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Life meets narrative

The title of this volume – *Life and Narrative* – inevitably evokes memories from the early days of the narrative turn in social research. When narrative theories and ideas started to blossom in psychology, sociology, and education from the early 1980s onwards, the predominant question often seemed to be nothing less than the relationship between life and narrative. This new focus of narrative thought indicates a radical change in the range of reference for ‘narrative.’ While the earlier generation of literary narratologists as well as such critics of narrative as Hayden White (1987) and Louis Mink (1987) had always thought of narrative as a primarily *textual* phenomenon, a particular category of fictional and non-fictional texts, the hermeneutical turn radically extends narrative into a special capacity of life, whereby theorists argue for instance that “narratives are forms inherent in our ways of getting knowledge that structure experience about the word and ourselves” (Brockmeier and Harré, 2001, p. 50).

The merit of launching what I have called the “metaphorical discourse on narrative,” however, most obviously belongs to the philosopher Louis O. Mink (Hyvärinen, 2012b; 2013). In an insightful essay, which Mink originally published in 1970, he authoritatively proclaims: “Stories are not lived but told” (1987, p. 50). Within the constructionist understanding of the social world, this claim at first sounds next to incontestable. Does it not carry the same message as the perspicacious remark Jerome Bruner quotes from Henry James, at the beginning his article “Life as Narrative,” reminding us that “stories happen to people who know how to tell them” (Bruner, 1987, pp. 11–12)? Mink, James, and White all make the fundamental and reasonable observation according to which telling about a life, a past, an individual occasion, always is an active, purposeful and constructive move. Telling a life, in this sense, never equals the simple record of what already was there, as a personal past. Let us call this idea the “activity of telling” claim.

However incontestable Mink’s claim seemed to be, it was, of course, contested. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) turned Mink’s claim upside down, by introducing his powerful metaphor of “living out narratives.” What is ingenious in his discussion about life and narrative is the suggestion that narratives can *precede*, if not entirely merge into the process of life. Quite obviously, MacIntyre does not exclusively understand narratives as texts in the way Mink and White appear to do. Narrative is no longer a textual representation of *past* things, it also seems to embrace the capacity to orient, guide, and format life events before they occur. Bruner (1987)

later discusses these orienting powers of narrative, suggesting that the narratives people tell about their lives entail the remarkable capacity to gain mental control over the direction of one's future life (Hyvärinen, 2008).

MacIntyre's extension of the meaning of narrative comes, however, at a price. Many years later and in an entirely different context, the narratologists James Phelan (2005a) coined the incisive term "narrative imperialism." In his conservative Aristotelianism, MacIntyre was not a keen advocate of individual multi-layeredness and diversity. Instead, he resorted to a kind of authoritative we-language which later became popular in several narrative discussions. Let me take just one example: "Thus the narratives which *we live out* have an unpredictable and a partially teleological character" (p. 216, italics added). I consider this to be an obvious case of blatant narrative imperialism. I have never understood what the reference of this above mentioned narrative could be, at least in my own life. I do not have such a narrative anywhere around, and I do not know what kind of mental and practical processes would constitute such a "living out." Nevertheless, I can accept that other individuals, differently oriented in terms of their psychology, family history or spirituality, may have command of the language game of living out narratives, but at least to me it makes no sense at all. Galen Strawson (2004) made a similar remark about the inevitable individual differences, albeit resorting to very dubious binary oppositions in outlining his position.

Arguably MacIntyre also belongs to the fathers of what later was discussed in terms of the big story bias. When narrative refers less and less to a particular storytelling occasion or narrative presentation, as is the case in MacIntyre's theory, it alarmingly begins to resemble a neutral record of the actual life course, the sequence of events in one's life – just in the manner that White, Mink, and James have all, in their own ways, shown as being problematic. As MacIntyre (1984) has it, "[t]o be the subject of a narrative that runs from one's birth to one's death is [...] to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life" (p. 217). While the later small story researchers, such as Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2007), emphasize the study of the *actual*, numberless, and partly contradictory daily stories, MacIntyre builds a veritable narrative iron cage comprising one life and one single narrative. Yet "[t]here is no single story which exhausts narrative identity," as Arnulf Depperman (2013, p. 1) has it.

Jerome Bruner, also in this volume, ingeniously connects narratives and "troubles." The troubles of life invite and make relevant the generation of narrative accounts – or narrative repairs, to use Hilde Lindemann Nelson's (2001) term. But do I already always know my next trouble? Do I not have more than one trouble? When I tell, do I always reflect the same trouble or set of troubles,

irrespective of the time, context, and audience? I am afraid most of us could easily name a great number of troubles, big and small, but without still being quite able to anticipate what the next relevant troubles just around the corner will be, and what kind of narratives they will summon in the future. Be that as it may, personally I do not see much use for this Grand, epic narrative running from my all too distant birth to the forthcoming death. It is a narrative I can neither tell nor listen to, and when told by others, I may only have the place of the trouble in the story. At this point, I seem to take a slightly different position than Paul Ricoeur (1991) and Mark Freeman (this volume), for the reason that I am not fully convinced about the aptness of the idea of life being “in quest of narrative.” The *quest* embodies all too much of heroic epics and romance for my understanding of life. Even here, I prefer the plurality of life narratives, perspectives to a life, or good stories in Bruner’s sense, that I possibly am able to compose in the course of my life. Instead of searching for a solution either from utterly big or very small stories, at this point I tend to be in favor of alternative, *medium* size narratives.

Of course, the metaphoric discourse about life and narrative extends much beyond MacIntyre’s influential work. Walter Fisher’s (1987, p. xiii) idea of humans as “homo narrans,” Bruner’s (1987) “Life as Narrative,” Theodor Sarbin’s (1986) narrative as the “root metaphor” for psychology, Rosenwald and Ochberg’s (1992) “storied lives,” and Vilma Hänninen’s (2004) “inner narrative” are just a few examples of this discourse. According to Marya Schechtman (1996, 2007), narrative identity equals “having a narrative.” The philosopher Hannah Arendt seemed to think that life itself is a story (see Kristeva, 2001; Livholts & Tamboukou, 2015). The essential point to make now is that there is absolutely nothing wrong, as such, with inventing metaphoric uses of narrative. Metaphor is an invaluable tool for invention and the suggested metaphors typically assisted in re-thinking, changing, and radicalizing the prevailing understandings of human life.

Kenneth Burke (1969, pp. 59–61) used the helpful term “representative anecdote” for the source fields of scholarly concepts of action and motivation. The psychological experiment, for him, was all too selective and narrow a setting to generate adequate terminology about human action, which inspired him to suggest “drama” as a replacement. What happened during the 1980s might correspondingly be characterized in terms of taking “narrative” as the representative anecdote for human psychology and action. The only serious limitation of metaphor is that it offers a perspective from one well-known, often bodily, phenomenon to the other, abstract, vague or difficult phenomenon. In the metaphoric discourse, narrative becomes the already-known, routinely understood term that helps us to see human life, psychology, and individual identities

more sharply. When it comes to merging narrative and life entirely together, I am afraid, the merits of metaphor will evaporate by the same token. A more practical problem with the metaphoric discourse may concern its distance to the actual study of narratives, and its (in)capacity to inspire and inform the proper study of narratives.

Indeed, do we already know narrative? If the answer is positive or hesitating, I warmly recommend Pekka Tammi's hilarious and ironic article "Against Narrative ("A Boring Story")," wherein the literary theorist airs his desperation at "stretching the notion disproportionately" (Tammi, 2006, p. 25). Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008), an expert from the side of narrative sociology, uses no milder term than "the tyranny of narrative," and reminds her readers that "[a]ll talk and text is not narrative"; and "[s]torytelling is only one form of oral communication." No wonder then that Riessman belongs to the very few social scientists who have insisted upon defining what they mean by 'narrative' (pp. 3–7).

Back to the 1980s?

The volume at hand suggests, with good reason, that the enhanced conversation between narrative theorists in social research and literary narratology can enrich both sides in important ways. Considering this idea, we can again look back at the narrative scene of the 1980s. In the formative years of the narrative turn, such influential authors as Bruner (1986), Donald Polkinghorne (1988), and Kenneth and Mary Gergen (1986) all exhibited serious efforts to translate and convey to social research what they understood to be the essentials of literary narratology. The prime theoretical example for such intellectual journeys most apparently was Paul Ricoeur (1984–1988) and his massive trilogy *Time and Narrative*. The particular and admirable feature in Ricoeur's philosophical genre indeed was this necessity of taking "detours" as he never confined himself to theorizing narrative merely within the perspective of his own philosophical tradition but insisted on taking detours through historiographical and narratological discourses as well. Ricoeur if anyone was the genuine predecessor of interdisciplinary narrative theory, yet even he, in spite of the remarkable scale of his project, never included the sociolinguistic theories of everyday storytelling, contributing thus to the big story bias.

Nevertheless, this transdisciplinary climate was soon lost. When the sheer volume of social and psychological research of narrative started to grow rapidly, and the need for legitimating narrative inquiry consequently abated, this early days' interdisciplinary ethos silently vanished. Oftentimes, the open rejection of narratology was argued by claiming that narratology is too

exclusively interested in the *forms* of narration, whereas we social scientists need to focus primarily on the narrative *contents*. “Narrative content,” of course, never emerges separately and in its own right, without the bearing of the form. One source of the misunderstanding may reside in the old structuralist idea of *the* form of narrative; and the consequent search for a universal narrative grammar, inscribed famously in Hayden White’s (1987) book title *The Content of the Form*.

Be that as it may, the recurrent appraisal and rejection of narratology was based on what now is called “classical narratology,” and not at all on the narratologies that were emerging and gaining momentum in the 1990s (Fludernik, 2005; Alber & Fludernik, 2010). I take only two striking examples to underscore my point. James Phelan, providing some of his nuanced and theoretically intricate tools of analysis in this volume, re-established the position of the rhetorically oriented narratology (e.g., Phelan, 1996, 2005b). Phelan’s strategy of defining narrative and narrative occasions as such is a useful point of departure for social analyses of narrative (see his chapter in this volume). When reading his current article and his refined take on narrative forms and expressions, one can hardly come to the conclusion that Phelan forecloses his interpretative work after revealing some structures or “conditions of possibility” for narrative meaning-making. Phelan’s persistent emphasis on the *ethics* of narration and narrative analysis as such explodes the continuing preoccupation about narratologists who only study the narrative forms.

The second case worth noting is equally full of astounding irony. Monika Fludernik published her *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* in 1996. What is especially remarkable in this work, in terms of interdisciplinary narrative theory, is Fludernik’s keen attempt at establishing a totally new version of narratology, a version which is based on observations about the regularities of the everyday, ‘naturally occurring’ oral narratives. This reference to naturally occurring narratives also invites a rejection of the one-sided, classical focus on narratives-as texts, pointing out the necessity to include the necessary *contexts of narration*. The narratologists Phelan, Fludernik, and David Herman (2009) all pay serious attention to the issue of narrative contexts.

Fludernik tried not only to assimilate the whole Labovian heritage (that Ricoeur had previously disregarded) into narratology, she also argued for a certain primacy of these ordinary narratives over the literary forms of narrative. Social scientists were kindly invited to the table of narratology, even provided with an honorary place at the head of the table, yet practically no one bothered to accept the invitation at the time. Fludernik defined narrativity with the help of “experientiality,” thus anchoring narratives and narrative theory in understanding human experience, instead of focusing on the mere sequence of events. Hanna Meretoja, in this volume,

similarly theorizes narratives as an effort to capture and reach the experience of the past. Yet, for example *The Handbook of Narrative Inquiry* (Clandinin, 2007) still does not mention Fludernik's work even once.

I wonder if this kind of deep theoretical isolation can have been entirely productive on either side of the divide. However, if it is obvious now that social scientists and psychologists largely ignored contemporary narratology, there still remains the consequent question about how well narratologists recognized the work done in psychology, sociology, or education. Have narratologists exhibited any avid interest in social analyses of narrative? For the most part, the interest used to be both thin and haphazard. Fludernik's pivotal work, as well as the rise of the project of cognitive narratology did finally excite more avid interest on the narratological side. While David Herman's (1999) original proposal for "socionarratology" mainly recognized the work done in sociolinguistics by William Labov, his more recent work has encompassed such authors as Bruner and Michael Bamberg, among others (e.g., Herman, 2002, 2009, 2013). *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2005) already offers entries on narrative psychology, sociolinguistics, health and sociology. All in all, it seems to me that narratologists have recently been more eager to cross the disciplinary borders than social scientists.

The realization of the merits of theoretical and interpretative exchange across disciplinary borders should not, however, lead to unfounded interdisciplinary zeal or rejection of one's own disciplinary particularities. As regards to the ongoing debate between the "separatist" and "unified" theories, most explicitly discussed by Lars-Åke Skalin in this volume, the interdisciplinary interest should not determine any definite position. The intensive debate between "natural" and "unnatural" narratologies has continued over the last years in different fora (see Alber, Nielsen & Richardson, 2012, 2013; Alber, Iversen, Nielsen & Richardson, 2013; Iversen 2013; Fludernik, 2012; Herman, 2011). It has been a debate that obviously has been confusing enough from the perspective of social research of narrative, the separatist and advocates of "unnatural" narratology claiming that the study of (experimental) fiction needs different theories and methodologies than the study of everyday, naturally-occurring stories.

Instead of now taking a strong position for or against a unitary theory, or against or for a separatist theory, one could simply wait and see which kind of results these alternatives are able to produce, and more precisely, what are the problems that the unified theory is better at solving, and conversely, on which issues the separatist position generates more nuanced results. In other words, I suggest understanding these proposals for unified and separatist, natural and unnatural

narratologies in terms of complementary intellectual and theoretical *moves* rather than as entirely independent or contrasting theoretical projects.

To sum up, we may even have a strong interest in interdisciplinary narrative theory, but there is no need to remain oblivious to the particular and particularized interests that may be relevant in the world of the neighboring discipline. Paul Atkinson (2009) has emphasized the healing power of original disciplines even more strongly, by declaring that “[n]arrative needs to be brought within the disciplinary traditions of sociology, anthropology or discursive psychology. We must reunite narratives with classic work on accounts and accounting devices” (p. 9). Michael Bamberg (forthcoming) similarly notes the need for taking further distance from the textual focus of classical narratology and the metaphorical discourse of narrative.

Against the narrative camp

Narrative – both narrative writing and research – seems to regularly invoke fierce criticism and movements “against narrative” (Meretoja, 2014, pp. 31–118). I will next visit one recent and one classical case of anti-narrativism. One of the most recent and still debated moves was prompted by the philosopher Galen Strawson in his article “Against Narrativity” (Strawson, 2004, 2007; Hyvärinen, 2012a). There are so many comprehensive discussions on his theses – in this volume, for example, by Mark Freeman – that I will confine myself mostly to his idea of the narrative camp. Strawson uses the term in passing, explaining that “Alasdair MacIntyre is perhaps the *founding figure* in the modern Narrativity camp, and his view is similar to [Charles] Taylor’s” (p. 437, italics added). The results from my own study on the history of the narrative turns (Hyvärinen, 2010) were exactly the opposite. Against my own assumptions, the narrative turn literature from the 1990s revealed practically no clear lineages of thought, and a meagre tendency towards a unified canon. The narrative inspirations came from different sources and from different disciplines, giving little space for fixed founding figures.

Nevertheless, the image of “founding figure” perfectly fits as the beginning of a simplified narrative account of the narrative camp. Bruner (1991, p. 5) himself located the paradigm shift in psychology in the collection of articles edited by W.J.T. Mitchell (1981), including such authors as Derrida, Ricoeur, White, and Nelson Goodman. This is not at all such an easy target as the presumed “founding figure” of MacIntyre. Strawson’s rhetorical strategy in building his case against narrativity was to suggest a series of binary oppositions and clear-cut camps of thought.

It goes without saying that Strawson does not fail to portray Narrativity as the “dominant view in the academy today” (p. 429).

However, what bothers me in the commentaries on Strawson is a kind of practical adoption of the idea of “narrative camp,” obvious in the attempts at rebutting every single claim Strawson makes, as if the question really were about the survival of the narrative camp (e.g., Battersby, 2006; Eakin, 2006). To clarify my point, I take one of Strawson’s theses and one of its concretizations for closer scrutiny:

There is a widespread agreement that human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least a collection of stories. (p. 428)

Rather than being a unifying tenet of the presumed narrative camp, I figure, this thesis is best understood as one important dividing line among narrative scholars. For example, Arendt and MacIntyre, among many others, would accept the idea without too many reservations. Yet, the rejection of the above thesis does not necessarily implicate any devaluation of the role of narrative. My proposal is to pay more careful attention to the narrative vocabulary and the exact idioms of narrative. Narrative and storytelling can well be understood as useful, necessary and profound methods for *understanding* and *communicating* life. Many young people nowadays constantly take selfies and photos of their friends, places, and meals. Yet I wonder how many of these young people would “see their life as a photo” or even “a sample of photos.” How about poets who transform their lives experiences into poems? Do they always consider their lives as a poem or at least a stack of poems?

Towards the end of his article, Strawson characterizes the narrative outlook of life:

One must have some sort of relatively large-scale coherence-seeking, unity-seeking, pattern-seeking, or most generally [F] form-finding tendency when it comes to one’s apprehension of one’s own life... (p. 441)

Strawson himself commits to this “large-scale coherence-seeking, unity-seeking, pattern-seeking” on the level of fixed psychological categories, which allow for much less variety and space for individuality than life narratives or narrative identities. Strawson’s major trick is to refer only to conventional narratives as narratives (p. 439). Narrative as exploration or narrative as a method to investigate one’s life are not even thinkable within his model. To put it differently, for Strawson, narratives cannot add complexity, ambiguity or fragility; they are straightforward vehicles of coherence and closure. However, this coherence-seeking is not an

issue between the “narrative” and “anti-narrative” camps; this is a matter of debate among the narrative scholars themselves (Hyvärinen et al., 2010). Strawson is perfectly correct in the sense that there has been, at least historically, a great deal of “relatively large-scale coherence-seeking, unity-seeking, pattern-seeking” thought in narrative studies, and equally wrong in thinking that this coherence-seeking wish is the characteristic feature of narrative thought.

It is time then to consciously renounce the whole idea of a narrative camp. The compelling task no longer is to collect ammunition for a presumed narrative camp; it is more sensible to promote more sophisticated research and argumentation, be it narrative or not. Strawson is biased and totally wrong in presenting “narrativity” as the majority line of thought in current academia, yet it is equally untenable to present narrative studies and narrative thought as the eternally emergent and new intellectual movement in need of constant legitimation. We already have plenty of history. This in mind, I suggest two strategic consequences from these observations:

Firstly, it is now a good time for critical re-assessment of the heritage of narrative thought. It is hardly credible or intellectually adequate to keep on collecting and rehearsing the gallery of key narrative quotes that are supposed to legitimate our current ideas as well. Such critical assessments of the tradition as Schiff’s (2013; forthcoming) work on narrative psychology are more than welcome.

Secondly, we could possibly learn something from the recent history of narratology. The boost of narrative thought in literary studies has not been piggy-backed on any “narratological camp,” but rather on an unbroken debate between competing narratologies. The lack of narrative debates indicates lack of interest in narrative theory. The meager interest in narrative theory, in turn, tends to lead to the often-lamented non-accumulation of narrative studies. If and when the empirical narrative analyses do not comment, reflect, and revise contested narrative theories, it is hardly odd that narrative texts do not build on each other, refer to each other, or revise each other. (Josselson, 2006)

Life, narrative, and Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre has an enduring position in debates on narrative and life. MacIntyre (1984) fiercely attacks him, Freeman (1993) discusses him; Hayden White (1999, pp. 74–76), and Strawson (2004) present him as their anti-narrative hero. Perhaps the most confusing and recurring feature in the discussions about Sartre is the pronounced textualism and the consequent

absence of proper context. In what follows, I begin with the famous textual excerpts from his *Nausea* (1938/2000) and proceed then to the *narrative context* with a narratological reading, and finally to cultural and biographical contexts. The principal purpose of this reading is to alert the reader of the changed content of the concept of “narrative.”

Mr. Roquentin, Sartre’s alter ego in *Nausea*, ponders narrative and life in oppositional terms:

This is what I have been thinking: for the most commonplace event to become an adventure, you must – and this is all that is necessary – start *recounting* it. This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.

But you have to choose: to live or to recount. (p. 61)

“Sartre” seems to enact above a necessity of choice between “living” and “recounting.” How this is possible when “a man is always a teller of tales,” still remains a bit unclear. However, the passage “he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it” could almost be a quote from Bruner’s “Life as narrative”, which equally studies the ways in which the narratives people tell tend to shape the future life as well. But there is more to come:

When you are living, nothing happens. The setting change, people come in and go out, that’s all. There are never any beginnings. Days are tracked on to days without rhyme or reason, it is an endless, monotonous addition. (p. 61)

Here we meet an excellent literary trick. The narrator Roquentin has at first framed adventure as something that comes into the picture only in hindsight, while recounting the events. This is not nearly the case, because “adventure” as an attitude can quite obviously both precede and coincide with the action and moments of life, as easily as the nauseous boredom Roquentin exhibits. Nevertheless, Roquentin purifies the elements of excitement out the present moment, while recounting all the same, and frames his own boredom as “the real thing,” which does not contain any attitude or literary or narrative embellishment. The literary trick consists in nothing less than cleaning all meaning-making out of the present life, and giving a purely behavioristic account of happenings. Nowhere does “life” exist in this entirely purified form (Brockmeier & Meretoja, 2014, Freeman, 2010). Nevertheless, Roquentin continues by affirming the purified image of life:

That’s living. But when you start tell about life, everything changes; only it’s a change nobody notices: the proof of that is that people talk about true stories. As if there could

possibly be such things as true stories; events take place one way and we recount them the opposite way. (p. 62)

Radical textualists, such as Strawson, take these quotes as “Sartre’s” philosophical comments on “narrative.” However, we are not discussing here a philosophical essay but a novel. Later on, Sartre makes the confession that he indeed was Roquentin, but this not the whole point. The often quoted words were expressed by Roquentin, the first-person or character narrator of the novel. The first obvious paradox resides here: how is it possible to pronounce a full-scale criticism of narrative within a narrative? Does it not indeed testify of the power of narrativity?

There is even more to it. At the end of the novel, Roquentin sits in a café, listening to the melody of “Some of these days,” and the voice of the singing “negress” (2000, pp. 249–253). The feeling of nausea is eventually lifted while listening to the melody, and Roquentin is getting new ideas:

I am going, I feel resolute. I dare not make a decision. If I were sure that I had talent...but I had never, never written anything of that sort; historical articles, yes – if you could call them that. A book. A novel. And there would be people who would read this novel and who would say: ‘It was Antoine Roquentin who wrote it...’ (p. 252)

The novel ends with these visions of writing a novel, a narrative, and the wish that by writing it, Roquentin “might be able to recall [his] life without repugnance” (p. 252). By challenging all the previous and many times repeated theses, Roquentin thinks:

Perhaps, one day, thinking about this very moment, about this dismal moment at which I am waiting, round-shouldered, for it to be time to get on the train, perhaps I might feel my heart beat faster and to say myself: ‘It was on that day, at that moment that it all started.’ And I might succeed – in the past, simply in the past – in accepting myself. (p. 252–253)

If the earlier opposition was between life and telling, Roquentin ends up envisioning life, and accepting himself, by distinctively narrative methods. Ironically, this vision of finally encountering the nausea is also based on Roquentin’s capacity to recognize a potentially dramatic beginning almost as it was taking place, then positing himself in the narrative future, and finally looking back to this moment of beginning. What Roquentin has accomplished is nothing less than a prospective narrative of overcoming his nausea, a narrative of becoming a novelist.

Reading the whole novel already problematizes the too straightforward interpretations. The author indeed seems both to criticize narrative, to use narrative, and find a narrative solution to a

vital life problem of nausea. As Meretoja (2014, p. 55) writes, Sartre undeniably “became one of the leading critics of narrativity” in the 1940s and 1950s. For these critics, the past no longer existed in the form of neat, well-formed stories. “The novels of our elders related the event as having taken place in the past,” as Sartre comments (quoted by Meretoja, p. 55). Instead of these already-finished stories, Sartre poses the radical openness and insecurity of the existential now. From Sartre and the French *nouveau romanciers* to White (1981), there is a constant critical discussion on the expected *tenses* of narrative. *Nausea* is tellingly not written in the French “preterite or the historic tense (*le passé simple*)” (Meretoja, p. 58), as the dominant versions of historiography and novel writing used to be at the time of the publication of *Nausea*, but in the more radical *present tense*. For Sartre, a novel written in the present tense was obviously *not* a narrative. A contemporary and informed reader would not make such categorical decisions based solely on the choice of tense. Students of oral storytelling, for example, know very well that tellers often change from the past to the present tense in the most dramatic and traumatic moments – say, for example, during Norman K Denzin’s (1989) epiphanies. In practice, the use of present tense intensifies the narrativity of the accounts.

There still remains the question of “Sartre” within the larger biographical context. In 1964, Sartre publishes his autobiographical work *Les Mots* (*Words* 1981). “Around 1850, in Alsace, a schoolteacher with more children than he could afford was willing to become a grocer” (p. 5). Now there is no hesitation about the nature of the text; this is a narrative without pretenses. At the end of the book, Sartre returns to the days of *Nausea*:

At the age of thirty, I executed the masterstroke of writing in *Nausea* – quite sincerely, believe me – about the bitter unjustified existence of my fellowmen and of exonerating my own. I was Roquentin; I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life. At the same time, I was *I*, the elect, chronicler of Hell [...] *Fake to the marrow of my bones* and hoodwinked, I joyfully wrote about our unhappy state. Dogmatic though I was, I doubted everything except that I was the elect of doubt. (pp. 251–252, italics added)

Sartre has certainly criticized conventional narratives in novel writing, yet he allows for narrative accounts of his own life, even an account of himself writing *Nausea* and the criticism about narrativity. There is no longer an opposition between recounting and living, instead Sartre recounts how he eventually has been learning to live. Sartre in his more advanced age was not Roquentin, and it is rather misleading to attribute Roquentin’s ideas to a generalized “Sartre” without any qualification. The narrowly textual reading of *Nausea*, such as Strawson’s, cannot

but lead to flawed results, while a more contextual reading testifies for the historical flexibility of narrative and narrativity.

There is no evidence of Sartre renouncing his earlier criticism of conventional narrativity. Nevertheless, his critical attitude towards conventional narrativity did not stop him from building his own narrative identity, or of seeking new forms of narration in his *Nausea*. More than anything, the case of Sartre shows how useless the urge is to categorize writers in clear-cut “narrative” and “anti-narrative” camps. Whatever Sartre criticized and commented on during the 1930s or 1950s, he was never a participant in current debates on narrative. Experimental writers and theorists on narrative have modified the limits and conventions of narrative so profoundly since the publication of *Nausea* that the quotes from the novel only work as anachronistic, a-historical comments in today’s debates.

Lives and narratives

The chapters of this volume display a respectable variety of ways connecting life and narrative. At one extreme, some scholars follow the actual process of life moment by moment, and study the emergent narratives within talk-in-discourse (as Alexandra Georgakopoulou does). “Life” is not represented; everything that takes place is a moment of life. At the other end of the range, the literary narratologists reflect the fictional methods of narration, painstakingly analyzing the ways the fictional worlds are construed for us. The real dilemma of narrative scholarship derives from the boundless diversity of narratives participating one way or another in the process of human life. The variety of narrative genres, from the “naturally occurring” to the most intricate literary experiments, forecloses the possibility of one privileged methodology and research agenda. In addition to narrative research, narrative practices intervene into social work, therapy, medicine, and planning.

As an attempt at drawing my discussion towards a partial closure, I revisit Kenneth Burke’s short and astute essay “Four master tropes.” Burke emphasizes that he is not interested in the purely figural usage of these tropes, he is interested in their role in “discovery and description” of truth (Burke, 1969, pp. 503–517). According to Burke, by metaphor it is possible to substitute perspective, by metonymy reduction, by synecdoche representation and by irony dialectic. Even though these tropes are far from being categorically fixed, they nevertheless offer different

understandings of the topic. White (1999, pp.128–136) demonstrates elegantly the power of Burke’s model in his reading of a short passage from Marcel Proust.

As I argued above, narrative as a *metaphor* for life became popular during the 1980s, and became famous, thanks to Bruner’s (1987) simile “Life as narrative.” In a *metonymic* reduction, narrative (as one part of the whole life) comes to embody life, and life and narrative almost merge together. *Synecdoche*, as the relation between the part and the whole, instead emphasizes the more complex constitution of life, and the non-narrative elements of it. *Irony*, in a way, uses all the other tropes and presents the object as a necessarily figural and never fully achievable. The way experimental fiction speaks about life without ever claiming it as the true life, renders it a powerful example of irony. As for research orientations, synecdoche seems to provide the most promising analytic frame and mode of representation. In contrast to such anti-narrativists as Strawson, a synecdoche as an approach to life and narrative does not suggest an external relationship between two, entirely separate entities. In contrast to such thinkers as David Carr (1986), synecdoche does not merge narrative and life entirely together.

Very soon after writing “Life as narrative,” Jerome Bruner published his influential book *Acts of Meaning* (1990). In this book, Bruner suggested that narratives are construed and told only after the “canonical” expectations about everyday life have been broken. Bruner thus proposes two different categories of everyday knowledge: the script-like common sense, folk psychological knowing of canonicity; and the corrective, emergent and creative knowing of narrative. On my analysis, Bruner transcends his metaphoric state of argumentation in this book. Because of its reactive function, narrative can no longer become a simple metonymy of life. Before narration, there is the *pre-narrative* knowledge of canonicity, and the troubling event of breach. Narrative is now embedded in the world of embodied action and the dense texture of expectations. Can we not, for good reasons, call this moment Bruner’s turn to narrative synecdoche?

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