

The Narrative Turn in the French Novel of the 1970s

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One of the central aspects of the *nouveau roman*, the most important French literary movement of the 1950s and 1960s, was the way in which it questioned the idea of the novel as storytelling. The *nouveaux romanciers*, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute and Claude Simon, wanted to bring forth the ideological questionability of narrativity epitomized by what they called “Balzacian realism” – in terms of which, they felt, the novel as a genre was still viewed and assessed. However, after this period of radical problematization, a rehabilitation of storytelling is visible in the French novel of the 1970s – a shift that some scholars have characterized as the “return of the narrative” or as “re-narratization of the novel” (see e.g. Kibedi Varga 1988, 38; Gratton 1997, 248; cf. Davis & Fallaize 2000, 14–15). In my article, I would like to shed some light on this “narrative turn” by arguing that it can be seen as a turn towards a fundamentally hermeneutic view of the narrative mediatedness of our relation to the world. As my primary example I will use Michel Tournier who has been mentioned as a major representative of this turn (Kibedi Varga 1988, 38; Gratton 1997, 248) but whose precise contribution to it has not yet been examined.

Problematization of Storytelling in the *Nouveau Roman*

First, I will have a brief look at why the *nouveaux romanciers* rejected the idea of the novel as storytelling or as “narration of a succession of fictional events” (to use Rimmon-Kenan’s (1988, 2) definition of ‘narrative fiction’). A central motivation for this rejection was the idea that storytelling creates a false illusion of the intelligibility, coherence, and meaningfulness of reality. In other words, the *nouveaux romanciers* repudiate storytelling in the name of a *new realism*, that is, in order to bring forth the fundamentally chaotic, fragmentary nature of reality. Thus, although

Matti Hyvärinen, Anu Korhonen & Juri Mykkänen (eds.) 2006
The Travelling Concept of Narrative

COLLEGIUM

Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences 1.
Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. 97–117.

they renounce realistic ideology, they still endeavour to say something about the human situation in the world. As Simon (1986, 86) puts it, what unites the *nouveaux romanciers* is the experience of the fundamental uncertainty of everything, that is, of “constantly treading on quicksand”. Similarly, Sarraute (1963, 435; 2002, 10) sees storytelling as a convention that masks the way in which reality is in a state of constant transformation; and Robbe-Grillet writes in his essay collection *For a New Novel (Pour un nouveau roman, 1963)*:

All the technical elements of the narrative – systematic use of the past tense and the third person, unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots [...] etc. – everything tended to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe (Robbe-Grillet 1989, 32).

By contrast, the *nouveau roman* is based on the experience of fragmentary, fleeting reality that, to put it in Robbe-Grillet’s (1989, 21) terms, “refuses to conform to our habits of apprehension and to our classification”. Robbe-Grillet underlines that reality is totally foreign to man; in his famous words, “Man looks at the world, and the world does not look back at him” (Robbe-Grillet 1989, 58).

Although the *nouveaux romanciers* renounced the existentialist idea of commitment, there are many other respects in which Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus were important forerunners for them.¹ Sartre and Camus, too, view reality as fundamentally non-human and reject storytelling because stories impose false order on reality. Sartre (1950, 167) argues that his generation can no longer accept the way in which narratives present reality as if already understood and ordered, ignoring “its ambiguity, its unforeseeability”; “the narrative explicates and coordinates at the same time as it describes, it substitutes a causal order for chronological connections” (Sartre 1947, 121). Similarly, in *Nausea (La Nausée, 1938)*, Roquentin suggests that it is false and dishonest to mould life into stories and adventures. There is a fundamental opposition between living and storytelling, but we are so entangled in stories that we deceive ourselves and fail to make this distinction clearly:

[F]or 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 the 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 (Sartre 1965, 61).²

1 Robbe-Grillet (see e.g. 2001, 239–262) acknowledges this, especially in his later essays. On the relation between the existentialist notion of political commitment and the *nouveaux romanciers*’ notion of “literary commitment”, see Meretoja (2004a, 122–131).

2 “Voici ce que j’ai pensé: pour que l’événement le plus banal devienne une aventure, il faut et il suffit qu’on se mette à le *raconter*. C’est ce qui dupe les gens: un homme, c’est toujours un conteur d’histoires, il vit entouré de ses histoires et des histoires d’autrui, il voit tout ce qui lui arrive à travers elles; et il cherche à vivre sa vie comme s’il la racontait. Mais il faut choisir: vivre ou raconter” (Sartre 1978, 61–62).

However, in Robbe-Grillet's opinion Sartre and Camus failed to distance themselves radically enough from anthropomorphism. To his mind, Camus's concept of the absurd, for example, gives a tragic, profound meaning to the strangeness of the world. By contrast, Robbe-Grillet (1989, 19) writes: "But the world is neither significant nor absurd. It *is*, quite simply."³ Simon grants this phrase his unreserved approval (Lebrun 1989, 39), and in his Nobel Lecture he paraphrases it as follows: "[I]n a word, I've been about the world ... all, however, without finding any sense to all this, unless it should be the one assigned to it, I believe, by Barthes, following Shakespeare: that 'if the world signifies anything, it is that it signifies nothing' – except that it exists" (Simon 1993, 70). Moreover, Robbe-Grillet (1984, 212/1988, 149) demands that the novel should give up – more radically than the existentialists – "the universe of meanings (psychological, social, functional)", because "reality begins at the precise moment when meaning becomes uncertain". In fact, Robbe-Grillet has expressed on numerous occasions his suspicion and even hostility towards meaning in general: "My greatest enemy, perhaps my only enemy, already for a long time has been meaning in general" (Ricardou 1976, 36). And in an interview he states: "The Real Is Everything Outside Meaning. The familiar, the constituted (world/text), is ideological, a cultural and linguistic construction. The real is what is outside this" (Ramsay 1992, 245).

In light of statements like these, it is questionable to regard Robbe-Grillet as a phenomenological novelist, as he himself and many scholars have done (see e.g. Robbe-Grillet 2001, 241–249; Laaksonen 1993, 273–274; Carrabino 1974; Morrisette 1963, Bernal 1964; Stoltzfus 1964; Sturrock 1969; Allemant 1997). Namely, phenomenologists from Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Sartre agree that it is senseless to posit a sharp opposition between meanings and reality since reality is always given to us in some sense, that is, interpreted and opened up from a certain horizon of meaning. As Sartre (1996, 76) notes: "There is no other universe than a human universe, a universe of human subjectivity". Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1962, xix) asserts, "we are *condemned to meaning*"; and Camus (1942, 32) contends: "In order to understand the world, man must transform it into human, he must impress his own stamp on it. [...] The old truth 'all thinking is anthropomorphic' has precisely this meaning".

In his novels (especially in his first four novels), Robbe-Grillet endeavours to avoid narrativity and meaning-giving as far as possible by focusing on the description of physical objects, often in a geometrical fashion, as in the following example from his novel *In the Labyrinth* (*Dans le labyrinthe*, 1959):

[A] square of varnished wood, as sharp as if drawn with a ruler, thus occupies the rear left-hand corner of the table, not in the angle itself but parallel to the edges, about four

3 From a Heideggerian perspective, for example, this view is, of course, highly questionable: in his *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger (2001, 2–4) argues that the question concerning 'Being' is not the simplest but the most profound and complex question. Below, I will deal more extensively with the hermeneutic view of the human mode of being.

inches from them. The square itself measures some six by six inches (Robbe-Grillet 1967, 10).⁴

As we can see, the objects of description are not interpreted from any individually constituted personal perspective: they are not related to anyone's life situation or life history, nor even to the human world of purposes and meanings in general. Robbe-Grillet (1989, 39) describes this mode of description as an attempt to cleanse things "from systematic *romanticism* [...]" so that at last they could be merely *what they are*"; and he regards sight as the "privileged sense" because of its "cleansing power": it "leaves things in their respective place", thereby enhancing "rejection of all complicity" with the world (Robbe-Grillet 1989, 72–73).

The opposition between things as they are "in themselves" and conventional notions of reality is central to all the *nouveaux romanciers*, and it is connected to their attempt to displace storytelling by description of internal or external reality in its immediacy (see e.g. Ricardou & Rossum-Guyon 1972b, 53; Sarraute 1963, 432–433; Robbe-Grillet 2001, 329). Sarraute's novels concentrate on the description of what she calls "tropisms", that is, the anonymous, pre-linguistic inner movements of the psyche. Instead of telling stories and portraying characters her novels attempt to describe "a substance as anonymous as blood, a magma without name or contours" (Sarraute 2002, 76). Simon, on the other hand, is a self-declared materialist – "Grosso modo, je suis matérialiste" (Lebrun 1989, 40) – who endeavours to bring forth, similarly to Robbe-Grillet, the solid materiality of the world. He sees himself as one of the modern novelists who are carrying out the prediction made by Tynianov of "a future form of the novel in which 'the story would be no more than the pretext for an accumulation of descriptions'" (Duncan 1985, 14).

Robbe-Grillet and Simon acknowledge that reality as such cannot be made immediately available in literature, as it is built of language which already represents artificial ordering of things, but they think they can come nearest to this goal by describing only concrete, particular visual perceptions without abstract conceptualization, as if without or before giving meaning to these perceptions (see e.g. Lebrun 1989, 38, 40; Robbe-Grillet 1989, 107).⁵ Simon speaks of resorting to the "primordial, elementary" (Lebrun 1989, 38), and Robbe-Grillet calls for observation which "consists of description without interpretation, without giving any meanings to things" (Bourdette 1959, 132). Underlying these views, however, there is an empiricist, positivistic way of identifying a certain way of relating to reality with the ontological nature of reality *per se*. From a phenomenological or hermeneutic perspective it is evident that the geometrical visual mode of description also represents only one human way of interpreting reality.

4 "[C]omme tracé au tire-ligne, un carré de bois verni occupe ainsi le coin arrière-gauche, non pas à l'angle même de la table, mais parallèlement à ses bords, en retrait d'environ dix centimètres. Le carré lui-même mesure une quinzaine de centimètres de côté" (Robbe-Grillet 1959, 12).

5 Robbe-Grillet (1989, 166) differentiates between "various levels of signification of language" and thinks that narration that focuses on describing only concrete, particular visual perceptions of things here and now "humanizes" reality less than other forms of narration.

Dismantling the Myth of Naturalness in the *Nouveau Roman*

For the *nouveaux romanciers*, however, the question concerning the chaotic nature of reality and the narrative order imposed on it was not only an ontological and epistemological question but also an ethical one. This ethical dimension should be understood in relation to the crisis of humanism after the Second World War. Modern Western humanism was based on the idea of an autonomous, individual subject which encounters the world as objects. Already Friedrich Nietzsche and the early Heidegger brought forward the problematic nature of this subject-object opposition, but it was not until the postwar period that its entire ethical weight emerged. Thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued that the relation of the modern subject to its objects implies a power relation that eventually leads to the conquest and oppression of not only the world but also of the subject itself (Adorno and Horkheimer 1998, 19–60).⁶ Also many French intellectuals continued, in the footsteps of Nietzsche and Heidegger, the critique of European rationalism and humanism, whereby they also brought forward the ethically problematic nature of narrative order (see Gibson 1996, 185–186). For example, Emmanuel Levinas declared that narrative order freezes time and turns it into fixed images, representations that imply evasion of initiative and responsibility: “By its reflection in a narrative, being has a non-dialectical fixity, stops dialectics and time” (Levinas 1998, 139). Later, philosophers from Michel Foucault to Jean-François Lyotard questioned the opposition between scientific and narrative knowledge and stressed the way in which narratives imply totalizing conceptual appropriation of their subject matter: “The narrative function [...] acts as if the occurrence, with its potentiality of differends, could come to completion, or as if there were a last word” (Lyotard 1988, 151; see also Lyotard 1986, 23).⁷

It is as part of this tradition that we should see also the *nouveaux romanciers*, who considered Western humanism’s idea of man as a master of the universe to be in part responsible for the atrocities of the Second World War (cf. Duncan 1985, 14; Lebrun 1989, 38; Robbe-Grillet 2001, 570). They renounce the modern subject who takes possession of the world by imposing a meaningful order upon it, and they see storytelling as a central means whereby such an order has been projected into the world (see e.g. Robbe-Grillet 1989, 29, 32).

6 See Menke (2003, 258–259) on how not only Adorno and Horkheimer but also later Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault saw a more or less direct connection between the structure of modern subjectivity and the development of modern society that culminated in Nazism.

7 In the Anglo-American world, Hayden White has attacked narrativity on similar grounds as the French postwar thinkers. For example, he argues that the narrative “reveals to us a world that is putatively ‘finished,’ done with, over” (White 1981, 20) and that the “value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (White 1981, 23). In his argumentation, he relies on similar positivistic assumptions as e.g. Robbe-Grillet, as he asserts: “Real events should simply be; [...] they should not pose as tellers of a narrative” (White 1981, 4; cf. Robbe-Grillet 1989, 19).

Especially Robbe-Grillet's writings bring forth the ethical questionableness of narrative order. It is questionable not only because it masks the chaotic and unattainable nature of reality but also because of its oppressiveness. According to him, order in general implies forcing reality under artificial, oppressive labels: as an example he mentions the way the Nazis classified people into different "races" (Robbe-Grillet 1984, 120, 126). Robbe-Grillet tells in his autobiographical novel *Ghosts in the Mirror* (*Le miroir qui revient*, 1984) that his whole adult life has been marked by a fundamental suspicion of order, which stems from his adolescent experiences of Nazism. Nazi Germany lured his parents precisely as a political system representing utmost order; and after the war he was struck by terror as he heard about the reverse side of this order with the concentration camps. He maintains that this experience resulted in an aspiration to fight against order, for disorder and freedom. (Robbe-Grillet 1984, 46, 118–122, 129–132; see also Laaksonen 1993, 267).

Accordingly, Robbe-Grillet demands that the visual descriptions of the object world should not create an order that pretends to mimic a pre-existing order found in reality. Instead, they are to constitute a "double movement of creation and destruction": successive descriptions must undermine and cancel each other out so that the novel displays the arbitrary and constructed character of the narrative orders it creates (Robbe-Grillet 1989, 147–148). In his novels, this can be seen in the manner in which the various textual series contradict each other and refuse to form a coherent fictive world, thereby underscoring their constructed, non-natural character. According to Robbe-Grillet, what makes the "new novels" subversive is precisely the awareness of their own non-naturalness:

[F]or the first time a mode of production declares itself non-natural; and I think this is extremely important, because, as you know, the myth of naturalness has served the establishment and preservation of an entire social, moral and political order. The bourgeois order, the bourgeois morality, the bourgeois values were taken as natural, that is, inscribed in the order of things, and therefore just, innocent and definitive. And the same is true of narrative order (Robbe-Grillet 1972, 159).

Thus, although he does not believe in the possibility of totally transcending human symbolic orders, Robbe-Grillet thinks it is important to try to shatter and deconstruct them as far as possible so as to disclose their nature as human constructions. He holds that the central task of the *nouveau roman* is to show that "there is no natural order, no moral, political or narrative, there are only human orders, created by men, which are necessarily provisory and arbitrary" (Robbe-Grillet 1972, 160).⁸ According to him, in our time, "to tell a story has become strictly impossible"

8 From this viewpoint Robbe-Grillet claims that the *nouveau roman* is fighting for a general "revolution of meaning" which is more fundamental than a revolution restricted to the economic structures of society (Ricardou & Rossum-Guyon 1972a, 174). This manner of thinking aligns Robbe-Grillet with the members of the *Tel Quel*, who also combated "the principle of naturalness" (Kristeva 1969, 212, 244; see also Sollers 1970, 76).

precisely because it creates a false illusion of a pre-existing natural order that the text represents (Robbe-Grillet 1989, 33).

By the fragmentary and contradictory structure of his novels, Robbe-Grillet aims to upset automatic processes of meaning-giving, to ensure that meanings remain “in movement”, and to bring forth the instability, temporariness and non-naturalness of each meaningful order (cf. Laaksonen 1993, 271). As the novels refuse to offer the reader a ready-made order, they demand his or her active participation in making sense of the text. Robbe-Grillet (1989, 156) asserts that they thereby encourage the reader not only to invent the text at hand but also “to invent his own life” – an idea that resembles remarkably the late Foucault’s (1983, 236–237) “aesthetics of existence”, that is, his idea that we should “create ourselves as a work of art”.⁹

Before moving on to the rehabilitation of storytelling after the heyday of the *nouveau roman*, it should be noted that the *nouveau roman* did not actually totally dispense with narrativity; rather, it problematized it and brought forward the constructedness and non-naturalness of narratives.¹⁰ The stories told by the *nouveau roman* are fragmented, discontinuous and contradictory, and they are often difficult to abstract from the textual level of narration.¹¹ Thereby they question the idea that stories would recount events that are ontologically prior to the act of narration.¹² Furthermore, they draw attention to the fact that narratives do not reflect order found in the world independent of man; instead, they are ideologically charged human constructions devoid of any naturalness or innocence.

Hermeneutic Rehabilitation of Narrativity

At the turn of the 1960s and 1970s many French novelists (such as Michel Tournier, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, Patrick Modiano, Tahar Ben Jelloun) started to question the way in which the *nouveau roman* had banned storytelling. Their discomfort with the “against narrative” movement of the *nouveau roman* stemmed from their different views on reality and human existence: namely, they do not shun

9 In both Robbe-Grillet’s and Foucault’s case, however, the plea for the subject’s self-creation seems to be in tension with other aspects of their thought that stress the subject’s profound powerlessness.

10 Robbe-Grillet (1989, 33) actually admits this in some passages, for example when he writes that in the modern novel “it is not the anecdote that is lacking, it is only its character of certainty, its tranquillity, its innocence”.

11 Most theories of narrative rely on the distinction between the story and its discursive representation: for Russian Formalists, the *fabula* and the *sjuzet*, for Genette (1972, 71–76), *histoire* and *récit*, and for Rimmon-Kenan (1988, 3), story and text. Usually the term ‘narrative’ is taken to include the discursive representation of the story. Sturges argues that the story and its discursive representation should be seen as two aspects of the narrative, and he points out that although there are novels (such as Robbe-Grillet’s) “whose *fabulae* seem difficult or impossible to reconstruct”, the distinction “allows us to establish this impossibility” (Sturges 1992, 11, 29). On defining narrative see also Abbott (2002, 12–23), who reminds us that there are different degrees of narrativity.

12 Cf. Rimmon-Kenan (1996, 8) who points out that formalist and structuralist conceptions of narrative “grant the events a logical priority over their telling”.

the idea of literature as storytelling, because for them narrativity is something that characterizes human experience in general, that is, our temporal manner of shaping reality and constructing our identities. Michel Tournier is the author who has articulated most clearly such a view in his theoretical essays, in which he underscores the role of culturally mediated narratives in constituting human existence:

Man is nothing but a mythical animal. He becomes man – he acquires a human being's sexuality and heart and imagination – only by virtue of the murmur of stories and kaleidoscope of images that surround him in the cradle and accompany him all the way to the grave (Tournier 1988, 158–159).¹³

By myths Tournier means cultural narratives on the basis of which we give shape and form to our experiences and aspirations (Tournier 1988, 158). For him narratives do not represent false ideology from which literature should be cleansed in the name of truth but something completely real that constitutes our way of being in the world: they form the medium through which we interpret ourselves and the world we encounter. This view can be characterized as *hermeneutic*, for the basic tenet of hermeneutic philosophy is the cultural-historical mediatedness of our relation to the world and to ourselves (see e.g. Ricoeur 1991a, 15–18; Gadamer 1993, 121–132; Figal 2001, 103).¹⁴ As Paul Ricoeur (1991a, 15), the most prominent French hermeneuticist, puts it: "There is no self-understanding that is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts." Similarly, the Canadian hermeneuticist Charles Taylor (1985, 45, 47) echoes Tournier's views by arguing that "human beings are *self-interpreting animals*", that is, beings constituted in the process in which they interpret themselves and the world.

From the hermeneutic perspective, the *nouveaux romanciers* – insofar as they reject storytelling in order to disclose the fundamentally discontinuous, fragmentary, and chaotic nature of reality – hang onto a positivistic idea according to which the "real" is only that which is independent of human meaning-giving processes. By contrast, the hermeneuticists consider also the human experience of the world to be real, and largely narrative in form.

Of the contemporary hermeneuticists, Ricoeur is the one who has explicated most clearly the idea that "our existence cannot be separated from the stories that we tell of ourselves" (Ricoeur 1981, 156). He has built his theory of narrative identity first and foremost on the basis of Martin Heidegger's and Hannah Arendt's thinking (cf. Ricoeur 1985, 442). One of the central ideas of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* is that the human mode of being, *Dasein*, is characterized by an understanding

¹³ In the English-speaking world, Paul Auster has expressed similar ideas. He writes, for example: "I believe that stories are the fundamental food for the soul. We can't live without stories. In one form or another, everybody lives on them from the age of two until their death" (Auster 1997, 336). "A child's need for stories is as fundamental as his need for food, and it manifests itself in the same way hunger does" (Auster 1992, 154).

¹⁴ Gadamer (1997, 302, *passim*) stresses that this cultural-historical mediatedness of our mode of being entails a fundamental finitude of our self-understanding.

of one's own being which differentiates it fundamentally from the "being-at-hand", *Vorhandensein*, of mere things: this is why "selfhood must be conceived *existentially*", that is, as a temporal process of constant reinterpretation, and not in terms of a substantial fundament, *subjectum*, that lies under or behind the continuum of experiences (Heidegger 2001, 114, 317–318). Arendt, on the other hand, expounds the link between narrativity and identity: "*Who* somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero" (Arendt 1998, 186).

Ricoeur develops further Arendt's ideas on narrative identity in two significant ways that bring him close to Tournier's views. Firstly, he analyses how we constantly reinterpret our identities in the light of stories handed down to us by the cultural tradition: "This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told" (Ricoeur 1988, 246/Ricoeur 1985, 443; see also Ricoeur 1991b, 437). Secondly, he analyses how narrativity and experience – or action and narration that gives it meaning – are always already entwined in such a way that renders problematic the distinction that Arendt makes between the actor or protagonist of a life story and its narrator/author: "Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and 'makes' the story" (Arendt 1998, 192). By contrast, Ricoeur (1985, 443) sees life and stories we tell about it intertwined in a way which entitles us to say, following Marcel Proust (see 1954, 1033), that we are both readers and writers of our own lives.

Ricoeur agrees with Arendt that the individual cannot create his life story at will: "Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer" (Arendt 1998, 190). However, where Arendt (1998, 184) draws the conclusion that "nobody is the author or producer of his own life story", Ricoeur (1991b, 437) suggests that we can "learn to become the *narrator of our own story* without completely becoming the author of our life". In other words, one can learn to interpret, give meaning and shape to the events of one's life story, although one cannot function as the sole source of its meaning. By taking this role one can make oneself into a "co-author" of one's life as far as its meaning is concerned (Ricoeur 1990, 191).¹⁵ Narrative reinterpretation of one's life implies not seeing it as a mere sequence of events but, instead, positing oneself as its responsible subject. By structuring his life into a story of which he can take responsibility, the individual can find out who he is and who he wants to be (Ricoeur 1991b, 434–436; Ricoeur 1983, 142–144; Ricoeur 1990, 190–193).

According to Ricoeur (1983, 105–162), narrativization of life is about *emplotment* (*dénouement*), by way of which life is restructured, refigured, through culturally

15 Ricoeur has borrowed the concept of "co-author" from Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, 213) but wishes to distance his own theory of narrative identity from that of MacIntyre who believes that "stories are lived before they are told" and sees life histories as "enacted dramatic narratives" (MacIntyre 1984, 212, 215). Ricoeur (1990, 188), by contrast, stresses the difference between life and fiction and agrees with Louis O. Mink that "stories are not lived but told". For him, the narrativization of life is a process of *interpreting* it narratively – and of refiguring it in the light of fictional and historical narratives (see Ricoeur 1990, 186–190).

mediated narrative models. He sees emplotment in terms of bringing together order and disorder that shape our lives: through it meaningful continuity is built into life, but the resulting narrative is characterized by not only concordance but also *discordance*, discontinuity and disorder (see Ricoeur 1983, 86–92, 139–140; Ricoeur 1984, 13, 22–23, 50–58, 291–293). As we tell stories of our lives we mould situations and events that we have encountered into a meaningful order, the continuum of our lives, but on the other hand the way in which we understand this continuum is constantly open to challenges posed by new situations. To sum up, for Ricoeur, narrativity points to the human way of shaping experiences into a meaningful temporal continuum, and he sees, on the basis of this narrativity, identity as a dynamic temporal process constituted in the continuous reinterpretation of cultural narratives.

Tournier sees the significance of literature in its very ability to tell stories on the basis of which we can find new ways of shaping our identities and our relation to the world and to other people. He mentions as examples of literature's transformative capacity the way in which "Rousseau invented the beauty of the mountains" and "Goethe, who in creating Werther in 1774 also created romantic love" which still continues to shape decisively the way people experience love today (Tournier 1988, 160). Accordingly, for Tournier the fundamental task of the novelist is to renew the cultural stock of narratives in such a way that it can nourish his or her contemporaries: "The artist's ambition is to add to or at any rate modify the 'murmur' of myth that surrounds the child, the pool of images in which his contemporaries move – in short, the oxygen of the soul" (Tournier 1988, 159–160).

In accordance with Ricoeur's views, Tournier sees a dialectical relationship between the cultural tradition and the individual who interprets his or her life in the light of culturally mediated stories. Thus, they both question the sharp dichotomy (postulated e.g. by Sartre's Roquentin) between life and storytelling.¹⁶ We are entangled in stories from the day we are born and we constantly reinterpret our lives through them. The stories handed down to us by the cultural tradition, in turn, are moulded by individual reinterpretations of the old stories.

For Tournier, the novelist does not create new narratives in a vacuum but instead in relation to the literary tradition. His work is a matter of critical rewriting and reinterpreting the already written in such a way that can shed new light on old stories as well as provide new models of sense-making. This manner of thinking finds expression in the form of his novels, namely, in the way in which they are woven intertextually on the basis of old narratives. For example, his first novel, *Friday (Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique, 1967)* is a critical rewriting of the story of Robinson Crusoe that has occupied a central position as part of the mytho-poetic basis of the Western world ever since Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).¹⁷

16 A similar dichotomy characterizes also the thinking of many philosophers of history, such as that of Hayden White, who constantly draws on the opposition between the reality of historical events and the narratives that impose on them the form of a story (see White 1981, 2–5, 19–23).

17 According to Ricoeur (1991a, 482–483), each society is based on a "hidden mytho-poetic nucleus", which consists of its foundational myths and narratives. On *Friday* as a critical rewriting of Defoe's novel, see Saariluoma 1992, 58–96; Saariluoma 1998, 105–125.

As the name of the novel already suggests, Tournier's novel accords Friday a subject position that he was denied in Defoe's novel. The novel depicts the process whereby Robinson gradually emancipates himself from the manipulative life form of the colonialist West through encountering the other, that is, by learning to relate to Friday as his equal partner. Thus, a central theme of the novel is the hermeneutic idea that "self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self" (Gadamer 1997, 97). Before Friday arrives at the island Robinson notes that his entire world is falling apart without the presence of another human being: "The other, a major constituent of my world... I measure each day what I owed him as I register new fissures in my personal edifice".¹⁸ Tournier contends that *Friday* is not an anthropological novel of the encounter of two civilisations but a philosophical novel on the "corrosive effects of inhuman solitude" and on the way in which Friday serves as "both guide and midwife" to the transformation of Robinson into a "new man" (Tournier 1988, 190–191).¹⁹

Encountering Friday as another subject enables Robinson to gain distance to the life form of his native country, largely based on the exploitation of nature and other people; the social order that he customarily identifies with "civilization" as such becomes relativized and loses its aura of superiority (Tournier 1984, 146–147, 243). Thereby Robinson finds a novel, less violent way of relating to the world. As part of this process, his sexuality abandons "the bed prepared for it in advance by society" (Tournier 1984, 119) and manifests itself as "gentle jubilation that envelops me and bears me from head to toe as long as the sun-god bathes me in its rays" (Tournier 1984, 229–230). In sum, this counter-narrative questions not only the heteronormativity but also the naturalness of the dominant Western social order in general; it renders visible the capitalist, individualist and colonialist ideological bearings of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and encourages the reader to ask to what extent they still define the Western way of life.

The idea of literature as a rewriting of culturally mediated narratives has been central also in the so-called post-colonial literature, for example in the novels of Tahar Ben Jelloun, a prominent French author emigrated from Morocco. Starting from the beginning of the 1970s, he has written novels that – drawing from the Arab oral tradition as well as from the formal experiments of European modernism – thematize the central role of narratives in the constitution of identity. In his first novel, *Harrouda* (1973), he reinterprets the myth, rooted in Moroccan folklore, of a magical woman figure Harrouda. The protagonist of the novel is a young boy trying to discover his identity and sexuality in relation to this mythical embodiment of subversion and transformation, a prostitute who defies the taboos of the repressive, patriarchal society. Whereas the traditional Maghrebian city of Fes functions as the main setting of *Harrouda*, since his second novel, *La réclusion solitaire* (1976),

18 "Autrui, pièce maîtresse de mon univers... Je mesure chaque jour ce que je lui devais en enregistrant de nouvelles fissures dans mon édifice personnel" (Tournier 1984, 53).

19 This line of interpretation has been elaborated by Gilles Deleuze (1969, 360–361) who argues that the absence of another human being is the most central question of Tournier's *Friday*.

Ben Jelloun starts dealing with the situation of Arabian immigrants in France. As Spiller (2000, 193–195) puts it, his novels are laboratories of the “entre-deux” in which the archaic and the modern, the Maghrebian and the European, encounter and challenge each other. They depict the way in which individuals marginalized by society, often young, subordinated women, struggle to construct their identities in a space described in his later novel *Les Yeux baissés* (1991) as “a third place” (*un troisième lieu*) between two cultures and two worlds (Ben Jelloun 1991, 295–296).²⁰ Growing up between two cultures means growing up between different narrative traditions, shaping one’s identity and life story in this ambivalent space. Whereas the protagonist of *La réclusion solitaire*, the guest worker Momo, has severe problems with overcoming the inhuman loneliness, alienation, and sense of exclusion in his new, inhospitable host country, the protagonist of *Les yeux baissés*, the young Berber girl Kniza who emigrates to France, weaves her own counter-stories that gradually help her gain distance to both cultures that surround her; she does not let the old stories “crush her” (Ben Jelloun 1991, 207). Ben Jelloun defends in his novels the right of each individual to tell his or her own story; and he sheds critical light on both the Arab countries and the racist West that violate this right in their own distinctive ways.

In Tournier’s novels, too, the author is not the only narrator of counter-narratives: his novels are often about individuals who are in one way or another marginalized and who construct their own narrative order against the prevailing social order. For example, in Tournier’s novel *Les Météores*, uncle Alexandre constructs “his own universe” (Tournier 1975, 34) that opposes the heteronormative society, whereas the twins Jean and Paul build their own “twin cell” that questions the naturalness of the life form of “non-twins”. They speak their own counter-discourse that problematizes the representations produced by our society of homosexuals and twins. Of Tournier’s novels, it is, however, his second one, *The Erl-King* (*Le Roi des Aulnes*, 1970), which deals in the most explicit and complex manner with the role of cultural narratives in shaping our identities – on both individual and communal level. Accordingly, it is to this problematic that I will devote the final section of my essay.

Narrativity of Identity in Tournier’s *The Erl-King*

The Erl-King tells the story of a car mechanic who believes he is “an ogre”, “a fabulous monster emerging from the mists of time” (Tournier 1972, 11/Tournier 1970, 11). His story is narrated from a double perspective, that is, both from an external third person perspective and from an internal first person perspective – through excerpts

²⁰ Ben Jelloun affirms in an interview that he tries to write from the perspective of those who suffer (Spear 1993, 41). Those are often the ones who are denied the right of speech, for as “the mother” asserts in *Harrouda*, “The tradition dictated me duties that I accomplished in silence. [...] To dare to speak was already to exist, to become a person!” (“La tradition me dictait le devoir que j’accomplissais dans le silence. [...] Oser la parole c’était déjà exister, devenir une personne!” Ben Jelloun 1973, 69).

from his diary “Sinister writings of Abel Tiffauges”. At the beginning of the novel, Tiffauges runs a garage in the pre-World War II Paris, and tries to figure out who he is in relation to his childhood experiences at Saint Christopher’s boarding school. Then the war breaks out, and after working with carrier pigeons at the communications branch of the army, he is captured by the Germans and taken to a prisoner of war camp. As time goes by, the Nazis assign him more demanding duties, and eventually he assumes a leading role in Kaltenborn, a Prussian fortress that has been converted into a Napola, a Nazi elite military training school for young boys.

Tiffauges has always felt like an outsider, someone with difficulty finding his place in society, and he interprets his “abnormality” in terms of being “an ogre”, a descendant of mythical monster and giant figures. The novel focuses on the process in which he constructs his identity narratively by taking certain historical, mythical, and literary figures as his models. In his diary he tells that he started this process of “building up his own culture” already as a young boy:

But here and there, leafing through dictionaries, picking up what I could in textbooks, watching out for fleeting allusions to what really interested me in French or history lessons, I started to build up a culture of my own, a personal Pantheon which included Alcibiades and Pontius Pilate, Caligula and Hadrian, Frederick William I and Barras, Talleyrand and Rasputin (Tournier 1972, 17).²¹

Later he assumes especially various kinds of mythical monster, giant and carrier figures as his predecessors and models. These include for example Atlas, the Greek titan who carried the whole sky on his shoulders: “But the more I think of it, the more it seems to me that Atlas uranophorus, Atlas astrophorus is the mythological hero towards whom my life must tend, and in whom it must at last find its fulfilment and apotheosis” (Tournier 1972, 76).²² But as his ultimate model he venerates the mythical carrier figure of Saint Christopher. According to a medieval legend he was a giant who wanted to serve the greatest man on earth. He worked as a ferryman, and one day he carried across the river a child who weighed like a lump of lead on his shoulders and turned out to be the Christ Child. Accordingly, Tiffauges undertakes child-carrying as his ultimate mission and vocation. Already at Saint Christopher’s school the boys are taught to think of themselves as “Child-Bearers”, but Tiffauges makes this identity truly his own only later in his life. He unravels the etymology of the word ‘euphoria’, and finds that it means literally “carrying with happiness” as the Greek word ‘eu’ refers to happiness and ‘phoria’ has its origin in the verb meaning carrying. Following this insight he reinterprets his whole life in a new light:

²¹ “Par bribes, en feuilletant les dictionnaires, en glanant ce que je pouvais dans des ouvrages de compilation scolaire, en guettant dans un cours d’histoire ou de français l’allusion fugitive à ce qui m’importait au premier chef, je commençai à me constituer une culture en marge, un panthéon personnel où voisinaient Alcibiade et Ponce Pilate, Caligula et Hadrien, Frédéric-Guillaume Ier et Barras, Talleyrand et Raspoutine” (Tournier 1970, 18–19).

²² “Mais plus j’y pense, plus il me semble qu’Atlas uranophore, Atlas astrophore est le héros mythologique vers lequel devrait tendre ma vie pour trouver en lui finalement son aboutissement et son apothéose” (Tournier 1970, 92).

At this, a shaft of light suddenly falls on my past, my present, and, who knows, perhaps my future too. For this fundamental idea of portage, of *phoria*, is also found in the name of Christopher, the giant Christ-bearer [...] and yet again it is embodied in the cars to which I reluctantly give the best of myself, but which even in their triviality are nonetheless instruments for the bearing of men, anthropophoric and therefore *phoric* par excellence (Tournier 1972, 74).²³

This is a good example of the way Tiffauges constantly renarrates the story of his life by relating things that happen to him in the present to his past, which thereby gains new meaning. His diary plays an essential role in this reflective process: “It may be that from now on there can’t even be a sequence of events in my life without that verbal reflection called diary” (Tournier 1972, 13).²⁴

There are numerous different variants of carrier figures in *The Erl-King*, and one of the most important ones is the Erl-King who represents a kind of “negative inversion” of Saint Christopher. The Erl-King is a death figure best known by Goethe’s “Der Erbkönig” which, according to Tournier, “has always been *the* German poem par excellence for every French school-child embarking upon the study of German literature, a symbol of Germany itself” (Tournier 1988, 97). In *The Erl-King*, a Nazi Professor names a man, whose embalmed body is found in a peat-bog, the “Erl-King”, and Tiffauges identifies strongly with this mythical figure; for him Goethe’s ballad appears as “the very charter of *phoria*”, which is “lifted to a paroxysm of incandescence by hyperborean magic” (Tournier 1972, 258).²⁵ And when Tiffauges rides about Prussia on a horse named Bluebeard recruiting children for the Napola, it becomes evident that he is not so much a Saint Christopher carrying children to safety but more like an Erl-King wrenching children from their parents arms.

However, it is important that Tiffauges is an ambiguous figure who is not clearly good nor evil.²⁶ He does not have a pre-given essence that would determine his identity but is, on the contrary, constituted in time on the basis of interpreting the situations he faces and acting in them. The reader has to participate in this interpretative process by constantly re-evaluating whether Tiffauges is a “good” or a “bad” carrier, a Saint Christopher or an Erl-King figure. And as the novel proceeds,

23 “Et là, un trait de lumière illumine soudain mon passé, mon présent et, qui sait, mon avenir peut-être aussi. Car cette idée fondamentale de portage, de *phorie*, elle se trouve aussi dans le nom même de Christophe, le géant Porte-Christ, [...] de même encore qu’elle s’incarne à nouveau dans ces automobiles auxquelles je consacre en renâclant le meilleur de moi-même, mais qui n’en sont pas moins dans leur trivialité l’instrument porteur d’homme, anthropophore, *phorique* par excellence” (Tournier 1970, 90).

24 “Les événements de ma vie ne peuvent-ils plus se succéder désormais sans ce reflet verbal qu’on appelle un journal” (Tournier 1970, 14).

25 “[C]’est la charte même de la *phorie* qu’elle élève à la troisième puissance. C’est le mythe latin de Christophe-Albuquerque porté à un paroxysme d’incandescence par la magie hyperboréenne” (Tournier 1970, 318).

26 In fact most of the giant-carriers in the novel are somehow ambivalent figures, for there is something monsterlike (or “ogriish”) in their gianthood. As Mikhail Bakhtin has shown in his famous study on Rabelais (1984, 24–27, 341–344) giants are typically ambivalent figures in folklore and world literature in general. On the ethical ambiguity of the monster imagery in *The Erl-King*, see Meretoja (2004b).

it becomes increasingly evident that he is a morally ambiguous figure, who has the potential for both good and evil, like all of us.²⁷

The Erl-King manifests the hermeneutic idea that there is a dialectical relationship between the cultural tradition and the individual who interprets his life in the light of the stories handed down by the tradition. In the novel, myths do not provide ready-made identities but only material for their construction. Tiffauges is a modern individual to whom self-identity is not automatically given but is, on the contrary, something that he must construct for himself.²⁸ Consequently, in the novel the individual subject is not a self-sufficient source of meaning, but neither is it reduced to those meaning systems that form the basis of its constitution. Rather, the relationship between the individual and the cultural system appears as dialogical in the sense described by Taylor, who has analysed the “dialogical nature of the self” with reference to the way we are constituted in conversation with “significant others” (Taylor 1996, 35; Taylor 1991, 311–314; see also Berger & Luckmann 1966, 152–172, 178–180). In Tiffauges’s case this conversation must be understood in an extended sense; his significant others are mythical models that he has chosen as his interlocutors from a vast cultural tradition rather than from his immediate social environment.

Tournier obviously thinks that in the modern world myths do not have only a social, adaptive function, as in traditional societies, but they can also function as tools for the individual’s construction of his or her private, personal universe of meaning. Thus, culturally transmitted narratives do not appear as necessarily repressive but as having also emancipatory potential for the individual. As we have seen, history and literary tradition provide Tiffauges material for building his own culture. Hermeneuticists, such as Gadamer and Ricoeur, have stressed that the emancipatory potential of literary narratives resides precisely in the way in which they disclose new possibilities of being and acting that enable us to take critical distance to ourselves and to our social environment (see Gadamer 1993, 478; Ricoeur 1991a, 37, 66, 300–301; Madison 1990, 94–96).²⁹ Ricoeur (1991a, 88) argues that as we expose ourselves to a world proposed by a literary text, we encounter “imaginative variations” of ourselves. Thereby our views on how we can live our lives, who we are, and who we want to be, are enlarged and enriched

27 This ambiguity is emphasized also by his name: Abel refers to the biblical nomad who was murdered by his brother, whereas Tiffauges is the name of the castle where Gilles de Rais, the child-murderer who is in the Breton tradition regarded as the historical model of Charles Perrault’s Bluebeard, committed his hideous crimes (see Cloonan 1985, 47–48). Tournier (1970, 102) thinks that phoria itself is essentially ambivalent: “He who carries [porter] the child carries him away [emporter]. [...] In other words, the ghost of Saint Christopher, bearer and saviour of children, is the erking, abductor and murderer of children. All the mystery and profundity of phoria lies in this ambiguity”.

28 As Giddens (1991, 32) writes, in modern, post-traditional societies self-identity becomes “a reflexive project”.

29 Gadamer (1993, 204) argues that encountering foreign worlds of meaning (such as literary worlds) enables us to “take a critical stance towards every convention”; and Ricoeur (1991a, 6) contends that “in one way or another all symbol systems contribute to *shaping* reality”, but especially art has power to “disturb and rearrange our relation to the real world”.

(see e.g. Ricoeur 1991a, 66, 88).³⁰ Furthermore, hermeneuticists do not consider symbolic systems in general to be necessarily violent in the manner in which many “post-structuralists” (see e.g. Derrida 1967, 112) frequently do, because hermeneuticists stress the role of the active individual interpretation in all constitution of meaning: no symbolic system can determine mechanically the processes of meaning-giving, which always include a moment of application. Thus, as Gadamer (1993, 8; see also 1997, 297) puts it, understanding is “always-understanding-differently” (*Immer-anders-Verstehen*). From this perspective, what is crucial is the way in which cultural narratives are understood and applied.

This is a central theme in Tournier’s *The Erl-King*, in which the potential dangers in the application of myths are delineated against the historical background of Nazi Germany. The novel shows that we can bear responsibility for our mythical constructions only insofar as we are aware of their constructed nature. When their cultural constructedness is disguised, narrative identities can become reified with devastating consequences, as in Nazi Germany.³¹ In the novel, Tiffauges ends up building a personal mythological universe that resembles alarmingly the universe of Nazi mythology. However, what crucially unites Tiffauges and the Nazis and what is troubling in Tiffauges is not the fact that he uses cultural narratives to construct his identity and his own meaningful order, but rather the fact that he does not see them as cultural constructions. Both Tiffauges and the Nazis reify their mythological systems by believing that they reflect some pre-given divine order or inevitable destiny for which they are not responsible.

Above we saw that according to Ricoeur narrative reinterpretation of one’s life implies positing oneself as its responsible subject. Tiffauges’s case, however, shows that the narrativity of identity does not in itself necessarily lead to taking responsibility of one’s life story. Instead, the novel suggests that such responsibility requires critical awareness of one’s active role in narrativizing one’s identity. In other words, it shows why it is important that we are conscious of narratives as *narratives*, that is, as cultural constructions that have no absolute basis. All in all, Tournier’s novels express the view that we cannot get rid of narratives but neither can we take them for granted; instead, they should be subject to continuous critical discussion and reflection. This requires also acknowledging the fundamental historicity of cultural narratives, that is, the fact that they exist only through a process of continuous reinterpretation and can always be transformed by new interpretations.

30 In his *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990) Ricoeur highlights the ethical dimension of the narrative constitution of identity and reminds us that narratives are never ethically neutral: they always transmit certain values and ideals as well as certain visions of good life and justice (Ricoeur 1990, 139). Narratives can also call us for responsibility and provoke us to “be and to act otherwise” (Ricoeur 1985, 447).

31 Reification is a Marxist term which, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966, 106) explain, refers to the “apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly suprahuman terms”. Accordingly, identities become reified when they are apprehended “as an inevitable fate, for which the individual may disclaim responsibility” (108).

Conclusion: Critical Appropriation of Narrativity

To conclude, I hope to have shown that the so-called narrative turn of the French novel involves consciousness of the human constructedness of narratives, which was something that the *nouveaux romanciers*, too, wanted to underline. As a consequence, the return of the narrative does not entail a return to nineteenth-century realism in which narrative orders were thought to reflect order found in reality itself. We can say that after the *nouveau roman* narratives have lost their innocence: they are conscious of their own narrative nature, of their historicity, and of the way they represent only one possible – inevitably ethically and politically charged – perspective into reality. Without the *nouveau roman*'s struggle against the myth of naturalness this self-consciousness would hardly be as acute.

The “return of the narrative” means accepting that although narratives do not reflect order that could be found in reality as such, but manifest human modes of giving it shape, narrativity is an essential structure of human existence, and thus it is a legitimate task for the novel to engage in storytelling. This view, which became widespread by the end of the twentieth century, is based on apprehending our relation to the world in hermeneutic rather than structuralist or positivistic terms.³²

From the horizon of the “return of the narrative”, the emancipatory task of literature does not mean trying to emancipate the reader from narratives into something more real, but, instead, promoting a more authentic, critical and reflected relation to narrative orders, including awareness of the historical processes and power relations in which they are entangled. Furthermore, literary narratives can provide the reader alternative possibilities of being and thereby a wider horizon for the construction of his or her own narrative identity. In sum, by making storytelling thematic and by telling counter-narratives that question prevailing models of sense-making, the novelists of the “narrative turn” promote critical reflection on the narratives on the basis of which we orient to the world and narrate our lives – both as individuals and as communities.

³² In addition, it should be noted that in the 1980s the *nouveaux romanciers*, too, contributed to the rehabilitation of the narrative by writing autobiographical novels that – although far from traditional autobiographies – manifest a more understanding stance towards the significance of narrativity in shaping human experience.

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