. For example, certain artworks in the Louvre function for him as important interlocutors, as he “pays them a visit” in order to “hear their news.”<sup>11</sup> The novel shows

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9. A similar, secular view of myth is prevalent in contemporary scholarship: Coupe (1997), for example, defines the “mythopoetic” dimension of literature in terms of its capacity “to create or recreate certain narratives which human beings take to be crucial to their understanding of their world” (p. 4), and Schilbrack (2002) argues, drawing on Geertz, that myths “function to provide models ... through which one comes to understand diverse aspects of the world” (p. 87).

10. On the intertextual relation of Tournier’s *Vendredi* (*Friday*) to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, see, e.g., Purdy, 1984; Saariluoma, 1992/1994, pp. 38–66.

11. “[J]e rends visite en quelque sorte, prenant de leurs nouvelles et scrutant mon image en eux, miroirs incomparables.” (Tournier, 1970, p. 95.)

both that cultural models provide individuals with important means of cognitive orientation and that these models gain meaning only in the temporal process in which the individuals interpret their present and past experiences in the light of these cultural models of narrative sense-making.

In the 1980s, several hermeneutically-oriented thinkers, such as Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor, developed ideas similar to those of Tournier.<sup>12</sup> Their starting-point is the basic tenet of the Heideggerian-Gadamerian tradition of hermeneutics, according to which understanding is the fundamental structure of our being in the world, and all experience has the structure of interpretation, of “understanding something as something” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 149; Gadamer, 1960/1997, p. 90). In particular, they emphasized the way in which we make sense of our experiences in time by weaving them into narratives, by interpreting new experiences in the light of our (constantly revised) self-narratives, and the way in which culturally constituted narrative models mediate this interpretative process. Ricoeur (1980, pp. 178–179; 1983, pp. 86–92, 139–140) deals with the narrativization of life with the notion of *dénouement* (*dénouement*), which he characterizes as a matter of “grasping together”: “plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events.” For Ricoeur, narrativity is the human way of shaping experiences in time so that they become meaningfully connected to each other.

In narrative hermeneutics, the epistemological claim of narrative is not based on the idea of representation of facts but on a wider notion of understanding which surpasses and questions the fact/fiction dichotomy.<sup>13</sup> Taylor (1977/1985), for example, develops this view on the basis of the hermeneutic insight that we are “self-interpreting animals”: We orient ourselves in the world by telling stories about who we are. For Taylor (1989, p. 289), the question of identity is essentially a question of orientation, which can be dealt with only in narrative terms: In order to know who we are, we must tell the story of where we have come from, where we are and where we are going, and it is the predicament of the moderns to be able to do this only in a self-reflective, temporal narrative process, not on the basis of pre-given “canonical models and archetypes.” However, we do not construct our narrative identities on our own, but in “webs of interlocution”: by conversing and negotiating with significant others and with culturally-mediated narrative

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12. Tournier’s notion of the “mythical animal” is also similar to MacIntyre’s (1984, p. 216) view of human beings as “story-telling animals,” which, in turn, has affected Ricoeur’s theory of narrative subjectivity.

13. For an insightful discussion of the way in which narrative hermeneutics thinks beyond these concepts, see Jens Brockmeier’s chapter in this volume (on “narrative hermeneutics,” particularly 125 ff.).

models.<sup>14</sup> He and other hermeneutically-oriented thinkers envisage the relationship between the individual subject and the cultural system as a *dialogical* one. In Gadamerian terms, we interpret cultural narrative models and respond to them from within a particular historically defined situation, and these interpretations, in turn, are constitutive of the meaning of the general models.<sup>15</sup>

It is a crucial aspect of the return of narratives in a “self-conscious” form that novels are dialogical both in their intertextual relation to the tradition and insofar as they thematize the way in which their characters’ interpretations of their experiences form a “novel-like” process of narration in which they relate themselves to culturally-mediated narrative models. This is an important aspect not only in the work of Tournier but also in that of many other contemporary novelists since the 1970s. For example, Annie Ernaux’s novels abound with reflections on the effect of literature on our ways of experiencing: The narrator-protagonist in *Les Armoires vides* (1974, *Cleaned Out*) examines her life in terms of novels (“I see myself as a heroine of Françoise Sagan”); the protagonist of *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien* (1977, *What They Say or Nothing*) tries to make sense of her life in relation to Camus’s *L’Étranger*; and the narrator of *Passion simple* (1991, *Simple Passion*) asserts: “Quite often I felt I was living out this passion in the same way I would have written a book” (Ernaux, 1991/2003, p. 12).<sup>16</sup> Similar thematization of the way in which individuals construct their life-stories in relation to narratives they have read and heard can be found in many contemporary novels world-wide. In the English-speaking world, some of the obvious examples of such novelists are Margaret Atwood, Paul Auster and Siri Hustvedt, as well as Jeanette Winterson, whose *Lighthousekeeping* (2005), for example, deals with storytelling on several levels – and also thematizes the experience of living the story of a character, although the novel itself constantly breaks the model of a coherent narrative evoked in this context: “She had a feeling of someone in a play or a book. There was a story: the story of Molly O’Rourke and Babel Dark, a beginning, a middle, an end.” (Winterson, 2004, p. 102.)

In sum, crucial to the narrative turn, both in theory and fiction, has been accepting narratives as essential to the human mode of making sense of the

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14. Taylor’s (1989, pp. 35–38) notion of “webs of interlocution” is used for example by Benhabib (2002) and Allen (2008), as synonymous to “webs of narrative,” in their analyses of the narrative constitution of subjectivity.

15. Gadamer’s (1979/2001, pp. 56–57) thinking is based on the view that our being in the world in general, as a process of understanding, has a “dialogic structure.”

16. “Je me prends pour une héroïne de Françoise Sagan, étudiante, un amant, il fait son droit, une chanson de Guy Beart” (Ernaux, 1974, p. 171); “Souvent, j’avais l’impression de vivre cette passion comme j’aurais écrit un livre” (Ernaux, 1991, p. 23).

world, in ways that take into account the intersubjective character of this process. This interpretative process is conditioned by culturally-mediated narrative models, and literature plays a crucial role in providing us with such models in relation to which we try to make sense of who we are. This position allows not only taking into account the manner in which cultural models affect our ways of understanding and experiencing the world and ourselves but also acknowledging the subject's capacity to agency and active sense-making. The stories we tell are socially and culturally conditioned, and embedded in webs of interlocution, but the stories we have absorbed do not determine how we use and interpret them as singular, embodied beings in whose sense-making processes the cognitive and the affective are inextricably intertwined.<sup>17</sup> As narrative hermeneutics makes clear, these narrative sense-making processes also have existential bearing, to which we will now turn.

### The ontological dimension

The epistemological shift underlying the narrative turn is intimately connected to a yet more profound but often less explicit shift in ontological assumptions. Whereas those working in the field of narrative hermeneutics readily emphasize the existential and hence ontological significance of narratives, those arguing “against narrative” usually frame their critique in epistemological terms, saying, for example, that narrative sense-making is distortive. Nevertheless, their critique, too, is based on certain ontological presuppositions concerning the nature of reality. This can be seen both in the critique presented by theorists such as Louis Mink, Hayden White or Galen Strawson and in “antinarrative” literary movements such as the *nouveau roman*.

Mink (1970, p. 557; 1981, pp. 238–239), for example, argues that “stories are not lived but told”; moreover, he agrees with Hayden White “that the world is not given to us in the form of well-made stories” and it is we who imagine that in our stories “the world speaks itself.” Similarly, White (1981) maintains that we represent “real events” in terms of narratives because we desire reality to “display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (p. 23). A similar ontological assumption underlies the argumentation of Galen Strawson (2004), who believes that on the most fundamental level the “self” is a succession of discontinuous experiences immediately given to the experiencing self. Despite their many differences, all of these theorists make

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17. For an eloquent formulation of a similar point, see Davis, 2004, 149–150.

the ontological assumption that what is real – including the lived experience as part of the flux of the real – is non-narrative and becomes distorted by narrative interpretation.

A similar ontology underlies much of twentieth-century modernist and postmodernist literature as well as post-war existentialist and post-structuralist thinking. Existentialist literature and thought, for example, is characterized by an opposition between the non-narrative nature of the world in itself and the human meanings projected onto the world. In Sartre's *La Nausée*, the mute presence of things is confronted with the human need to name, explain and order this world of things. Roquentin contends that only singular, inexplicable things have real existence, not, for example, abstract entities, such as a circle: "[A] circle doesn't exist either. That root, on the other hand, existed in so far that I could not explain it. Knotty, inert, nameless . . . . It was no use my repeating: 'It is a root' – that didn't work anymore" (Sartre, 1938/1965, pp. 185–186).<sup>18</sup> In emphasizing the difference between living and telling, Sartre suggests that there is something of this muteness and inexplicability in the human experience, too, as immediately lived, an opacity that narratives tend to obscure.

The *nouveau roman* continues and radicalizes the French phenomenological-existentialist tradition that sees the world as "empty" and the subject as an impersonal flow of perceptions (cf. Meretoja, 2010). For Robbe-Grillet (1963/1989), "to tell a story has become strictly impossible" since we no longer believe the world to have meaningful order which literature could represent (p. 33). Although the *nouveaux romanciers* assert that we cannot know anything for certain, at the same time they maintain, similarly to the Nietzschean-Deleuzean tradition, that reality in fact is a chaotic, dynamic flux of perpetual change (cf. Sarraute, 1963, p. 435; Simon, 1963, p. 26; Robbe-Grillet, 2005, p. 15).

On the other hand, the ontological commitments underlying the *nouveau roman* must also be understood in relation to its conception of meaning, manifested in its endeavor to construct a "new realism" that presents reality as fundamentally chaotic, fragmentary and non-narrative as opposed to the prevalent "realism of signification" (see, e.g., Robbe-Grillet, 1963/1989, p. 14; Sarraute, 1956/2002, p. 10, 12, 55; Butor, 1960, p. 9). Robbe-Grillet demands that the novel should give up the "universe of 'signification,'" because "the Real Is Everything Outside Meaning" (Robbe-Grillet, 1963/1989, p. 21; Ramsay, 1992, p. 245); moreover, he has on numerous occasions expressed his suspicion and hostility towards

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18. "[L]e monde des explications et des raisons n'est pas celui d'existence... [A]ussi un cercle n'existe pas. Cette racine, au contraire, existait dans la mesure où je ne pouvais pas l'expliquer. Noueuse, inerte, sans nom . . . . J'avais beau répéter: 'C'est une racine' – ça ne prenait plus." (Sartre, 1938/1978, p. 182.)

“meaning in general” his “greatest enemy” (Ricardou, 1976, p. 36). Here, we can see an empiricist-positivistic tendency to take human meanings per se to be unreal. Such an ontology leads, in the *nouveau roman*, to privileging disconnected images at the expense of narratively connected experiences and to presenting the subject primarily as a subject of anonymous (mostly visual) perception – often even as a perceiver of geometrical objects. Such a subject is not only non-narrative but also abstract and disengaged, rather than a concrete, embodied agent who, as Danièle Sallenave (1989) puts it, “gives shape to his experiences ... as a subject in the world” (p. 21).

What crucially differentiates existentialism and the *nouveau roman* from novels that can be associated with the narrative turn are their different views on the nature of humanly constructed order – especially narrative order. The narrative turn as an ontological shift does not hence concern so much the conception of “reality in itself” but rather the ontology of human existence and the ontological status accorded to human meaning-giving and narrative sense-making in particular. This can be seen clearly, for example, in Tournier’s (1977/1988) view of man as “a mythical animal,” who “becomes man – he acquires a human being’s sexuality and heart and imagination – only by virtue of the murmur of stories and kaleidoscope of images that surround him” from cradle to grave (pp. 158–159). Here, unlike in the *nouveau roman*, for example, narrative interpretations are not seen as inherently false or unreal but as something that belong essentially to the way human beings are in the world. From this horizon, narrative sense-making and the “murmur of stories” that surrounds us are seen as *constitutive* of human existence: We would not be human beings without engaging in a process of narratively interpreting our experiences in the light of culturally-mediated models of sense-making. The presence of a *mélange* of cultural narratives in us is compellingly depicted not only by Tournier but also by several of his contemporaries, such as Le Clézio:

The young girl, without really being aware of it, carries with her the memory of Rimbaud and Kerouac, the dream of Jack London and the face of Jean Genet, the life of Moll Flanders, the straying gaze of Nadja on the Parisian streets.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of ontology, the narrative turn can hence be described as a shift from an ontology that grants reality only to what is immediately given in sense perception, in a chaotic flux of becoming, towards an ontology that accepts narrative interpretation of experience – in its temporality – as something that is real and constitutive

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19. “La jeune fille porte en elle, sans vraiment le savoir, la mémoire de Rimbaud et de Kerouac, le rêve de Jack London ou bien le visage de Jean Genet, la vie de Moll Flanders, le regard égaré de Nadja dans les rues de Paris” (Le Clézio, 2000, p. 87).

of human existence. The more positive appraisal of narratives that began to emerge in the 1970s is inextricably linked to questioning the opposition between human experience on the one hand, and its interpretation in narratives on the other – an opposition that had been crucial in various forms of antinarrative thinking. Whereas in the post-war years the emphasis had been on the distortive and even violent character of narratives – on the way in which they impose order on the disorder of experience and historical events –, attention then shifted towards the profound intertwinement of lived experience and its narrative interpretation, in terms closely reminiscent of hermeneutic views on the ontology of human existence and on narratively constituted subjectivity.

For example, according to Charles Taylor's (1977/1985) hermeneutic conception of human beings as "self-interpreting animals," we are beings constituted in the process of interpreting ourselves and the world. Drawing on Heidegger's (1927) analysis of the temporality of human existence and on Hannah Arendt's (1958/1998) account of the narrativity of identity, Ricoeur (1985/1988, p. 246; 1990; 1991b, pp. 436–437) elaborates a theory of narrative subjectivity which envisions the subject neither as a contingent series of events, nor as a stable, coherent substance but as a being constituted in the dynamic temporal process of continuously interpreting one's experiences in the light of cultural narratives – in a process of "refiguration" which "makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told." For him, the process of narrative interpretation is the human way of shaping experiences into a meaningful temporal continuum, which brings together the order and disorder – or "concordance" and "discordance" – which constitute our lives (Ricoeur, 1980, pp. 178–179; Ricoeur, 1983, pp. 86–92, 139–140).<sup>20</sup>

In narrative hermeneutics, acknowledging the constitutive role of storytelling for human existence rarely means simply identifying life with narrative, but rather, involves reflection on the tensional relation and interplay between experience and narrative.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it seems to me that narrative hermeneutics should articulate more clearly the conceptual relations between experience, interpretation and narrative. My suggestion is that if we begin with the key hermeneutic insight according to which experience always has the structure of interpretation, narratives can be conceived of as having the structure of a "double hermeneutic": By weaving experiences into connected accounts, narratives provide interpretations

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20. For other hermeneutically-oriented positions that stress not only the cognitive but also the existential significance of narratives, see Kerby, 1991; Freeman, 1993; Kearney, 2002; and Brockmeier's chapter in this volume. On Ricoeur's fundamental role in the "narrative turn," see Mark Freeman's chapter in this volume.

21. For a position according to which all experience has a narrative quality, see e.g. Carr, 1991, and on the problems of "narrative imperialism," see Phelan, 2005.

of experiences which are already interpretations, and when we (re)interpret our everyday experiences, (narrative) identities and life plans in the light of cultural narratives (such as literary or historical narratives), this results in a complex interplay between narrative interpretations that can be characterized in terms of a “triple hermeneutic.”<sup>22</sup>

In a similar vein, contemporary fiction associable to the narrative turn often depicts how the subject is constituted in a temporal, interpretative process in which living and telling about it are interwoven and reciprocally determine one another. The vague, messy and amorphous experiences of the present moment are often retrospectively given meaning as part of a process of narrative sense-making, as the protagonist of Siri Hustvedt’s *The Summer Without Men* (2011) explicates:

It is impossible to divine a story while you are living it; it is shapeless; an inchoate procession of words and things, and let us be frank: We never recover what was. Most of it vanishes . . . . Time is not outside us, but inside. Only we live with past, present, and future, and the present is too brief to experience anyway; it is retained afterward and then it is either codified or it slips into amnesia. Consciousness is the product of delay. (Hustvedt, 2011, pp. 38–39)

The quotation draws attention to the way in which the past and future always pervade the present, even as it is first experienced, which renders problematic the idea of immediately given present experience. Afterwards, only a small part of experiences end up being organized into narratives, in a process that is concomitant with the process of remembering: Both narrative and memory are selective, and what can be integrated into a narrative is easier to remember than discrete experiences. This intimate relation between memory and storytelling is a recurrent theme in contemporary literature.<sup>23</sup>

What is crucial, however, is that neither the theorists nor the novelists who perceive storytelling as ontologically constitutive of human existence see this process of narrativization as a process of falsification but rather as a process of producing reality. Storytelling is perceived as ontologically significant and basic for human existence because it is conceived of as a *reality-producing* and *world-making* activity. For example, for Ricoeur (1983, pp. 86–92, 139–140) the process of “emplotment” is a process of creative reorganization and reconstruction

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22. For a more detailed account of this multilevel model and on how the “triple hermeneutic” is related to Ricoeur’s three levels of mimesis, see Meretoja (in press). On the “double hermeneutic” in the context of social sciences, in which the object domain consists of human reality that is already symbolically structured, see Giddens, 1976, p. 146, 158 and Habermas, 1981/1984, p. 110.

23. For example, on this problematic in Günter Grass’s novels, see Meretoja, 2011.

of reality. This reconstruction, in turn, is grounded in the interpretative structure of experience. In line with this hermeneutic mode of thinking, the protagonist of *The Summer Without Men* points out that even the simplest perception is a matter of interpreting and giving shape to the world: “Perception is never passive. We are not only receivers of the world; we also actively produce it” (Hustvedt, 2011, p. 77). In the novel, this insight is connected to awareness of the fact that each story is an interpretation, not a mere reproduction of what actually happened: “I am not so philosophically naïve as to believe that one can establish some empirical reality of THE STORY. We can’t even agree on what we remember” (Hustvedt, 2011, p. 89). The self, too, is a product of self-interpretation and selective remembering which take place through a process of telling stories about oneself to oneself and to others: “After all, we, none of us, can ever untangle the knot of fictions that make up that wobbly thing we call a self” (Hustvedt, 2011, p. 188).

Contemporary novels that deal with these themes often display awareness of the intersubjectivity of this process of reinterpretation in which reality and identities are produced through storytelling, a process in which collective imagining and remembering play a crucial role. For example, *The Summer Without Men* shows that the individual always tells stories in relation to other people, and it is ultimately intersubjectively determined what counts as real and what as delusional: “I meditated for a moment on the imaginary and the real, on wish fulfillment, on fantasy, on stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. The fictive is an enormous territory, it turns out, its boundaries vague, and there is little certainty about where it begins and ends. We chart delusions through collective agreement” (Hustvedt, 2011, p. 103).

The intersubjective character of the process of narrative interpretation through which we become who we are, as individuals and communities, has been elaborated by hermeneutic scholars such as Gadamer (e.g. 1979/2001, pp. 56–57) and Taylor (1991, p. 33; 2002) in terms of the “fundamentally *dialogical* character” of human existence, stressing that we are constituted by engaging in a continuous conversation with various “others.”<sup>24</sup> In contemporary fiction, this dialogue must be understood in a wide sense, both as dialogue between individuals and as dialogue with cultural models of sense-making. Generally speaking, in contrast to avant-garde movements such as the *nouveau roman*, contemporary fiction is interested in the ways in which the subject constructs meaningful order in relations of dialogue and negotiation with social frameworks of meaning rather than in whether or not our meaning-constructions correspond to the way the world is

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24. Bakhtin (1984, p. 293), too, has famously argued that “life by its very nature is dialogic.” On Bakhtin’s close relation to hermeneutics, see, e.g., Gardiner, 1992, pp. 99–140.

“in itself.” This process of narrative sense-making is shown to be dependent on the socio-cultural world in which the subject is embedded, on narrative models that are imposed on us but to which we are not reducible. We become who we are in a process of telling stories about ourselves in a dialogic relation to stories we have heard: by repeating but often also challenging narrative models provided by contemporary culture.

For example, Michel Houellebecq’s several novels thematize the narrative and dialogical constitution of the self. It is most explicitly articulated in *La possibilité d’une île* (2005, *The Possibility of an Island*) which moves on different temporal levels, alternating the journal entries of a man called Daniel and those of his future successors, clones (or “neohumans”) named after him as Daniel24, Daniel25, etc. In the novel, the dream of eternal life has led to the development of clone technology which enables humans to continue their lives in ever new bodies. It soon becomes evident, however, that the individual does not consist only of his or her genetic makeup but of a sense of self, formed of his or her experiences and memories. In order to preserve the identity of their predecessors, the clones use an “autobiographical” method of narrating their life-stories by meditating on the life-stories of their predecessors. Only through this process do they become who they are. First, a hazardous method of “memory downloading” is used, but it is soon replaced by

what today we call *life story*, initially conceived as a simple complement, a provisional solution, but which was ... to become considerably more important. Thus, curiously, this major logical advance resulted in the rehabilitation of an ancient form that was basically quite close to what was once called *autobiography*.

(Houellebecq, 2006, p. 18)<sup>25</sup>

But it turns out that life based on mere meditation of others’ lives is not quite the same as living through the experiences that make up these lives: “the limited, respectable memories we keep of existences that have identical contours do not have any of the pregnancy that would be necessary for an individual fiction to take hold” (Houellebecq, 2006, p. 371).<sup>26</sup> Daniel24 eventually chooses a life course

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25. “[N]ous connaissons aujourd’hui sous le nom de *récit de vie*, initialement conçu comme un simple complément, une solution d’attente, mais qui allait ... prendre une importance considérable. Ainsi, cette avancée logique majeure allait curieusement conduire à la remise à l’honneur d’une forme ancienne, au fond assez proche de ce qu’on appelait jadis *l’autobiographie*” (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 27).

26. “[L]es souvenirs limités, avouables, que nous gardons d’existences aux contours identiques, n’ont nullement la prégnance nécessaire pour que la fiction individuelle puisse y prendre appui” (Houellebecq, 2005, pp. 416–417).

radically different from that of his predecessors. This thought experiment interestingly shows the way in which subjectivity and identity are narratively constituted – “individual history, in a word, creates the individual” (Houellebecq, 2006, p. 207)<sup>27</sup> – but also that the neohumans are never exactly the same, because they become who they are in a process of reflecting on their own being in a dialogic relation to the stories handed down to them. This is a process of interpretation which can never be mechanical.

It is one of the central tenets of hermeneutic conceptions of meaning that cultural models of sense-making are actualized only when they are interpreted in concrete situations (see, e.g., Gadamer, 1960/1997; Gadamer, 1993, p. 8). The insight that these models exist only via individual interpretations of them allows us to acknowledge both the dependency of the individual subject on social structures or cultural models *and* the dialectical dependency of these structures and models on the continuous interpretative process in which the subjects are engaged.<sup>28</sup> Thereby, the subject can be envisaged as fundamentally dialogical: as socially, historically and culturally situated and relational, simultaneously *constituted* by a complex network of socio-historical forces, including intersubjective narrative frames, and *constituting* them.

### The ethical dimension

Lastly, I would like to draw attention to the shift in the attitudes towards the ethical value of narrative for human existence.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the post-war years, narrative was taken to imply not only cognitively but also ethically problematic imposition of order, forcing reality into natural-appearing categories. Underlying the renunciation of the autonomous subject of Enlightenment humanism, in response to the experience of the Second World War, was distrust not only in the de facto capacity of the subject to master the unfolding of history but also in the ideal of such rational control. In the wake of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung*,

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27. “l’histoire individuelle, en un mot, crée l’individu” (Houellebecq, 2005, p. 237).

28. As Frank (1984/1989) writes, “precisely this is the fundamental idea of hermeneutics, namely, that symbolic orders, as opposed to natural laws, are founded in interpretations; hence ... they can be transformed and transgressed by new projections of meaning” (p. 6).

29. Although Strawson (2004) seeks to keep narrativity as an ethical issue strictly separate from narrativity as a descriptive thesis, the intertwinement of the ontological and the ethical can be seen both in the long strand of antinarrative thinking that emerged in the post-war period and in the successive turn to narrative, as I argue in Meretoja (in press).

many post-war intellectuals saw the concentration camps as a logical culmination of the process in which “world domination over nature [turns] against the thinking subject itself” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/1979, p. 26). In connection with a general critique of Enlightenment reason, thinkers such as Levinas, Sartre, Barthes, Irigaray and Lyotard brought forward the ethically problematic nature of narrative representation of the world, seeing it as violent imposition of order on the world, which in itself lacks rationality, order and meaning.<sup>30</sup>

The problematization of narrativity in the post-war period must be understood in the context of what Sarraute dubbed the “age of suspicion,” in which all order appeared to be suspicious. In his autobiographical novel *Le miroir qui revient* (1984, *Ghosts in the Mirror*), Robbe-Grillet suggests that his whole adult life has been marked by a fundamental suspicion of order, which stems from his adolescent experience of National Socialism, an experience that resulted in an aspiration to fight for disorder and freedom, against order, which for him, implies forcing reality under artificial, oppressive labels, such as when the Nazis classified people into different “races” (Robbe-Grillet, 1984, pp. 46, 118–132). The idea of a violent moment inherent in all narrative and symbolic order links Robbe-Grillet to the same tradition as Levinas, Barthes, Foucault and Derrida.<sup>31</sup> They follow the legacy of Nietzsche (1886/1999a, p. 167; 1999b, p. 302), who maintained that knowledge is “an instrument of power” and that “in every will-to-know there is a dribble of cruelty.” Levinas (1948/1998) considers narrative to be a particularly problematic mode of appropriating reality, since it allegedly turns temporal beings into fixed, frozen images that pretend to render the Other totally understandable, and lends an air of inevitability to the events recounted. Underlying this critique is a view of knowledge and understanding as violent appropriation: of the act of “assigning meaning” as already entailing appropriation of the world (Levinas, 1948/1998, p. 6; 1983/2002, p. 102). In this tradition, the experience of the unintelligible is taken to be not only an experience of powerlessness but also an ethically valuable experience of being open to the unknown: in Lyotard’s (1991) words, accepting “the occurrence for what it is: ‘not yet’ determined. ... [T]o be and remain questioned by it, ... without neutralizing by explanation its power of disquiet” (p. 74). This results in an “ethics of non-comprehension,” which post-war novelists from Beckett to the *nouveaux romanciers* explore in different ways. In line with this ethos, Robbe-Grillet (1963/1989, p. 23) stresses the violent, unethical aspect of narrative appropriation and writes about “the tyranny

30. For an overview of the poststructuralist distrust of narrative, see Scholes, 1980, p. 212.

31. See, e.g., Derrida’s (1967, pp. 164–165) analysis of the originary violence, arche-violence of language.

of significations,” connected to the attempt of the bourgeoisie to control the world “by assigning it a meaning.”

This criticism, however, is directed first and foremost against narratives that pretend to present a certain meaningful order as the natural and inevitable order of things, rather than as a human-made, historically contingent and politically charged order that can be changed. Robbe-Grillet (1972), for example, underlines that “there is no natural order, no moral, political or narrative, there are only human orders, created by men, necessarily provisional” (p. 160). The project of demythologization as a process of denaturalizing politically charged forms of discourse was also crucial to post-structuralist thinking (see, e.g., Barthes, 1957, pp. 251–252; Kristeva, 1969, pp. 212, 244; Kellner, 1987, pp. 1–9). The whole “against narrative” movement, beginning from the early 20th century (i.e. long before Strawson’s attack), repudiated storytelling precisely because narratives tend to create a false illusion of a pre-existing natural order that they transparently reproduce.

Crucial to various forms of antinarrative ethos is also the view according to which narrative interpretation falsifies and distorts experience. This view gains its impetus from the assumption of “pure experience” immediately given here and now. By contrast, from an antipositivistic perspective, such as that represented by the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition of thought, our narrative self-interpretations are not only constitutive of who we are but also provide ethically valuable means of self-reflection. For example, Taylor (1989, pp. 47, 52), Ricoeur (1990, p. 158; 1991b) and MacIntyre (1984, pp. 204–225) suggest that the possibility of moral agency depends on the possibility of seeing one’s life as a narrative continuum or unity. All three emphasize the ethical significance of narrative self-interpretation, but MacIntyre (1984) goes furthest by drawing a strong parallel between a narratively structured life and a good life and by arguing that “the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest” (p. 219).

Many contemporary novelists, however, who see storytelling as an integral part of human existence, and can hence be associated with the narrative turn as a larger cultural shift, deal with this phenomenon as an ethically complex one. Novelists such as Tournier, Le Clézio, Modiano, Grass, Winterson or Hustvedt celebrate the way in which cultural narratives can function as means of resistance for individuals engaged in processes of constructing their identities, sexualities and personal worlds of meaning, providing them with a reservoir of sense-making models that open up possibilities unavailable in their immediate social environments. At the same time, however, they suggest that although narrative self-reflection can be ethically valuable, a way of taking responsibility for one’s life, it is by no means a guarantee of such responsibility. Several of their novels – from Tournier’s

*Vendredi* (1967) to Grass's *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006) – reflect on the ways in which narratives are intertwined with practices of power and can become vehicles of social ideologies, such as colonialism or National Socialism; they also demonstrate why narratives become dangerous when they are reified and presented as the unquestionable truth. Hence, in various ways, contemporary literature promotes awareness of the ethically complex impact of cultural narratives on our personal and communal lives.

To conclude, the narrative turn can be seen as a philosophically multidimensional shift towards a view, perceptible both in theoretical discourse and in narrative fiction, according to which a process of narrative sense-making is an integral part of human existence and awareness of the role of narratives in our lives is ethically and politically important. This way of thinking has resulted in self-conscious narratives that thematize and reflect on the process whereby experiences are narrativized and identities narratively constituted. In many contemporary novels, the subject is shown to be importantly affected by the socially dominant narrative models but also able to challenge and resist them. They hence manifest a dialogical conception of the subject as dependent on socio-cultural forces but not determined by them.

A similar dialogical conception of narrative subjectivity has been developed since the 1980s in theoretical discourse. After the heyday of post-structuralism and postmodernism, reconceptualizations of subjectivity and identity in terms of narrativity have become increasingly popular, because they enable the rehabilitation of these notions in a temporal, processual and anti-essentialist form, that is, taking identity as not something pre-given, but as something constituted in a dialogical relation to socially-mediated narrative models.<sup>32</sup> Hermeneutically-oriented conceptualizations of narrative subjectivity are attractive precisely because they acknowledge the intersubjective dimension of our narrative existence without reducing the subject to social structures. Instead, the subject's being is seen in terms of a constantly revised process of reinterpretation. Whereas it has been considered to be a central shortcoming of traditional hermeneutics that it has too little to say about the coercive aspects of the power structures that are instrumental in the constitution of subjectivity, recently various strands of critical hermeneutics have fruitfully extended the hermeneutic analytic of the situatedness of human existence to questions of power and embodiment.<sup>33</sup> As contemporary theorists

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32. See, e.g., Taylor, 1989; Freeman, 1993; Benhabib, 2002; Cavarero, 2000; Kearney, 2002; Allen, 2008. On the significance of the narrative turn for renewed notions of subjectivity in feminist thinking, see Guaraldo's chapter in this volume.

33. See, e.g., Vattimo, 1988; Madison, 1990; Ricoeur, 1986/1991a, pp. 294–307; Kögler, 1999; Warnke, 2002; Pappas & Cowling, 2003.

from Adriana Cavarero (2000) and Judith Butler (2005) to Amy Allen (2008) show, attentiveness to our entanglement in narratives enables us to acknowledge the fundamental role played by power in the constitution of subjectivity and identity (the narratives with which we identify are always embedded in social contexts and relations of power of which individuals are largely unaware) but at the same time also to recognize the subject's ability to resist and transform the prevailing narratives and their underlying power relations.

I have argued that it is legitimate to see the narrative turn as a broader cultural shift, since in both contemporary narrative fiction and theoretical discourse across disciplines human existence has come to be seen as a matter of constantly reinterpreting experiences in a dialogic relation to the cultural narratives that surround us. Thinking about subjectivity and identity in terms of narrative dialogicality enables us not only to think about their socially conditioned nature and to take into account the bodily, situated nature of our narrative existence, but also to acknowledge the individual's possibility of narrating otherwise. It allows us to pay attention both to the complex mechanisms through which our narrative dialogues are socially regulated and to how they can nevertheless provide us with important insights and inspiration to imagine alternative narrative identities and new modes of experience. Such a dialogical conception of narrative subjectivity brings together the epistemological, ontological and ethical aspects of this problematic. It conceptualizes the way in which the subject is constituted in a continuous dialogue with the cultural tradition and social environment by reinterpreting the narrative models available for him or her, and at the same time it shows how and why this process of sense-making can never be ethically or politically neutral. Interpretations are never mere interpretations. They enter into the "dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293) and thereby take part in the making of the world we coinhabit.

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