Fact and fiction:

Exploring the narrative mind

Jens Brockmeier

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Abstract

Building on an unified approach to literary and the everyday, written and oral (or otherwise performed) narrative, this chapter gets its bearings from a hermeneutic notion of narrative as a psychologically fundamental practice of human meaning construction, a practice that cuts across the putative divide between fiction and nonfiction. The argument put forward is that at the base of both literary and everyday processes of narrative meaning construction we find the same interpretive operations. These fundamental processes of human understanding and intersubjectivity are less shaped by epistemological or even ontological distinctions such as “fact” and “fiction” but first of all by a shared cultural canon of narrative conventions. To explore this argument in the contexts of narratological and philosophical discussions, I examine a slightly unusual narrative—unfolded in a letter by a person who considers suicide—in light of the narrative hermeneutics outlined in this chapter.
**Just the facts**

Although it is hard to overlook the amazing rise of narrative studies in the human sciences, there are different interpretations of this success story. That there are diverse interpretations of basically every story is one of the main points of narrative studies—this, at least, is the case I want to make in this chapter. Yet before this, let us remember that the concept of narrative, on its meandering travels through the academic landscape as traced by Matti Hyvärinen, has been all but unanimously welcomed. One does not need to consult Thomas Kuhn to see that there typically are more forces working against introducing radically novel orientations than in favor of it. Considering that narrative approaches, especially in the social sciences, psychology, and medicine and the health sciences, are often presented under the banner of qualitative and interpretive research methods (challenging those methodologies that are presented under banners of quantitative, evidence-based, and scientific standards), it is even more comprehensible why some quarters have reacted as if proper academic research has come under siege.

Concerns are particularly linked to an issue that has triggered controversial debates in all disciplines affected by the narrative turn, or turns, for that matter. This is the question of fact and fiction which comes with the question of the very meaning of these concepts and of their relationship. Fact and fiction are terms used across-the-board in everyday and highbrow discourses. They are at home in TV shows and in philosophical papers, in debates among historians, aesthetes, and political activists. Take this example of the semantic field in which the terms usually appear—a Call for Papers of the 2011 American Literature Association Conference on “Hemingway: Fact or Fiction?”:
Hemingway’s longstanding fame and reputation has fostered a variety of tall tales, stories, allegations and attributions. Some are blatantly false. Others are surprisingly true. Still others linger in the space between fact and fiction. This panel seeks papers that examine the history and circumstances of any of these Hemingway myths, legends, and misappropriations or explore the question of what it is about Hemingway or his writing that creates this mythical aura of potential misinformation around the reality of his life and career.

While the meanings of fiction—and the opaque “space between fact and fiction”—are manifold and ambivalent, the meaning of fact is clearly conceived in sharp contrast with all Hemingwayesque labels: facts are hard; they stand for objective reality or likewise solid information representing this reality.

Interestingly, within the sphere of literature and the public cultural discourse, it is, however, the field of fiction with its numerous genres and traditions that is the most valued and to which most critical attention and intellectual prestige has been devoted. From a mere theoretical point of view, fiction no doubt is the more multilayered and intricate notion. There are many full-blown theories of fiction, but not many theories of fact—if we leave out of account critical re-descriptions of “facts” as social constructs or postulates.1 Under closer scrutiny, affirmative theories of fact come down to empiricist and positivist epistemologies, seamlessly merging into the common sense view. In their way, they undergird Clifford Geertz’s (1983) point that common sense is a cultural system, a system based on the blend of “matter-of-fact apprehension of reality … and down-to-earth, colloquial wisdom, judgment or assessment of it” (p. 75). The tenets of this cultural system, Geertz (1983) notes, “are immediate deliverances of

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1 In the sociology and philosophy of science, the most consequential approach perhaps is Ludwik Fleck’s (1935) Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache, translated into English, in 1979, as The genesis and development of a scientific fact (T. J. Trenn & R. K. Merton, Eds., foreword by T. S. Kuhn).
experience, not deliberated reflections upon it” (p. 75). In a nutshell, the world in its immediacy is its authority.

The modern semantics of fact and fiction harks back to the idea of a sharp dichotomy between the sciences and the humanities that came in tandem with the establishment of modern universities. Erecting sharp disciplinary barriers between different areas of research was already absurd at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century when it was enforced primarily by university administrators in Germany, Britain, and France—supported by the will for system and classification in a new generation of politically influential scientists, for example, in the Royal Society. In 1830, the Prussian Academy of Sciences reorganized itself based on the assumption that there were only two categories of investigation: one was physical-mathematical, the other philosophical-historical. Accordingly, the Prussian Academy (and soon all similar institutions) had only two academic classes or departments. Yet this dichotomy has become even more nonsensical today, in a world of unparalleled ecological, technological, cultural, and scientific complexities that question the disciplinary and epistemological matrixes of the nineteenth century every day anew. As Stephen Jay Gould put it, “our taxonomies of human disciplines arose for largely arbitrary and contingent reasons of past social norms and university practices, thus creating false barriers that impede current understanding” (Gould, 2003, p.17).

Still, these epistemological taxonomies continue to pervade not only debates on Hemingway and literary theory, positivist philosophy of knowledge, and common sense, they also are wide-spread in the relatively new social-scientific areas of narrative studies. One well-known defense position—or, perhaps better, attack position—against narrative approaches in the social sciences derives from the long-standing positivist assumption that there are specially made
facts, data. Data are conceived of as ontologically specific entities that contrast with the vague and subjective stuff of fiction and stories (and, more generally, so-called qualitative research). In this view, the battle cry of science, in its Latin version, is facta non verba. Whereas facta or data indicate science, verba are for priests and pastors, Jane Austin reading circles, ideologues, and continental philosophers.

But fact and fiction are not only conceived of as qualities of information that belong to ontological orders, disciplines, and discourse types that are different in principle. The opposition also re-emerges within narrative theory itself, for example, in the distinction between fictional narrative and nonfictional narrative (or nonfiction). Here we enter the terrain of a differentiated narratological debate. Both classical and postclassical narrative theorists have argued that there are inherent textual or linguistic features—specific narrative and more general linguistic markers and qualities—that “objectively” distinguish fictional from factual discourse. These markers are meant to draw a sharp borderline between fiction and nonfiction, which for the most part coincides with the borderline between literature and non-literary discourse, in fact, between fiction and fact. Factual or nonfictional narrative appears to be defined by its reference to what is seen as the real world (Cohn, 1999), its truth value (Lejeune, 1989), or because it is falsifiable (Abbott, 2008). Fiction, on the other hand, is supposed to be exceptional with respect to these restrictions. In narrative and literary theory, the claim that fiction represents a kind of

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2 The historian Jill Lepore has reminded us that fact and fiction were for long also seen as differently gendered qualities. Lepore points out that, historically, the main antipode of fiction did not present itself as fact-based science but as fact-based history. By the end of the eighteenth century, most historians, along with their readers, were men, whereas most novel writers, along with their readers, were women. “As the discipline of history, the anti-novel, emerged, and especially as it professionalized, it defined itself as the domain of men,” Lepore (2008, p. 82) writes. Thus, eighteenth and early twentieth-century observers understood the distinction between history and fiction not merely as a distinction between fact-based truth and narrative-based invention “but as a distinction between stories by, about, and of interest to men and stories by, about, and of interest to women. Women read novels, women wrote novels, women were the heroines of novels. Men read history, men wrote history, men were the heroes of history.” (Lepore, 2008, p. 83)
narrative sui generis has therefore been characterized as the “exceptionality thesis” (Herman, 2011).

At the same time, postclassical narrative research has embraced the study of narrative phenomena beyond the boundaries of literature and written texts altogether. Challenging the exceptionality thesis, a new generation of narrative theorists has begun to investigate how understanding literary prose requires making sense of how human minds work, both the minds of fictional and actual characters. As a consequence, a more comprehensive view of the interrelations between narrative and the mind has come into prominence, focusing on the dynamics of narrative world construction that underlie both fictional and nonfictional discourse. In these processes we use both nonfictional and fictional narrative techniques and strategies of interpretation, and we do so in both nonfictional and fictional genres and discourses. Envisioning things in this light makes the already blurred terms fact and fiction even fuzzier. They begin to look, to use the language of Hemingway panels, like vestiges from innocent times.

The new view complements the reverse assumption that everyday narrative practices continuously absorb resources from literary, dramatic, and filmic discourses, and from the popular arts. If we wonder why these multi-layered exchanges and transformations work so smoothly and indeed typically escape our attention we must keep in mind that it is the same basic psychological abilities and practices that are involved on both sides. Clearly, the inclusive vision of narrative practices emerging in this way is quite different from the exceptionality thesis.

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3 See, e.g., Alber and Fludernik (2010); Fludernik (2009); Herman (2009); Palmer (2004); “Social Minds in Fiction and Criticism” (2011).
Building on this “unified approach” (Herman, 2011), I have tried in my own work to find out more about the common fabric of literary and everyday narrative. This effort gets its charge from a notion of narrative as a psychologically fundamental practice of meaning construction, a practice which cuts across the putative divide between fiction and nonfiction. That is, I assume that at the base of both literary and everyday processes of narrative meaning-making we find the same operations, and that these operations are interpretive in nature. Realizing basic processes of human understanding and intersubjectivity, these acts of interpretation are less shaped by qualitatively different modes of reflection or cognitive processing than by a shared cultural canon of narrative conventions.

Thus my approach to the categories of fact and fiction and their supposed opposition is not to discuss their validity with respect to particular texts or discourse genres or ways of reasoning. Nor do I want to investigate the conventions and cultural models of literature, positivist epistemology, or common sense that have given shape to them. Because I am first and foremost interested in the interplay of mind and narrative, I concentrate on practices of meaning-making or, hermeneutically speaking, practices of human understanding in and through narrative. And from this point of view, the importance of the categorical distinction between fact and fiction dwindles. It dwindles even more if we turn to genres of autobiographical narrative or, as it is mostly called today, genres of life writing—whether oral or written or performed in other media and semiotic environments. Drawing on the analysis of some examples of autobiographical life writing, I want to capture the process of narrative meaning formation in a way that does without “facts” and “fictions” and instead follows the dynamic of human understanding.

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4 I am, of course, not the only one working in this border zone; see, for instance, the studies on the intermingling of literary and everyday narrative in the world of illness and health by Mildorf (2010; 2012), or in the social sphere of work by Fasulo and Zuccamaglia (2008).
Narrative hermeneutics

As my discussion builds on basic assumptions of the hermeneutic tradition, a few philosophical qualifications are in order. One of these assumptions is that the human condition is characterized by a hermeneutic imperative, to borrow Mark Freeman’s term (2012). Following this imperative we do not take our being in the world for granted but are continuously engaged in the business of making sense of it. Living a life is establishing a world of sense and meaning which urges us to ongoing interpretive efforts to constitute sense. “Acts of meaning” is Jerome Bruner’s (1990) name for these efforts. The argument I want to advance is that these acts, to a large degree, are shaped by a narrative dynamic, a dynamic that is particularly dominant whenever we seek to understand complex human affairs. And it seems, to seize Montaigne’s aphorism, that living a life always is a complex affair, whether there are challenges or not. Differently put, at the heart of every process of interpretive understanding that reaches a certain level of complexity is a narrative process. Yet the narrative nature of interpretation is only one side of the coin. On the other side there is the interpretive nature of narrative, that is, at the heart of every process of narrative understanding is an interpretive process. Examining this twofold movement is the gist of what I call narrative hermeneutics.

Let me explain what I mean by narrative hermeneutics turning again to the opposition of fact and fiction. The idea that narrative presents the world either in terms of facts or fiction is predicated on the notion of narrative as representation. As Richard Rorty (1989) puts the matter, conceiving of language as a medium of representation or of expression assumes “that there are nonlinguistic things called ‘meanings’ which it is the task of language to express, as well as … that there are nonlinguistic things called ‘facts’ which it is the task of language to represent” (p.
To say that this opinion is widespread is an understatement. In almost all debates in narrative and linguistic theory as well as in the social sciences about how to define narrative it is taken for granted that language is representation (Ryan, 2007, p. 25). By contrast, the idea of understanding as a hermeneutic process of interpretive meaning-making is grounded in a notion of language as form of action. Based on a Wittgensteinian notion of language as an open and fleeting form of life, the view of language as a form of action contrasts with an understanding of language lodged within an exclusively linguistic arena. Wittgenstein’s (1953/2009) idea of language as action or activity also finds support in Vygotsky’s conceptions of both language and activity. It repudiates a cluster of exclusionary oppositions such as those between the verbal and the nonverbal, between linguistic and communicative practices, between speaking and acting (including bodily acting), and between linguistic and material action. Conceiving of narrative as form of action and interaction does not necessarily exclude the idea of representation; but it brings to bear a different focus, one—as I have pointed out in more detail in another work (Brockmeier, 2012)—that allows us to recognize aspects of narrative that are often neglected and ignored.

The view of narrative as action intertwines two lines of argument which both substantiate the case of a narrative hermeneutics. One has been outlined by Wittgenstein, as just pointed out, and Wittgensteinian pragmatists such as Davidson and Rorty. The other has taken shape in the classical hermeneutic tradition of investigating human understanding, especially in the wake of Heidegger’s re-conceptualization of understanding as an activity that is not just an intellectual or cognitive act—as, say, in the reading of texts—but a fundamental structure of human existence. Human beings, as Taylor (1985) put the matter, are self-interpreting animals. To make this point

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5 Lars-Christer Hydén (2012) provides several arguments that support such an action-theoretical concept of language drawing on the study of people with diseases that restrict their verbal, but not communicative activities.
using a different vocabulary, one could say that the search for meaning is not an intellectual exercise but part and parcel of our cultural nature as it has historically developed in many diverse traditions. In the twentieth century, this line of hermeneutic inquiry has not only been elaborated by philosophers such as Gadamer, Ricoeur, Taylor, and Derrida, but also by anthropologists such as Geertz, psychologists such as Bruner, and historians such as Koselleck.⁶ All of them have committed themselves to the matter of interpretive understanding in theoretically expounding and analytically employing it in their own work, thereby highlighting and exploring the role of narrative in the process.

Now my point is not that viewing narrative as action and interaction, instead of representation, takes sides with either fact or fiction. What I do propose is that within this understanding of language there is no space for this opposition at all. We have to look for concepts that are more sensitive and appropriate to describe what happens in this space, concepts that, in Wittgenstein’s sense, leave ragged what is ragged (1977/1980, p. 45).

If we examine, against this backdrop, processes of interpretive understanding (or meaning formation) we realize there is no such thing as an isolated representation that can be labeled as “fact” or “fiction.” Instead, there are *phenomena*—phenomena in a world that is not independent of us and our actions, nor is it prior to our languages and other symbolic systems. From the very beginning, these phenomena are defined by the cultural world of which they are a part and in which we encounter them as phenomena. That is to say, we encounter them in our sphere of action, perception, and reflection in forms of likewise culturally shaped *observations*.

Our observations (as well as other modes of experience or practice) are guided and organized by

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circumstances and history, whether we take them to be our own observations, or whether they suddenly enter our attention and our life or even burst into it.\textsuperscript{7} Successfully or not, we try to make sense of our observations, interpreting them, again, along the lines of cultural traditions of meaning-making. The results are and always remain interpretations—interpretations of observations of phenomena.

Of course, phenomena-observations-interpretations are not fixed configurations but fleeting gestalts in an ongoing hermeneutic movement. We must not mistake them as concepts that refer to ontological realities; they are meant to foreground certain aspects of these fleeting gestalts. Typically, they are interrelated moments of one interpretive connection—as when a phenomenon collapses with a particular observation, and the observation already implies its own interpretation. Likewise the other way around: A particular interpretation may suggest a specific observation that singles out a phenomenon. It is in this sense that the original Greek meaning of “phenomenon” resurfaces in modern usages of the term, as something that comes to light, or appears, or becomes present. Depending on the point of view of the observer, this may be something essential (or the essential), evident, apparent, or mere appearance (Hossenfelder, 1989).

Most of the time, these moves are effortless and unproblematic. Unfolding the semantic and affective geography of a person’s being in the world, they appear to operate like instincts: spontaneously, quickly, reliably. However, as we know, there are more serious challenges for human understanding. Sometimes we do not know if a sudden onslaught of thoughts and concerns is triggered by well-founded observations or just imagined. Think of a suspicious glance into the rear mirror when you spot someone in the car behind you, as described in a John

\textsuperscript{7} Contemporary phenomenology has coined the concept of Sinnereignis, an experienced meaning event, to capture the sudden and unexpected emergence of meaning that goes beyond its formation by a subject and his or her activities (Crowell, 2008; Godek, Klass & Tengelyi, 2011).
le Carré novel. Or of the strange experience the Norwegian writer Per Petterson reports in his novel *I curse the river of time*, where the narrator enters a bar:

There was a man I did not like. I did not like his face when he looked at me. It was as if he knew something about my person that I myself was not aware of, which for him was clear as day, as if I were standing naked, with no control over what he saw, nor could I see in his eyes what he saw in mine. But what he saw and what he knew made him feel superior to me and, in some strange way, I felt he had a right to. It could not be true, I have never seen him before, I was certain of that, he didn’t know anything about my life. But his gaze seemed all-knowing and patronizing each time he turned in my direction and he often did. It made me uneasy, I could not concentrate. (Petterson, 2008/2010, p. 30)

It is such processes of troubled understanding, or not understanding, that are particularly telling for the question in which I am interested. Rather than being based on acts of perception, categorization, or representation, they carry out a continuous flow of interpretive and self-interpretive acts; they perform a narrative stream of attempts to figure out what one’s and others’ experiences, intentions, desires, and anxieties mean or could possibly mean. Heidegger and Arndt have employed the Greek term *poiesis* (which stems from the Greek verb “to make”) to describe this process of meaning-making and meaning-negotiation. Localizing it more explicitly in the context of narrative, Freeman (2010) writes that poiesis captures “that sort of constructive, imaginative activity that is involved in our various efforts to make sense of the world, both outer and inner” (p. 43). On this view, which Freeman (2012) derives from his reading of Ricoeur, making sense refers to a kind of interpretive exploration in which meaning is found through being made. More precisely, as Freeman (2010) goes on to explain, “‘to make sense of’: in this
simple term, there is a reference both to ‘making,’ in the sense of a kind of constructive doing, and to ‘explicating,’ in the sense of discerning what is actually there, in the world” (p. 43).

Reaching for meaning, we use all signs and indications, all clues and guesses, whatever bits and pieces, odds and ends we can grab a hold of, whether present or past, real or imagined, helpful or not, to poetically make sense, in the Greek sense, of what we experience in a possibly apprehensive or threatening way. Recall Petterson’s example. It would be misleading to label these interpretive efforts as merely contingent and subjective. If we want to use concepts such as “subjective” and “objective” we have to situate them within the “objectivity” of socio-cultural frameworks that give interpretive practices their social plausibility and persuasiveness. All interpretation, as Martin and Sugarman (2009) underline, is “enabled by a shared background of traditional and conventional ways of life consisting of networks of social and cultural practices within which things and events are revealed or concealed, and generally rendered intelligible” (p. 19).

I am concerned with this kind of meaning-oriented, creative, imaginative, and in principle ever open process of understanding because, as already mentioned, I believe that it is, at its heart, a narrative process. And I am dealing with the process of narrative understanding because I believe that it is, at its heart, a process of potentially never-ending interpretation. Obviously, this

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8 Viewing interpretation as socially and historically situated is well established in the hermeneutic tradition where this is commonly framed in terms of historicity of human understanding. “To speak of interpretation in terms of an operation,” as Paul Ricoeur outlines hermeneutics’s fundamentally historical approach to interpretation, “is to treat it as a complex of language acts—of utterances—incorporated in the objectifying statements of historical discourse. In this complex several components can be discerned: first, the concern with clarifying, specifying, unfolding a set of reputedly obscure significations in view of a better understanding on the part of the interlocutor; next, the recognition of the fact that it is always possible to interpret the same complex in another way, and hence the admission of an inevitable degree of controversy, of conflict between rival interpretations; then, the claim to endow the interpretation assumed with plausible, possibly even probable, arguments offered to the adverse side; finally, the admission that behind the interpretation there always remains an impenetrable, opaque, inexhaustible ground of personal and cultural motivations, which the subject never finishes taking into account... It is this operating complex that can constitute the subjective side correlative to the objective side of historical knowledge” (Ricoeur, 2000/2006, p. 337).
process takes place on a quite different plane than categories such as fact and fiction are able to capture.

There is a further important qualification I must add to this notion of interpretation. So far, my examples have been rather one-sided or, more exactly, one-focused: on one person making sense of his or her being in the world. This, however, leaves out of account that such a process of interpretation is far from being structured like a monologue, even if it can be and often has been perceived and explained in this fashion. Yet the idea of a monologue organizing this process needs to be understood in a dialogical, Bakhtinian sense—to refer to just one important theoretician from a long tradition of dialogical and intersubjective thinking. The primal model, the ur-scene of interpretation is communication or the wish to communicate; it consists of at least two persons trying to connect and understand each other.

This is particularly evident when we consider practices of intersubjective interpretation within the specific area of narrative meaning-making that is constituted by the autobiographical process. Autobiographical narrative (or life writing) comprises a field where the relationship of fact and fiction has been subject to controversial debates that go far beyond the academic field (see e.g. Eakin, 2004, 2008; Smith & Watson, 2010). While Herman, as I believe, has convincingly challenged the exceptionality claim of fiction in general terms, I see the autobiographical process as a peculiar field with particular intricacies where the exceptionality thesis has to be repudiated in its own way, not least in view of the controversial but differentiated debates in this field.

Much of the discussion on autobiographical discourse is due to the fact that narrative serves diverse functions. Often these functions are not well distinguished. A police detective, a judge, a traditional literary scholar, a classical narratologist, a social-science researcher, an
epistemological positivist, all of them are primarily interested in one function: the representation function of narrative. Accordingly, narrative is conceived of as an extended proposition that is at its best if it records a pre-linguistic reality “as it is”; for then it can be accurately judged in terms of its truth value. Now to avoid any misunderstanding, I believe this view is not only understandable, in many cases it is legitimate, indeed indispensable—take hearings in court, truth finding committees, and oral history investigations that give voice to those whose views all too often are ignored, marginalized, and oppressed.9

However, a side effect of this often exclusive focus on the referential function of narrative is to neglect that many, if not most, autobiographical stories serve more than just one, representational function—if they are representational at all. And there is no place where this skepticism is more justified than in court, as Amsterdam and Bruner (2000) have pointed out. Yet irrespective of whether there are special places, institutions, and discourses where it is possible to identify in a theoretically and empirically satisfying manner the truth value of autobiographical narrative, this is of little help if we want to inquire how the narrative mind works, particularly, if it is not in those special places. Searching for representational truth (if we assume for a moment that there is such a thing, that it can be unmistakably identified, and that it is the function of the autobiographical process to do so) is not the driving motive for finding an answer to what it means to live a life.

9 It might be seen as ironic that the spectacular cases of narrative “misrepresentation” of “autobiographical truth” by writers or public figures which drew much attention to this issue in the last decade in the United States were not linked to events in courtrooms, truth finding committees, or debates about narrative truth, but to marketing issues. Eakin (2008, Chapter 1) has examined some cases that made it to the front page of the New York Times and were passionately discussed in the nationwide broadcasted talk-shows of Oprah, Larry King, and others. Packaging, Eakin writes, turned out to be at the heart of controversies about writers such as James Frey and Rigoberta Menchú, because whether a narrative work would be marketed as a novel, a memoir, an autobiographical narrative, a nonfictional novel, or “a story based on autobiographical experiences” is almost always decided in agreement with publishers and agents. For most of these genres there are not only literary but also social conventions. Eakin (2008, p. 39) argues that published autobiographies are governed by two sets of rules, one being that of literary genres, the other that of social “identity systems” which outline the publicly perceived identity of the writer. In the latter, “the truth-telling rule” overrides the literary and creative function of published autobiographical narrative to a degree that is defined by common sense, and that means in the first place mass media mainstream.
One quality that makes the narrative approach to life and mind so compelling and powerful, Andreea Ritivoi (2009) has reminded us, is its “relative neutrality toward questions of ontology” (p. 27). Ritivoi explains the ontological neutrality of narratives as a consequence of a basic quality of narrative: “the universe of utterance and the uttered world, or discourse and story (or sujet and fabula, to use the taxonomy imposed by Russian formalism), are distinct” (2009, p. 27). An event, idea, or feeling can be told as minor incident or tragic catastrophe, as joke or moral tale, as mishap or crucial moment in one’s life, all depending on the discourse—that is, the cultural environment and the personal act of poiesis—that gives shape to the story.

The example to which I now turn is an autobiographical sequence that allows us to take a closer look at the interpretive fabric of the narrative mind, which is, as I argue, the flip side of the narrative fabric of the interpretive mind.

**Interpretive meaning-making and the autobiographical process**

My example is an extract from a letter. Like personal email messages, diary entries, and blogs, letters are often neglected and underestimated autobiographical genres. If letters are seen as “highly stylized in terms of conventions of politeness and modes of conveying information“ (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 273), then this one surely appears to be an unusual example. Moreover, in terms of content, genre, and style it clearly defies traditional narratological definitions. But these definitions, as already indicated, reflect only a few of the great variety of narrative language games played in town. What they miss are all kinds of “weird stories,” stories that we find in much of twenty-first century literary narrative as well as in the ragged contexts of real life actions and minds (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). So they certainly would also fail the
story told in this letter. Oscillating between report, self-reflection, philosophical musing, and conversation, it also includes passages reminiscent of an entry in a psychiatric file. As we will see in a moment, the letter is written by someone who while writing is contemplating suicide. This sets the tone of the often associatively narrative meandering between different observations and considerations. The author, obviously in a severe personal crisis, writes to a friend trying to bring to mind some things that strike him as stable ground in moment of great uncertainty.

As my main interest is in the nexus of narrative and interpretation, it does not actually matter that the author of this letter is the young Jacques Derrida, who wrote it to his long-time friend Michel Monory in October 1955. The letter resurfaced only recently, a couple of years after the French philosopher’s death.10 At the age of twenty-five, Derrida wrote the letter after he had just failed his final exam (the oral for the agrégation of philosophy) at the École Normale Supérieure and withdrawn to his native Algeria. In those days, Algeria was a place of political and military turmoil. In 1954, a war of decolonization had begun that would tear the country apart for eight years. A number of personal events had further aggravated Derrida’s “confusion” as he puts it to his friend. He is going through “terrible hours and nights,” “feeling no longer any good for anything,” “encounter[ing] nothing but dead-ends that I meet with everywhere, dead-ends for myself and for everyone in the world, in my Algeria, in my family” (D, pp. 145–146).

If there is one thought, an idée fixe, that runs through his worries and musings, it is this one: “I have always thought about death, Michel, a death that I might give myself” (D, p. 145). This is not a new thought for the young man, as he goes on to write:

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10 Translated into English by Danielle Sands and Manya Steinkoler, it was published by Adrian Vodovosoff (2011) and inserted in an article in which he discusses the theme of death and suicide in Derrida’s life and thought, a theme that Vodovosoff views as recurrent in the hundreds of unpublished letters of the correspondence between Derrida and Monory between 1949 and 1959. At present, the letters are housed at the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine. All quotes from Derrida’s October 1955 letter are from Vodovosoff (2011), pp. 144–146, referred to as D when citing.
I do not know exactly why—perhaps others, more knowledgeable could tell me—this thought which has not let a day or even less go by without coming to find me, which always was, in the end, the only at least imaginary way of giving to my life a meaning of which I would be in complete control, why this thought has stayed with me for perhaps the last two years and will tolerate almost nothing that will not submit to it. Imagine someone who knows, without being able to do anything about it, that he has forgotten or is forgetting his soul, his youth, even what makes him live (D, p. 145).

There are some parts of the letter where the tone changes. The style and narrative focus shift to apparently more prosaic themes.

I would like to speak plainly now, to tell you a thousand banal and everyday things, but I don’t have the heart. The weather is fine, I’m not working, I’m very aware of all that is happening around me, even the most trivial or odious thoughts and things. Bellemin, Domerc, Lancel, Pariente, Chauveau and some others are in Algeria. I see them often but it doesn’t help. I no longer know how to pray but I look to God for everything. I dream of families disappearing, of an endless private diary, of new suits, of genuine political action, of an unprecedented philosophy book, of having children, of raising my little niece, of earning lots of money and of being very poor. I drive several cars very skillfully. I no longer know how to speak. I have put on weight again and gone suntanned. I will return to Paris at the end of the month (D, p. 146).

Obviously these sentences are not about the thought of suicide, nor are they about other ideas. This narrative process is not to carry out an act of representation; it is an acting or enacting—and, following Wittgenstein, I take writing (like speaking) for acting—that gives shape to “the secret thought which animates all other thoughts” (D, p. 145). This acting occurs in the context
of autobiographical reflections in which self and story are intimately fused. Derrida himself appears to be fully aware of this fusion of his “sickness,” his self, and his language when he writes, “but I don’t want to go on struggling with this language, with my sickness in front of you. It’s indecent. I would need 20 years of solitary language before allowing myself to return to the language of the world” (D, p. 145). The point I am making is that these lines are not about a process of, say, self-examination or self-ascertainment; rather, they carry it out, scrutinizing the central concerns of a life or, perhaps better, searching for them. Although some remarks might suggest this, the voice does not reflect (or construe) a detached and reflexive point of view.\footnote{Apparently Derrida jotted down the letter without revising it. He ends with the remark, “I’ll stop here. I don’t want to reread these lines, where in addition to my initial weakness, I am sure to discover countless small mistakes” (D, p. 146). In fact, he did never re-read this letter or the other letters he sent to Monory who kept them unpublished all his life (Vodovosoff, 2011, p. 140).}

We observe a real-time activity, a series of autobiographical attempts to localize oneself in the here and now, in an array of projects, events, blueprints of possible selves and lives. This, however, does not make the letter unusual. Localizing ourselves in multiple worlds and in scenarios of possible lives and selves is a feature inherent to many of our autobiographical narratives (Brockmeier, 2002).

Although the letter is written by one person, we should keep in mind that it is a turn in an ongoing conversation. It is a dialogical act, a move in an exchange between soul mates who, during their first years together as teenage students at a Parisian boarding school, developed the habit of writing each other long letters, hundreds of letters, when they were separated for the long summer holidays with Derrida returning to his family in Algeria. “Now I’m going to say quite simply,” we read in Derrida’s letter from October 1955, “that nothing is worth more to me than our friendship” (D, p. 145). I mentioned the tradition of thought emphasizing the intersubjective and discursive nature of human speech, even if uttered as monologue. For the
person writing this letter, this is not only an act of close interacting with a confidant (he addresses his friend several times by his name, anticipates possible reactions and comments). It also allows him to position himself vis-à-vis a number of other people. He refers to his family and his friends in Algeria and in Paris, considers the possibility of having a family with children of his own, envisions raising his niece, contemplates his relationship with God. This world may be put on paper by a single writer, yet it is a world densely populated and agitated by a multitude of social relations. Every word, as Bakhtin might have said, is animated by a social universe.

It is interesting to see how, in these words and universes, the borderlines of different genres and styles blur. Many observations appear as testimonials (“I’m very aware of all that is happening around me…”). Presented as a report, an account of the writer’s seemingly meaningless life, they provide an inventory of what he considers the raw material of a narrative that fails him—a lacuna echoed by the fragmented, distracted, and laconic texture of the narrative self-portrait he conveys to his friend. The inventory ranges from a list of “a thousand banal everyday things” (the weather, new suits, cars, looks) to a register of potentially meaningful projects (friends, family and children, career, religion), professional and intellectual commitments (the philosophical book), and political action. How to live a life? Where to live it—in Algeria or in Paris? Finally, how to reflect on it all? Perhaps in an “endless private diary”?

Yet inventory is a lens that foregrounds only one level on which this sequence can be read. On another, the focus of interpretation takes center stage. Here the narrative dynamic appears as that of an endless search movement, a succession of attempts to understand one’s life without existential, religious or otherwise transcendent or transcendental certainty, without an ultimate and reliable framework of meaning. As if the mind at work here is reading and
interpreting a text that widens in the process of being read and interpreted because every new interpretation at the same time enriches and opens up all other interpretations (Brockmeier, 2005). There is something restless about these interpretive attempts, an obsessive pressure, as though under compulsion. As though, for the author, the only remaining lifeline is an ongoing effort to understand, to make sense—a continuous search for meaning, to give significance to one’s life and actions. As though it were this impulse, this interpretive imperative to construe a world of sense and meaning, that distinguished life from death.

This, then, does after all remind us of an important philosophical concern of the later Derrida. In situating the traditional hermeneutic striving for understanding within a post-metaphysical horizon and its skepticism towards ideas of a substantial self, ultimate truth, and ontological or metaphysical center of reference, Derrida took a further step along the route of philosophical hermeneutics first suggested by Heidegger in the 1920s. Heidegger transformed the hermeneutic idea of understanding into an existential quality of the human being in the world. In this transformation, the meaning of interpretive understanding also altered its character. The hermeneutic imperative to understanding and meaning-making changed from a merely intellectual operation, a cognitive act of reading, knowing, and thinking, to a fundamental quality of human life, to a human imperative. It turned into an Existential, an existential structure that Heidegger considered to be constitutive of the human condition. What Derrida and other hermeneutic philosophers after Heidegger, such as Gadamer and Ricoeur, emphasized was that however such existential structures of action and experience would be conceived of in detail, they could only be conceived of in language, that is, in a world of signs, action, and history. Every attempt to go beyond, or otherwise avoid, this world of sign-mediated meaning-making cannot but get tangled up in irresolvable contradictions and, ultimately, fail. Derrida
demonstrated this in his analyses of Husserl’s and Hegel’s “logocentric” philosophy that he traced back to the Western metaphysics of “pure thought,” as I have discussed elsewhere (Brockmeier, 1992, Chapters 3 & 4).

This critical attitude toward the possibility of prelinguistic and presemiotic construction of complex meanings also motivates Ricoeur’s conception of narrative identity. In his essay *Life in quest of narrative*, Ricoeur investigated what he called the *Socrates’ maxim* of the relationship between narrative and life. According to this maxim, a life can only be examined if it is told: “If it is true that fiction is only completed in life and that life can be understood only through the stories that we tell about it, then an examined life, in the sense of the word as we have borrowed it from Socrates, is a life recounted” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 31).12

Even if the young Derrida might have been too distraught for what Ricoeur would consider a proper Socratic examination, his letter shows that, for its author, the existential quality of self-interpretation, the unremitting hermeneutic search for meaning, manifests itself even when this search only seems to confirm the irrecoverable loss of meaning. For Derrida, this then is the place of the idea of death, *la pensée de la mort*, of a death that one “gives to oneself.” This idea, as Vodovosoff (2011) remarks, followed Derrida “like a gadfly” (p. 148). Death, in the form of suicide, was the secret thought that not only animated all other thoughts but virtually haunted Derrida all his life, while, paradoxically, in this way helping him to live: death was the thought that, “insofar as it was mortifying, gave meaning to life” (Vodovosoff, 2011, pp. 146–147).

12 What Ricoeur meant by examining and understanding one’s life is of course a matter of degree or, perhaps more precisely, degree of complexity. And so is the necessary involvement of language and narrative in this undertaking. I cannot imagine that Ricoeur meant to say in his reading of the Socrates’ maxim that a life can only and exclusively be lived if it is examined and understood, as some Ricoeur critics have maintained. My own take on this issue is that as soon as our self-discourses reach a certain degree of complexity—as evoked, for example, in the multiple temporality of our autobiographical meaning-constructions—it comes to narrative. In fact it is only narrative that allows for conceiving and imagining the complexities of “autobiographical time” (Brockmeier, 2000).
Interpretation and intersubjectivity

These short extracts from Derrida’s letter of course do not allow us to adequately assess what exactly happened in his life in those days in 1954. Was it really the outcome of a university exam that made him lose confidence that there is meaning in life? Was it the situation in war-torn Algeria? Was it an uncertain personal future? Or was it a philosophical blind alley in which the young thinker felt trapped? We do not know the answer. Yet what the letter suggests is that whatever existentially meaningful concerns might have emerged in his later life, they would not just emerge as new philosophical ideas. They had to be inherent in the way he viewed himself and his lifeworld, the “phenomena” of his everyday experience—including family life, political action, and new suits. Once more, only narrative could afford us with the possibility to understand such a process in which a new sense of life and self might have arisen. At the same time, these phenomena need a frame or background of meaning within which they take shape as phenomena. Conversely, without significant phenomena no such frame or background would make sense.

The scenario of interpretive understanding emerging in this view is that of phenomena that are observed and interpreted against a background of meaning like a figure against a ground. However, it also is true that the ground comes into being only because the figure makes it appear as a ground. In the hermeneutic literature this twofold movement is known as the hermeneutic circle. Sometimes this movement is more straightforward, akin to the development of a theme in the sonata form of the Classical period. At other times it just outlines a territory and what follows is an adventure, to borrow a line from saxophonist Ornette Coleman about free jazz.
improvisation. In order to better comprehend this hermeneutic movement I have traced it as a narrative activity in which life and language, action and story are inextricably intertwined. My reading of Derrida’s letter has assumed this activity as a fundamental psychological practice of meaning construction, a practice that cuts across both the putative divide between fictional and nonfictional discourse and the putative divide between literary and everyday acts of meaning.

I want to finish with a comment on an obvious shortcoming of this chapter. I am aware that investigating processes of interpretive understanding is itself a multi-layered and trans-disciplinary undertaking and that the philosophical side of it—which I have considered here mainly in hermeneutic terms—has to be complemented by other analyses, for example, of the micro-structures of the narrative dynamic at the center of these processes. This is all the more demanded in light of the argument that these narrative processes of interpretation are not just cognitive or structural (or structuralist) operations localized in individual heads. Make no mistake, the narrative mind is a socialized mind, and it is socialized through the very processes of understanding that binds it into several contexts of social interaction (Brockmeier, 2011).

Herman (2008) describes the social entanglement of the narrative mind in a similar vein. He sees the interpretive dynamic of the narrative event as intrinsically built into “the activity structure of storytelling and interpretation” (Herman, 2008, p. 256). This activity structure encompasses a number of elements: the story (or narrative sequence), its narrator(s), and its reader(s) or listener(s) or observer(s). Because all of them are involved in the process of narrative interpretation, the structure of this interpretation comes close to that of a conversation. Conversation is, in fact, the notion hermeneutic philosophers like Gadamer, Habermas, and Rorty have proposed in order to capture the basic dynamic of human understanding. Localizing narrative in the context of conversation has also been proposed by more empirical researchers of
oral everyday narrative. What has decisively been transformed in this way is the traditional understanding of storytelling as a part of the language system into something bound up with the use of language, with language as an activity, a form of life in Wittgenstein’s sense.

In this light, it makes sense to consider the story Derrida tells in his letter, as well as the act of its telling, as a form of life. This is in synchrony with situating the letter, as I have suggested, in a densely populated social space and, moreover, viewing it as a move in the ongoing dialogue with Michel Monory. As part of an intense exchange embracing many letters, messages, and personal encounters, it is a turn in a conversation among friends that lasted for many years.

I certainly have not taken into account this backdrop as thoroughly as would be necessary. A more careful analysis of narrative microstructures would have brought two things into sharper relief: the intersubjective deep structure and the cultural multi-voicedness of interpretive understanding. It thus would have also lent further support to the main argument of the narrative hermeneutics outlined in this essay, namely, that in order to understand the narrative dynamic of the interpretive mind and the interpretive dynamic of the narrative mind, we need to investigate the activity structure of human meaning-making. This process, however, takes place on a different plane than categories such as fact and fiction are able to recognize.

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13 More recently, e.g., De Fina & Georgakopoulou (2012); Georgakopoulou (2007); Ochs & Capps (2001).
References


