Storytelling and Ethics

Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative

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Chapter 7

From Appropriation to Dialogic Exploration

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A Non-subsumptive Model of Storytelling

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Ours may be an age of storytelling, but it is also an age in which narrative has been fiercely criticized. Already in the 1920s, Virginia Woolf famously argued that in the name of "likeness to life" literature should have "no plot, no comedy, no tragedy": "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged" (1925, 188–89). It was first and foremost in response to the Second World War and the Holocaust, however, that narrative came to appear as *ethically* problematic. Essential to what Nathalie Sarraute (1956) called the *age of suspicion*, in postwar France, was the conviction that after Auschwitz it was no longer possible to tell stories. Narratives appeared to postwar thinkers to be an ethically problematic mode of appropriation, a matter of violently imposing order on history and experience that are inherently non-narrative. The most influential strand of ethical thinking in twentieth-century continental thought, which derives from Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity and its various poststructuralist variations, is resolutely antinarrative. Many contemporary Anglo-American philosophers—from Crispin Sartwell (2000) to Galen Strawson (2004)—follow suit by attacking narrative because fixed narratives falsify or destroy the openness to the singularity and freshness of each moment.

This chapter asks why it is that narrative form is frequently considered to be ethically problematic and argues that underlying different ethical takes on storytelling are drastically different conceptions of understanding, which can be best understood in terms of the difference between *subsumptive* and *non-subsumptive* conceptions of (narrative) understanding. While poststructuralist thinkers and other proponents of antinarrativism tend to conceive of all understanding in terms of the subsumption model that links understanding to appropriation and assimilation, philosophical hermeneutics explores the possibility of non-subsumptive understanding. After outlining these two approaches to understanding, I sketch a non-subsumptive model of narrative understanding. In the final part of the chapter, I will discuss the non-subsumptive model in dialogue with Jeanette Winterson's novel *Lighthousekeeping* (2004).

Two Conceptions of Understanding

That narrative is a mode of sense-making has become a widely shared premise of contemporary narrative studies. Opponents and proponents of narrative have little disagreement on this issue, and even etymology points to the link between narrating and knowing: *narrare*, the Latin for narrating, derives from *gnarus*, which means "having knowledge of a thing". Narrative is generally seen as a mode of understanding in which events or experiences are related to something familiar that renders them intelligible by giving them a meaningful context. The philosopher J. David Velleman argues that the explanatory force of narrative is based on how it encourages the audience to assimilate the narrated events to "familiar patterns of *how things feel*" (2003, 19). Others place the emphasis on the cognitive process of explaining experiences or events by assimilating them to cognitive scripts or schemas.[1] It is precisely the *assimilatory* dimension of narrative understanding that makes it ethically suspect, in the eyes of many.

When critics argue against narrative as an assimilatory mode of understanding, they generally take it for granted that all understanding necessarily involves ethically problematic conceptual appropriation. They thereby implicitly rely on the subsumption model of understanding, which has dominated Western philosophy. In the Cartesian tradition, for example, understanding is conceptualized as a capacity for forming clear and distinct ideas, and experience is expected to conform to the innate ideas of the mind that regulate understanding. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1998, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft,* 1781), in turn, envisages understanding as a process of organizing sense-perceptions according to general, atemporal categories. A wide range of theories similarly conceptualize understanding as a process of subsuming something singular (the object of understanding) under a general concept, law or model. For centuries, philosophers took the subsumption model for granted (in one version or another), and in the mainstream analytic tradition, it still appears to be accepted as unproblematic. For example, Velleman (2003) sees no problem in the assimilatory logic of narrative when he argues that the explanatory force of narrative is based on how it allows us to assimilate the narrated events to familiar affective patterns.

In the continental tradition, however, Friedrich Nietzsche launched a powerful critique of knowledge by arguing that knowledge as assimilation and appropriation is ethically problematic and inherently violent. He linked the violence of knowledge to that of concepts by drawing attention to how thought typically masks the singularity of things by subsuming them under a single concept: "Every concept comes into being by making equivalent that which is non-equivalent" (2001, 145). He used the leaves of a tree as an example: each one of them is different, but "the concept 'leaf'" homogenizes them and makes us forget the differences between them (145). The act of knowing that a leaf is a leaf is to subsume a singular leaf under a general category. This Nietzschean criticism of understanding shapes the twentieth-century continental tradition in innumerable ways, including Levinas's ethical criticism of understanding, which he sees in terms of violent appropriation:

> In the word 'comprehension' we understand the fact of taking *[prendre]* and of comprehending *[comprendre]*, that is, the fact of englobing, of appropriating. There are these elements in all knowledge *[savoir]*, all familiarity *[connaissance]*, all comprehension; there is always the fact of making something one's own.
>
> (Levinas 1988, 170)

This conception of understanding also underlies the poststructuralist view that the very attempt to understand is ethically suspicious. Jacques Derrida, for example, links—like Nietzsche—the violence of understanding to that of language: he writes about "the originary violence of language" (or "arche-violence") with reference to how language is based on classifying, naming and inscribing "the unique *within* the system" (1997, 112). He relies on the subsumption model when he suggests that language eliminates our singularity and thereby also our freedom and responsibility: "By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility. Once I speak I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique" (1995, 60). Derrida gestures towards a utopian dream of liberation from the violent chains of language, but at the same time he is acutely aware of its impossibility.[2]

The poststructuralist tradition of thought has been instrumental in sensitizing us to the ways in which knowledge is linked to mechanisms of power, and it articulates the ethical potential of the encounter with the unintelligible as an experience that can foster openness to the unknown.[3] However, its way of presenting all understanding and knowledge as ethically problematic is not without its own problems. One of its major problems, I argue, is that it takes for granted the subsumption model. I would like to suggest that, instead of assuming that all understanding is necessarily violent, we should explore wherein resides the possibility of non-violent understanding.

In the continental tradition, philosophical hermeneutics provides an alternative to the subsumption model.[4] The non-subsumptive model of understanding starts from the premise that understanding is a fundamentally temporal process, which follows the structure of the hermeneutic circle: when we encounter something new in the world, we draw on our preunderstanding, that is, a horizon of understanding shaped by our earlier experiences; but instead of simply subsuming the unfamiliar under the familiar, the new experience can shape, modify and transform our pre-conceptions. We always understand "something as something" (Husserl 1982, 33; Gadamer 1997, 90–92), and our concepts mediate this "as-structure", but new experiences also leave a mark on our concepts. Language is not a fixed, atemporal system, and concepts are in a constant state of transformation whenever language is used:

> [I]t is obvious that speaking cannot be thought of as the combination of these acts of subsumption, through which something particular is subordinated to a general concept. A person who speaks—who, that is to say, uses the general meanings of words—is so oriented toward the particularity of what he is perceiving that everything he says acquires a share in the particularity of the circumstances he is considering. But that means, on the other hand, that the general concept meant by the word is enriched by any given perception of a thing, so that what emerges is a new, more specific word formation which does more justice to the particularity of that act of perception.
>
> (Gadamer 1997, 428–29)

Gadamer describes this as the "constant process of concept formation" (429) and emphasizes that "everywhere that communication happens, language not only is used but is shaped as well" (2001, 4). The temporality of the use of language and of processes of understanding entails that they are always already infused with the unfamiliar, strange and other; concepts and our conceptions are not closed, fixed vehicles of appropriation but in a process of becoming. Fundamental to this hermeneutic conception is the *performative* dimension of language: rather than merely representing what has happened, language creates and shapes reality. This view allows us to see how understanding, mediated by language, neither necessarily perpetuates dominant sense-making practices nor is inevitably oppressive; instead, it can also open new possibilities, experiences and realities.

However, even if language never stays the same through time, it is obvious that there are ethically crucial differences in the extent to and ways in which concepts are transformed in the process of understanding. In fact, understanding in the strong hermeneutic sense is successful only when it goes beyond merely subsuming new experiences to what is already known. In such understanding that is non-subsumptive in a strong sense, concepts are transformed so that they do justice to whatever is being understood; understanding then "*proves to be an event*" (Gadamer 1997, 309) that involves an element of uncontrollability and unexpectedness. Gadamer calls this the *negativity of understanding*: we properly understand only when we realize that things are *not* what we thought they were (353–61). Because of this structure of negativity, the hermeneutic model is radically opposed to the subsumption model of understanding. Instead of subsuming the singular under general concepts, in genuine understanding the singular has power to transform the general.

Hence, I suggest that it is useful to distinguish, within the non-subsumptive model, between the *structural* dimension of non-subsumption in all language-usage and a more radical sense of non-subsumption, in which understanding is animated by a specific *non-subsumptive ethos*, linked to openness to that which is other. Encountering otherness—that which disturbs preconceptions because it does not fit with them—is what challenges our preunderstanding and provokes us to change our views. That is why Gadamer suggests that genuine understanding—and learning—occurs only through receptivity to something so unassimilable that it requires us to transform our preconceptions. He does not adequately acknowledge, however, that often—in the absence of the non-subsumptive ethos—the opposite happens: lack of openness to the challenge presented by the other tends to lead to violent appropriation. Nevertheless, the non-subsumptive model of understanding makes it possible to acknowledge that even if language and understanding are often violent, they are not necessarily, inevitably violent; instead of being *structurally* violent, they can be *used* for both violent and non-violent—subsumptive and non-subsumptive—purposes. The non-subsumptive model provides a theoretical framework for thinking about the possibility of non-violent understanding and for articulating the ethical significance of the non-subsumptive ethos. It alerts us to the continuum from violent, appropriative, subsumptive sense-making practices to ones that are affirmatively non-subsumptive and dialogical by being open to the unassimilable otherness of the encountered experiences or persons.

A Non-subsumptive Model of Storytelling

The subsumptive and non-subsumptive conceptions of understanding have important implications for how one envisages storytelling as a form of understanding. The critics of narrative usually subscribe to the subsumption model, according to which the act of storytelling reduces or assimilates an irrevocably singular event into an account that appropriates it by giving it a general meaning or explanation. They thereby see it as a way of assimilating new experiences into a pre-given mold. Levinas, for example, considers narrative to be a violent mode of appropriation in which singular experiences, events or persons are subsumed into a coherent system of representation: narrative represents them as "fixed, assembled in a tale", as part of a chronological-causal chain that reverts "freedom into necessity" and fails to acknowledge that otherness is "unnarratable", "indescribable in the literal sense of the term, unconvertible into a history" (1991, 42, 166; 1998, 138–39).[5] Similarly, Strawson relies on the subsumption model in assuming that narrative limits what we can experience and even more: that narrative self-experience entails the disposition to subsume one's life under "the form of some recognized narrative genre" (2004, 442). I would like to suggest that contemporary narrative studies should pay more attention, first, to the unquestioned subscription of mainstream narrative theories to the subsumption model and, second, to the alternative to this model.

Narrative hermeneutics rejects the subsumption model and provides a theoretical grounding for an ethics of storytelling that articulates how narrative understanding in itself is neither good nor evil.[6] Storytelling is a temporal process that has the potential to transform our conceptual frameworks, even if this potential often remains unrealized. The point is, however, that not all narratives aim to produce totalizing explanations or end up reinforcing violent practices of appropriation. Storytelling can function as a vehicle of genuine understanding when it does not enact the comfortable subsumption of new experiences into what we already know. The hermeneutic conception of the temporal and interpretative nature of communication implies that communication is not just about applying general meaning-systems but a process that can involve learning, changing and understanding something completely new that challenges our previous conceptions and identities.

I argue that the potential of storytelling to function as an ethical mode of understanding is based on the possibility of non-subsumptive understanding. This link is rarely articulated, but it can be seen to underlie, for example, Hannah Arendt's view that storytelling makes it possible to acknowledge the lives of others in their uniqueness without trying to appropriate them through abstract conceptual schemes. She famously links the uniqueness of identity to narrative: "*Who* somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero—his biography, in other words" (Arendt 1998, 186). In her account, we are unique first and foremost in our capacity to initiate new processes in the world—to give birth to the unpredictable—and we reveal our uniqueness to others through action and speech; while conceptual representations and definitions tend to reduce the unique "who" to a "what", she suggests that a narrative in which the "who"—the temporal, individual subject—is presented as acting in the world in concrete, complex situations can give expression to the unexchangeable "who" revealed in that action (180–81). The subject thereby appears in the process of becoming rather than as appropriated in atemporal, conceptual, abstract terms: "storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it" (1968, 105).

Walter Benjamin (1977) argued from a similar perspective that storytelling is about exchanging experiences, and Adriana Cavarero (2000, 36–45) asserts that the desire for stories is a desire to be narrated—to hear one's own story told by someone else—linked to the desire for an identity. Cavarero emphasizes that we could not know the beginning of our own story were it not for the stories told by others: no one can remember their own birth or first years. Life-stories take shape relationally—in dialogic relation to others. We do not know who this unique self is, and in searching for an answer to the question of the who we cannot rely on mere autobiographical narration; we are dependent on stories told by others (Cavarero 2000, 36–45). Both Arendt and Cavarero believe that narratives dignify the uniqueness of the individual.

I do not disagree with the Arendtian view that narratives can have ethical potential in presenting subjects of action in the temporal process of acting and becoming, and in giving more reality, as it were, to lives that would otherwise vanish into oblivion as well as to lives that have been ill-understood or silenced. However, I also consider it important to acknowledge that narratives often have the opposite effect; they can be violent, oppressive and manipulative means of appropriation, and they can legitimate structures of violence through strategies of naturalization.

I suggest that in ethically evaluating narratives, it is helpful to distinguish, on a differentiating continuum, between *subsumptive narrative practices* that function appropriatively and reinforce cultural stereotypes by subsuming singular experiences under culturally dominant narrative scripts and *non-subsumptive narrative practices* that challenge such categories of appropriation and follow the logic of dialogue and exploration. Subsumptive narrative practices can never be subsumptive in an absolute sense because they take place in time and always include the possibility that the act of subsumption leaves a mark on the categories (e.g. narrative models or scripts) that are used subsumptively. Nevertheless, there is an ethically decisive difference between narratives that aim at subsumptive appropriation and ones that are oriented towards non-subsumptive dialogic understanding. This distinction is not meant as a binary but as a heuristic tool that helps us place specific cases of storytelling on the continuum.

Narrative practices function subsumptively when they reinforce problematic stereotypical sense-making practices. Such practices tend to hinder our ability to encounter other people in their uniqueness and perpetuate the tendency to see individuals as representatives of the groups to which they belong according to gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, class and so on. Non-subsumptive narrative practices, in contrast, problematize simplistic categorization of experiences, persons and relationships, as well as control-oriented appropriation of what is unfamiliar, foreign and other. They can function as counter-narratives that consciously challenge stereotype-reinforcing hegemonic narrative practices and provide us with tools to see the singularity of individual lives beyond generalizing narratives. While the former frequently use naturalizing strategies to mask their own nature as interpretations and to take on an authoritative tone, the latter are more likely to include a self-reflexive dimension that involves open reflection on their own limits and fosters an ethos of openness to the unknown. At their most powerful, narrative practices animated by a non-subsumptive ethos prompt us to look beyond our preconceptions, to be open to what we cannot control, to learn from what is new to us, and to engage with it with wonder, empathy and curiosity. They place the emphasis on the dialogic, temporal process of an open-ended exploration rather than on achieved, comprehensive knowledge. They are narratives that lay bare their own constructedness, processuality and the movement of telling rather than the told.

Recent social analysts have suggested that we live in a post-truth world, where politics is driven more by emotion and rhetoric than by rational argumentation.[7] The British EU Referendum and the 2016 US presidential election have provided us with abundant examples of the power of storytelling—and particularly of its destructive potential. The political campaigns that led to "Brexit" and Donald Trump's election were largely based on producing and reinforcing aggressive subsumptive narratives. Such narratives typically present themselves as the unconditional truth, not as narrative interpretations. They build narrative identities that aspire to be exhaustive, unambiguous and unproblematic, based on a clear sense of the difference between "us" and "them". Trump's speeches abound in examples of subsumptive narratives that invoke the dichotomy between "us" and "others". They present the Americans as a unified group that is threatened by immigrants and everything "foreign": "We need a system that serves our needs, not the needs of others. Remember, under a Trump administration it's called America first" (Bump 2016). In his Manichean world-view, not closing the borders from foreigners will lead to complete chaos: "The result will be millions more illegal immigrants; thousands of more violent, horrible crimes; and total chaos and lawlessness. That's what's going to happen, as sure as you're standing there" (Bump 2016). This world-view emphasizes the importance of control, safety and security—from a perspective that takes American middle-class white male privilege for granted and explicitly sets out to fight for it against diversity, equality and minority rights.

The intersubjective world is shaped by competing narratives, and these narratives are not ethically or politically neutral. The "narrative in-betweens" that hold people together also divide people.[8] The dominant narrative in-betweens are frequently based on creating a sense of "us" by excluding those perceived as "others". As Richard Rorty argues, "the force of 'us' is, typically, contrastive in the sense that it contrasts with a 'they' which is also made up of human beings—the wrong sort of human beings" (1989, 190). The force of us was evident in the rise of Nazism in the Weimar Republic of the 1930s, and it is evident now that far-right extremism, nationalism and populism are on the rise in Europe and the US, as narratives that work against inclusion and diversity are increasing their power and dominance. Rorty believes that "moral progress" ultimately depends on our ability to expand "our sense of 'us' as far as we can" (196), towards "greater human solidarity"; it is "the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (192).

In the current world situation, it is imperative to find ways of expanding people's sense of "us" by fostering their capacity to acknowledge commonality across and through differences. Our shared vulnerability and destructibility suggest possible ways of doing this, as Judith Butler (2004, 2009), for example, has argued. At the same time, however, we need hermeneutic attentiveness to the way in which ethical understanding begins with acknowledging difference. As Andreea Ritivoi (2016, 63) puts it, contra Rorty, "it is important to resist positing similarity between ourselves and others if we are to maintain the possibility of understanding them"; a hermeneutic "dialectic of general and particular, new and familiar, difference and sameness defines the parameters for empathy as the product of a situated understanding" that narrative can make possible (61). Narratives, however, are far from ethically equal in the ways in which they enact the dialectic of general and particular, and we currently sorely need ones that succeed in doing it in ethically sustainable ways.

The need for a new global movement against the rise of right-wing populism is currently being voiced in the international community across religions, nations and political parties. Many agree that a new democratic left needs to build itself around the idea of inclusion and diversity. One of the writers who has articulated the need for a new counter-narrative, in response to the British EU referendum result, is the British author Jeanette Winterson. She writes about "the power of the stories we tell", suggests that Labour as a word and story has become outdated and argues for the need for new, better stories that would unite forces of solidarity in these dark times:

> Everything starts as a story we tell ourselves about ourselves. Every political movement begins as a counter-narrative to an existing narrative. … To change the way we are telling the story of our country, the story of our world, does need more than facts.
>
> (Winterson 2016)

I agree that we need new stories to transform the narrative in-between that used to bind together the forces that fight for solidarity across differences. We also need more acute awareness of storytelling as a process that always takes shape from a particular perspective and engages with the world in various ways—such as appropriatively or in the mode of a non-subsumptive, explorative dialogue. In the last part of this chapter, I will analyze Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping* as an example and exploration of non-subsumptive storytelling.

Dialogic Storytelling in Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping*

Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping* (2004) is a novel about storytelling. It can be characterized by the term *metanarrativity*: it self-reflexively reflects on the significance of storytelling for human existence and identity.[9] Through its key metaphor of the lighthouse, it explores how to live—and how to orient oneself—in a world that is like a constantly changing dark, chaotic sea, and it suggests that stories shared with others can create flash-like moments through which people search for meaning. The novel shows how narratives can be both ethically valuable and questionable, and it presents as ethically crucial the distinction between subsumptive "grand narratives" that aim at appropriation and non-subsumptive storytelling that functions in the mode of dialogic exploration.

Lighthousekeeping not only thematizes narrative sense-making but also embodies a certain conception of storytelling through its narrative form. The novel has a fragmentary shape: it consists in interlacing story fragments that function like flashes of light that travel across time. They momentarily bring together different times, but instead of forming a coherent narrative, they produce a discontinuous interplay of light and dark. The novel is set in Salts, a Scottish "sea-flung, rock-bitten, sand-edged shell of a town" that harbors a lighthouse (Winterson 2004, 5). The protagonist is an orphan called Silver, looked after by Pew, a blind lighthouse-keeper, for whom keeping the light is inseparable from storytelling:

> 'I must teach you how to keep the light. Do you know what that means?' I didn't. 'The stories. That's what you must learn. The ones I know and the ones I don't know.' How can I learn the one's you don't know? 'Tell them yourself.'
>
> (40)

The novel is structured around the idea that our lives are shaped by stories that we have inherited, experienced or invented and that we pass on in our own versions. It entwines *intertextuality*—the idea that literature arises from literature—and *internarrativity*—the idea that stories, including life-stories, take shape in a dialogic relation to other stories. Instead of presenting stories as fixed and concluded, it foregrounds the *process* of storytelling, which underlies their open-ended, tentative and non-subsumptive nature.

The novel abounds in stories that Pew tells Silver and Silver goes on to tell her lover, a woman she meets in Athens. The most important of these is Babel Dark's story. In 1828, Josiah Dark built a lighthouse in Salts and his son Babel was born. Years later, in Bristol, Babel Dark falls in love with Molly, who later becomes pregnant by him, but after seeing Molly in the company of another man (who later turns out to be Molly's brother) he is riven with jealousy and assaults her; unable to face the uncertainty, he decides to leave everything and starts a new life. He moves to Salts as a pastor and marries a woman whom he does not love. Later he meets Molly again, realizes that he still loves her and begins to live a double life, spending two months a year in Bristol with Molly as Babel Lux and the rest of the year in Salts as Babel Dark. While the novel as a whole can be read as a rewriting of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), Dark's story evokes Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), but it unsettles the subtext's black-and-white constellation. The irreproachable, respectable life of Babel Dark is joyless and loveless; as Lux he comes back to life. He tries to explain this to Stevenson, who is also a character in the novel, related to Dark "through the restless longing" and whose story of Jekyll and Hyde is inspired by Dark (Winterson 2004, 26): "Stevenson had not believed him when Dark told him that all the good in his life had lived in Bristol with Molly. Only Lux was kind and human and whole. Dark was a hypocrite, an adulterer and a liar" (187). Silver uses Dark's story as a mirror, to reflect on her own life, and realizes that "it is necessary to find all the lives in between" (161).

The whole novel is structured around the tension between grand narratives and the telling of story fragments—or between narrative appropriation and storytelling as a process of search, exploration and dialogue. Christianity and evolution theory represent grand narratives that have been integral to Western historical imagination; they set out to provide an overall, subsumptive explanation of life and history. The novel depicts how Darwinism—by approaching life as "always becoming" (150)—challenges the stability, security and anthropocentrism of the Christian world-view and puts the world in flux: "Darwin overturned a stable-state system of creation and completion. His new world was flux, change, trial and error, maverick shifts, chance, fateful experiments, and lottery odds against success" (170). Dark, however, clings obsessively to the old order:

> He had always believed in a stable-state system, made by God, and left alone afterwards. That things might be endlessly moving and shifting was not his wish. He didn't want a broken world. He wanted something splendid and glorious and constant.
>
> (119–20)

The novel articulates the destructiveness of his inability to live with the flux, ambiguity and uncertainty that are integral to human life in its fragility.

Although Darwinism puts the world in flux, the novel also shows how it functions subsumptively and aspires to provide an exhaustive explanation. Both Christianity and Darwinism purport to tell the whole story, but while the former fails to explain the change and contradictions that are integral to life, the latter cannot account for love: "Love is not part of natural selection. … In the fossil record of our existence, there is no trace of love. You cannot find it held in the earth's crust, waiting to be discovered" (170). The counterpole of these grand narratives are the late modern small stories that do not aim at narrative appropriation. The key metaphor of the novel, the lighthouse, characterizes the evanescence of these story fragments: they function like flashes of light that afford us moments of insight but no overall sense of mastery. They are compared to a light that shines across the sea to provide a momentary structure to the darkness:

> Later … he told anyone who wanted to listen what he had told himself on those sea-soaked days and nights. Others joined in, and it was soon discovered that every light had a story—no, every light *was* a story, and the flashes themselves were the stories going out over the waves, as markers and guides and comfort and warning. (41)

The imagery of sea and light that pervades *Lighthousekeeping* links the novel to the Woolfian tradition and its conception of reality as something fluid and chaotic that evades attempts at narrative mastery.[10] In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), for example, the sea manifests the chaotic, fluid formlessness of reality, and the light across the water conveys the way in which humans can momentarily see reality as meaningful, in an epiphany that then fades back to darkness. The narrative structure of the novel manifests the disintegration of the coherent, unified narrative form of realist novels, but the question of significant form has not lost its pertinence, as exemplified by the search of one of its characters, the artist Lily Briscoe, for a significant form for her painting.[11]

Lighthousekeeping deals with the human need to find a direction for one's life in a constantly shifting world and relates the *search* for identity to a sea voyage. Silver feels that she is lost as if on a wide-open sea without a "string of guiding lights" and with "no place to anchor" (Winterson 2004, 21). The experience of being lost is linked to that of not conforming to the norms provided by culturally dominant narratives; she is a poor, uneducated orphan, later labeled as a thief and a psychotic, and her love evades the heteronormative matrix. She asserts that humanity "notes every curve from the norm with fear or punishment" (5) and observes that people are frightened of Pew, too, "because he isn't like them" (15). But instead of building her sense of herself around her failure to conform to sexual and other societal norms, her approach to life is affirmative. Telling about the sea voyage of her life to her lover, Silver suggests that the experience of being lost turned out to be a new beginning: “I had no idea where to look, or what I was looking for, but I know now that all the important journeys start that way” (33). When we travel towards a set destination, we already know beforehand what we will find, whereas not knowing what we are searching for can lead us to unexpected discoveries. The search for something unexpected that she could recognize as her own defines Silver’s world-making: “‘You’re not like other children,’ said my mother. ‘And if you can’t survive in this world, you had better make a world of your own’” (5).

Silver’s world-building is one that learns to accept existence as a process of constant becoming. While the lighthouse is stable, the sea represents the ever-shifting flux of the real: “the sea is fluid and volatile” (17). People are different in how they relate to the flux: do they deny it, struggle against it or accept it and learn to live with it? Babel Dark is driven by the need for a stable foundation for his life, but by fighting against change he “made himself feel seasick, listing violently from one side to another, knowing that the fight in him was all about keeping control” (120). He searches for “solid reliability” from the unchangeable essence of God, but he is tormented by doubts and feels that in the end, “God or no God, there seemed to be nothing to hold onto” (120). Dark meets a wretched fate precisely because he is unable to accept the fundamental uncertainty that is an inalienable dimension of human existence. It leads him to a life in which he cannot recognize himself. In one notebook, he writes “a mild and scholarly account of a clergyman’s life in Scotland” and in another, “a wild and torn folder of scattered pages, disordered, unnumbered”, he “wrote his life”: “It was not a life that anyone around him would have recognized. As time passed, he no longer recognized himself” (58–59).

Although Dark wrote his life, he “refused to live” (57); eventually he feels like a “stranger in his own life” (65) and ends up wanting to “walk slowly out to sea and never come back” (121). Obsessive control and the need for stability ruin Dark. Silver learns from this: “It’s better if I accept that I can’t control any of the things that matter. My life is a trail of shipwrecks and set-sails. There are no arrivals, no destinations” (127). She grows to accept that the experiences of meaning and direction come as elusive moments of insight, not in the form of a coherent, comprehensive—subsumptive—narrative:

> [T]he stories I want to tell you will light up part of my life, and leave the rest in darkness. You don’t need to know everything. There is no everything… The continuous narrative of existence is a lie. There is no continuous narrative, there are lit-up moments, and the rest is dark. (134)

"Tell Me a Story"

Subsumptive narratives frequently aim at teleological explanation by presenting an inevitable sequence of events that leads to an equally inevitable end; the story of Darwinism ends in the evolution of higher, superior forms of life, Christian narrative in the salvation of the good Christians, the Marxist one in the socialist utopia, and the Trumpian narrative in "making America great again", entailing the destruction of "anti-American" elements of society. Non-subsumptive narratives, in contrast, are open-ended, exploratory and provide no exhaustive explanations; instead of a sense of inevitability, they emphasize the openness of each moment of action—a sense of how the story can evolve in a different direction depending on how the subjects involved act in the situation—and of the act of narration, which can always transform the story into a different one. The intersecting dialogues of the novel emphasize that there is no absolute ending:

> Tell me a story, Pew.
> What kind of story, child?
> A story with a happy ending.
> There's no such thing in all the world.
> As a happy ending?
> As an ending.
>
> (49)

Stories generate new stories and are recycled from one generation to the next in different variations:

> These stories went from man to man, generation to generation, hooped the sea-bound world and sailed back again, different decked maybe, but the same story. And when the lightkeeper had told his story, the sailors would tell their own, from other lights.
>
> (39)

Lighthousekeeping emphasizes the open-ended and processual nature of storytelling by foregrounding the re-telling of stories from ever new beginnings: "The story begins now—or perhaps it begins in 1802 when a terrible shipwreck lobbed men like shuttlecocks into the sea" (11–12). Stories never end because they are "always beginning again" (93), and more important than a sense of an ending (Kermode 1967) is *a sense of a beginning*, the significance of which is thematized throughout the novel:

> Why can't you just tell me the story without starting with another story?

> Because there's no story that's the start of itself, any more than a child comes into the world without parents.
>
> (26–27)
>
> Tell me a story, Pew.
> What story, child?
> One that begins again.
> That's the story of life.
>
> (109)

Arendt emphasizes the importance of new beginnings as the foundation of ethical and political agency. Integral to the human condition is the ability to initiate something new and unpredictable in the world:

> To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin … to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*) … It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before.
>
> (1998, 177–78)

According to Arendt, we are beings who express our "unique distinctness" and "insert ourselves into the human world" through speech and action (176). She uses the notion of *natality* to characterize the way in which each birth brings to the world a beginning, a new person with the capacity to start a "new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life-stories of all those with whom he comes into contact" (184). She reminds us that human beings, "though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin" (246).

Lighthousekeeping emphasizes that as agents we are fundamentally dependent on one another. It presents exchanging stories as a dialogic process of exploration—a search for identity, connection, orientation. In a Benjaminian and Arendtian spirit, the novel suggests that storytelling is what ties people together and makes experiences bearable. The motor of narration is a powerful desire for stories, encapsulated in the recurrent petition that structures the story fragments: "tell me a story". The ritual of asking for a story—Silver asks Pew several times to tell her one, and her lover asks her to tell her a story—is integral to the dialogic dynamic of the novel. We are able to tell our own stories on the basis of the stories we receive from others: "'if you tell yourself like a story, it doesn't seem so bad.' 'Tell me a story and I won't be lonely'" (Winterson 2004, 27).

The novel suggests that we need stories to make sense of where we are coming from and where we are going; stories provide us with "imaginative variations" of the self (Ricoeur 1986, 131) in relation to which we can explore who we are and who we could be. In the novel, the stories—including life-stories—are always discontinuous and plural: "'Do you feel you have more than one life perhaps?' 'Of course I do. It would be impossible to tell one single story'" (Winterson 2004, 160). The novel foregrounds the temporal process of the search for identity and the performativity of the shaping of identity through the process of telling. Identity is not something pre-given that one could find or a task that one could complete. Narrative identity should be thought of as a verb-like process, an activity, rather than as a noun (something fixed and nameable). The temporality of storytelling is ethically crucial: both our understanding of who the characters are and their own self-understanding become possible only through the temporal process of narrative engagement. The narrative dynamic of the novel—its emphasis on processuality, open-endedness and the way in which meanings takes shape in dialogic encounters—invites the reader to participate in the dialogic, non-subsumptive process of storytelling. Our stories are always part of a larger narrative fabric that reaches across time: "These were my stories—flashes across time" (232).

Insofar as *Lighthousekeeping* functions as a rewriting of *Treasure Island*, the treasure that Silver searches for is less concrete and unstable than in Stevenson's novel. In fact, the treasure, in Winterson's novel, seems to be first and foremost those moments when we discover a connection to another person and know for a moment why we have come to where we are now: "These moments that are talismans and treasure. Cumulative deposits—our fossil record—and the beginnings of what happens next" (212). Silver discovers that the ultimate treasure is love, the greatest force of life, which entails exposing oneself to what one cannot control—and is, ultimately, the only thing that matters:

> I know that the real things in life, the things I remember, the things I turn over in my hands, are not houses, bank accounts, prizes or promotions. What I remember is love—all love—love of this dirt road, this sunrise, a day by the river, the stranger I met in a café. … But love it is that wins the day. On this burning road, fenced with barbed wire to keep the goats from straying, I find for a minute what I came here for, which is a sure sign that I will lose it again instantly. (200–01)

The experience of the meaning of life can only be momentary, like a flash of light across the dark sea, but its evanescence makes it no less meaningful. In the end, all we have is this moment, and the possibility to share it with others: "Don't wait. Don't tell the story later. Life is so short. This stretch of sea and sand, this walk on the shore, before the tide covers everything we have done" (232).

The value of learning to let go of the ideal of control is linked, in the novel, to the insight that our stories are always intertwined, so that ultimately nothing is completely our own: "All of us are bound together, tidal, moon-drawn, past, present and future in the break of a wave. … There it is, the light across the water. Your story. Mine. His" (134–35). Accepting one's dependency is interlaced with the insight that we are each other's beacons and coordinates, anchors and strongholds, like Molly to Babel and Silver to her loved one. Dependency on others makes us vulnerable—or shipwrecked—but accepting it is the condition of possibility for being able to share with others the "span of water I call my life" (134).

The Ethos of Dialogic Exploration

This chapter has explored a non-subsumptive narrative logic, arguing that it is crucial to the ethical potential of storytelling. While subsumptive narrative practices tend to reinforce an ethos of dogmatism and cultural stereotypes in explaining singular events in terms of general narrative scripts, non-subsumptive narrative practices question such general scripts and challenge our categories of appropriation. The non-subsumptive model of (narrative) understanding provides a theoretical grounding for analyzing the possibility and ethical potential of non-violent narrative practices, and it allows us to evaluate different cultural practices on a differentiating continuum from subsumptive to non-subsumptive ones. Whether subsumptive or non-subsumptive, storytelling has a performative dimension: it is not just about representing the world but also about constructing intersubjective reality. Only non-subsumptive narratives, however, are usually aware of—and self-reflexively display—their own performative dimension. Such self-awareness is particularly prominent in literary fiction, which in many of its finest achievements—such as Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping*—promotes sensitivity to storytelling as an interpretative, explorative process that always emerges from a particular perspective and in dialogue with other narratives.

In these dark times, it has become increasingly evident that democracy depends—as Arendt (1968, 1998) already emphasized—on the recognition of the diversity and plurality of unique beings. While in *Lighthousekeeping* dialogic storytelling is a process of building an intersubjective narrative in-between for those who exchange stories within the fictive world, the novel as a whole contributes to the narrative in-between of the readers. It fosters awareness of the roles that stories play in our lives, of how they can always be told from different perspectives and of the importance of learning to live without obsessive fixation on control and certainty. It is unlikely that those who would most need such awareness—including white supremacists, jihadists and others whose lives are structured by dogmatic black-and-white narratives aimed against diversity and inclusion—would read *Lighthousekeeping*. But the novel encourages us to take an affirmative approach, like Silver, and it reminds us that in these dark times tending the light is ever more important.

Storytelling is a mode of engagement, and we need to be attentive to the divergent forms it takes in different situations; the ethos of narrative appropriation is strikingly different from the ethos of dialogic exploration. The former pretends to know the answers, the latter animates the effort to explore questions that matter most by acknowledging that no universal answers are available and that we can only learn from one another. Literature may not save the world, but it can promote our perspective awareness and make its own small contributions to expanding the sphere of the "we". It can sensitize us to the open-endedness of narratives and to our fundamental dependency on one another's stories—to our condition as internarrative beings. When it comes to the question of how to realize the ethical potential of storytelling, however, there are no guarantees. Literature can make no promises. Ultimately, narratives only function non-subsumptively when we are willing and able to engage with them non-subsumptively—exposing ourselves to what may challenge our beliefs and sensibilities.

Notes

1 An influential classic of the script theory is Schank and Abelson (1977).

2 For Derrida (1978), Levinas is guilty of empiricism in not taking seriously enough the ways in which language shapes experience and, in consequence, how it excludes the possibility of immediate experience; the aporia of ethics is that encountering the other non-violently would require that one "does not pass through the neutral element of the universal" (96) but, instead, encounters the other without the violence of concepts, which, in turn, seems impossible.

3 See e.g. Lyotard (1991, 74); for a broader discussion of this postwar tendency, see Meretoja (2014, 13–17, 86–118).

4 A starting-point for the non-subsumptive model can be traced further back, to Kant's (2002/1790, 74–276) theory of "reflecting judgments", in his aesthetics, in which he acknowledges that not all judgments follow the logic of subsuming the object under a known universal, as he had suggested in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Due to its more radical way of acknowledging the temporality and historicity of understanding, however, philosophical hermeneutics provides a more productive foundation for a non-subsumptive model of understanding.

5 For a discussion of Levinas's ambivalent relationship to narrative fiction, see Davis (2015).

6 I develop this view more fully in Meretoja (2018). On narrative hermeneutics, see also Brockmeier and Meretoja (2014) and Meretoja (2014, 2016).

7 The Oxford Dictionaries chose "post-truth" as the "word of the year" in 2016, defining it as follows: "Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016). The term is controversial, for example because, first, narratives, rhetoric and affect have always been important in politics and, second, truth still matters, which is why Trump's lies cause so much outrage across the globe.

8 I develop the concept of "narrative in-between" in Meretoja (2018), in dialogue with Hannah Arendt's "in-between", which she defines as a "common

world", which "lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together" (Arendt 1998, 182, see also 50–58).

9 On metanarrativity, see Meretoja (2014, 2–3, 226–29).

10 Mine Özyurt Kılıç (2009, xv) links Winterson's waters to the problematics of time in her novels, but I see them as manifesting more broadly her vision of the fluid, flux-like nature of reality. A similar vision characterizes Woolf's oeuvre, such as *The Waves* (1931), in which the narrative fragments follow a wave-like rhythm and convey a sense of how it "seems as if the whole world were flowing" (20). In her diary, Woolf writes about the idea of a "continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night etc., all flowing together" (1982, 107). Winterson sees herself as an "heir of Woolf" and emphasizes the significance of the modernist tradition for her work. On Winterson's relationship to modernism and postmodernism, see Andemahr (2009, 16–21) and Front (2009).

11 Winterson makes the intertextual reference explicit: "To the lighthouse" (Winterson 2004, 19).

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