

1. The Return of Experience to Theory

The concept of experience did not fare well during most of the second half of the twentieth century. Poststructuralists condemned experience as belonging to metaphysics; the advocates of Critical Theory scented ideology behind it; and analytical philosophers were too busy concocting impervious definitions to care about experience.² By the end of the century, however, the scene had changed significantly, and the idea of experience was fully rehabilitated in academic research. Together with such ideas as presence or materiality, experience was marshalled to overcome the linguistic turn (e.g. Pickering 1997; Mersch 2002; Gumbrecht 2004; Ankersmit 2005; Runia 2006). Perhaps most importantly, experience caters to the current desire to strip down the walls of constructivism and to break free from the prison-house of language. It opens up phenomenological perspectives and resonates powerfully with the current upsurge of cognitive studies.

Narrative theory has not remained unaffected by this broad trend to resuscitate the idea of experience. A pioneer in the attempt to place experience center-stage has been Monika Fludernik in her *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, published in 1996. Against traditional approaches, which consider plot to be the key of narrative, Fludernik argued that narrativity is constituted by experientiality, that is, “the quasi-mimetic evocation of ‘real-life experience’” (9): “In my model there can therefore be narratives without plot, but there cannot be narratives without a human experience of some sort at some narrative level” (13).³ The notion of experience enabled Fludernik to make a move that has profoundly changed how many of us understand narrative: a shift from formalist to cognitive approaches.

Pivotal as the idea of experience is in natural narratology, its significance for narrative has, I think, not yet been fully charted out. In fact, a fresh look at the tradition of continental philosophy can show us that experience need not be pitted against plot. The history of narratology makes it obvious why Fludernik emphasized that experience can center on “mental simulations,” that it can be, as she puts it, “quite uneventful” (29). Eager to move away from formalist approaches, Fludernik replaced the focus on plot with a focus on

¹ I wish to thank John Pier for his comments and suggestions.

² Notable exceptions include Sontag (1966) and her erotics of reading; Dufrenne (1967) and his phenomenological aesthetics; Bohrer (1994 [1981]) and his aesthetics of suddenness. Cf. Grethlein 2015a: 309–10; 2017: prologue. For a survey of the idea of experience in modern intellectual history, see Jay (2005).

³ For a more recent discussion of experientiality with a special focus on historical narrative, see Fludernik 2010.

consciousness. However, a look at philosophical discussions will show us that the concept of experience encompasses the temporal dynamics of narrative as well as the role of consciousness. In fact, the design of plot remains pivotal to the reading experience. I thus wish to propose that experience can do even more than what was set out and realized in natural narratology. Substituting experience for fictional minds might very well yield significant advantages for cognitive studies in narrative.

2. The Temporal Dimension of Experience

For Fludernik, the key aspect of experientiality is embodiment. Here, too, she anticipated an approach that has proved instrumental in the rise of “second-generation” cognitive narrative studies (e.g., Kukkonen and Carraciolo 2014; Troscianko 2014; Cave 2016). Marco Caracciolo, for instance, has drawn on the latest theories of embodiment to elaborate on the experientiality of narrative. In *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (2014), he emphasizes the importance of the reader’s experiential background which is activated in the process of reading. This includes bodily experience as well as perception, emotion, higher-order cognitive functions, and socio-cultural practices. These distinctions foster a deeper understanding of the dynamics of reading, for they alert us to the significance of the recipient’s horizon of expectations and highlight the many layers of reader response. The term experience, however, remains vague in Caracciolo’s approach. Experience, it seems, has become an umbrella term for the reader’s response at large, without any specific meaning of its own.⁴

In order to achieve a clearer sense of what experience is, it is illuminating to survey the specific connotations which philosophers have bestowed upon it. If one indulges in a coarse generalization that cuts across philosophical schools and ignores some of them fully, two tendencies can be distinguished.⁵ On the one hand, experience is associated with sensation and immediacy. John Locke and David Hume, for example, pit experience against the claims of the rationalists (Locke 1979 [1689]; Hume 1977 [1748]). For the empiricists, experience establishes direct access to the world, uncorrupted by the idiosyncrasies of the mind. In the very different tradition of German philosophy, this sense of directness stands out in the term *Erlebnis*. Dilthey in particular elaborated on *Erlebnis* as that which is immediately given; for him, *Erlebnis* precedes all interpretation and reflection (Dilthey 1907).

⁴ For a critique of the vagueness of Fludernik’s notion of experientiality, see Alber (2002: 66), Wolf (2013: 36 n. 36), and Caracciolo (2014: 47–8).

⁵ For a helpful survey, see Carr (2014: 8–30).

On the other hand, experience has been defined through temporality. From this perspective, it signifies not so much a fleeting impression as it does something that takes time and is accumulated over time. Hegel is an important proponent of this tradition. In his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, experience is a long series of mostly false starts through which consciousness slowly and painfully advances to an awareness of itself (Hegel 1807). This sense was picked up by Gadamer, who coupled experience with expectation: all experience is temporal, he argued, as it corresponds to, and most often thwarts, an expectation (Gadamer 1986 [1960]: 352–68). Seen from this angle, experience is linked to knowledge in a way that is nicely captured in an ancient Greek formula quoted by Gadamer, namely “learning through suffering” (*pathei mathos*). While the first approach to experience may be grasped in the phrase “I am experiencing something,” the second can be summed up as “I am experienced.”

Husserl’s philosophy of time demonstrates that even the fleeting impression foregrounded by the first group has a temporal dimension (Husserl 1928). Impressions make way for new impressions, but instead of simply vanishing, past impressions are retained in the modified form of a retention. This means that upon hearing a musical note, we remain aware of the note that has just faded. Retention coexists with the actual impression that is itself about to be transformed into a retention. In addition to retentions, impressions also contain protentions, that is, the intention of the consciousness toward what is to come. To stick with the example of the musical note: not only do we hear the note against the backdrop of the notes already heard, but also in anticipation of those that will continue the melody. No matter how punctual and fleeting our impressions may seem to be, they are embedded in a chain of retentions and protentions.

Distinct from this continuously moving chain are memory and expectation. Memory is not a succession of “nows” that have just passed, but the representation of something that is no longer present within the continuum of perception. This representation recalls not only the past moment to which our attention is directed but also the chain of retentions of that passed moment. Likewise, besides recalling past impressions, consciousness also produces images of the future. As is further spelt out by Gadamer, expectations form the backdrop against which we have experiences. It thus emerges that experience is eminently temporal: at the micro-level through the chain of protentions and retentions that accompany each impression; at the macro-level through memories and expectations that transcend the here and now.

3. Experience and Narrative

With its heaviness and forbidding terminology, German phenomenology may not be a tradition to which scholars of narrative are likely to turn for inspiration. Yet its emphasis on the temporal dimension of experience is key to gaining a better understanding of the experiential quality of narrative. Most importantly, it challenges the juxtaposition of experience with plot. Plot designates the sequential arrangement of a story, whether it foregrounds actions or processes of consciousness. Being a temporal category, plot is not opposed to, but aligned with, experience. In fact, plot, understood as the temporal unfolding of a story, is crucial to the reading experience. In real-life experiences, our consciousness harbors protentions and retentions and engages in memories and expectations. When we read, we attend to the unfolding of the story; it is the plot that triggers our protentions and retentions and therefore defines our reading experience. In order to define this reading experience, notably to distinguish it from real-life experience and to grasp its relation with plot, I wish to make four qualifications.⁶

First, it is important to recognize that our experience of narrative is framed by an “as-if.” Cognitive approaches elucidate the full dimension of the responses elicited by narrative: we process narrative not only intellectually but also respond to it with our entire sensorimotor system. When we read about a movement, the same brain areas seem to be activated as when we engage in this movement (e.g. Bolens 2008; Cave 2016). We may also be deeply moved, for novels or films make us laugh or cry. Nonetheless, we are not directly affected by what is happening. Our consciousness unfolds the same chain of protentions and retentions as in real-life experience, but the object of our attention is a representation, not life itself. We even remain aware of attending to a representation. Scholars as diverse as Kendall Walton (1990), Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2010 [1999]) and Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) concur in that even high degrees of immersion are balanced by a residual degree of reflection. Drawing on cognitive accounts of joint attention, Merja Polvinen (2014) has argued that an emotional response to narrated action and attention paid to narrative as an artefact are not mutually exclusive but coalesce in the process of reading.

Second, in addition to the “as-if,” the closed form of narrative distinguishes readerly from real-life experiences. In everyday life, the flow of time continues until the moment of death, at which time the possibility of experience is effaced. Narratives, on the other hand, come to an end. There are of course narratives (not least Romantic and postmodern ones) which marshal various devices to undercut closure; and yet, their finitude allows us to experience an ending, even if it is destabilized. What is more, the narrator’s retrospect, tangible in the preterit as the

⁶ For an extended version of this argument, see Grethlein (2017).

default tense of storytelling, bestows on narratives a teleological tendency. Things mentioned in narrative tend to be significant for the plot, as Chekhov once famously pointed out: “If in the first chapter you say that a gun hung on the wall, in the second or in the third chapter it must without fail be discharged” (1974 [1927]: 23). Of course, a narrator can refer to things that serve no function in the plot to establish an “effet de réel” (Barthes 2002 [1968]). However, the fact that such elements evoke an impression of reality only confirms the general teleological inclination of narrative, which attenuates the raw immediacy of experience.

Third, narrative shares the “as-if” and the finitude with such games as monopoly. Here, too, we focus our attention on a simulation. We recall the moves of the other players and eagerly anticipate what will happen next. At the same time, as buried in the game as we may be, we do not forget that we are engaged in a game. The temporal extension is limited, and the game will come to an end. Now, what renders narrative distinct from such games is its doubling of experience. This is, I think, already encapsulated in Fludernik’s definition of experientiality through the “quasi-mimetic evocation of ‘real-life experience’.” To spell the point out: besides narrative time (*Erzählzeit*) there is narrated time (*erzählte Zeit*) (Müller 1968). While the unfolding of narrative time triggers the reader’s experience, the experiences of the characters take place in narrated time. No matter what the medium, whether a text, a cartoon or a film, narrative grafts the reader’s experience upon the experiences of the characters. It is tempting to contend that the reading experience mimics the experiences at the level of action. Indeed, the reader’s experience is directed towards the character’s experiences, and it is certainly often, if not necessarily, shaped by them. By no means, however, is it a necessity that the two levels be mapped onto one other.

This leads me to my final qualification. Narrative time can simply follow narrated time. Often, however, narrative time reconfigures narrated time. Due not only to flashbacks and foreshadowing but also to the orchestration of perspective, the reading experience deviates from the experiences at the level of action. Homeric epic, for example, indulges in the kind of tragic irony that arises when the reader is informed about what the characters do not know yet. Detective novels, on the other hand, tend to capitalize on information that has been withheld from the reader. The reconfiguration of time often yields particularly intense experiences, namely (to take up Sternberg’s three master tropes), through suspense, curiosity, and surprise (e.g., Sternberg 1992). Cliffhangers, for one, generate a sharp sense of suspense that we rarely encounter in the everyday world. Some stories enthrall us through the nagging question of who committed a crime. The power of surprise in narrative is already conceptualized in Aristotle’s meditation on *peripeteia* in the *Poetics*. Even without spelling

this out in detail, we can see that, far from being opposed to experience, plot is crucial for the shaping of the reading experience.

It does not take an elaborate construction of plot to render a narration highly experiential. A linear account may do the same. A powerful recent example is the acclaimed movie *Victoria* (Sebastian Schipper, 2015) that shows a group of young people in Berlin who get mixed up in a crime in the after-party hours of the early morning. Narrative time not only equals narrated time here, for the entire film consists of a single shot. Nonetheless, the film is, as its enthusiastic critics insist, extremely suspenseful; it is a rollercoaster that leaves the audience drenched in sweat and, in some cases, in tears. At issue here is not the play with narrated and narrative time, but mimesis of the former in the latter through which a dramatic action spellbinds the audience. I will leave the question open as to what kind of plot can be more immersive: a plot that is straightforward or one that is wildly reshuffled.

Combined with the “as-if” of our reading experience, the doubling and reconfiguration of narrated time in narrative time endows the reading experience with a distinct character. On the one hand, the experience takes place in the realm of the “as-if.” The reader is subjected to the same chain of protentions and retentions, memories and expectations as in the everyday world, but she directs her attention to what is only a representation. Moreover, while in real life the flow of time continues until the moment of death, narratives offer us a closed universe. On the other hand, reading experiences can be particularly powerful, be it through a simple mimesis as in *Victoria* or through an artfully constructed plot. It is this capacity to exacerbate and simultaneously distance the temporal structure of experience that gives narrative its specific experiential quality. Narrative subjects us to the dynamics of time, sometimes with particular intensity, while liberating us from the strains of everyday life. As I will argue below, this makes narrative a powerful means of engaging with time.

4. Experience: More than Minds

Finally, let me tease out some of the ramifications of my argument. Monika Fludernik’s *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* is a pioneering study that broke new ground, opening the way to cognitive approaches to narrative. It is however noteworthy that, despite the introduction of the notion of experientiality, experience properly speaking is not among the elements of Fludernik’s approach that have been widely taken up. Cognitive narratologists tend to favor concepts of fictional minds, notably the Theory of Mind. Alan Palmer (2004; 2010), for instance, asserts that narrative is the description of fictional mental functioning. Palmer’s work, beautifully written and well-argued, has found much acclaim among scholars

of narrative. Even so, premodern narrative poses a powerful challenge to Palmer's claim that fictional minds provide the key to narrative in general. Ancient and medieval narratives are, by and large, far less invested in the representation of consciousness processes than Palmer's modern test cases (Grethlein 2015a; 2015b; von Contzen 2015). There are of course fictional minds in premodern narrative,⁷ but they hardly constitute what intrigues their readers. Likewise, modern para-literature also rarely engrosses readers through the complex inner lives of characters. Just as the reader of Chariton's *Callirhoe* (probably first century CE) will not be spellbound by the thoughts and feelings of the novel's heroes, so the audience of a James Bond movie will not focus on the interior worlds of Bond and his girlfriends.

The concept of experience may provide a way to avoid some of the shortcomings that characterize the Theory of Mind. The notion of mind tends to be static. This stands out in Palmer's use of the term "description": "Narrative is the description of fictional mental functioning" (2004: 12). At stake here is more than an incidental lack of terminological precision; we can see that a focus on mind tends to underrate the temporal nature of narrative. Experience, on the other hand, is inherently dynamic. Like the concept of fictional minds, the notion of experience targets the processes of consciousness of the readers as well as those of the characters, making it possible to account for the cognitive dimension of narrative. But experience does more than mind: as the phenomenological tradition reminds us, experience also captures the crucial aspect of time (cf. Grethlein 2015a: 275–79).

This makes experience an important asset for narrative theory in many regards. Let me mention three of them, one pertaining to a central narratological category, one to the project of a diachronic narratology, and one to the anthropological function of narrative. First, a shift from fictional minds to experience will enable us to redeem the notion of plot. By no means have cognitive scholars ignored plot (e.g. Herman 2002), and yet the focus on mind has detracted from its prominence. In current research, plot may well be the most neglected major narratological category in cognitive approaches to narrative.⁸ But this need not be the case. A phenomenological notion of experience could help to set things aright: due to its inherently temporal nature, experience is well-suited to cover the dynamics of plot. More specifically, it lends itself to unfolding the intricate entwinement of plot with character and of time with mind.

These issues are highly relevant to a diachronic approach to narratology. As both Eva von Contzen and I have argued, much premodern narrative is less invested in character portrayal than it is plot-driven (Grethlein 2015a; 2015b; 2017; von Contzen 2015). The current

⁷ See Herman (2011).

⁸ For a survey of work on plot, see Kukkonen (2014).

infatuation with mind in cognitive narratology has not only emerged from a focus on modern texts, it is also in danger of occluding premodern forms of narrative that do not fit the bill.⁹ Even Fludernik, one of the most prominent advocates of diachronic narratology, subscribes to a teleological model which lends itself to a reductive view of premodern narrative: “In my view narrative thus properly comes into its own in the twentieth century when the rise of the consciousness novel starts to foreground fictional consciousness” (Fludernik 1996: 276). More encompassing than mind, experience will allow us to consider the historical development of narrative forms instead of relegating premodern texts as deficient or desperately trying to prove that everything was already there in antiquity, presumably in Homer.¹⁰

Finally, a phenomenologically informed concept of experience would open a new perspective on the existential dimension of narrative. Paul Ricœur has put forward the thesis that “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence” (1985 [1984]: 52). As powerful as this thesis is, it is not spelt out satisfyingly in *Time and Narrative*, at least not for the narrative theorist. Ricœur is more interested in the conundrum of time than in the workings of narrative. Neither the threefold mimesis, laid out in volume I, nor the interweaving of historical and fictional narratives, as argued in volume III, explain how narrative lets us come to grips with time. As I have tried to show elsewhere, the phenomenon of experience opens the way to conceptualizing this existential dimension of narrative (Grethlein 2010; 2017). Doubling and reconfiguring experience and casting it within the framework of “as-if,” narrative allows us to engage with time in a special way. In narrative, time is not made the object of a theoretical investigation; instead, it is simultaneously experienced and reflected, just as the reader is simultaneously subject to distant from experience. The performative reflection on time which narrative instils in its recipients is more visceral than any philosophical treatment can ever aspire to do.

While Ricœur’s investigation of narrative remains vague, a focus on experience will enable us to undertake a technical analysis of narrative which is fruitful for an anthropological approach to narrative. An analysis of the basic categories of narratology—tense, mood, and voice—makes it possible to describe the reading experience and its relation to the experiences of the characters. Shifts in perspective and focalization give readers insights into expectations at the level of the action, as when speeches or representations of the characters’ interior lives inform the readers about their plans and desires. The handling of narrative time shapes the

⁹ Herman (2011) is a noteworthy exception.

¹⁰ This strategy undergirds the *Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative* (2004–2012), edited by Irene de Jong et al.

expectations of the readers themselves. The tools of classical narratology can thus be put to service for a cognitive as well as a phenomenological approach. They can help to define how time is reconfigured in the interplay of reading experience with experiences at the level of action. Both sides benefit from this joint venture: the investigation of tense, mood, and voice becomes more than a technical exercise when it serves to illustrate how narrative reconfigures time. Conversely, the phenomenological thesis that narrative enables us to reflect on time is given a solid ground in narratological categories that it does not have in Ricœur.

Just over twenty years ago, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* was published, and in the intervening years, it has profoundly changed our understanding of narrative. Monika Fludernik has paved the way for the current cognitive approach to narrative, introducing narratologists to such influential ideas as experientiality and embodiment while also making a strong case for a diachronic approach to narrative. And there may be more to come: with experience, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* has bequeathed to us a concept many of whose ramifications are still waiting to be fully explored.

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