

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Toward an Ethics of Storytelling

That stories are indispensable for human existence is an idea that reaches back at least to *One Thousand and One Nights*: as Scheherazade's fascinating tales delay and ultimately prevent her murder by King Shahryar, storytelling becomes, quite literally, an art of survival. At the same time, entanglement in narratives has notoriously raised suspicion. In the Western imagination, Don Quixote and Emma Bovary epitomize the dangers of reading too many stories, and the crisis of European humanism, in the wake of two world wars and the Holocaust, thoroughly problematized the imposition of narrative order on history and our experience of the world. The protagonist of Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938, *Nausea*) encapsulates this sensibility: "you have to choose: to live or to recount" (1965, p. 61).¹ Over the past few decades, discourse surrounding the ethical significance of narrative for human existence has gained unprecedented urgency and intensity. As the debate on the ethics of storytelling has become one of the liveliest in interdisciplinary narrative studies, positions have also become increasingly polarized: as theorists of narrative argue "for" or "against" narrativity, the quarrel tends to be whether narratives are "good" or "bad" for us.²

As part of the "narrative turn," the idea that stories are not only indispensable but also inherently beneficial for us has become hugely popular.³ A wide range of thinkers have come to share Paul Ricoeur's view that only "a life *narrated*" can be "a life *examined*" and hence worth living (1991b, p. 435). Many contemporary novelists seem to agree: while Paul Auster

asserts that “stories are the fundamental food for the soul” (Irwin & Auster, 2013, p. 46), Jeanette Winterson’s narrator compares storytelling to light-housekeeping and presents “stories going out over the waves, as markers and guides and comfort and warning” (2004, p. 41). Yet the strong narrativist position has provoked a fierce counter-reaction. One of the most outspoken representatives of the “against narrativity” movement, Galen Strawson, argues provocatively, “the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being” (2004, p. 447).

Against the backdrop of this polarized debate, there is a need for a theoretical-analytical framework that allows us to explore the ethical complexity of the roles that narratives play in our lives. In this book, I set out to develop such a framework—one that acknowledges *both* the ethical potential *and* the risks of storytelling. My starting point is that a nuanced analysis of the uses and abuses of narrative for life is possible only when we are sensitive to the ways in which narratives as practices of sense-making are embedded in social, cultural, and historical worlds. We are always already entangled in webs of narratives. They are integral to the world that precedes us, and they make it possible for us to develop into subjects who are capable of narrating their experiences, sharing them with others, and telling their own versions of the stories they have inherited. Each cultural and historical world functions as a *space of possibilities* that encourages certain modes of experience, thought, and action, and discourages or disallows others, and stories play a constitutive role in establishing the limits of these worlds—both enabling experience and delimiting it.

This book aims to develop an approach that invites analyzing both how narratives enlarge the dialogic spaces of possibilities in which we act, think, and reimagine the world together with others, and how they restrain or impoverish these spaces. Precisely this, I argue, is a crucial but generally overlooked dimension of the ethics of storytelling: narratives both expand and diminish our *sense of the possible*. I call my approach a *narrative hermeneutics* because it treats narratives as culturally mediated practices of (re)interpreting experience, and I will explore its ethical implications.⁴ It aims to provide a philosophically rigorous, historically sensitive, and analytically subtle approach to the ethical stakes of the debate on the narrative dimension of human existence. On the basis of narrative hermeneutics, I propose a *hermeneutic narrative ethics*, which acknowledges that narrative practices can be oppressive, empowering, or both, and provides resources for analyzing the different dimensions of the ethical potential and dangers of storytelling.

Narrative hermeneutics emphasizes that interpretation does not concern only our engagement with texts; it characterizes our whole being in the world and is the basic structure of experience, narrative, and memory. When we go through meaningful experiences, weave them into stories, and remember them in a certain light and from a certain perspective, we engage in interpretative processes of sense-making. It is as “self-interpreting animals” (Taylor, 1985) that we narrate our experiences and fashion our lives. Narratives are interpretative practices through which we make sense of our lives, and these meaning-making practices are ethically charged. As Ricoeur puts it, narratives are “never ethically neutral” (1992, p. 140), and storytelling can function as “a provocation to be and to act differently” (1988, p. 249).

I will explore the ethical potential of storytelling with particular attention to that of narrative fiction. While it has long been taken for granted that literature is beneficial for us, this is no longer necessarily the case. Against the backdrop of the current crisis of the humanities, many philosophers, psychologists, and literary scholars have defended the value of narrative fiction by drawing attention to its cognitive and ethical significance for our development as human beings, moral agents, and democratic citizens, particularly insofar as it boosts our capacity for empathetic perspective-taking. Martha Nussbaum describes such a capacity in terms of *narrative imagination*, which she sees as a major counterforce to the anti-democratic tendencies in the contemporary world:

[Narrative imagination] means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. (2010, pp. 95–96)

Cognitive scientists have recently sought to provide empirical support for such views by arguing that narrative fiction is more “transformative” than nonfiction (Djikic et al., 2009) and has a stronger impact on our “social perception and moral self-concept” (Hakemulder, 2000). David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano’s (2013) widely reported study asserts that the affective and cognitive skills involved in understanding that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions that are different from one’s own—what cognitive scientists call “theory of mind”—are improved by reading literary fiction compared with reading nonfiction, popular fiction, or nothing at all.⁵ The researchers not only claim that after short-term exposure to fiction, people do better on tests that measure empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence, but also suggest that in addition to temporary enhancement

of these skills, long-term effects could be achieved by regular engagement with literature. Recently, Kidd and Castano (2016) have reached the same conclusion through a different method, but other researchers have failed to reproduce their results (Panero et al., 2016).

Irrespective of the short-term effects of reading fiction, it is far from evident how long-term effects could be measured in reliable ways. To me it seems far more plausible to argue that literature cultivates our ability to perceive the world from multiple perspectives, or at least increases our awareness of and sensitivity to such multiplicity—what I call *perspective-awareness* and *perspective-sensitivity*—than to argue that literature makes us ethical in the sense of causing us to engage in moral action. As many critics have observed, there is a significant difference between embracing the perspectives of others—or imagining what one might do in hypothetical scenarios—and actually carrying out concrete actions in the real world. Suzanne Keen, for example, argues that “the very fictionality of novels predisposes readers to empathize with characters,” because “fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers’ feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action” (2007, p. 4). Indeed, there is ample evidence that reading fiction is no guarantee of ethical action. As George Steiner famously reminds us, the Holocaust seriously undermined the long unquestioned belief in the “humanizing force” of literature: “We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning” (1967, p. 15).

However, perspective-awareness may be a *necessary* condition for moral agency, even if it is not a *sufficient* condition. Several moral philosophers have argued that imagination is indispensable not only for our cognitive and emotional development, but also for our ethical development and agency.⁶ As moral agents we are capable of initiating new processes in the world, and in making decisions and embarking on actions we must imagine the myriad potential consequences of these actions—how they might affect others and change the world we co-inhabit. Without such a power of imagination, our existence as acting subjects would be truncated. A sense of the possible—a sense of how things could be otherwise—is integral to moral agency and to the ethical imagination of individuals and communities. It has transformative potential.

I will explore the capacity of narratives to expand our sense of the possible in relation to five additional aspects of the ethical potential of storytelling: narrative’s contribution to personal and cultural *self-understanding*; narrative as a *non-subsumptive* mode of encountering alterity; storytelling as a way of shaping the *narrative in-between*; narrative as cultivating our

perspective-awareness and capacity for *perspective-taking*; and narrative as a form of *ethical inquiry*. On the basis of these six aspects of what narratives can do to us, ethically speaking, I propose a schematic map for exploring and evaluating, in a differentiated manner, the ethical potential and problems of different storytelling practices. As a literary scholar, I mainly test the model on literary narratives, but it is meant to be usable for the ethical analysis of any narratives.

In reflecting on the sense of the possible, what interests me are real, genuine possibilities, in contrast to merely logical possibilities.⁷ As Gary Saul Morson writes, “the temporal world consists not just of actualities and impossibilities but also of a third, in-between category: real, though unactualized, possibilities” (1998, p. 602). These real possibilities often go unacknowledged in actual worlds, and they are linked to our power to imagine the “what-ifs” and alternative courses of events that could make the world utterly different. While many kinds of narratives can stimulate our capacity to think beyond—and resist—the actual, this task is particularly important for literature and other arts. As Jacques Rancière puts it, aesthetic acts can function “as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception” (2013, p. 3). In Gilles Deleuze’s terms, storytelling has power to add to the real, for example by contributing to the invention of new subjectivities and “a people to come” (2005, pp. 208, 264).⁸ Through the exploration of human possibilities, narrative fiction opens up new perspectives on history, the everyday, and the yet-to-be. We engage with fictional narratives as whole, embodied human beings with our own desires and anxieties, values and beliefs, memories and fantasies. What is at stake is not just an escape to the realm of the unreal but an exploration of the possible. Through reading, we encounter what Ricoeur (1991a, p. 88) calls *imaginative variations* of ourselves that allow us to explore—as individuals and communities—who we are in relation to who we could be. Such exploration cultivates our understanding of where we come from, where we are now, and where we could go. This, in turn, affects who we in fact *are*.

TOWARD A NARRATIVE HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics refers to theoretical reflection on interpretation. It originates in the study of sacred and legal texts and in its modern form (at the turn of the nineteenth century) came to signify theoretical reflection on interpretation and understanding. In the early twentieth century, in Martin Heidegger’s and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s work, hermeneutics went through an “ontological turn”: while nineteenth-century hermeneutics

focused on interpretation and understanding as the methodological basis of the humanities, in *Sein und Zeit* (1927, *Being and Time*) Heidegger analyzed understanding as the human mode of being in the world. This shift expanded the scope of hermeneutics to concern human existence in general. As Gadamer puts it, Heidegger

placed hermeneutics in the center of his analysis of existence in showing that interpretation is not an isolated activity of human beings but the basic structure of our experience of life. We are always taking something *as* something. That is the primordial givenness of our world orientation, and we cannot reduce it to anything simpler or more immediate. (1984, p. 58)

After the existential-ontological turn of hermeneutics, interpretation came to refer to the sense-making process that structures our engagement with the world. As Gadamer (1993a, p. 339) acknowledges, this turn is indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche, who launched the antipositivistic tradition, according to which there is nothing more basic than interpretation: all that is “given” (*das Gegebene*) to us is itself a result of interpretation. Nietzsche famously argued that “facts is [*sic*] precisely what there is not, only interpretations” (1968, p. 267). That interpretation is primordial—irreducible to anything more elementary—is the most fundamental tenet of philosophical hermeneutics. In Heidegger’s terms, our mode of being in the world has an interpretative “as-structure” (1996, p. 140); the “hermeneutic understanding-something-as-something [*das hermeneutische Etwas-als-etwas-Verstehen*]” (Gadamer, 1993a, p. 339) is the structure of all experience.

Narrative hermeneutics is motivated by the view that theoretical reflection on interpretation deserves a more central place in contemporary narrative studies and critical theory. Instead of assuming that we all know what interpretation means, we need more reflection on different conceptions, levels, and practices of interpretation. As Rita Felski observes, hermeneutics has received surprisingly little serious consideration in critical theory over the past few decades: “Given the surge of interest in questions of reading—close and distant, deep and surface—the neglect of the hermeneutic tradition in Anglo-American literary theory is little short of scandalous” (2015, p. 33). This is largely due to a common misunderstanding, particularly in poststructuralistically oriented humanities and social sciences: the concept of interpretation is often taken to imply seeking a hidden “ultimate meaning” that waits to be discovered in the depths of the object of interpretation (pp. 32–33).⁹ Such suspicion toward interpretation has animated French poststructuralism and has exerted its influence in the

Anglo-American world through the reception of French thought—an early example being Susan Sontag’s influential attack “Against Interpretation” (1964).

Felski (2015, p. 33) proposes a rebranding of hermeneutics, starting with the recognition that hermeneutics does not imply a commitment to any particular conception of interpretation; rather, it is simply the pursuit of theorizing interpretation, within which many rival understandings of interpretation can flourish and debate, and hence should be seen as a “resource to be reimagined rather than an idol to be destroyed” (p. 34). Such a project of reimagining is precisely what I intend to do in this book. An important starting point for this project is the acknowledgment that interpretation is fundamental not only to our engagement with texts, but to our whole being in the world, and that narratives mediate and condition our interpretative engagements with the world and other people.

Within narrative studies, narratology in particular has sought to distance itself from interpretation, which it has associated with unscientificity and subjectivity. As Liesbeth Korthals Altes puts it, “scientificity has often been considered to come proportionally to one’s distancing from interpretation, and from hermeneutics more generally”; this tendency has been coupled with narratology’s “lack of systematic interest in the social dimensions and, hence, the diversity of interpretive processes” (2014, p. 19). However, as the most lucid narratologists, like Korthals Altes (2014) and Jonathan Culler (1988, p. 279), recognize, interpretation is a key element of all narrative analysis, even of the most descriptive. I suggest that we should go one step further and acknowledge that interpretation is something that we always already do, not only when we interpret texts, in order to be able to rethink the relationship between different levels of interpretation.

Narrative hermeneutics approaches narrative as a culturally mediated interpretative practice that makes someone’s experiences in a particular situation intelligible by drawing meaningful connections between them. It explores narrative as an activity of organizing experiences that has bearing on our sense of who we are and who we could be. This may sound simple, but these basic premises are far from self-evident. For example, the classical narratological tradition shaped by the legacy of French structuralism deliberately omitted notions of experience and the experiencing subject and instead conceptualized narrative in terms of a (quasi-causal) representation of a series of events. Today, Monika Fludernik’s (1996, p. 12) view that *experientiality*—which she defines as the “quasi-mimetic evocation of ‘real-life experience’”—is the key feature of narrative has become one of the widely shared premises of cognitively oriented “postclassical narratology.”¹⁰ Yet contemporary narratologists mostly rely on a conception of experience

that is rarely thematized but seems to be very different from a hermeneutic one. Their notion is usually closer to the empiricist-positivistic belief in “raw experience” than to the hermeneutic conception of experience as mediated and interpretatively structured. In cognitive narratology, “experiencing” is a universal cognitive frame (Fludernik, 1996), and it tends to be linked to the ahistorical assumption that experience is something quite unproblematic, immediately given here and now.

This ahistorical conception of experience is generally coupled with a narrow conception of history: history is seen as something that happens elsewhere—where the great political leaders meet and wars are fought—rather than right here, in our everyday lives. In Fludernik’s definition, for example, the “historical” refers to such historically “significant” events as wars, the American moon landing, and the fall of the Berlin wall (2010, pp. 43, 46).¹¹ She suggests that soldiers in the battlefield have “historical experience” that can be characterized as “raw experience” (pp. 41–43), whereas those who follow the war on television have only “mediated” historical experience, as if the experience of those engaged in ordinary everyday activities were not historical:

In order to become “historical” experience (rather than mere experience of things happening to impinge on one), events or processes need to be cognized as either significant (which will cause them to be experienced as historic even though they are only just evolving) or as past. (p. 46)

What is problematic in this narrow conception is that it ignores the historicity of everyday life in which apparently nothing much happens. Who gets to decide, and how, what counts as “significant”?¹² It can be legitimately argued that the personal, subjective, and everyday are highly significant and just as historically constituted as the events of narrowly conceived political history. It is rarely acknowledged in narrative studies that history is not something external to us but constitutive of all experience.¹³ Despite the widespread use of the concept of experience in narrative studies, it is wildly under-theorized, and its temporal complexity tends to be downplayed.¹⁴

Most approaches to narrative, developed by a range of thinkers from Hayden White (1981) to Strawson (2004) and several cognitive narratologists, rely on a hierarchical dichotomy between living and telling, based on the assumption that there is pure or raw experience on which narrative retrospectively imposes order. Narrative then easily appears as a projection of false order, or as a distortion of the original experiences or events. Narrative hermeneutics, in contrast, questions the dichotomy

between living and telling by stressing that experience is continuously mediated. Its key insight is that *cultural webs of narratives affect the way in which we experience things in the first place*.

In narrative psychology, there is a line of thought that recognizes this mediatedness, or what Jerome Bruner calls the mimetic “two-way affair”: “Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative” (1987, p. 13). Bruner acknowledges that our lives are a product of imagination in the sense that they are available only through a process of recounting, which is not a “recital of something univocally given,” but “an interpretive feat” (p. 13). Hence, “life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold” (p. 31). One of Bruner’s great insights is that the cultural “stock of canonical life narratives” affects how we tell our lives against what we perceive as “possible lives”: these cultural narrative models have the “power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life” (p. 15). Drawing on Bruner, much of narrative research in the social sciences emphasizes what Ann Phoenix characterizes as the need to “give equal importance to individual and to social processes” and to pay attention to how “canonical narratives provide insights into the ways in which narrators use culture in doing narratives” (2013, pp. 74–75). Bruner’s thinking is indebted to the hermeneutic tradition of thought, but he rarely refers to it, and the connections remain largely implicit; this is even truer of contemporary narrative psychology and narrative social sciences. One of the aims of this book is to explicate the relevance of hermeneutics for today’s interdisciplinary narrative studies.¹⁵

Perspectivism—the recognition that we always interpret the world from a particular perspective—is integral to narrative hermeneutics. It considers different disciplines, for example, as practices of interpreting the world from different perspectives and of posing different types of questions to reality. These interpretative perspectives are primary in relation to any propositional statements: it is a key tenet of hermeneutics that “every statement has to be seen as a response to a question and that the only way to understand a statement is to get hold of the question to which the statement is an answer” (Gadamer, 1981, p. 106). Hence, a certain way of asking questions is more fundamental to a discipline than the propositional claims it makes: chemistry and media studies, for example, approach the world from different perspectives and ask it different types of questions.

As Alexander Nehamas (1985) argues, Nietzschean perspectivism and the primordially of interpretation implies that literary interpretation is a relevant model for understanding not only texts but also lives. Just as

we can interpret literary texts “equally well in vastly different and deeply incompatible ways,” the same is true of human lives (p. 3), but this does not mean that all interpretations are equally good; rather, it is to acknowledge that knowledge is never absolute and all interpretations take place from a particular perspective.¹⁶ As Gadamer puts it, “[i]nterpretation is always on the way. . . . [T]he word *interpretation* points to the finitude of human being and the finitude of human knowing” (2001, p. 105). This endlessness is linked to the unfinalizable nature of interpretation: “the key hypothesis of hermeneutic philosophy is that interpretation is an open process that no single vision can conclude” (Ricoeur, 1991a, p. 33). Interpretations are never exhaustive, and our interpretative relationship with the world involves ongoing engagement with its nonsemantic, material aspects.¹⁷

That narrative is seen as a cultural interpretative *practice* (rather than only as a structure, like in classical and much of postclassical narratology) means that it is perceived as a social activity, process, and interaction: something we do together with others and through which we take part in shaping social reality. My interest in narrative hermeneutics is animated by the conviction that we should move beyond linking interpretation to the idea of unveiling deep meanings; we should see interpretation as an endless activity of (re)orientation, engagement, and sense-making, which is thoroughly *worldly*, both in the sense of being embedded in a social and historical world and in the sense of participating in performatively constituting that world. Narrative is about understanding in the Gadamerian sense of “understanding oneself in the world,” which entails comprehending one’s possibilities of acting and experiencing (Gadamer, 1993b, p. 345).

For Gadamer, our interpretative engagement with the world is profoundly historical and situated. However, the level of abstraction of his philosophy is such that he says little about the specific ways in which our being in the world is situated, as multiple axes of differentiation—such as those of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and age—intersect in particular historical and cultural contexts to produce lived experience.¹⁸ Yet philosophical hermeneutics and approaches that emphasize the gendered, ethnicized, and classed nature of our social existence are far from incompatible; indeed, the importance of these modes of situatedness is implied in the emphasis of philosophical hermeneutics on the historicity of our being in the world—on the way all actions and understandings are anchored in a particular historical situation, conditioned by the social system that imputes identity categories on people.¹⁹ In philosophical hermeneutics, however, too much remains implicit. In my view, hermeneutics should be developed in a direction that is more articulate about power relations, specific modes of situatedness, and the unequal distribution of agency and vulnerability.²⁰

In articulating the performative dimension of narrative interpretations and their intertwinement with relations of power, I propose a narrative hermeneutics that synthesizes aspects of philosophical hermeneutics, on one hand, and of Nietzschean-Bakhtinian-Foucauldian hermeneutics, on the other. It aspires to function as a theoretical-analytical framework for exploring narratives as interpretative practices that exist in relations of dialogue and struggle in the world, not merely in some textual universe. The Nietzschean-hermeneutic approach acknowledges that interpretative practices not only represent the world, but take part in performatively shaping it. This framework invites reflection on who gets to decide which stories get told and how, and what worldly effects these ethically charged storytelling practices have.

NARRATIVE, AGENCY, AND ETHICS

From the perspective of narrative hermeneutics, cultural models of narrative sense-making condition—but do not straightforwardly determine—our lives, identities, and modes of experience. Narrative hermeneutics envisages the relationship between narrative sense-making models and the individual subjects who interpret them as fundamentally *dialogical* in the sense that while the subjects become who they are in relation to the cultural models, these models only exist through being interpreted. As Jens Brockmeier puts it, cultural meanings “signal a range of options, of possibilities for action” (2009, p. 222). He builds on Klaus Holzkamp’s idea of how our relationship to cultural meanings is a “‘possibility’ relationship [‘*Möglichkeits-Beziehung*’]” (1983, p. 236). The idea that cultural webs of meanings do not determine our actions or who we become but rather indicate possibilities for action suggests that we can, to some extent, detach ourselves from them (Brockmeier, 2009, p. 222)—or at least some aspects of them. Reinterpretations can resist and challenge culturally prevalent narrative models, although such challenging is considerably more difficult for precarious subjects than for those in privileged positions of power.

The notion of *narrative agency* designates how, as Catriona Mackenzie puts it, “to be a person is to exercise narrative capacities for self-interpretation,” which bring about “the integration of the self over time,” and that such “[n]arrative integration is dynamic, provisional and open to change and revision” (2008, pp. 11–12). I would like to emphasize, however, that the narrative dimension of agency is not only at play in processes of self-interpretation but is more broadly a constitutive aspect of moral agency as we constantly participate, through our actions and inactions,

in narrative practices that perpetuate and challenge social structures. The concept of narrative agency is useful in signaling that culturally mediated narrative (self-)interpretations take part in constituting us as subjects capable of action, while simultaneously recognizing that as agents of narrative interpretation we are both constituting and constituted. Narrative agency can be amplified or diminished, and agentic power is unevenly distributed across the globe.

There are crucial differences in the ways in which narratives as cultural interpretative practices affect us and our narrative agency. Often narratives are so integral to one's way of life that one is largely unaware of them, and in fact it is impossible to become aware of all the narrative webs in which we are entangled. Narratives can become dangerous weapons for political ideologies when they are not presented *as narratives* but as neutral, perspectiveless statements of how things are. This insight fueled the attack on storytelling after the Second World War. Importantly, however, this attack was directed not against narrative per se but against a particular conception and function of narrative, namely, against narratives that present themselves as the discourse of truth.²¹ Such narratives function according to what Roland Barthes (1957, pp. 251–252) described as the logic of myth: they present what is historical and human-made as if it were natural and inevitable.

Narratives function in different ways: sometimes they perpetuate problematic stereotypical sense-making practices; at other times they encourage critical reflection on dominant cultural narrative practices and self-reflexively question the kind of naturalizing tendency that the postwar thinkers criticized. I suggest that instead of a singular and definitive logic of narrative, there are different *logics of narrative*. In particular, an important distinction can be made between *naturalizing narratives*, which hide their own mediating and interpretative role, and *self-reflexive narratives*, which openly present themselves *as narratives*, that is, as selective, perspectival interpretations that can always be contested and told otherwise. Self-reflexive narratives overtly raise the possibility of reinterpretation and invite the recipient to participate in the dialogic process. I will argue that naturalizing and self-reflexive narrative strategies are intimately linked to ethically distinct logics manifested by *subsumptive* and *non-subsumptive* narrative practices: while some (typically naturalizing) narratives seek to subsume the particular under the general, others (typically self-reflexive ones) destabilize such appropriative aspirations and display a non-subsumptive logic by foregrounding the temporal process of encountering the singularity of the narrated experiences. This book develops an alternative to the subsumption model of narrative understanding and argues that the ethical potential of storytelling depends on the

possibility of non-subsumptive understanding, in which singular experiences are not subsumed under what we already know, but shape and transform our understanding.

Ethics explores different ways of responding to the question of how we should live. This involves reflection on how our values and commitments affect how we live, act, respond, and express who we are and what we value and care about as we try to make sense of our place in the world, including our responsibilities and goals. The question of how to live is intimately linked to the question of who we are. Culturally mediated narrative practices are inseparable from how we understand ourselves as moral agents and communities.

Socially and culturally oriented approaches to ethics have criticized the dominant moral theories, such as Kantian and utilitarian approaches, for relying on an individualist, atomistic conception of subjectivity and neglecting how we become moral agents in social frameworks that allow us to express and define who we are through actions and responses that are intelligible within a moral community.²² Approaches that acknowledge how moral life is thoroughly entwined with other aspects of social life have been developed by a range of thinkers, including Gadamer (1997, orig. 1960), Emmanuel Levinas (1980, orig. 1961), Stanley Cavell (1979), Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), Charles Taylor (1989), Richard Rorty (1989), Nussbaum (1990), Ricoeur (1992), Margaret Urban Walker (2007), and Hilde Lindemann (2014).

Hermeneutic narrative ethics explores the ethical potential and risks of narratives as culturally mediated interpretative practices. It is interested in the ethical issues that pertain both to our relation to others and to our sense of self. In continental ethics, the tradition inspired by Levinas focuses on the relation to the Other,²³ while the tradition that draws on Nietzsche's and Michel Foucault's work places the emphasis on the cultivation of one's own ethos and style of existence—what Foucault calls “the aesthetics of existence” and the “elaboration of one's own life as a personal work of art” (1996, p. 451). The latter tradition is relevant to a consideration of how in narrating our lives we shape them into something akin to works of art.²⁴ We become selves, however, only in relation to others, and it is this interplay between an ethics of self-realization and a relational, other-oriented ethics that I attempt to unearth through an approach that emphasizes the dialogical character of narrative identity, (inter)subjectivity, and agency. This involves showing that a sense of history cultivates our sense of the possible in ways that are ethically crucial for our capacity to imagine different possibilities of relationality. The performative understanding of narrative implies that because storytelling produces and shapes reality, we have

a responsibility as storytellers and should reflect on the intersubjective implications of our storytelling activities.

My approach to ethics has four main dimensions: reflective-analytic, transcendental, evaluative, and explorative. I reflect on, and analyze, the ways in which the ethical potential and dangers of narrative have been understood; I examine tacit ontological and normative assumptions underpinning different conceptions of narrative, and I unearth the conditions of possibility for moral agency and ethically sustainable narrative understanding; I provide evaluative tools for differentiating between ethically beneficial and problematic narrative practices; and I engage in exploring what kinds of ethical potential storytelling might have, how it could be realized, and how different narrative practices implicate us.

While approaches that are sensitive to the social dimension of ethics tend to focus on how morality develops in and shapes communities, I will explore particularly the transformative potential of literary narratives in their power to not only manifest social morality, but also open up ways of going beyond it. Drawing on Deleuze, Jill Bennett formulates a similar idea in terms of a difference between morality and ethics:

An ethics is enabled and invigorated by the capacity for transformation. . . . A morality on the other hand, operates within the bounds of a given set of conventions, within which social and political problems must be resolved. (2005, p. 15)²⁵

The ethos that animates my approach to ethics is that richer awareness of how narrative webs constitute the ethical universe in which we orient ourselves—a universe that functions as a space of possibilities—has power to strengthen our ethically charged narrative agency and to expand our sense of the possible. Literature can contribute to such awareness by functioning as a form of ethical inquiry that reflects on the ethical complexity of the narrative webs in which we are entangled.

THE ACTUAL AND THE POSSIBLE

Ever since Aristotle famously argued that history narrates what has happened and literature what “might happen, i.e. what is possible” (1984, p. 4979), the Western tradition has drawn on a dichotomy between the actual and the possible when conceptualizing the relationship between fiction and history. I suggest, however, that this conceptual dichotomy has led to a dismissal of how a sense of the possible is integral to who we

are and how it constitutes an important aspect of intersubjective reality in every actual world. This dichotomy may hinder our understanding of how literature provides interpretations of actual (past and present) worlds through its own literary means and how it can *enrich and expand our sense of real worlds as spaces of possibilities*. Narrative hermeneutics addresses these issues as a framework in which history and fiction are seen as complementary practices of narrative interpretation.

Most theorists of fiction share Gottlob Frege's (2008, orig. 1892) view that fiction lacks truth value and is hence not, as Dorrit Cohn puts it, "subject to judgments of truth and falsity" (1999, p. 15). Given that the language of fiction is performative in that it creates the world it refers to precisely by referring to it (p. 13), Lubomír Doležel (2010, pp. 41–42) claims that historical research constructs possible worlds that function as models of actual worlds, whereas fiction constructs possible worlds that contain fictional elements and therefore cannot function as models of any actual world: "A possible world in which counterparts of historical persons cohabit, interact, and communicate with fictional persons is not a historical world" (p. 36).

By characterizing fiction as "nonreferential," theorists of fiction stress that it does not—or does not have to—refer to the actual world. For example, Cohn defines fiction as "nonreferential narrative" (1999, p. 9) and argues that a fictional world "remains to its end severed from the actual world" (p. 13). Similarly, Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh suggest that discourse construed as fictional invites us to assume "that it is not making referential claims" (2015, p. 68). However, they importantly draw attention to the need to acknowledge the "seemingly paradoxical double quality of some uses of fictionality": "it is not meant to be understood as true and yet is meant to shape our beliefs about the actual world" (p. 68). They thereby acknowledge that even though fiction belongs to the realm of the possible, it can still affect our conceptions of what is "actual, factual, and real" (p. 71), but they do not further explicate how we should understand the relationship between these two realms.

The way in which the relationship between the actual and the possible is conceptualized depends on one's assumptions concerning the basic nature of reality and history. These assumptions, however, generally remain highly implicit, largely because they are frequently considered to be self-evident, even when in reality they are far from it. A theory of fictionality necessarily implies a theory of factuality. The dominant theory of factuality that relies on the conceptual opposition between the actual and the possible is based on the ontological assumption that the actual and the real refer to what can be objectively observed: to actions, events, and facts that

can be verified with observations or documents. But what if reality—past and present—does not consist merely of actions, events, and facts? Does human reality not also consist in such invisible phenomena as patterns of experience, affect, and meaning-giving? Engagement with these aspects of reality arguably requires imagination. From such a perspective, cultural history has challenged “historical realism,” according to which history is composed of observable actions; it emphasizes that the past world is also constituted by thoughts, feelings, and representations—by what is invisible and perishable—and suggests that it is crucial for the study of the past world to map past possibilities (Salmi, 2011, pp. 173–174; Wyschogrod, 1998). In this task, the historian needs not only documentation of what we can know for certain about that world, but also the capacity to imagine (Corbin, 2002, p. 9; Salmi, 2011, pp. 176–177).

I suggest that both fictional and nonfictional narratives can contribute to our sense of how to live in a historical world (including our own) is to live in a particular space of possibilities in which it is possible to experience, perceive, think, feel, do, and imagine certain things, and difficult or impossible to experience, perceive, think, feel, do, and imagine other things. This view of historical worlds emerges from the tradition of thought developed by Heidegger (1996), Gadamer (1997), Reinhart Koselleck (2004), Foucault (1966), and Rancière (2013). Heidegger (1977b) argues that every age has an underlying metaphysic with certain presuppositions about what is real and possible; Foucault (1966) describes such a metaphysic as the historical *a priori* that defines the limits of intelligibility in a particular age, and subjectivity as a process of taking up subject positions “within a more or less open field of possibilities” (2000, p. 341). Koselleck’s (2004) concept of “space of experience” (*Erfahrungsraum*) refers to how the present world is shaped by frameworks of meaning, an important aspect of which is how it understands the past; “horizon of expectation” (*Erwartungshorizont*), in turn, refers to the way in which we orient ourselves to the future and imagine the yet-to-be. Narrative practices shape both the space of experience and the horizon of expectation, as well as their shifting relationship.

Neither the space of experience nor the horizon of expectation of a particular world, however, is as homogenous as Koselleck makes them sound. As Rancière acknowledges, each age includes the “co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities” (2013, p. 26). A historical world always consists in a multitude of historical worlds. Moral agents are socially situated, they position themselves differently within a social world, and their sense of the possible differs from one another. This plurality and heterogeneity

are implicit in my use of the notions of the historical world and the sense of the possible. For example, in the contemporary world, acute historical consciousness exists side by side with complete dismissal of how history mediates the present. And within societies, across this shared planet, vulnerability, agency, and possibilities are unequally distributed (Butler 2004, 2009).

Ricoeur argues that fiction can function as a “detector of possibilities buried in the actual past” (1988, pp. 191–192): “What ‘might have been’—the possible in Aristotle’s terms—includes both the potentialities of the ‘real’ past and the ‘unreal’ possibilities of pure fiction” (p. 192). Although Cohn (1999, p. 9) claims to share her definition of fiction as “nonreferential narrative” with Ricoeur, in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* (*Temps et récit*, 1983–1985) Ricoeur moves on from this simplified starting point to a complex reflection on how thinking based on referentiality is insufficient for understanding the relationship between fiction and reality. Fiction opens up the world in a certain way, and at the same time participates in transforming it: it is both disclosive and transformative. Hence, the “critique of the naive concept of ‘reality’ applied to the pastness of the past calls for a systematic critique of the no less naive concept of ‘unreality’ applied to the projections of fiction”; fiction is “undividedly revealing and transforming” (1988, p. 158). Ricoeurian mimesis can be characterized as a process that is simultaneously performative and interpretative and therefore cannot be captured by the conceptual dichotomy between finding and inventing: “Here we reach the point where discovering and inventing are indistinguishable, the point, therefore, where the notion of reference no longer works” (p. 158).

In a similar vein, Bruner argues that while the sciences create hypotheses and possible worlds that fit them, the humanities and the arts create possible worlds that give expression to “possible alternative personal perspectives” (1986, p. 54). Creating hypotheses of human possibilities in a past world is an interpretative task that is in principle endless, and historians, novelists, and philosophers can make equally legitimate contributions by their own means: “For the object of understanding human events is to sense the alternativeness of human possibility. And so there will be no end of interpretations of Charlemagne’s ascendancy (or Jeanne d’Arc’s fall or Cromwell’s rise and fall)—and not only by historians, but by novelists, poets, playwrights, and even philosophers” (p. 53). I endeavor to further elaborate on this interpretative dynamic through a narrative hermeneutics, according to which the actual and the possible constantly interpenetrate one another in both fiction and nonfiction and in the different modes of engagement they invite.

NARRATIVE UNCONSCIOUS AND NARRATIVE IMAGINATION

In this book, I explore how storytelling practices shape our sense of the range of possibilities that are open to us. This involves two key aspects: an understanding of the unconscious narrative imaginaries that underpin cultural worlds, and a sense of how it is possible to go beyond the dominant imaginaries to imagine and grasp new possibilities of being, thinking, and experiencing. Hence, I argue that the relationship between *narrative unconscious* and *narrative imagination* is crucial in shaping our sense of the possible.

Freeman uses the notion of *narrative unconscious* in reference to “those culturally rooted aspects of one’s history that have not yet become part of one’s story” but are “operative in our ongoing engagement with the world” (2010, pp. 105, 120). I will suggest, however, that the narrative unconscious affects us in many problematic ways, and we need to not only integrate it into our self-understanding, but also engage with it critically. The concept is useful in signaling that we are largely unaware of the cultural narrative webs and narrative traditions that regulate how we narrate the past, understand our possibilities in the present, and orient ourselves to the future. The stories we tell are never entirely our own.

As the hermeneutic psychoanalyst Roger Frie puts it, “the narrative and hermeneutical traditions challenge the view of the unconscious as an individual container of experience, separate from the social and cultural surround”; he refers to the unconscious to draw attention to how “we are embedded in narratives whose meanings remain beyond our reflective grasp” (2016, p. 121).²⁶ Another approach that acknowledges how cultural narratives shape our self-interpretations is “narrative therapy,” inspired by Michael White and David Epston’s (1990) work. As Martin Payne (2006, p. 21) articulates, it reflects on how culturally dominant narrative models can be a source of distress if our experiences do not conform:

Language . . . influences . . . our interpretations of what happens to us by providing both ready-made meanings and “canonical stories”—ready-made stereotypical narratives into which we try to fit and story our lives. These canonical narratives (achieving success in work, finding a permanent partner, being a parent, living in gender-appropriate ways and so on) are frequently a source of distress and loss of identity when our lives fail to correspond to them.

Narrative therapy is based on the idea that when we become aware of the culturally available stories that lead us to narrate our experiences in certain ways, we are no longer so tightly bound to them and can envisage

alternatives. When significant aspects of the experiences of persons seeking therapy contradict dominant narratives, therapy aims to identify or generate “alternative stories that enable them to perform new meanings, bringing with them desired possibilities—new meanings that persons will experience as more helpful, satisfying, and open-ended” (White & Epston, 1990, p. 15). As Julia Vassilieva puts it, narrative therapy is “fundamentally concerned with using narrative for liberation,” both “from the oppressive effects of power” and from “the tyranny of problems and predicaments that people face” (2016, pp. 180–181).

I use the notion of narrative unconscious to signal that the cultural mechanisms that regulate how we narrate our experiences and share them with others affect us largely unconsciously. We can never be totally aware of this unconscious layer, but we can become partly conscious of it, particularly by developing our awareness of the historical processes that have shaped the narrative traditions in which we are entangled. Such awareness can have emancipatory power because in the unconscious form, narrative models are easily reified so that they conceal their nature as human interpretations; they present themselves as if mirroring the natural order of things, and in this reified form, they cannot be subjected to critical discussion.²⁷ In this book, I explore narratives that not only draw on the narrative unconscious, but also thematize it and help us become aware of the ways in which we rely on culturally mediated narrative models of sense-making, thereby allowing us to establish critical distance from these received models and to expand our narrative imagination. Fredric Jameson opens his influential book *The Political Unconscious* (1981) with the words, “Always historicize!” (p. 9); I would like to suggest that literary narratives can themselves use strategies of historicizing and thereby contribute to our ability to historicize.

The concept of *narrative imagination* has been used by a range of thinkers, but in the wake of Nussbaum’s (1997, 2010) influential thinking, it is most often used with reference to the capacity to imagine the experience of people different from oneself—a capacity that pervades all aspects of our lives. Drawing on John Dewey’s (1916) discussion of the relevance of art for life, Nussbaum argues that instead of teaching that “imagination is pertinent only in the domain of the unreal or imaginary,” children need to “see an imaginative dimension in all their interactions, and to see works of art as just one domain in which imagination is cultivated” (2010, p. 103). Nussbaum focuses mainly on empathetic identification with literary characters, often almost as if they were real people, and downplays our engagement with different narrative forms. Her ahistorical approach also lacks a sense of how, in reading fiction, we engage with fictional worlds from

the horizon of our own world. In critical dialogue with Nussbaum's work, I propose rethinking narrative perspective-taking in such a way that entails both emotional engagement and the possibility of critical distance. I articulate a model in which perspective-taking does not imply the dissolution of one's own, historically constituted interpretative horizon, but rather a dialogue that allows one to become aware of one's preconceptions and alternatives to them. I aim to show that not only empathetic feeling with disadvantaged characters, but also imaginative engagement with ambiguous or problematic perspectives, can be ethically valuable.

My work links up with that of Ricoeur (1988, 1991a), Brockmeier (2009, 2015), Freeman (2010), and Molly Andrews (2014) on the connection between narrative and imagination. They all understand narrative imagination in wider terms than Nussbaum and emphasize its temporal multidirectionality: it involves a "dialectical shuttling back and forth" (Freeman, 2010, p. 66), as we reinterpret the past from the perspective of the present and project ourselves into the future. Andrews describes imagination as a "social faculty" at work when "we think about our lives as they have been lived, and as they might be led" (2014, pp. 7, 10). Brockmeier analyzes how "narrative imagination is pivotal in probing and extending real and fictive scenarios of agency" (2009, p. 215). He acknowledges both that imagination is not a faculty separate from our everyday lives—"most of our practical actions are enmeshed with acts of imagination"—and that it is a creative, often tentative and playful, "pathway to the construction of new meanings" (p. 227). I focus particularly on how narrative fiction contributes to our narrative imagination by cultivating our sense of the possible—our capacity to imagine beyond what appears to be self-evident in the present.

Narrative unconscious and narrative imagination are two sides of what can be called the *narrative imaginary*. Cornelius Castoriadis (1975) uses the notion of "social imaginary" to show how society and social institutions are founded on basic assumptions about our being in the world, and Rosi Braidotti links it to a dynamic conception of subjectivity as "a term in a process, which is co-extensive with both power and the resistance to it" and of narrativity as "a crucial binding force," as a "collective, politically-invested process of sharing in and contributing to the making of myths, operational fictions, significant figurations of the kind of subjects we are in the process of becoming" (2002, pp. 21–22). Taylor's "social imaginary" refers to the "common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (2007, p. 172). Michèle Le Doeuff's (1990) analysis of "philosophical imaginary" disentangles how social power affects philosophical thinking. These notions of the imaginary

articulate how cultural meaning-systems have the power to shape not only our beliefs and values, but social reality in general. The narrative imaginary of any given society is mainly unconscious, but it also includes the ways in which individuals and communities actively engage with, reinterpret, and reimagine their myths, stories, and imageries. I will explore the ethical potential of the narrative imaginary in terms of the concepts of *dialogicality* and the *narrative in-between*, which foreground the relationality of our existence as narrative agents.²⁸

Narrative unconscious and narrative imagination are also constitutive aspects of *narrative identity*, and all three are based on processes of (re)-interpretation. Our narrative identity—our narratively mediated sense of who we are and who we could become—is importantly shaped by telling stories of our lives in relation to the narrative webs and traditions in which we are entangled. We engage in a dialogue with these traditions mostly unconsciously—through automatized interpretative processes—but sometimes in a highly conscious way. I suggest that there is a continuum from narrative identity based on received narrative models of sense-making to narrative identity based on self-aware narrative imagination that creatively or subversively reinterprets these models.

BEYOND THE PERPETRATOR-VICTIM DICHOTOMY

In order to adequately take into account the complexity of the ethical issues of storytelling, it is important to appreciate the inseparability of the ethical dimension of narratives from the concrete situations they narrate and in which they are used and abused. The singularity of ethical situations is one major reason why literature provides a fertile “laboratory for thought experiments” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 148): by creating literary worlds in which moral agents act in concrete situations in relation to others, narrative fiction can explore the ethical complexities of the impact narratives have on our lives in richer terms than abstract moral philosophy. After three theoretical chapters (Chapters 1–3), I shall develop my argumentation in relation to contemporary literary and autobiographical narratives that deal directly or indirectly with the traumatic legacy of the Second World War, which plays a pivotal role in contemporary narrative imaginary on a global scale.

The Holocaust has become so central to our ethical imagination that it is difficult to think about the ethics of storytelling without considering how Nazism showed the terrifying power of storytelling to build a narrative of “us” and “them” and to exclude the latter from humanity. Why

is it that Karl Ove Knausgård ends his autobiographical series *Min kamp* (2009–2011, *My Struggle*) with a long treatise of Hitler and Nazi Germany? Because he realized that he cannot think through who he is without coming to terms with that legacy. This is a sentiment widely shared by the children of European humanism from the immediate postwar years to the present: we cannot understand who we are without responding, in one way or another, to the question of how it is possible that European humanism could lead to Auschwitz, or at least could not stop it from happening. This question has grown even more urgent during the period I have been finalizing this book, as the new president of the United States, Donald Trump, has started his term by putting in practice alarming policies that enforce his extremist nationalist narrative of “America first.” Many commentators draw parallels to the rise of fascism in Europe of the 1930s; others warn against such comparisons. I agree with those who see comparison as inevitable, but emphasize that it should be sensitive to both continuities and discontinuities, similarities and differences. As Michael Rothberg (2017) puts it, in our moment, comparison is needed in the name of both “political mobilization (e.g. anti-fascism)” and “historical understanding,” which are different but “feed into and off of each other.”

The legacy of Auschwitz structures my ethical universe—and European “moral topography” (Muschg, 1997)—in ways that may not apply to people with different cultural backgrounds, but we should not think of discourses on different historical traumas in competitive terms (Rothberg, 2009), and rather than positing some kind of hierarchy of suffering, I use contemporary narrative engagements with the Second World War as a touchstone for exploring theoretical issues that, I hope, others can elaborate on in relation to different kinds of material. While most of the fictional and literary-critical work on the Holocaust focuses on the perspectives of the victims, contemporary literary Holocaust studies is increasingly acknowledging the importance of also engaging with the perspectives of the perpetrators.²⁹ I aim to both contribute to the ongoing discussion on the ethics of such engagement and analyze how the selected narratives unsettle the perpetrator–victim dichotomy.

In *Die Mittagsfrau* (2007, *The Blind Side of the Heart*), the German novelist Julia Franck (b. 1970) tells the imaginary life story of her half-Jewish grandmother, who abandoned her seven-year-old son (Julia Franck’s father) at a railway station after surviving the Second World War and Nazi persecution. The novel emerged from the need to imagine how it was possible that anyone could do something so incomprehensible.³⁰ Günter Grass’s (1927–2015) semi-fictional autobiography *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006, *Peeling the Onion*) tells the story of a young Nazi who served in the

Waffen-SS, was taken to an American re-education camp, and became an artist. Grass delves deep into the ethical issues of remembering and forgetting, reflecting on how it was possible that he did what he did as a teenager, and in what sense it was he who did those things. In *Les Bienveillantes* (2006, *The Kindly Ones*), the French-American novelist Jonathan Littell (b. 1967) sets out to imagine what it might have been like if he had been born in the historical world of Nazi-occupied Europe, what he might have done, and who he might have become (Uni & Littell, 2008). When the Israeli writer David Grossman's (b. 1954) son was doing his military service in the Israeli army, in the middle of the Israel-Palestine conflict, he wrote a novel, *To the End of the Land* (2010, *Isha Borachat Mi'bsora*, 2008), that deals with the agony of a mother who takes her son to the army at the start of a military operation against the Palestinians.³¹ After his own son, Uri, died during his military service, Grossman wrote *Falling Out of Time* (2015, *Nofel mi-huts la-zeman*, 2011), a narrative that deals with the grief, loss, and guilt of parents who have lost a child—as so many have in the Middle East and other conflict zones.

All the preceding narratives can be linked to the phenomenon of *perpetrator fiction* or *complicity fiction*, but at the same time they show the inadequacy of the perpetrator–victim dichotomy in making sense of the ways in which we are implicated in violent histories. Rothberg (2014) importantly draws attention to how the victim–perpetrator imaginary “tends to polarize and purify the relationship between victims and perpetrators, evacuate the field of other crucial subject positions, and model violence on a small-scale, decontextualized scene”; he suggests that the concepts of *implication* and *implicated subjects* “help us better capture the conditions of possibility of violence” and asks us “to think how we are enmeshed in histories and actualities beyond our apparent and immediate reach, how we help produce history through impersonal participation rather than direct perpetration.” In thinking about this implicatedness, it is important to acknowledge, as Judith Butler puts it, that “we each have the power to destroy and to be destroyed, and that we are bound to one another in this power and this precariousness” (2009, p. 43).

The narratives I have chosen for analysis make palpable the dynamics of implication. They not only complicate our narrative imagination dominated by the dichotomy between Nazi perpetrators and Jewish victims, but also raise broader questions of the ways in which the narrative webs in which we are entangled are also webs of violence—webs of meaning that enable and perpetuate structural violence in society. They unearth the cultural condition of weaving narrative identities in the contemporary post-Holocaust world, and they explore how the traumatic legacy of the Second World War

implicates us. They suggest that instead of simply demonizing the Nazis as the evil other, it is important to try to understand what made possible a historical world in which ordinary people took part in industrial mass murder. Although these narratives are written from positions of privilege—mainly by European white men—their authors also belong to minorities: Franck, Littell, and Grossman have a Jewish background; Grass was a refugee of Kashubian descent.³² The three male authors have first-hand experience of war (Littell from humanitarian missions across the world). I have chosen these works because they are particularly ethically complex and compelling narratives that invite reflection on the ethically charged roles that narratives play in our lives.

These narratives display *metanarrativity* in reflecting on their own process of narrating and in exploring the significance of narratives for human existence.³³ Therefore, they provide a fertile ground for exploring the immersive and self-reflexive dimensions of narrative dynamics. They invite a mode of perspective-taking characterized by an interplay between experiential participation and a distanced reflection fueled by an awareness of the constructedness of the narrative. Cognitively oriented narrative theorists rarely acknowledge that engagement with fictional worlds can be at the same time immersive and self-reflexive; they tend to conceptualize literary engagement in terms of an experience of being immersed in, or transported to, a fictional world, an experience allegedly interrupted by textual self-reflexivity (Walton, 1990; Gerrig, 1998; Ryan 2003). In dialogue with the selected narratives, I develop a conceptual framework for analyzing the kind of engagement with historical experience—of war and trauma in particular—that is both self-reflexive and invites immersion and emotional participation so as to produce *a sense of implication*.

Each of these literary works has a personal, autobiographical aspect, but they also have broader cultural relevance. The traumatic legacy of the Second World War and the Holocaust has shaped Western cultural memory like no other cultural trauma and has also affected narrative imaginary on a global scale—a phenomenon that has been discussed in relation to the concepts of “cosmopolitan memory” (Levy & Sznaider, 2006; Beck, 2014), “multidirectional memory” (Rothberg, 2009), “transcultural memory” (Erll, 2011), “mnemonic imagination” (Keithley & Pickering, 2012), “palimpsestic memory” (Silverman, 2013), and “transnational memory” (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014), all of which attempt to draw attention to the intersecting histories of violence and to the entanglement of the discourses around them.³⁴

The legacy of the Second World War, in its various post-Holocaust, post-colonial, and post-communist forms, is fundamental to our sense of who

we are in the present historical world. Divergent ways of interpreting this legacy inform different perspectives on the present age of terror and current political ruptures, such as the wars in Ukraine and Syria, the refugee crisis, debates that revolve around the future of the European project after the vote of the British to leave the European Union (“Brexit”), and the global concern about the threat to democracy and human rights presented by the Trump administration. In these troubled times—as the tensions between Russia and the West have reactivated Cold War mentalities, discourses, and narrative practices, wars in the Middle East and Africa have forced millions of people to leave their homes and seek refuge, and nationalist extremism and xenophobic populism are rising across the Western world—it is particularly urgent to understand different narrative imaginaries and the experiential realities that they reflect, produce, and shape.

That history is written from the perspective of the victors has led many theorists who work on the ethics of remembering to argue that we have an obligation to write history that follows “the plot of suffering rather than that of power and glory” (Ricoeur, 1991b, p. 464). Currently, however, the increasing acknowledgment of the ethical importance of imagining not only the perspectives of victims, but also those of perpetrators and implicated subjects, shifts attention to the *conditions of possibility for good and evil* and to how their possibility within us is linked to the social world in which we become who we are. Precisely this type of reflection lies at the heart of the narratives analyzed in this book. They self-reflexively deal with how the author, narrator, and/or protagonist engages in a process of narrative imagination, conditioned by a culturally shaped narrative unconscious, and reflect on the ethical issues involved. The narratives thematize acts of storytelling, link them to broader cultural mechanisms, and bring to light both how storytelling can perpetuate dominant social power structures (to the point of playing a pivotal role in orchestrating industrial mass murder) and how it can be an empowering means of resistance that opens an avenue to addressing the incomprehensible.

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECT

This book draws on, brings together, and contributes to the following, partly overlapping fields: (1) narrative ethics, (2) literary narrative studies and ethical criticism, (3) philosophy of narrative, (4) narrative psychology, and (5) cultural memory studies. Narrative hermeneutics is an approach that intersects and engages with all of these fields. By bringing them into dialogue, I aim to shed new light on the multifaceted narrative dimension

of human existence and its ethical complexities. I hope this produces cross-fertilization and intensification of some of the exchanges taking place between these five areas of inquiry.

Narrative Ethics

First, narrative ethics is in itself an interdisciplinary area of research, most commonly understood either as a subfield of narrative studies or as a particular approach to ethics. It comprises a vast array of different, partly overlapping discussions, the common denominator of which is the view that narratives “do moral work” and are integral to “the moral life” (Lindemann, 2001, p. 36).

Narrative approaches to ethics are mostly forms of contextual, situated ethics that emphasize the social embeddedness of moral agency. They focus on how stories “help to define and structure our moral universe” and how, in storytelling, “we both create and reveal who we think we are as moral agents and as persons” (Gotlib, 2015). These approaches explore the “interlacing of moral vocabularies and practices with other historically and culturally embedded beliefs and social practices” (Walker, 2007, p. 62). Narrative ethics challenges abstract, universalizing, top-down, and principlist ethical theories (such as deontology and utilitarianism), which tend to view the moral agent “as an autonomous, rational actor, deliberating out of a calculus of utility or duty,” a “disembodied and decontextualized ideal decision-maker,” unburdened by “the messy contextuality of an actual lived life” (Gotlib, 2015). Many narrative approaches to ethics (including those developed by Hannah Arendt, Taylor, MacIntyre, Ricoeur, Walker, Lindemann) emphasize the links between narrative, identity, and ethics, and understand morality to be a fundamentally interpersonal and dialogical practice. Narrative practices not only are entwined with ethics as an activity of reflecting on different ways of dealing with the question of how we should live but also shape our ethically charged intersubjective reality and who we are as moral agents.

Nussbaum (1990, 1997, 2010) and Richard Rorty (1989) are philosophers who place narrative fiction at the center of their narrative ethics. They suggest that fiction cultivates our moral sensibility, our capacity for empathy and solidarity, and our powers of self-invention. Nussbaum argues that for some ethically relevant views on human life, “a literary narrative of a certain sort is the only type of text that can state them fully and fittingly, without contradiction” (1990, p. 7).³⁵ Rorty maintains that “detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (in,

e.g., novels or ethnographies), rather than philosophical or religious treatises, were the modern intellectual's principal contributions to moral progress" (1989, p. 192).

Within narrative ethics developed in literary narrative studies, in contrast, the emphasis has been less on the relevance of narrative fiction to moral life and more on how integral ethical issues are to the production and reception of narrative fiction. As Jeremy Hawthorn and Jakob Lothe put it, authors make ethical decisions when they choose their topics and design the literary devices through which they deal with them; characters make ethical decisions in the fictive world; and readers make ethical decisions in responding to the narrative: ethical issues are not a supplement to "be added on once processes of writing, reading, or criticism have been completed . . . because there is no narrative that is free of ethical issues, no reading, viewing, or listening to a narrative that does not require some ethical sensitivity and the exercise of moral discrimination on the part of reader, viewer or listener" (2013, pp. 5–6).

The literary narratologist James Phelan (2014) distinguishes between four subfields of narrative ethics: "(1) the ethics of the told; (2) the ethics of the telling; (3) the ethics of writing/producing; and (4) the ethics of reading/reception." Although Phelan's distinction can be useful as a heuristic tool, I see the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling as inseparable, in the same way as form and content are inseparable and interdependent. The way in which a narrative is told crucially affects what is being told as well as its ethical underpinnings. While according to Phelan (2014) "the ethics of the telling" focuses on "text-internal matters" that concern the situation of "the narrator(s) in relation to the characters and to the narratee(s)," I want to stress that the author's, narrator's, and reader's engagement in the narrative process take place in worldly contexts, and, hence, the ethics of storytelling—in all its dimensions—is a thoroughly worldly affair. Storytelling is ethically loaded precisely because it is a way of making sense of our being in the world, and narrative fiction is a particular form of such storytelling—one that has specific ethical potential in engaging us through its own literary means.

With the notion of the ethics of storytelling, I refer to an exploration of a range of ethical issues that arise in connection to the phenomenon of storytelling. The central issue in this book is the ethical significance of storytelling for human existence. Other relevant questions include the following: How do ontological assumptions affect the ways in which one answers this question and understands the relationship between living and telling? What are the key aspects of the ethical potential and dangers of storytelling, and how are they addressed within different literary narratives? How

does the interplay between form and content bear on literature as a mode of ethical inquiry and on our engagement with ethically challenging narratives? How is the dimension of the possible linked to the ethical relevance of storytelling?

Although Phelan (2014) is critical of “reading for the moral message,” which “has as its goal extracting a neatly packaged lesson from the ethics of the told,” the focus of the rhetorical-narratological tradition on strategies of persuasion (by the author) and judgment (by the reader) often seems to be linked to the assumption that human beings are rational, self-conscious subjects who basically already know what is right and wrong and engage in acts of persuasion and judgment from their established value positions.³⁶ This assumption generally underpins “humanist ethics,” as opposed to “poststructuralist ethics,” the former being more influential in narratology.³⁷

While I draw on certain aspects of both traditions, I also wish to move beyond them. The starting point of my hermeneutic approach is that meanings take shape as we engage in a dialogue with texts from the horizon of our own sociocultural world, and narratives exist in dialogic relations to cultural meaning-systems. The way in which a narrative signifies cannot be reduced to how it communicates the intentions and values of the author; authors and readers are embedded in sociocultural webs of meaning of which they are only partly conscious and which they perpetuate and challenge through their interpretative actions. While scholarship that draws on humanist ethics often analyzes the ethics of a certain text in terms of a pre-given set of values, I aim to contribute to the line of narrative ethics that foregrounds the relevance of literature as a form of ethical inquiry in its own right. Literature does not merely illustrate or communicate pre-given ideas and values—as a form of “moral guidance” or “moral education,” as Wayne C. Booth has it (1988, p. 211)—but functions as a medium of thought and imagination in which ethical questions are explored in their complexity and messiness, often offering radically new perspectives on them but no definitive answers.

Literary Narrative Studies and Ethical Criticism

The hermeneutic ethos implies a commitment to the view that we can learn something from literature—that it can be a source of knowledge and understanding. This position is far from self-evident. It is essential to Gadamerian and Ricoeurian hermeneutics that literary interpretation means engaging in a dialogue with the literary text and letting it transform

us, and that literature is a mode of cultural self-understanding. This way of thinking, however, appeared rather outdated for quite some time, as literary studies were dominated by forms of critical reading that placed more emphasis on how readers deconstruct texts and analyze them as symptoms of social power structures than on what the readers might learn from them. Recently, however, the situation has changed remarkably.

My work links up with such recent contributions as Felski's *Uses of Literature* (2008) and *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Colin Davis's *Critical Excess* (2010), Marielle Macé's *Façons de lire, manières d'être* (2011), and Cassandra Falke's *The Phenomenology of Love and Reading* (2016), which articulate, from different perspectives, dissatisfaction with the critical tradition that emphasizes the poststructuralist aspiration to dismantle the text and lay bare its underlying power structures. They argue for a dialogic engagement with literature that moves beyond deconstruction toward a new kind of hermeneutics, one that emphasizes the value of the ability to be open to the text, to learn from it, to be affected and transformed by it.

Davis develops a "hermeneutics of overreading," which "does not quite correspond to either the recollection of meaning or the exercise of suspicion" and is "motivated by a fierce commitment to the singularity of the work of art and to its potential to transform our ways of thinking" (2010, pp. 180–181). Macé (2011) explores how literature compels us to reinvent ourselves by giving our existence new form and style. Falke (2016) develops an analogy between engagement with literature and the capacity to love: at the heart of both are attention, empathy, and a willingness to be overwhelmed. Felski articulates an expanded understanding of "use," one that "allows us to engage the worldly aspects of literature in a way that is respectful rather than reductive, dialogic rather than high-handed" (2008, p. 7). She calls for going beyond a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (2015, p. 9): "Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible" (p. 12). These studies are examples of a welcome shift toward a conception of literature that has a close affinity with the one developed by philosophical hermeneutics, even if this affinity is rarely explicated. I hope to contribute to this development and articulate its link to hermeneutics, while at the same time moving hermeneutics in a direction of fleshing out its affective, performative, critical, and ethical aspects that have so far remained underdeveloped.

I propose narrative hermeneutics as a path beyond the dominant approaches of ethical criticism. These include, first, the humanist, neo-Aristotelian strand described earlier, including the Nussbaumian approach

and rhetorical narratology, which perceive literature in terms of teaching or communicating moral values. Second, they include poststructuralist and deconstructive ethical criticism, which generally succeeds better in giving due weight to the radicalness of literature but often problematically mystifies literature as something radically “Other” that evades interpretation and thereby detaches it from our everyday processes of understanding the world, our lives, and those of others. Cultural studies forms the third major strand of ethical criticism. While much of this tradition is relevant for my approach, it often risks reducing literature to symptoms of practices of power and tends to appreciate inadequately the specificity of literature and the inextricable intertwinement of literary form and content.³⁸

I agree with Felski that we need an “alternative to either strong claims for literary otherness or the whittling down of texts to the bare bones of political and ideological function” and we should acknowledge that “our engagements with texts are extraordinarily varied, complex, and often unpredictable in kind” (2008, pp. 7–8). I propose to contribute to this project by developing narrative hermeneutics as a philosophically and text-analytically rigorous approach that cultivates an ethos of dialogue and avoids mystifying literature. By focusing on thematic analysis, the dynamics of reading, and the interplay between form and content, I aim to show how literature can be a source of ethical insight in exploring the relationship between narrative and human existence.

Philosophy of Narrative

This book also contributes to philosophy of narrative or narrative philosophy, by which I mean philosophical work that reflects on the nature of narrative, its relevance for human existence, and the philosophical assumptions and commitments underlying different conceptions of narrative.³⁹ My work has been motivated by the conviction that in the current phase of narrative studies, with its increasing interdisciplinarity and expanding scope, what is particularly needed is reflection on the philosophical presuppositions of different traditions of theorizing narrative. While I have previously explored the philosophical underpinnings of different conceptions of narrative in narrative theory and fiction (Meretoja, 2014a, 2014b), the current book focuses on different aspects of the ethical potential and risks of storytelling and analyzes the philosophical assumptions underlying various normative positions on narrative and its relation to life. At the same

time, I continue to develop narrative hermeneutics as a philosophically rigorous and historically sensitive approach that provides an alternative to problematic hierarchical models of experience and narrative.

I have insisted that not only are there no ethically neutral narratives, there are no ontologically or epistemologically neutral ones either (Meretoja, 2014b, p. 219). Narratives always rest on some (mostly tacit) presuppositions about the nature of the real and of knowledge—or at least suggest certain perspectives on these issues. Unlike some philosophers, most notably Strawson (2004), I do not believe that the ethical and the ontological can be strictly separated when discussing the relationship between life and narrative. What we take to be “real” affects our stance on the ethical value of storytelling.

Research that makes these assumptions explicit can be linked to the Foucauldian tradition of “historical ontology of ourselves,” in which “the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (Foucault, 1984, pp. 49–50). My work can be seen as historicized transcendental inquiry that unearths the unspoken philosophical presuppositions that undergird different ways of seeing the relationship between narrative and experience, the possible and the actual, and the imaginative and the historical. This ties in with Ian Hacking’s (2004) and Jeff Sugarman’s (2013) (Foucault-inspired) historical ontology, which explores how things—concepts, kinds of people, institutions, psychological conditions—come into being historically, as well as with Butler’s “relational social ontology,” which scrutinizes the conditions of “grievability” and of “the struggle for non-violence” (2009, pp. 171, 184). Rancière’s work continues the Foucauldian tradition of historical transcendental philosophy by exploring the “conditions immanent in a particular system of thought, a particular system of expression” (2013, p. 50) and acknowledges that historically constituted regimes of perception are not homogenous spaces of possibility that would exclude one another or abolish earlier regimes: “At a given point in time, several regimes coexist and intermingle” (p. 50). I propose that the exploration of the conditions of possibility of experience, agency, and narrative identity is not the exclusive enterprise of philosophers, but one to which literature also contributes.⁴⁰ Literature lays out the world as a condition of possibility for the characters to act, feel, experience, and think, and it can provide us with new insights into the implicit assumptions that underpin different historical and cultural worlds as spaces of possibility.

Narrative Psychology

This book explores key issues of narrative psychology, such as how cultural narratives shape our sense of who we are and who we could be in relation to others and to our personal and cultural pasts. It articulates the relevance of the hermeneutic tradition to the inquiry into how lives are storied and the ethical stakes of such storying, with a particular emphasis on the intersections of narrative identity and ethical identity in relation to our sense of the possible. My work ties in with those efforts in contemporary narrative psychology—such as Freeman’s (2014b, 2016) work on the priority of the other and Andrews’s (2014) research on the social dimension of narrative imagination—that shift attention from self-focused models to relational, dialogical, and other-focused approaches.⁴¹ Such a shift foregrounds the way in which ethics is central to psychology—not only to moral psychology, but also to psychology more broadly, and to narrative psychology in particular.

The worldly and historically mediated character of our narrative engagements is neglected in many branches of psychology that focus on individual lives and cognitive processes. Yet all individual experience is made possible and is conditioned by a certain historical world. By showing the relevance of historical imagination to our (personal and cultural) narrative identities, my aim is to contribute to historicizing the study of the roles of narratives in our lives. Both psychological and literary narrative studies have been dominated by an individual-centered and ahistorical perspective when considering the nature of experience, and they would benefit from a richer sense of history. My book maps onto the hermeneutically oriented strand of contemporary narrative psychology that emphasizes the worldly dimension of experience and the ways in which individual lives are embedded in social, cultural, and historical worlds—a strand in which the “capacities and dispositions of the mind traditionally defined in mentalist and individualist terms have been re-described with respect to the narrative fabric of meaning that underlies them and binds them into a wider social and cultural world” (Brockmeier, 2015, p. 126).⁴² In dialogue with the work of narrative psychologists such as Bruner (1986, 1990, 1991), Brockmeier (2013, 2015), Freeman (1993, 2010, 2013), Andrews (2014), Frie (2016), and Brian Schiff (2017), as well as with theoretical work on narrative therapy,⁴³ I propose to contribute to developing narrative hermeneutics as a framework for exploring the ethical significance of narratives in our lives.

Moreover, my project aims to show how insights from literary studies can contribute to our understanding of the issues of narrative psychology that revolve around how we story our lives and construct narrative

identities.⁴⁴ In this endeavor, I also discuss work in the field of cognitive psychology, the psychology of reading, and cognitive narratology, particularly insofar as it deals with empathy and the ethical value of literature.⁴⁵ In discussing concepts such as imaginative resistance, engagement, and perspective-taking, I aim to bring into dialogue cognitive psychology, hermeneutically oriented narrative psychology, and literary narrative theory.

Cultural Memory Studies

This book also connects with recent work in cultural history that proposes to examine history from the perspective of the possible (Wyschogrod, 1998; Koselleck, 2004; Salmi, 2011) and explores ways in which narrative fiction contributes to cultural memory. I share with contemporary cultural memory studies an interest in the dynamics of collective remembering as a process of making sense of the past from the horizon of the present.⁴⁶ To use Rothberg's (2009) term, memory is multidirectional: it is directed to both the past and the future, and it brings together different moments of time into new constellations. Memory work is something we do in the present; like narrative, it is an interpretative activity. Instead of simple retrieval of what is stored in our minds, it is a present activity that is entwined with a narrative process of meaning-making.⁴⁷

Drawing on Richard Terdiman's view of memory as the past "made present" (1993, p. 7), theorists of cultural memory, such as Rothberg (2009) and Max Silverman (2013), emphasize the processuality and productivity of memory. Rothberg argues that the "notion of a 'making present' has two important corollaries: first, that memory is a contemporary phenomenon, something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present; and second, that memory is a form of work, working through, labor, or action" (2009, pp. 3–4). Silverman's "poetics of memory" follows suit by suggesting that the activation of an "elsewhere through memory, which converts the blandness of the everyday into something beyond 'common sense,' is a performative and transformative act in the present" (2013, p. 23). Like narrative and experience, memory is necessarily selective and interpretative—and it always includes forgetting. Memory presents versions of the past, never the whole truth, and it allows us to extend the present space of experience by drawing on the possibilities "buried in the actual past" (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 192). "Postmemory," the memory of a past that one has not personally lived but that is mediated transgenerationally through cultural imagery, makes the "imaginative investment" of memory particularly salient (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5), but it is also the case that all remembering

is mediated and involves an interpretative-imaginative aspect. Imagination is what creatively transforms “memory into a resource for thinking about the transactions between past, present and future” (Keithley & Pickering, 2012, p. 1).

In addition to the intertwinement of remembering and imagining, key issues of this book include the links between cultural memory, narrative identity, and processes of autobiographical storytelling, as all of the discussed literary texts contain an autobiographical dimension (even if indirectly).⁴⁸ While the past is always recalled and reconstructed in the present, this poietic process of reinterpreting the past is part and parcel of the process in which our narrative identities—our storied sense of who we are—are constructed and negotiated. Remembering is not only oriented to the past; by telling stories, we take part not just in creating a version of the past, but also in shaping the intersubjective world that we co-inhabit and in refiguring the ways in which we—as individuals and communities—orient ourselves to the future. In dialogue with the notions of vulnerability and implication, I will explore how this future-oriented narrative dimension of our existence involves our being implicated in histories of violence as well as in histories of resistance and solidarity, marked by unequal distribution of vulnerability.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 expands upon narrative hermeneutics as a framework for exploring the ethical complexities of the relationship between life and narrative and discusses the interconnections between the ethical and ontological assumptions underlying different conceptions of narrative. It delineates a broad Nietzschean-hermeneutic conception of interpretation and focuses on its three interlaced advantages in theorizing narrative, experience, and subjectivity. It allows us (1) to understand how narrative relates to experience without seeing their relationship as dichotomous or identifying them with each other; (2) to articulate how life does not form one coherent narrative but is instead a process of constant narrative reinterpretation; and (3) to understand the relationship between narrative webs and the individual subjects entangled in them as profoundly dialogical.

Chapter 3 explores the ethical implications of the hermeneutic approach to narrative. I propose a framework for analyzing and evaluating narrative practices from an ethical perspective by differentiating between six aspects of their ethical potential. (1) I argue that the power of narratives

to cultivate and expand our sense of the possible is ethically crucial. In relation to this key point, I suggest that narratives can (2) contribute to personal and cultural self-understanding; (3) provide an ethical mode of understanding other lives and experiences non-subsumptively in their singularity; (4) create, challenge, and transform narrative in-betweens; (5) develop our perspective-awareness and our capacity for perspective-taking; and (6) function as a mode of ethical inquiry. Nothing in narratives, however, guarantees that they have ethical effects, and often, in fact, the opposite happens. The chapter elucidates how the hermeneutic approach allows us to go beyond the dichotomous question of whether narratives are good or bad for us and to appreciate the ethical complexity of narratives in our lives.

In Chapter 4, I move on to testing the theoretical framework of hermeneutic narrative ethics by using it as a lens through which to analyze the uses and abuses of narrative for life in Julia Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau* (2007, *The Blind Side of the Heart*). I focus on how the novel explores storytelling as a mode of sharing one's life with others and lays bare the conditions of possibility for moral agency—showing its fragility. By addressing the transgenerational culture of silence that leads to the repetition of harmful emotional-behavioral patterns, Franck's novel demonstrates how history implicates us, pervading even the most intimate aspects of our lives, and attests to the necessity of storytelling for survival. I explore how narrative practices expand and diminish the space of possibilities in which moral agents act and suffer, and how narrative in-betweens both bind people together, through dialogic narrative imagination, and engender exclusion that can amount to annihilation. The chapter delineates a continuum from being able to tell our own stories to narrative identities violently imposed on us. It argues that moral agency requires a minimum narrative sense of oneself as a being worthy and capable of goodness, and that the ethical evaluation of narrative practices must be contextual—sensitive to how they function in specific sociohistorical situations.

Chapter 5 problematizes the prevalent way of conceptualizing the relationship between fiction and history in terms of the actual and the possible, and argues that both fictional and autobiographical narratives have the potential to cultivate our sense of history as a sense of the possible. It examines four different aspects of their capacity to contribute to historical imagination by analyzing (1) how Günter Grass's *Hundejahre* (1963, *Dog Years*) and his autobiography *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006, *Peeling the Onion*) depict Nazi Germany as a space of possibilities; (2) how they self-reflexively examine—against idealist and determinist conceptions—the way history consists in concrete actions and inactions; (3) how they explore

the ways our narrative interpretations of the past shape our orientation to the present; and (4) how they address the duty to remember—and to engage with the conditions of possibility for atrocity—through a future-oriented narrative ethics of implication. In relation to the paradoxical status of autobiographical narratives—which are expected to be “truthful,” although autobiographical memory is necessarily selective, interpretative, and unable to convey an exhaustive account of a lived life—and to Marya Schechtman’s philosophy of the narrative self, the chapter analyzes how in autobiographical narration, too, we have access to the past only via narrative imagination, and discusses the ethics of engaging with aspects of the past that one cannot identify with.

Chapter 6 expands the discussion of how the interplay between form and content is crucial to the ethics of storytelling by analyzing Jonathan Littell’s *Les Bienveillantes* (2006, *The Kindly Ones*), one of the most famous perpetrator novels, which has fueled heated controversy over the contribution of literature to the understanding of the Holocaust. The chapter discusses imaginative resistance, difficult empathy, and identification in relation to readerly engagement and perspective-taking. It shows how the interplay between immersiveness and critical distance can produce a narrative dynamic that allows the reader to engage emotionally—but without uncritically adopting the protagonist’s perspective—with an ethically problematic life-world. It analyzes how the novel performatively shows, through the breakdown of narrative mastery, that no exhaustive comprehension is possible. In relation to different logics of narrative, the chapter articulates the ethical significance of self-reflexive narrative form and relates the hermeneutic notion of *docta ignorantia*—knowing that one does not know—to the novel’s way of dealing with the conditions of possibility of the Holocaust and with the limits of narrative understanding.

Chapter 7 explores the ethical potential of dialogic storytelling and the non-subsumptive model of narrative understanding—a model that foregrounds the temporal process of engaging with the singular events and experiences that the narrative deals with—in relation to David Grossman’s *To the End of the Land* (2010, *Isha Borachat Mi’bsora*, 2008) and *Falling Out of Time* (2015, *Nofel mi-huts la-zeman*, 2011). It argues that Grossman’s narratives not only thematize the ethical potential of narrative interaction; in them, dialogic storytelling structures the entire narrative in dialogue with the literary tradition of exploring storytelling as an art of survival. The analysis shows how storytelling animated by an ethos of dialogue—involving receptivity, responsivity, and openness—functions as a mode of non-subsumptive understanding and how subsumptive narrative practices, examined against the backdrop of the Israel-Palestine conflict, reinforce

harmful cultural stereotyping. In relation to theories of the dialogical self and Bracha L. Ettinger's and Butler's work on trans-subjectivity and vulnerability, the chapter contributes to an ethics of relationality that articulates the primacy of the dialogic space with respect to individual subjects, our implicatedness in violent histories, our fundamental dependency on one another, as beings both capable of inflicting and destructible by violence, and the potential of dialogic storytelling to create a trans-subjective narrative in-between that makes possible new modes of experience, identities, and transformative, agency-enhancing encounter-events.

Drawing together the main lines of argumentation developed in the book, Chapter 8 (Conclusion) synthesizes the hermeneutic ethics of storytelling as a framework that provides theoretical and analytical resources for studying both oppressive and empowering narrative practices and the uses and abuses of narrative in specific cultural contexts. It summarizes narrative hermeneutics as an approach that is attentive to how practices of storytelling expand and diminish our sense of the possible and explores narrative fiction as an inquiry into the ethics of being implicated in histories of violence, silence, and dialogue. The Conclusion sums up how the narratives examined in the book bring us to the limits of storytelling and reviews how they attest to the ethical potential of storytelling in the six senses articulated in the book, in ways that nuance the theoretical framework. It articulates a fierce commitment to non-subsumptive narrative practices animated by an ethos of dialogue.

The organization and progression of this book aims to enact the hermeneutic idea of a dialogue between the theoretical framework and the analyzed material. The literary narratives explored in the latter part of the book are meant not just to illuminate and concretize, but also to test and challenge the theoretical framework that is set up in the first part of the book. Some theoretically minded readers may want to read only the first three chapters, and that is fine. Acknowledging this, however, I also want to signal that my aim in the latter part of the book is to show how narrative fiction is relevant not only for literary scholars, but to a wide range of approaches on the relationship between life and narrative—across disciplines including psychology, philosophy, cultural history, and the social sciences—not only as illustrative material, but as a form of inquiry that deals with issues central to these disciplines. As for the theoretical framework constructed in the next two chapters, it is meant to serve a wide range of disciplines, and not just the study of literature or narratives that bear a link to the Holocaust, perpetration, or the experience of war and catastrophe. I have to leave it to others, however, to test this framework in relation to other kinds of material. Let us now embark on the journey toward an ethics of storytelling that articulates how narratives expand and diminish our worlds.

NOTES

1. “[I]l faut choisir: vivre ou raconter” (Sartre, 1978, pp. 61–62).
2. Probably the most influential manifestos “against narrativity” are by Sartwell (2000) and Strawson (2004); the “for narrativity” group is diverse, and ranges from MacIntyre (1984), Taylor (1989), and Ricoeur (1988, 1992) to contemporary narrative psychology and narrative therapy.
3. On how the narrative turn consists in several turns, see Hyvärinen (2008); on the relationship between the narrative turn in fiction and theory, see Meretoja (2014b).
4. On narrative hermeneutics, see Brockmeier & Meretoja (2014); Meretoja (2014a, 2014b); Brockmeier (2015); Freeman (2015); and the special issue of *Storyworlds* (Brockmeier [ed.], 2016).
5. Several philosophers have convincingly argued that it is problematic to conceptualize social cognition in terms of “theory of mind” (see, e.g., Gallagher & Hutto, 2008; Zahavi, 2014). They argue that rather than see mental states as “theoretical entities that we attribute to others on the basis of a folkpsychological theory of mind” (Zahavi, 2014, p. 100), social cognition is a practical ability that we learn through dynamic interaction with our social environment; Gallagher and Hutto’s Narrative Practice Hypothesis argues that “repeated encounters with narratives of a distinctive kind is the normal route through which children acquire an understanding of the forms and norms that enable them to make sense of actions in terms of reasons” (2008, p. 17). Discussion of this hypothesis is beyond the scope of this book, but suffice it to say that this hypothesis—and more broadly the philosophical movement often referred to as “enactivism”—is based on insights that bear a remarkable similarity to arguments advanced by the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics much earlier; on the hermeneutic approach to narratives as part of our practical (phronetic) engagement with the world and our dialogic relationality, see Chapters 2 and 3.
6. See, e.g., Nussbaum (1997, p. 90; 2010); Carroll (2000, p. 362); Goldie (2012, pp. 76–97). Carroll (2000, p. 367) suggests that fictional explorations can enrich the scope of our capacity to imagine alternative possible scenarios and particular situations in ways that cultivate “our powers of moral judgment.”
7. Heidegger argues that “our words *möglich* [possible] and *Möglichkeit* [possibility], under the dominance of ‘logic’ and ‘metaphysics,’ are thought solely in contrast to ‘actuality’ . . . When I speak of the ‘quiet power of the possible’ I do not mean the *possible* of a merely represented *possibilitas*” (1993, p. 220). As Macdonald shows, possibility has primacy over actuality in Heidegger’s and Adorno’s thinking, and it encompasses not only “obvious possibilities” but also the possibilities “that actuality does not acknowledge” (2011, p. 49). On Ernst Bloch’s distinction between theoretical and real possibilities, in relation to the not-yet, see Bloch (1996); Levy (1997); Levitas (2010, p. 102).
8. On Deleuze’s conception of fabulation (translated as “story-telling”), see also Bogue, 1999; Hongisto, 2018, pp. 190–192. The real possibilities that *The Ethics of Storytelling* explores have an affinity with Deleuze’s (2005, pp. 150–152) view of possibilities that are not mere logical possibilities.
9. On how this prejudice is linked to the idea of “interpretation-as-excavation,” i.e., interpretation as “an act of digging down to arrive at a repressed or otherwise obscured reality,” see Felski (2015, pp. 53, 58).

10. See, e.g., Herman (2007, p. 11).
11. Fludernik distinguishes between two ways of applying the notion of historical experience: "On the one hand, one can speak of our present-day experiencing of the Afghan War or, in history, of the Elizabethans' experience of the war in Ireland. . . . Type two of historical experience, which I would like to call *past historical experience*, corresponds to our present-day experience of historicity when encountering representations of historical subjects and/or periods" (2010, pp. 42–43). She adds that because mostly people experience "historically relevant figurations . . . through the media, i.e. *indirectly*," one may want to create a third category for "direct physical experience of processes and events such as *raw experience*," exemplified by soldiers' experience of war (p. 42). Underlying this view is the empiricist-positivistic assumption that experience of events is immediately given, raw, and not historical, except in the special cases when it concerns "historical events" such as war.
12. On how the memorialization of the past is dominated by a male perspective that privileges heroism in violent contexts (such as wars) at the expense of nonviolent struggles, see Reading & Katriel (2015).
13. This applies to rhetorical narratology, too, although it acknowledges that experience has different layers (intellectual, emotive, ethical, aesthetic). It focuses on how authorial strategies and textual phenomena affect these layers of the reading experience (Phelan, 2007, p. xiii), but it tends to take the concept of experience largely for granted and to neglect its worldly, historically, and socially mediated nature.
14. For example, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* has no entry for *experience*, only a very short entry on *experientiality*, in which Fludernik (2005, p. 155) cites her own work.
15. Ever since Bruner (1986, 1990; see also Sarbin [ed.], 1986), narrative psychologists have referred to hermeneutic thinkers, to Ricoeur in particular, but they rarely articulate or engage in depth with the philosophical underpinnings and theoretical complexities of the hermeneutic tradition.
16. This view entails "relativism" only in the sense that all statements are relative to their underlying approach to reality, not in the sense that they would all be equally valid (their validity is assessed intersubjectively). The relativism debate, however, is beyond the scope of this book.
17. Gumbrecht (2004) posits a dichotomy between hermeneutic approaches that, in his view, seek to reduce everything to meaning and non-hermeneutic approaches that rehabilitate "what meaning cannot convey" (as his subtitle has it). Unlike he suggests, however, hermeneutics does not imply a neglect of the material, real world, and, in fact, Gumbrecht acknowledges the way in which Gadamer suggests "a greater acknowledgment of the nonsemantic, that is, material components of literary texts" (p. 64).
18. This is more or less the definition of intersectionality put forward by Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix: "We regard the concept of 'intersectionality' as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple [axes] of differentiation—economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts" (2004, p. 76).
19. A hermeneutic approach could also be used to analyze how non-human agents orient themselves in the world and interpret it in different ways. Birds, dogs, and humans all engage in interpretative sense-making activities. The focus of this book is on human narrative practices, but I see no theoretical reason why one

- could not develop a hermeneutic approach to the interpretative engagements of non-human actors. Herman (2016) uses narrative hermeneutics to develop a “trans-species hermeneutics.”
20. Hermeneutics that moves in this direction is often called “critical hermeneutics”; see Kögler (1999); Pappas & Cowling (2003); Vasterling (2003); Ritivoi (2006); Mootz & Taylor (2011); Roberge (2011); Meretoja (2014b). On the unequal distribution of vulnerability, see Butler (2004, 2009).
 21. For a more detailed discussion of the postwar crisis of storytelling, see Meretoja (2014b, 53–118).
 22. Kantians and utilitarians are primarily concerned with trying to formulate a plausible criterion of right conduct (i.e., a criterion specifying the property or properties in virtue of which all right conduct is right). Strictly speaking, that endeavor leaves open the question of how we should go about our lives to behave in ways that exhibit the relevant property or properties (to behave rightly), and it does not necessarily rule out the possibility that reading literature may be one of the relevant ways to learn how to live well. I thank Frans Svensson for this observation.
 23. In the poststructuralist tradition inspired by Levinas’s work, the other is usually spelled with a capital, but because it can contribute to mystifying the other, I refrain from using the capital.
 24. This parallel underlies, for example, the work of William L. Randall and A. Elizabeth McKim (2008) on the poetics of our lives. See also Randall (2015); McAdams (2015).
 25. Along these lines, I follow the convention of referring with *morality* to prescriptive, collectively shared moral norms, values, and principles that regulate conduct in communities and with *ethics* to critical reflection on different approaches to ethical issues (concerning issues of right and wrong, justice, and the good life).
 26. Frie’s (2016) approach is similar to the cultural psychologist Katherine Ewing’s conceptualization of the unconscious as “the implicit”; his analytical practice is “concerned with how our emotional lives are guided by interpersonally generated” narrative frameworks that are mainly “outside our awareness” (pp. 120–121).
 27. For a discussion of such reification of cultural narratives, see Berger & Luckmann (1987, pp. 106–108, 192); Habermas (1984, pp. 47–51); Meretoja (2014b, pp. 181–182, 207–208).
 28. I will deal with dialogicality particularly in Chapters 2, 4, and 7; the concept of “narrative in-between” will be introduced in Chapter 3.
 29. On the ethics of engaging with perpetrators, see Adams (2013); Sanyal (2015); McGlothlin (2016); Pettitt (2016).
 30. On the autobiographical background of the novel, see Geu (2007); Meretoja & Franck (2010).
 31. I read Franck’s, Grass’s, and Littell’s work in the original (German and French) but Grossman in English translation. While reading in the original must remain an insurmountable ideal for a literary scholar, I consider Grossman so important from the perspective of my approach that I want to include him at the risk of the failure to do full justice to his work.
 32. To be precise, Grossman, as a Jew, is not part of a minority in Israel, but he is a descendant of Polish Jews, and has grown up in the shadow of the Holocaust, knowing that he must write “about what would have happened to me had I been

- over there as a victim, and as one of the murderers" (2007). He deals most directly with the Holocaust and perpetration in *See Under: Love* (1989, 'Ayen *'erekh: ahavah*, 1986), but I will focus here on his less studied, more recent books.
33. "Metanarrativity" is usually taken to refer to narration in which narrators reflect on their process of narration (see Neumann & Nünning, 2012), but as I argue in Meretoja (2014b, p. 3) there are grounds to understand it "in a wider sense to characterize narratives that make narrative their theme and deal with the significance of narratives for human existence in general (for how we understand ourselves, others, the world, history)."
 34. For relevant discussion, see also Huyssen (2003); Hirsch (2012).
 35. I find problematic Nussbaum's expression "without contradiction," for various reasons. I will discuss my disagreements with Nussbaum in more detail in Chapter 3; here it suffices to say that what fascinates me in literature is precisely the way it can deal with ethical issues in their full complexity, which often means engaging with them in all their contradictions.
 36. In Phelan's (2014) definition, narrative ethics is concerned with the following question: "How should one think, judge, and act—as author, narrator, character, or audience—for the greater good?" This definition seems to imply that there is some kind of shared understanding of "the greater good." Nevertheless, there is a clear affinity between rhetorical narrative studies and narrative hermeneutics in terms of their mutual interest in processes of narrative engagement, narrative interpretation, and narrative dynamics.
 37. On this distinction, see Phelan (2014). While he situates Newton's (1995) narrative ethics in the "humanist ethics" camp, I would consider Newton's Levinasian approach closer to poststructuralist ethics. I am sympathetic with many of Newton's aspirations, but at times his approach appears to me somewhat too schematically Levinasian.
 38. On these main strands of ethical criticism, see Meretoja & Lyytikäinen (2015, pp. 8–9) and Meretoja & Davis (2018).
 39. Key figures of hermeneutically oriented philosophical approaches to narrative include Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988) and Taylor (1989); contributions in the tradition of analytic philosophy include Nussbaum (1990); Carroll (2000); Velleman (2003); Strawson (2004); Currie (2010); Goldie (2012).
 40. Arguably, professional philosophers have no monopoly on ethical inquiry either; they also draw on their life experience and produce socially situated reflections on the life forms that they are familiar with (for a discussion, see Lindemann, 2014, p. xi).
 41. See also Gilligan (1982); Hermans (2001); Gergen (2009); Hermans & Hermans-Konopka (2012); Bertau et al. (2012); Hermans & Gieser (2014); Goodman & Freeman (2015); Vassilieva (2016).
 42. The way in which socially, culturally, and historically constituted narrative discourses condition subjectivity and identity is of course acknowledged in much of narrative research in social sciences and in socioculturally oriented psychology (see, e.g., Andrews et al. [eds.], 2013; Phoenix, 2013; Bhatia, 2007; Kirschner & Martin [eds.], 2010; Frie, 2016; Schiff, 2017).
 43. Like narrative hermeneutics, narrative therapy literature emphasizes how our moral agency develops in social contexts and how we tell and retell our personal life stories in dialogic relations with cultural narratives (see White and Epston, 1990; Payne, 2006; Vassilieva, 2016).

44. Work at the intersections of narrative psychology and literary studies include White & Epston (1990); Hermans (2001); Eakin (2004); Randall & McKim (2008); Randall (2015); Holler & Klepper (eds.) (2013); Brockmeier (2015).
45. Discussions relevant from this perspective include Hakemulder (2000); Oatley (2011); Polvinen (2012); Caracciolo (2013); V. Nünning (2015); A. Nünning (2015); Leake (2014); McGlothlin (2016).
46. On the “dynamics of cultural memory,” see Rigney (2012, pp. 17–19).
47. For a thorough discussion of such a conception of memory, from the perspective of narrative psychology, see Brockmeier (2015).
48. See, e.g., Eakin (2004); Saunders (2010); Assmann (2013); Holler & Klepper (ed.) (2013); Brockmeier (2015).