



BOOK REVIEW:

The Ethical Pedagogy of Complex Narrations

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Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible*. Oxford University Press, 2019. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-19-064936-4.

Hanne Meretoja's admirable book asks how literary stories compel ethical reflection. She presents close readings of three European novelists — Julia Franck, Günther Grass, and Jonathan Littell — and the Israeli novelist David Grossman. The European novels are all set during or in the shadow of World War II, but all four can be considered post-Holocaust novels. As Meretoja notes, the Holocaust is the constant background to violent conflicts in contemporary Israel. The ethical questions raised are generalizable beyond wartime, but all these novels are about war.

Meretoja's readers get to these substantive studies after three chapters that contain no stories, except for one brief, charming anecdote about Meretoja's bed-time reading to her daughters. In these opening chapters *narrative* figures as a theorized activity, discussed through selected quotations from multiple philosophers. Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Hanna Arendt are most often quoted. Meretoja's synthesized version of narrative hermeneutics leads, in chapter 3, to 6 ways in which literary stories develop readers' ethical awareness. Despite its title, the book is about *reading* as ethical inquiry. Literary storytelling is ethical insofar as it calls upon readers to confront the complexity of choices that

a novel's characters have no choice about making; choices that cannot end well for anyone.

Hanna Meretoja is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Turku, Finland, and director of SELMA, which stands for Ethics of Storytelling and the Experience of History in Contemporary Arts. In *The Ethics of Storytelling* the experience of history is multi-sided and conflicted. The book is published in Oxford's "Explorations in Narrative Psychology Series" and is so much a part of that series that this review is a postscript to my longer review essay (Frank, 2018) on four volumes in the series, one of which included a chapter by Meretoja that reappears, expanded and better contextualized, in the present volume.

My preference for the second half of the book, when Meretoja gets to actual stories, reflects my impatience with talking about *narrative* in the abstract, an impatience that increases as years go by since the source material was written. Ricoeur and Gadamer, especially, frame narrative philosophically as human activity that — curiously, to me — can be analyzed without telling any stories, or even vaguely referencing actual stories more than occasionally. I have trouble taking seriously theorists of narrative who, first, don't show much interest in telling stories themselves or engaging with actual storytellers, and second, decontextualize narrative acts, treating *context* only as a theorized abstraction. Those who do not share my bias — which is: *when talking about narrative, tell stories early and keep them in the foreground* — will better appreciate the first half of Meretoja's book.

Meretoja's quotations are well chosen aphoristic testimonials to the centrality of narrative in human life; I agree with them. My disagreement is over how philosophical theorists do narrative hermeneutics, their textual practice. Narrative matters because humans become *caught up in* stories; stories capture us, mobilize us, inspire and distress us. If hermeneutics involves a self-reflective circle, then the interpreter herself needs to write from a position of being caught up in stories, or at least not write close to 150 pages before getting to any actual stories. Plus, at this point in the development of the literature on narrative, the same theorists have been quoted too often, reiterating the same issues. Those new to narrative studies will find Meretoja offers a clear, reliable introduction. Other readers might turn directly to chapter 4, where the stories begin.

Meretoja discusses novels from the late twentieth century (Günther Grass, although his memoir *Peeling the Onion* was 2006) and early twenty-first century (Julia Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau* [2007; translated as *The Blind Side of the Heart*, 2009]; Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* [2006; *The Kindly Ones*, 2010]; and David Grossman's *To the End of the Land* [2010] and *Falling Out of Time* [2015]). Her critical practice might be called meta-pedagogical. That is, Meretoja

teaches her readers how these novels teach their readers how to be ethical human beings. She practices a form of literary criticism that enhances the novels' effect of enlarging readers' ethical capacity. The distinctive issue that collects these novels, beyond their shared historical context, is that central characters are both victims and perpetrators. Meretoja talks about the ethics of blurring that line, most provocatively when Littell's protagonist is a Nazi officer in a death camp — how can such a person be positioned as the narrator, giving that perspective a voice, even imagining him as a sort of victim? These characters inhabit wartime worlds that require choices most of us have been lucky enough not to face. Fiction brings us as close as we can get to the violence of having such choices forced upon us. Conflicted choices include what to remember and how to remember. What sort of guilt to feel and how to express that guilt can be an ethical crisis — options include silence, writing as witness, or suicide.

In my mapping of the academic world, I locate Meretoja's form of criticism as a sophisticated version of writing in which colleagues in health humanities describe how they teach specific fictional texts to student clinicians. Their criticism-as-pedagogy offers students resources that can help them remain fully human while doing work that is too often dehumanizing in its demands (for example, Stagno and Blackie, 2019). I regret that Meretoja does not discuss her relationship to health humanities; the comparison would be mutually elucidating. Health humanities teachers will find Meretoja's work well worth studying as an exemplar of how to bring out the ethical problematics posed by complex contemporary fiction.

Meretoja's conclusion about the ethics of storytelling is that stories are *good* when they proliferate more stories from different points of view. She writes: "Ethically relevant is whether narratives invite us, through an ethos of dialogue, to such retelling—to a plurality of different versions and interpretations—or pretend, through naturalizing strategies, to be the only possible version" (p. 304). I agree, having once argued the same, stated negatively: "If there can be any inherent ... quality that makes a story *bad*, it is that bad stories discourage moving to another story that presents the same content from a different perspective" (Frank, 2010, p. 153).

The politics of storytelling have intensified during the last decade. Stories claiming to be the only possible version ground personal identities, and political affiliations are increasingly based on acceptance of only-possible-versions. Stories thus appear more dangerous than ever; ethical questions become more immediate, with higher stakes. Meretoja seems more optimistic than I feel. "Cultural conflicts," she writes, "are frequently predicated on a lack of in-depth

understanding of the sociocultural worlds from within which the ‘others’ make their choices and develop their basic beliefs” (p. 304). How frequently? I see around me people who understand others’ troubles well enough, but they refuse to acknowledge how their own privileges depend on having created and continuing to sustain those troubles. They disallow *a priori* any narrative that might call their privileges into question.

Meretoja’s choice of novels is especially useful as it allows her to explore “moral implication”, by which she means readers coming to recognize their own participation, their unintended and unacknowledged duplicity, in violences being depicted (p. 231). She makes an exemplary case for literary fiction “as a mode of engaging what we do not know or understand, what perplexes us, unravels us, moves us viscerally or unexpectedly”, *but* she adds: “we have to be reminded that nothing in narratives guarantees the actualization of their ethical potential” (p. 306). *The Ethics of Storytelling* does its share of the necessary work of making that ethical potential actual.

References

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