

Exploring the Possible Philosophical Reflection, Historical Imagination, and Narrative Agency

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Article abstract

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**SPECIAL INVITED ISSUE:
NARRATIVE ACROSS DISCIPLINES**

**Exploring the Possible: Philosophical Reflection,
Historical Imagination, and Narrative Agency**

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This article suggests that narrative studies would benefit from (hermeneutically informed) philosophical reflection on the basic assumptions underlying different conceptions of narrative, a sense of history in conceptualizing narrative and experience, and nuanced reflection on the significance of narrative for agency and our sense of the possible. It argues for conceptualizing narrative as an interpretative, dialogical, and performative activity of cultural sense-making that is integral to how we understand our past, present, and future possibilities. It proposes three ways in which acknowledging the historicity of experience allows us to explore how narratives shape historical imagination. Arguing for approaching literary narratives as explorations of human possibilities, the article ends by showing, through an analysis of Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* (2015), how narrative fiction can contribute to our sense of the possible and to our understanding of narrative agency.

Literary scholars like to think that it was their discipline that started the whole business of narrative studies, which has now exploded and extended across all fields that study human reality.¹ Sometimes they go as far as suggesting that they are therefore the ultimate experts in the study of narrative and that narrative scholars in other fields should learn from literary narratologists to make proper distinctions. These narratologists typically frown upon social scientists if they venture to use the concepts of narrative and story interchangeably, as this is perhaps the most fundamental distinction to which any student of literature embarking

¹ On the roots of narrative theory in early twentieth-century narrative poetics (such as Russian formalism), see Herman, 2006.

upon the study of narrative will be initiated. Although I distinguish between story and narrative, I often feel like a rare bird in literary narrative studies, for I have generally more in common with philosophical, psychological, and social scientific approaches to narrative than with the formalist tradition of literary narratology. I believe that not only other narrative scholars have much to learn from literary narrative scholars but also the latter have much to learn from the former—going all the way to their basic assumptions about the concept of narrative. Over the past two decades, narrative studies has been marked by a general aspiration towards interdisciplinarity and a more intense dialogue between literary and social scientific approaches. Nevertheless, more could be done to enhance such dialogue, and I, for my part, would like to participate in the effort to bridge some of the still existing disciplinary divides.

In my view, perhaps the most important thing that literary scholars could learn from other narrative scholars is the courage to engage with the “big questions” that concern the function and significance of narrative for life, identity, agency, and cultural self-understanding. When I was embarking on my university studies, I was undecided between philosophy, psychology, and literary studies but eventually decided to major in comparative literature because I was fascinated by the way in which narrative fiction deals with the most fundamental philosophical and existential issues in a concrete form, that is, in narrative—rather than in abstract—terms, which involves acknowledging the cultural embeddedness, relationality, and situatedness of our being in the world. What drew me to literature was precisely its relevance for life, for our reflection on who we are and who we could be. When I started my PhD studies, interdisciplinary narrative studies was starting to take shape as a field defined by intensive and exciting discussions between scholars with divergent disciplinary backgrounds.² It was hugely exciting to find a world that allowed me to go beyond the narrow discipline of literary studies and to bring together my interests in philosophy, society, culture, and literature.

² For me, the landmark event that properly initiated me to the world of interdisciplinary narrative studies was the international conference *The Travelling Concept of Narrative* (Helsinki, 2004). Matti Hyvärinen was the main organizer of the conference, and just as fruitful was the 2010 follow-up symposium, *Travelling Concepts of Narrative II*, which he organized in London and which led to the publication of *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative* (Hyvärinen, Hatavara, & Hydén, 2013).

Nevertheless, despite the increasing dialogue over the past few decades, I have been struck by the extent to which the literary narratological and social scientific segment of narrative studies have remained largely separate fields of inquiry. The narratological tradition that draws on the formalist and structuralist legacy still predominates in literary narrative studies. This legacy is visible, for example, in the way in which interest in narrative structures and techniques dominate at the expense of narrative as a cultural sense-making practice; as a way of thinking about subjectivity, identity, and agency; as an exploration of past, present, and future worlds; and as a form of existential and ethical inquiry.³ As the drive towards systematicism has always been a defining feature of narratology, it has been marked by universalist aspirations at the expense of a historical sensibility. This remains the case in contemporary “postclassical” narratology characterized by the “cognitivist paradigm shift” (Fludernik, 2006, p. 51). A taxonomic aspiration—the attempt to systematically classify different types of narrative representation, for example—is privileged at the expense of exploring literature as a form of cultural self-understanding.⁴ The scientific tendency of many narratologists is linked to an inclination towards highly technical, scientific-sounding terminology, intelligible only to fellow narratologists and modeled after linguistics or cognitive science. A completely different starting point is offered by the hermeneutic approach to narrative, which proceeds from the assumption that narratives are cultural sense-making practices and that narrative studies should contribute to cultural self-understanding and hence be accessible to a wider audience.

I have always been interested first and foremost in the existential dimension of narrative that goes beyond the scope of—or is at best marginal in—literary narratology: Who are we and who could we be? How do narratives mediate the ways in which we address these questions as we struggle to understand ourselves and others in time? I would like to contribute to the kind of narrative studies that deals with these major

³ Narratology is commonly defined as “a theory of narrative” (Prince, 1995, p. 110; Nünning, 2003, pp. 227–228), which “co-exists with other theories of narrative,” or “a discipline or an approach to narrative” that is “dedicated to the study of the logic, principles, and practices of narrative representation” (Meister, 2014). It is nowadays, however, a diverse, heterogeneous field, and also includes many areas (such as culture-sensitive narratology and narrative ethics) which are highly relevant for my own approach.

⁴ As Herman puts it, from the beginning, the “aims of narratology were . . . fundamentally taxonomic and descriptive” (2006, p. 30).

philosophical questions while at the same time cultivating a sensitivity to the cultural and historical mediatedness of our narrative agency. Hence, as concerns the direction in which I wish to develop narrative studies, I would like to see more (hermeneutically informed) *philosophical reflection* on the basic assumptions underlying different approaches to narrative, more *historical reflection*, in connection to a more historical conception of experience and narrative, and more nuanced *reflection on the significance of narrative for agency and our sense of the possible*. In what follows, I will discuss the first two from a perspective informed by the third, and I will then briefly analyze, in relation to my theoretical reflections, a contemporary novel that is currently a topic of heated debate, Michel Houellebecq's (2015) *Soumission* (*Submission*).

Narrative Hermeneutics and Other Philosophies of Narrative

My work in narrative studies has been motivated by the belief that in the current phase of narrative studies, with its increasing interdisciplinarity and expanding scope, what is particularly needed is reflection on the philosophical assumptions underlying different traditions of theorizing narrative. In an effort to contribute to such reflection, I have analyzed the philosophical underpinnings of different conceptions of narrative both as they are developed in various narrative theories and as they structure literary fiction (Meretoja, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). In particular, I have been interested in how the ways in which we conceptualize and evaluate narrative depend on our philosophical assumptions about what is real, that is, on our ontological assumptions. For example, if we assume that reality is given to us in immediate sense perception, we are likely to take narrative to be a matter of distorting the real. This is what Galen Strawson (2004), for example, assumes when he claims that our experiences are distorted every time we engage in narrative reflection on them or even just reminisce about them: allegedly, recent neuroscientific research has shown that it is

an inevitable consequence of the mechanics of the neurophysiological process of laying down memories that every studied conscious recall of past events brings an alteration. The implication is plain: the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being. (p. 447)

Such “alteration” looks less questionable if we acknowledge that living is a temporal process of constant reinterpretation of experiences (which makes it a process of ceaseless alteration), that experience is necessarily always already mediated, and that cultural webs of narratives take part in mediating how we perceive and make sense of the world, ourselves, and other people (see Meretoja, 2014a). However, instead of repeating my earlier arguments here, I will briefly reflect on why it is that the existential-ontological significance of narratives for human existence has been neglected in literary narrative studies, and I will put forward my own suggestion of how to conceptualize narrative in terms of a *culturally mediated, dialogical, and ethically charged interpretative activity*.

Narratology has traditionally studied narrative first and foremost as a matter of *representing events*. According to the standard narratological definition, “narrative is the representation of an event or a series of events” (Abbott, 2008, p. 13). Many narratologists also highlight that causality and chronology are interconnected in narrative representations. In Roland Barthes’ (1982) famous definition, “the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes after being read as what is caused by; in which case narrative would be a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*—a good motto for Destiny” (p. 94). According to Marie-Laure Ryan (2007), the “sequence of events must form a unified causal chain” (p. 29), and in Gregory Currie’s (2010) terms, narratives “represent sustained temporal-causal relations between particulars” (p. 27). The notion of representation suggests that narrative represents a narrative order that pre-exists its telling. As Porter Abbott (2008) puts it, narrative is a representation because it is “conveying a story that at least *seems* to pre-exist the vehicle of conveyance” (p. 15), even if the story only exists through being narrated. Many narrative theorists and novelists find narrative inherently suspicious precisely because it allegedly pretends to mirror a meaningful (chronological-causal) order that can be found in the world, although in reality such order is merely a human projection.⁵ According to this view, there is a basic discrepancy between the real and narrative representation of the real. It is from such a position that Hayden White (1981), for example, argues: “Real events should simply be; they can perfectly well serve as the referents of a discourse, can be spoken about, but they should not pose as the tellers of a narrative” (p. 4).

⁵ For an analysis of such suspicion in (particularly French) postwar thought and fiction, see Meretoja 2014b.

The representational thinking that dominates narrative studies is linked to a tendency to posit a hierarchy between events/experiences and narrative: there are first events/experiences and they are then, retrospectively, narrativized. Narrative is considered to be always secondary, as what is projected on the pure, raw, disconnected events/experiences. According to the narratological dogma, narrative always comes afterwards, and living and telling cannot take place simultaneously: “Life tells us that we cannot tell it while we live it or live it while we tell it. Live now, tell later” (Cohn 1999, p. 96). Literary narratologists share this assumption with such antinarrativists as Crispin Sartwell (2000) and Galen Strawson (2004) as well as with such philosophers of history as Louis Mink (1970) and Hayden White (1981). They all rely on the (tacit empiricist-positivistic) assumption that the world is given to us in raw, unmediated experience, and that narrative is a retrospective representation of experiences or events.

The hermeneutic approach problematizes precisely this assumption. It emphasizes the *mediatedness* of experience—that experience is always already temporally, historically, culturally, and socially mediated and that it has an interpretative structure. As Hans-Georg Gadamer (1997) puts it, experience, even simple sense perception, “always includes meaning” (p. 92): all experience involves “understanding of something as something. All understanding-as is an articulation of what is there, in that it looks-away-from, looks-at, sees-together-as. . . . Seeing means articulating” (pp. 90–91). The way in which our experience is organized is mediated by the cultural narrative webs in which we are entangled. Hence, narratives are not merely a matter of retrospective interpretation but *shape the way we experience things in the first place*. Narrative interpretation is part and parcel of the process of living our lives. From a hermeneutic perspective, living and telling are constantly entangled in complex ways that undermine a hierarchical conception of their relationship. In Jerome Bruner’s (1987) words, “life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold” (p. 31).

Narrative hermeneutics is a philosophical approach to narrative that conceptualizes narratives as cultural practices of sense-making, which have an interpretative structure (see Brockmeier & Meretoja, 2014; Meretoja, 2014b). Seeing narratives as interpretative practices foregrounds that narratives mediate our relation to ourselves, others, and the world. It emphasizes the socio-cultural character of narratives, and the relational, dialogical way in which we become who we are in relation to

other people, their stories, and culturally-mediated narrative models of sense-making. Individual narratives are always woven in relation to cultural narratives that they perpetuate, vary, challenge, and transform.

My interest in narrative largely grew out of my interest in issues of subjectivity, identity, and agency, which I came to study in the context of the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition of thought, Bakhtinian dialogism, as well as French poststructuralism and its discussion of the “death of the subject.” Narrative provided me a way of rethinking subjectivity from a perspective that rejected the essentialist idea of a substantialist core self and acknowledged the fundamental temporality, processuality, and relationality of our existence. I wanted to build on the Ricoeurian approach to the subject as a dynamic temporal process constituted in the continuous reinterpretation of cultural narratives, and to blend this hermeneutic approach with a Foucauldian and Bakhtinian emphasis on the fundamental role played by power in the constitution of subjectivity, identity, and agency. What I attempted to do was to rethink both subjectivity and narrative in terms of *dialogicality* (Meretoja, 2014b).

The dialogical conception of narrative, subjectivity, and agency emphasizes that cultural webs of narratives only exist through individual interpretations, and individual subjects, in turn, are constituted in relation to cultural narrative webs. Acknowledging this two-way reciprocal relationship and interdependency allows us to avoid reifying cultural narratives (and social systems of meaning more generally) and to account both for the socially conditioned nature of subjectivity and for the subject’s capacity for active agency. As the sociocultural systems of meaning—including narrative webs—cannot determine how they will be interpreted and since all interpretation takes place in different socio-historical situations, ultimately all understanding is characterized by the structure of “always-understanding-differently” (“Immer-anders-Verstehen”, Gadamer, 1993, p. 8). As Catriona Mackenzie (2008) puts it, the notion of narrative agency suggests that “to be a person is to exercise narrative capacities for self-interpretation,” which bring about “the integration of self over time,” and that such “narrative integration is dynamic, provisional and open to change and revision” (pp. 11–12). For me, the concept is useful in emphasizing that culturally mediated narrative (self-)interpretations take part in constituting us as subjects capable of action while simultaneously acknowledging that, as agents of narrative interpretation, we are both constituting and constituted.

I endorse a narrative hermeneutics which, instead of thinking of narrative interpretation in terms of mere representation, acknowledges its productive and performative dimension: narrative interpretations take part in constituting and shaping human reality. Narrative interpretations are social acts of bestowing meaning on experiences and events, and they participate in shaping the world. They have real, material effects: they perpetuate, challenge and transform the way in which we see and act in the world.⁶ Another way of conceptualizing the performative dimension of narrative interpretations is to say that they are inevitably ethically and politically charged. As Ricoeur (1992, p. 140) puts it, no narrative can be ethically neutral. Narratives always provide certain perspectives to the world, and through those perspectives they participate in meaning-making that shapes and transforms intersubjective reality.

I would like to argue for a conception of narrative that makes *interpretation* the key concept in understanding narrative. While narratives themselves are interpretations, our engagement with them is also an interpretative activity, and it takes place in the world in which we are always already entangled in narrative webs that function as interpretative frameworks. From the perspective of narrative hermeneutics, it is hence absurd that the study of narrative and the interest in theorizing interpretation have often seemed to be mutually exclusive, particularly in literary narratology.⁷ I have suggested that if we take seriously the hermeneutic view of the interpretative structure of all experience, narratives can be conceptualized as interpretations of interpretations because they concern human reality that is itself interpretatively constituted. Hence, I have used the notion of *double hermeneutics* to describe the interpretative character of narratives, and the notion of *triple hermeneutics* to characterize the way in which we reinterpret our experiences in the light of cultural and historical narratives. The latter concept emphasizes these three interpretative layers: the basic interpretative structure of experience, narrative interpretations of

⁶ This productive, performative dimension of interpretations is acknowledged in the thinking of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Bakhtin; for all of them, understanding is our way of being in the world as embodied beings, and interpretations are constitutive of social reality. On the productivity of narratives in a Foucauldian approach to narratives, see Tamboukou, 2013.

⁷ As Liesbeth Korthals Altes (2014) puts it, “scientificity has often been considered to come proportionally to one’s distancing from interpretation, and from hermeneutics more generally,” and this tendency has been coupled with narratology’s “lack of systematic interest in the social dimensions and, hence, the diversity of interpretive processes” (p. 19).

experience, and (transformative) reinterpretations of experiences in the light of culturally mediated narratives. In practice, these layers are interlaced but it can be useful to separate them analytically in order to gain a differentiated view of the complexity of the interrelations between interpretation, experience, and narrative.⁸

While the way we conceptualize narrative largely depends on our ontological assumptions about the nature of human existence and experience, it is also the case that our views on the nature of reality crucially affect our take on the ontology of literary narratives. If literary narratives are narrative interpretations, what kinds of narrative interpretations are they? The narratological approach that conceptualizes narrative in terms of a representation of a series of events is dominated by the (empiricist-positivistic) view that literary narratives, as fictive, invented narratives, can have no truth value (Cohn, 1999, p. 15; Doležel, 2010, pp. 36–42). This assumption is implicit even in the rhetoric approach in which fictionality is defined by contrasting fictional discourse with what is “actual, factual and real” (Nielsen, Phelan, & Walsh, 2015).⁹ If we acknowledge that our being in the world is mediated through narrative interpretations of what human existence is about, literary narratives can be seen to play a crucial role in shaping these interpretations and hence our ways of being in the world with others. When narratives are seen as interpretations of the real, they are not opposed to what is actual, factual, and real; in contrast, both fictive and non-fictive narratives take part in shaping our view of what is actual, factual, and real. Instead of merely representing what is, they open up new ways of seeing what is and can expand our sense of what is possible for us. Instead of linking the imaginative dimension of literary narratives to the status of the “unreal,” I would like to emphasize their power to explore possibilities of human existence. Precisely this power lies at the heart of narrative fiction: it is about *exploring human possibilities*.

My interest in the possible ties in with the work of narrative scholars like Paul Ricoeur, Jerome Bruner, Jens Brockmeier, and Molly Andrews, all of whom have studied narrative in terms of the possible. For Ricoeur (1991), to understand a literary narrative is “not to find a lifeless sense that is contained therein, but to unfold the possibility of being indicated by the text” (p. 66). In a similar spirit, for Bruner (1986), narrating is “being in the subjunctive mode,” “a trafficking in human

⁸ On triple hermeneutics, see Meretoja, 2014a.

⁹ For a fuller discussion of the problematic dichotomy between the actual, factual, and real and the possible, fictional, and unreal, see Meretoja, 2015.

possibilities rather than in settled certainties” (p. 25). Brockmeier (2015) articulates the role of narrative imagination in envisioning our options for acting:

Narrative imagination enables us to probe the reach and range of our options—in Bruner’s words, their alternativeness—both in everyday and literary discourse and thought. . . . If meanings are *options for acting*, then narrative appears to be the most advanced practice by which we can envision, scrutinize, and try out these options. . . . We all continuously sort out real and fictive, contrasting and competing versions of actions, or inactions, we play them through and reflect on them, imagine possible and impossible scenarios and speculate about their implications. (pp. 120–122)

Andrews (2014), in turn, draws on the Sartrean theory of imagination, which takes as its starting-point “our ability to see things not only as they are, but as they are not” and to see that the “not-real might also be the not-yet-real” (pp. 5–6). As she puts it, imagination is a “social faculty,” which “extends from the ‘real’, the world as we know it, to the world of the possible” and “is manifested as we think about our lives as they have been lived, and as they might be led” (pp. 7, 10).

I find the concept of narrative imagination useful in many ways, not the least because it invites reflection on the *futurity* of narrative thought: narratives are about imagining what could be. The aspect of futurity is crucial to the process of narrative reflection, which, as Mark Freeman (2014) acknowledges, concerns the values and ethical ideals towards which we strive: “Rather than thinking of narrative mainly in terms of its orientation to the past, I have tried to suggest that it bears upon the future as well: the process of rewriting the self is at one and the same time a process of articulating the self-to-be, or the self that *ought* to be” (p. 14).

This is a perspective that tends to be absent from narrative approaches that conceptualize narrative in terms of a representation of a series of events. While representational accounts of narrative frequently suggest that narratives present the represented events as part of a chronological-causal chain defined by necessity, the hermeneutic approach acknowledges that narratives can make visible the openness and unpredictability of the moment of action—in Brockmeier’s (2015) terms, “narrative’s specific sensitivity for the openness and unpredictability of

human affairs” (p. 120). This is in line with Hannah Arendt’s (1998) idea of the human condition as being characterized by our capacity to act and thereby to bring into the world something new and unpredictable.

Given that what is so fascinating about narrative fiction is its capacity to open up new possibilities of human existence, it is astonishing how difficult it is to find in literary narrative studies considerations of how the possibilities of fictive worlds can feed into, shape, and transform the possibilities in our real world. In my recent work, I have been particularly interested in the ways in which literary narratives contribute to the process in which we imagine the past and the future in relation to the present, and in the subsequent sections I will briefly explore these two dimensions in relation to the notion of the possible.

Historical Imagination

Since the beginning of the 21st century, narrative scholars have voiced the need to historicize narratology (e.g. Fludernik, 2003; Nünning, 2009), but only in the recent years there has been more serious interest among narratologists in the relationship between experience and history and in the concept of *historical experience* (Fludernik, 2010). This is significant because precisely the notion of experience is central to postclassical, mainly cognitively oriented narratology, in contrast to the way in which classical narratology conceptualized the logic of narrative in terms of representing *events*. Decisive in this respect has been Monika Fludernik’s (1996) *Towards a “Natural” Narratology* where she defines, in the wake of Paul Ricoeur’s (1983-1985/1984-1988) *Temps et récit*, narrativity in terms of *experientiality* and thereby makes central the subject of experience. However, the conception of experience that has dominated cognitive narratology has arguably remained rather ahistorical and linked to assumptions of the universality and immediacy of experience.

Let us first have a look at the philosophical assumptions that underlie Fludernik’s (2010) conception of historical experience. She distinguishes between two ways of applying the notion of historical experience:

On the one hand, one can speak of our present-day experiencing of the Afghan War or, in history, of the Elizabethans’ experience of the war in Ireland. . . . Type two of historical experience, which I would call past historical experience, corresponds to our present-

day experience of historicity when encountering representations of historical subjects and/or periods. (pp. 42–43)

She adds that because people mostly experience “historically relevant figurations . . . through the media, i.e. *indirectly*,” one may want to create a third category for “direct physical experience of processes and events such as *raw experience*,” exemplified by soldiers’ experience of war (p. 42). Underlying this view is an empiricist-positivistic conception of experience: the assumption that experience of events is immediately given, raw, and not historical except in some rare, special cases, as when it concerns “historical events” such as war.

All Fludernik’s examples of historical experiences are major political events, such as wars, the American moon landing, and the fall of the Berlin wall, and she uses the concept of “historical” in a very narrow event-historical sense: “In order to become ‘historical’ experience (rather than mere experience of things happening to impinge on one), events or processes need to be cognized as either significant (which will cause them to be experienced as historic even though they are only just evolving) or as past” (p. 46). What is problematic in this narrow conception of history is that it ignores the historicity of everyday life in which apparently nothing much happens. And who gets to decide, and how, what counts as “significant”? It can be legitimately argued that the personal, subjective, and everyday are highly significant, and just as historically constituted as the events of (narrowly conceived) political history.

I would like to suggest that narrative studies should take into account the historicity of everyday experience in a threefold sense. First, everyday experience is historical in the sense that it is historically conditioned, shaped by the historical world in which it is embedded. The historical world in which we live defines what it is possible for us to experience, feel, think, and do. For example, Reinhart Koselleck (1979) conceptualizes a historical world as a “space of experience,” *Erfahrungsraum*, in reference to how the present world is shaped by frameworks of meaning that set certain limits to possible experience in that world. A similar way of thinking underpins Gadamer’s (1997) views on our historical situatedness, Michel Foucault’s (1966) idea of the historical a priori that defines what it is possible to know and experience in a certain world, and Jacques Rancière’s (2013) approach to the (re)distribution of the sensible and thinkable. From this perspective not only the wars are historical but all experience, even our most everyday, habitual, unreflective ways of perceiving the world are historically

constituted. There is no raw experience: present experience is always mediated, temporally—through past experiences and ways of orienting oneself to the future (what Koselleck calls the “horizon of expectation”, *Erwartungshorizont*)—and through historically constituted cultural webs of meaning.

Second, experience is historical in the sense that our interpretations of the past shape our space of experience in the present and our ways of imagining the yet-to-be. That we always interpret the past in relation to the present is an insight that informs contemporary cultural memory studies. Memory is something that we do in the present; like narrative, it is an interpretative activity. It is not simple retrieval of what is stored in our minds but rather an activity that takes place in the present and an integral aspect of which is a narrative process of meaning-making (see Brockmeier, 2015). Theorists of cultural memory, such as Michael Rothberg (2009) and Max Silverman (2013), emphasize the processual and productive aspects of memory with reference to Richard Terdiman’s (1993) view that “memory is the past made present.” Rothberg argues that the “notion of a ‘making present’ has two important corollaries: first, that memory is a contemporary phenomenon, something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present; and, second, that memory is a form of work, working through, labor, or action” (pp. 3–4). Silverman, in turn, writes about a “poetics of memory” with reference to the past made present: “the activation of this elsewhere through memory, which converts the blandness of the everyday into something beyond ‘common sense’, is a performative and transformative act in the present” (p. 23). Like narrative, memory is necessarily selective, interpretative, and intertwined with imagination. As Ricoeur analyzes it, we can extend our present space of experience by drawing on the possibilities “buried in the actual past” (1988, pp. 191–192).

Third, everyday experience is historical in the sense that it is the very stuff of history; it is what history consists of. Instead of being mere effects of social and historical forces, we are agents who have the potential to affect the course of history. In this context, I consider important Hannah Arendt’s (1998) insights into how “the human condition of natality” defines us as beings capable of revealing our “unique personal identities” through acting and speaking: “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something new” (p. 9), that is, of acting, which “means to take an initiative, to begin,” to set something new and unexpected “into motion” (pp. 177–178).

I would like to argue that acknowledging this threefold historicity of experience allows us to explore three ways in which narratives shape our historical imagination. First of all, it allows us to analyze the narrative mediatedness of experience. While standard narratological accounts present narrative as something that necessarily comes afterwards and requires “a stepping back from the events” (Fludernik, 2010, p. 46), the approach that acknowledges the historical and cultural mediatedness of experience can take into account how narratives shape experience and the space in which individual experience is embedded. Instead of being merely a matter of retrospective meaning-giving, narratives affect how we experience things in the first place. Literary narratives can contribute to our historical imagination by conveying a sense of what it was like to live in a particular historical world as a space of possibilities and by reflecting on how cultural narratives shaped that world and mediated the experience of its inhabitants.

Second, narrative interpretations of the past shape our space of possibilities in the present. Literary narratives contribute to cultural memory by interpreting the past from the perspective of the present, and they can thereby open up new possibilities and visions of the future. For example, literature has played a key role in the “memory work” through which different generations have struggled to come to terms with the traumatic legacies of the Holocaust and colonialism. Jonathan Littell’s (2006/2009) *The Kindly Ones* (*Les Bienveillantes*) shows how National Socialism was linked to a logic of instrumental rationality that is not alien to contemporary Western society, and provokes us to reflect on how this legacy places ethical obligations on us in the present (see Meretoja, 2015). The dystopian, post-apocalyptic vision of Cormac McCarthy’s (2006) *The Road*, in turn, explores the conditions of possibility of being human and invites us to consider our present world as the past of a future world—as a past in which it might still have been possible to do something to prevent an environmental disaster. Literary narratives frequently prompt us to address the question of who we are in relation to the cultural traditions that mediate our efforts to make sense of our past, present, and future possibilities.

Third, literary narratives can contribute to historical imagination by helping us see how history consists of the everyday actions and inactions of people: that history is not taking place somewhere else, where the political leaders meet, but right here where our everyday lives unfold. In Claude Simon’s words, “History is not, as the school books would like to make us believe, a discontinuous series of dates, treaties and

spectacular battles . . . the dull existence of an old lady is History itself, the very stuff of History.”¹⁰ Literary and historical narratives can also cultivate our sense of how subjects of action are not merely historically conditioned but also capable of new initiatives; instead of simply following dominant cultural narratives, we are capable of shaping those narratives and creating our own ones. Narratives can help us imagine the openness of the past historical present: how the people of the past lived in an open present and made choices and decisions that shaped history, that is, how their present was not a predetermined part of a linear chain of events but an open space in which the future was in the process of being made. By cultivating our sense of how history unfolds through moments in which different possibilities are open to moral agents, fiction can work against reification in which history is seen in terms of a necessary development. Fiction can cultivate our sense of the *unpredictability* of human actions and interactions.

Imagining the Future: Houellebecq’s *Submission*

To exemplify the relevance of literary narratives as a form of reflecting on narrative agency and contributing to historical imagination, let me cast a brief look at Michel Houellebecq’s (2015) new novel, *Submission* (*Soumission*). Houellebecq is probably internationally the most famous and controversial contemporary French novelist. From the beginning, the reception of his work has been exceptionally mixed, and it has remained so, despite Prix Goncourt and his growing critical acclaim.¹¹ While Houellebecq has been criticized for being pornographic, racist, misogynist, Islamophobic, and reactionary, many admirers of his novels (me included), are compelled by how they succeed in dissecting the pathologies of contemporary Western consumer culture. In part due to the narrative ambiguity of his novels, critics disagree on whether they are primarily diagnoses or symptoms of what they depict, that is, whether they embrace or criticize the pathologies of global capitalism. It is symptomatic of the contemporary media culture that less often than being based on a careful reading of his novels, the debate has focused on

¹⁰ “L’Histoire n’est pas, comme voudraient le faire croire les manuels scolaires, une série discontinue de dates, de traités et de batailles spectaculaires . . . la terne existence d’une vieille dame, c’est l’Histoire elle-même, la matière même de l’Histoire.” (Simon, 1958, pp. 35–36)

¹¹ For helpful overviews of this mixed reception, see Morrey (2013) and Korthals Altes (2014).

Houellebecq's person. Yet only nuanced readings of their narrative strategies allow us to evaluate their ethos.¹²

Submission is set in France in 2022, in a period of political turmoil shadowing the presidential elections after the Socialist president François Hollande's second term. In the final round of the elections, the far-right Marine Le Pen faces Muhammed Ben Abbas's new moderate party, the Muslim Brotherhood, which eventually wins the elections, as the "broad republican coalition" backs it in order to keep Le Pen out. Instead of being Islamophobic, as some critics have suggested, the novel addresses the fear of Islam with which much of the Western world is currently grappling, and explores politics as an arena of struggle between different political narratives that provide divergent world-views, values, and interpretations of the past, present, and future. It depicts the current crisis of the Western culture as a value crisis rooted in the bankruptcy of secular humanism in the wake of twentieth-century totalitarianisms.

Houellebecq is most critical of the likes of himself: white, Western, middle-aged, middle-class men who are trapped in their sad, lonely, pleasure-seeking, and self-centred lives. Such are his protagonists, and the I-narrator of *Submission*, François, makes no exception. He is a 44-year-old professor of literature, who describes himself as being "as political as a bath towel" (p. 39)¹³ and lives in the vacuum of values of the Western hedonist, individualist consumer culture. The protagonist's life is financially secure, and yet he is "close to suicide, not out of despair or even any special sadness" but simply because the "mere will to live was clearly no match for the pains and aggravations that punctuate the life of the average Western man" (pp. 170–171).¹⁴ In his view, Europe is faring no better: "Europe had already committed suicide." (p. 213)¹⁵

Houellebecq writes within the Balzacian tradition in which the task of the novelist is to provide a truthful, honest account of what is happening in contemporary society, but unlike Balzac, whose third-person narration aimed at objectivity, Houellebecq privileges a first-person narrative perspective that is firmly rooted in the middle of the

¹² As Korthals Altes (2014) insightfully shows in her book on ethos attribution, completely opposite ethoses have been ascribed to Houellebecq's novels.

¹³ "Je me sentais aussi politisé qu'une serviette de toilette" (p. 50).

¹⁴ "Pourtant, je le sentais bien, je me rapprochais du suicide, sans éprouver de désespoir ni même de tristesse particulière La simple volonté de vivre ne me suffisait manifestement plus à résister à l'ensemble des douleurs et des tracas qui jalonnent la vie d'un Occidental moyen." (p. 207).

¹⁵ "L'Europe avait déjà accompli son suicide" (p. 256).

depicted world, *au milieu du monde*.¹⁶ His narrators engage in constant critical reflection on the social developments they observe, but never from a position of moral high ground—nor is such a position offered to the reader: “Every single one of us reeks of selfishness, masochism and death. We have created a system in which it has become simply impossible to live, and what’s more, we continue to export it” (2002, p. 361).¹⁷ That there is no authority above the openly partial, often provocative and self-ironical I-narration encourages the reader to see the limits and biases of the narrator’s perspective and to engage in the tasks of assessing and interpreting. The narrator’s constant commentary creates a metalevel to Houellebecq’s novels, shifting the attention from what happens to how the story is told and to the narrator’s and readers’ responses to the narrated events.

Submission explores the idea that the religions return because, unlike Western consumerism, they are able to address people’s “metaphysical questions” and their need for meaning (p. 209).¹⁸ The narrator’s story of his conversion to Islam ends in a utopian vision, told in proleptic future tense with a twist of black humor, of being surrounded by young brides arranged for him and whom he “would come to love”: it is a promise of a “second life, with very little connection to the old one” (p. 250).¹⁹ The temptation is linked to the idea that “the summit of human happiness resides in the most absolute submission,” and, according to the converted academic who “sells” the idea to the narrator, “Islam accepts the world, and accepts it whole. It accepts the world as such, Nietzsche might say. For Buddhism, the world is dukkha—unsatisfactoriness, suffering. Christianity has serious reservations of its own. Isn’t Satan called ‘the Prince of the world’? For Islam, though, the divine creation is perfect, it’s an absolute masterpiece” (p. 217).²⁰ Despite such attempts at

¹⁶ *Au milieu du monde* is the name of a series of his novels, including *Lanzarote* (2000) and *Plateforme* (2001).

¹⁷ “Je sais seulement que, tous autant que nous sommes, nous puons l’égoïsme, le masochisme et la mort. Nous avons créé un système dans lequel il est devenu simplement impossible de vivre ; et, de plus, nous continuons à l’exporter.” (2001, p. 369.)

¹⁸ “questions métaphysiques” (p. 251).

¹⁹ “Je parviendrais, de mon côté, à les aimer . . . ; et ce serait la chance d’une deuxième vie, sans grand rapport avec la précédente” (p. 299).

²⁰ “Le sommet du bonheur humain réside dans la soumission la plus absolue. . . . Voyez-vous, poursuit-il, l’islam accepte le monde, et il l’accepte dans son intégralité, il accepte le monde tel quel, pour parler comme Nietzsche. Le point de vue du bouddhisme est que le monde est dukkha—inadéquation, souffrance. Le christianisme lui-même manifeste de sérieuses réserves—Satan n’est-il pas qualifié de “prince de ce monde” ?

philosophical legitimation, however, the conversion of the intellectual elite seems primarily driven by pragmatic reasons: lack of courage to resist, indifferent uncertainty about why it would matter if France were turned into a Muslim country, the temptation of pleasure (polygamy), and simple opportunism (the opportunity to continue teaching, and with a better salary, in the Islamic Sorbonne). As Klaus Ove Knausgaard (2015) puts it, the novel's "satire is directed toward the intellectual classes, among whom no trace is found of idealism, and not a shadow of will to defend any set of values, only pragmatism pure and simple." The novel depicts the *reductio ad absurdum* of a world taken over by indifference and opportunism, where people just want to get on with their lives, with as little pain and as much pleasure as possible.

In the novel, experience in the narrative present is historically and narratively mediated. The subjects of political action and inaction live in a space of experience conditioned by their historical world and its narratives; their historical situation sets certain limits to what is possible for them to think, experience, and do. For example, it is a world in which most Westerners take for granted the capitalist market system. The leader of the moderate Muslim party "understood that the pro-growth right had won the 'war of ideas,' that young people today had become *entrepreneurs*, and that no one saw any alternative to the free market" (p. 125).²¹ But the novel depicts not only the historically conditioned experience of people living in a particular socio-historical world but also history in the process of its making. The war of the ideas is a war of narratives, and although the capitalist narrative has "won" and now mediates the historical experience of the inhabitants of that world, it is still a world in which competing narratives are struggling for power, and these competing narratives project different futures. The present is a time of political turmoil when the future is radically open, unsettled, and there are many alternative paths which the social development can take.

Submission is a literary narrative that prompts us to reflect on the possible and on how narratives limit and expand our sense of the possible. It not only imagines the possibility of the rise of Islam in Europe but also explores how our sense of the possible is constituted and transformed in a dialogical relation to cultural narratives. Our first reaction to the idea of

Pour l'islam au contraire la création divine est parfaite, c'est un chef-d'œuvre absolu" (pp. 260–261).

²¹ "la droite libérale avait gagné la « bataille des idées », il l'avait parfaitement compris, les jeunes étaient devenus *entrepreneurs*, et le caractère indépassable de l'économie de marché était à présent unanimement admis" (p. 153).

France becoming an Islamic country is likely to be disbelief, but the novel invites us to consider how that may not be quite as impossible as we first thought, and perhaps even more importantly, to see that many things that are first met with disbelief become part of “normalcy” as new cultural narratives gain impetus. The protagonist cites the Trojan War and the rise of Nazism in the 1930s:

History is full of such blindness: we see it among the intellectuals, politicians and journalists of the 1930s, all of whom were convinced that Hitler would ‘come to see reason’. It may well be impossible for people who have lived and prospered under a given social system to imagine the point of view of those who feel it offers them nothing, and who can contemplate its destruction without any particular dismay. (p. 44)²²

In the novel, narrative practices are ways of weaving the past, present, and future into one trajectory, and the present is the site where conflicting narrative trajectories are negotiated. Narratives told by different political groups harness the past to serve divergent visions of the future. The far-right anti-immigrant movement, for example, begins to call itself the “nativist movement,” allegedly representing the “Indigenous Europeans”:

We are the indigenous people of Europe, the first occupants of the land. They said, We’re against Muslim occupation—and we’re also against American companies and against the new capitalists from India, China, et cetera, buying up our heritage. They were clever, they quoted Geronimo, Cochise and Sitting Bull. (p. 55)²³

²² “Un tel aveuglement n’avait rien d’historiquement inédit : on aurait pu retrouver le même chez les intellectuels, politiciens et journalistes des années 1930, unanimement persuadés qu’Hitler « finirait par revenir à la raison ». Il est probablement impossible, pour des gens ayant vécu et prospéré dans un système social donné, d’imaginer le point de vue de ceux qui, n’ayant jamais rien eu à attendre de ce système, envisagent sa destruction sans frayeur particulière” (p. 56).

²³ “Nous sommes les indigènes de l’Europe, les premiers occupants de cette terre, et nous refusons la colonisation musulmane ; nous refusons également les firmes américaines et le rachat de notre patrimoine par les nouveaux capitalistes venus d’Inde, de Chine, etc. Ils citaient Geronimo, Cochise, Sitting Bull, ce qui était plutôt adroit” (pp. 68–69).

The present is a heterogenous site of struggle between competing political narratives, each of which leads to a different future.²⁴ People come from different religious and socio-cultural backgrounds, and they are at different phases of life. François's range of interests differs remarkably from those of the young:

For them it was all just starting to mean something, and for me nothing mattered except which Indian dinner I'd microwave (Chicken Biryani? Chicken Tikka Masala? Chicken Rogan Josh?) while I watched the political talk shows on France 2. (p. 27)²⁵

The novel itself is about imagining a possible future, but it also shows how our orientation to the future—our horizon of expectation and sense of futurity—is linked to how we narrate the past. The narrator suggests that we are still living in the spiritual space defined by the crisis of humanism in the aftermath of the Second World War, facing the dead end implicated in that crisis: “Freud was not wrong, and neither was Thomas Mann: if France and Germany, the two most advanced, civilized nations in the world, could unleash this senseless slaughter, then Europe was dead” (pp. 214–215).²⁶ The different political narratives present competing versions of how to interpret this crisis and the way out. The narrator believes that the decline of Europe is as inevitable as the decline of the Roman empire was: “The facts were plain: Europe had reached a point of such putrid decomposition that it could no longer save itself, any more than fifth-century Rome could have done” (pp. 230–231).²⁷ The Muslim Brotherhood, in turn, aims at “the rebuilding of the Roman Empire” (p. 164), which involves shifting “Europe's centre of gravity

²⁴ On the present as heterogenous, as a “coming together of different, but equally ‘present’ temporalities,” i.e., as a “disjunctive unity of present times,” see Osborne (2013, p. 44); and on how each age consists of the “co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities,” see Rancière (2013, p. 26).

²⁵ “Pour eux il commençait à y avoir un enjeu et pour moi plus du tout, à part choisir le plat indien que je ferais réchauffer au micro-ondes le soir (*Chicken Biryani ? Chicken Tikka Masala ? Chicken Rogan Josh ?*) en regardant le débat politique sur France 2” (p. 37).

²⁶ “Freud ne s’y est pas trompé, Thomas Mann pas davantage : si la France et l’Allemagne, les deux nations les plus avancées, les plus civilisées du monde, pouvaient s’abandonner à cette boucherie insensée, alors c’est que l’Europe était morte” (p. 257).

²⁷ “Il fallait se rendre à l’évidence : parvenue à un degré de décomposition répugnant, l’Europe occidentale n’était plus en état de se sauver elle-même—pas davantage que ne l’avait été la Rome antique au Ve siècle de notre ère” (p. 276).

towards the south” and making France “a great Arab power” (pp. 128–129).²⁸

As the narrator-protagonist tells the story of the events unfolding around him, his sense of what is possible is far from settled—it is changing, vague, and ambiguous—and he thematizes this very ambiguity and uncertainty: “At this point, it’s hard to say what is, or isn’t, possible. Anyone who tells you otherwise is either a fool or a liar” (p. 51).²⁹ After the Muslim Brotherhood gains power, French society goes through a major change, women begin to wear veils, and the new order soon comes to appear just as normal, necessary, and inevitable as the old order appeared earlier. The novel shows that narratives are not mere representations—they have performative power to transform political reality. Those whose narratives win over people’s hearts and minds have power to change the world. The novel suggests that we are just as vulnerable to political extremism as Europe was in the 1930s. The temptation of submission is the temptation to follow a narrative that is provided for us instead of taking the initiative in the Arendtian sense and creating one’s own narrative.

The novel shows the threefold historicity of experience: the historical world and its dominant narratives affect how people experience the events, but they do not determine those responses; the narrative agency of the subjects of action and experience consists in their capacity to participate in shaping the course of history and in the power struggle between competing narratives. These narratives include those that reinterpret history in order to transform the space of experience in the present. Even if the agency of most people remains weak and fragile, this does not change the fact that while their experience is narratively mediated, they are also agents of narrative change.

Houellebecq’s novels present no clear-cut answers to any of the questions that haunt the reader. Their protagonists are troubled, conflicted hedonists and atheists in search of love and meaning. They often see their own predicament clearly and insightfully—and narrate it with a good dose of black humor and self-irony—and nevertheless remain trapped in the form of life that they despise. Their narrative agency remains limited but at the same time their narration performatively shows how the

²⁸ “La reconstruction de l’Empire romain” (p. 198), “le centre de gravité de l’Europe vers le Sud”; “d’une grande politique arabe de la France” (p. 157).

²⁹ “Vous voyez, il est bien difficile de dire en ce moment ce qui est, ou non, possible. Si quelqu’un vient vous prétendre le contraire, ce sera un imbécile ou un menteur” (p. 64).

dominant system is being perpetuated without it being necessary. Houellebecq's novels engage in complex narrative reflection on our condition as narrative agents, on the cultural narratives in which we are entangled, and on the futures towards which they are taking us.

Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn on the trajectory through which I have come to see narrative as a productive lens for exploring our condition as self-interpreting animals, that is, the complex temporality of our being in the world as social and cultural beings who embark on action in response to perceived and imagined possibilities. Our existence is inseparable from our self-interpretations and our ways of imagining the past and the future, and narrative plays a crucial role in these interpretations and imaginings. I have argued here for conceptualizing narrative as an interpretative activity of cultural sense-making that has a dialogical, performative dimension and is integral to how we understand our past, present, and future possibilities. Such a conception acknowledges the existential-ontological significance of narratives for human existence and the cultural, social, and historical embeddedness of our narrative agency. It presents the subject not only as socially and historically conditioned but also as capable of agency, and it takes into account the processual, dynamic nature of our being as a constant process of becoming. The performative approach of narrative hermeneutics explores narratives as culturally-mediated, ethically and politically charged interpretative practices that have real world effects.

I have also argued here for a more historical conception of experience and narrative. Our historical imagination is shaped through processes of narrative (re)interpretation, and our narrative imagination always has a historical dimension. It is intimately linked to a sense of history—a sense of where we are coming from and where we are going and of our present historical world as space of possibilities shaped by historical processes. This perspective allows us to analyze how narratives contribute to historical imagination by cultivating our sense of how our narrative interpretations are historically mediated, how the ways we narrate the past shape our space of experience in the present, and how we as agents of narrative practices take part in constituting history.

Narratives are interpretations that explore human possibilities. Our sense of the possible in the present is shaped by how we understand the past, orient ourselves to the future, and narratively integrate the different

temporal dimensions of our historical and narrative imagination. My work as a literary and narrative scholar is fueled by the conviction that narrative fiction plays an important role both in imagining the past and in prompting us to address our futurity through visions of alternative futures. Literary narratives provide interpretations of our narratively shaped space of possibilities, and these interpretations take part in shaping our sense of the possible in the present. This is integral to the potential of literature to strengthen our (mostly fragile) narrative agency—both by critically reflecting on how we participate in perpetuating the narrative webs in which we are entangled and by proposing ways to reinterpret, challenge, and transform them.

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