The Limits of Testimony and Narrative Representation:
Anna Blume *In the Country of Last Things*

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Parts of the paper

I begin my paper by discussing the problems of historiography that rendered narrative and truth suspicious concepts. Then I will proceed to Paul Ricoeur, and his *Memory, History, Forgetting* as one possible program to reclaim the relevance of truth, narrative, and testimony. After this first part, I leave historiography and move on the side of literary fiction. There, my focus is not on the question of fictional or literary truth. Rather, I will read Paul Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* both as a testimony, and contemplation on narrative theory. In particular, I maintain, Auster argues for the practical relevance of narrative for the human capacity to act.

1. The suspicious narrative

When the narrative turn in humanities begun after the publication of Vladimir Propp’s (1958) *The Morphology of the Folktale*, the concept experienced altogether different careers inside literature, historiography, and social sciences (Kreiswirth 2005; Hyvärinen 2006a and b). Both in historiography and social and political studies, the concept came to indicate an antipositivistic attitude and a challenge to the hegemonic conceptions of study. However, in a very ironic manner, the targets of narrative criticism were so different that they engendered a deep clash within the narrativists movement itself. In historiography, authors such as Louis O. Mink (1987) and in particular Hayden White (1981; 1999) addressed their criticism towards the naïve and realistic narrative historiography; and finally towards the role of narrative in historiography in general. As Kalle Pihlainen has it, “narrative theorists of history like Hayden White and F.R. Ankersmit tend to argue that historical narratives are identical to fictional ones in form” (Pihlainen 2002, 39). White criticizes, to quote Pihlainen (1998, 7) the general reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are – verbal fictions, the content of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. (White 1978, cit. by Pihlainen 1998, 7)

This ‘impositionalist’ way of thinking suggests thus that the whole line between fiction and historiography is more or less questionable, and thus also the claims for historical truth are without
a sound ground. The ‘imposition’ White is so famous of becomes evident in one of his most quoted passage:

What I have sought to suggest is that this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the *coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image* of life that is and only can be imaginary. (White 1987 [1981], 24, italics mine)

Arts provide the complete form, clear images, and powerful metaphors that are then imposed on originally chaotic facts and events of history. As Louis O. Mink has it: “So it seems truer to say that narrative qualities are transferred from art to life” (Mink 1987, 60). However, the direction of this imposition of form is not always quite clear. White closes his essay by the question: “Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?” (White 1987, 25). The concept and process of narrativizing is both fertile and central for the whole argument. Events, facts, pasts are not as such narratives, White argues, they have to be first narrativized, and thus provided with moral and aesthetic value. But what does it mean to narrativize? As the term comes at use in narratology and narrative theory, it is understood as *cognitive capacity* and process. For example, Monika Fludernik (1996) takes narrativizing as one part of her ‘natural’ narratology. Narratives and narrativity grow, according to Fludernik, from naturally occurring interaction. Narrativizing does not, thus, emerge from some high artistic impulse but is embedded in human cognition. Fludernik shares White’s view of experience which is not as such a narrative, but what is perceived as narrative. Texts, for example, do not need to “be” narrative, they may be *narrativized* in their reception. If ordinary people are asked to account for, say movements of abstract geometrical patterns, they may well emplot stories about dislike, animosity, persecution, or fear. All of this may support White’s point on “imposition” of form, yet this imposition is not inspired by arts or artistic culture but every-day conversational routines (see also Ochs & Capps 2001).

The suspicious aspects of narrative seem to derive from the narrative capacities of emplotting (providing chaotic events with storylines), configuring (e.g. organizing complex developments under concise concepts) and providing metaphors. As criticism, all these points are well grounded and useful tools in evaluation of historical narratives. But the question remains whether “historical truth” or “truthful representation” has any room after this criticism. Indeed, is there any longer any difference between fiction and historiography?
Pihlainen (1998, 2002) has pointed out several differences between fictional and historical narratives. Quite apparently, “if the historian aims at a narrative that is true and a novelist does not, this intention is sufficient to create a difference in the resulting texts…” (2002, 49). Another important difference concerns the narratological difference between “narrative discourse” (the mediated text that is available for a reader and receiver) and “story” (the presumed course of events that may be inferred on the basis of the narrative discourse). In the case of fiction, the author fully knows and freely manipulates the story, and creates his or her narrative discourse on the basis of this command of the material. In the case of historiography, the story is and remains to be at least partly unknown. The author is the narrator, and cannot freely choose an intradiegetic focalization (that is, to put one of the historical agents to see and recount the events). The narrator remains necessarily outside of the narrative, and has instead to refer to a great number of sources and voices, and to argue for their relevance and meaning. Ironically, a narrator who does not fully know what happened, has traditionally been characterized as “unreliable” in the case of fiction, whereas such reservations in historiography are understood as signs of professional ethics and competence (Pihlainen 2002).

Paul Ricoeur has a long history in discussing Louis Mink and Hayden White (Hyvärinen 2006). Ricoeur met White in the end of 1970s at the same conference which launched the ‘narrative turn’ in social sciences (Mitchell 1981); White is discussed in Time and Narrative (Ricoeur 1984); they kept meeting at same panels and debates (Wood 1991). However, Ricoeur’s complete answer to the problems introduced by Hayden White was expressed only in his massive work Memory, History, Forgetting (Ricoeur 2004). Next, I will discuss Ricoeur’s defence of historiography and historical truth – whereof he speaks rather shamelessly. This work is particularly useful in linking the themes of testimony and historical truth together.

2. Narrative, testimony and historical truth by Paul Ricoeur

With its important footnotes, Ricoeur’s book is just over 600 pages, and yet the text is unrelentingly compact and full of intellectual turns and layers. To put it simply: any attempt at taking a major argument out of this complex is more than hazardous. The conversation with White is an undercurrent in many parts of the book, and cannot be simply found from one, separate chapter. All this reservations in mind, I try to outline Ricoeur’s line of argument.
Ricoeur’s point of departure is the agreement that White’s criticism of narrative in historiography is still both relevant and topical. However, he goes on to argue that White’s conception of historiography in terms of operations and processes is all too focused on the literary form. Following the thought of Michel de Certeau, he suggests three analytically separate but not necessarily sequential phases of historiographical operation: first the documentary phase; secondly the phase of explanation/understanding and thirdly the phase of inscription. He explicitly rejects the idea of naming the last phase as writing of history, because the term covers the whole range of historiography. Reading and finding documents, explaining and inscription are thus equally characterized and permeated by writing (Ricoeur 2004, 136-137). Already this setting exposes Ricoeur’s main line of argumentation. Even though a historiographer and a novelist may face similar problems and use parallel linguistic instruments on the level of inscription, this phase of inscription is still only a narrow part of the all practical operations of a competent historian. Just as Pihlainen argued above, the historian is not free to invent the voices of the past but needs methodically regulated consultations with documents; testimonies and archives.

Ricoeur presents a more explicit answer during his discussion on “the historians representations” (ibid, 234-285). In opening the section on “representation and narration”, he outlines the setting:

On the one hand, it is taken for granted that narrativity does not constitute an alternative solution to explanation/understanding, despite what the […] narrativists curiously agree on saying. On the other, it is affirmed that emplotment nevertheless constitutes a genuine component of historical operation, but on another plane than that what is concerned with explanation/understanding…(ibid, 238)

It seems to me that Ricoeur’s position here has partly changed since Time and Narrative, where he emphasized the argumentative power of emplotment almost the same way as Louis Mink (Ricoeur 1984). Now his main line of argument is to distinct analytically the processes of explaining and representing in narrative form. In this horizon, narratives are not about engendering or tainting the explanations metaphorically and fictively, rather they are to represent on a new plane the explanations made earlier. By systematically employing his idea of operations, he unpacks the antinomies of earlier debates:

It would be futile to seek direct tie between the narrative form and the events as they actually occurred: [and so far in agreement with narrativists, but] the tie can only be indirect by way of
explanation and, short of this, by way of documentary phase, which refers back in turn to testimony and the trust placed in the word of another. (ibid, 244)

In this way, Ricoeur keeps arguing for a distinction but not an opposition between explanation and narration. “In this sense, representation in its narrative aspect”, he says, “does not add something coming from the outside to the documentary and explanatory phases, but rather accompanies and supports them” (ibid, 238). White, instead, takes emplotment “to be the explanatory mode par excellence” (ibid, 252). He characterizes White’s approach as “a theory of style”, and welcomes its attempt to explore “the mediations proposed by stylistic practice over the course of the history of literary traditions” (ibid, 253). Then he concludes:

…I regret the impasse that White gets caught up in dealing with the operations of emplotment as explanatory models, held to be at best indifferent as regards the scientific procedures of historical knowledge, at worst substitutable for them. There is category mistake here that engenders a legitimate suspicion regarding the capacity of this rhetorical theory to draw line between historical and fictional narrative. While it is legitimate to treat the deep structures of the imaginary as common generating matrices for the creation of plots of novels and those of historians […] it also becomes urgent to specify the referential moment that distinguishes history from fiction. (ibid, 253)

As he curtly notices, the whole aspect of reconsidering historical discourse “in terms of the complexity of its operative phases” is lacking in White’s work (ibid, 254).

The theme of operations reappears in Ricoeur’s discussion on historical interpretation. Again, as a criticism towards the ‘narrativist’ school, Ricoeur makes a clear distinction between representation and interpretation. For one thing, interpretation already is a part of documentary phase, in negotiating the reliability and contents of testimonies and archives and making explanations. For other thing, interpretation is understood as a “second-order reflection on the whole course of operation” (ibid, 333). In this discussion, he arrives at “the difficulties arising between interpretation and the quest of truth in history” (ibid, 336). How, indeed may interpretation – with its ‘subjective’ aspect – and historical truth be included in the same picture? The problem concerns in particular contemporary history because the studied phase still continues (and does not present itself as another to the historian) and because the roles of historian and the “memorialist” are at risk to be conflated.
As a reply to these questions, Ricoeur proffers one of his most amazing summaries, by suggesting to “speak of interpretation in terms of operation” and thus to treat it “as a complex of language acts” (ibid, 337). He suggests four different language acts that are meant to provide the historian with a “good subjectivity”. These operations do indeed constitute not only the interpretations of history but the subjectivity of a historian as well. There are:

…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 amount of controversy […]; then, the claim to endow the interpretation assumed with plausible, possible, even probable arguments offered 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. (ibid, 337)

These complex language acts constitute the “who of the acts of interpretation”. As for the current discussion, this passage is vital in outlining a significant difference in regard to too smooth and fluent narrative historiography. The reservations, counterarguments, and alertness for “personal and cultural motivations” build necessarily complex and layered historical discourse. On the other hand, these operations of interpretation again hammer in the understanding that representation and narration do not cover or substitute for the entirety of the operations of historiography. The objective of these interpretative operations and the name of their competently probed results is historical truth.

Ricoeur is an interesting philosopher of history in the sense that he surveys a vast amount of concrete, historical works and approaches. He is almost too erudite to be readable himself. The point of his discourse is not to arrive at some elegant and all-encompassing theses but carve out the complexities and tensions in historical work. The general outcome is to relativize the abstract conflation of history and fiction, which appears as a narrow and exaggerated thesis after the visit to historical debates.
3. The problem of testimony

For Ricoeur, testimony (“I was there and saw it”) stands in the beginning of historical process. Testimonies that are inscribed by others constitute archives. What is the historical study of law court archives but surveying the complex layers of testimonies and their fate in the legal process? However, as Ricoeur points out, testimonies are not exclusively about law. Seeing the template of testimony in law is problematic due to the fact that legal discourse tends to understand testimonies as unreliable and questionable. In addition to the legal discourse, testimony has a regular and constitutive role in ordinary conversation. Indeed, “I was there and saw it” is a routine operation in exchanging experiences, for example in evaluating colleagues, friends, neighbours, athletes, authorities, and so on. It is hard to gossip without a recourse to testimony. (ibid, 146, 161-166)

Testimony is not a neutral operation; it always connects the assertion of certain reality and the “self-designation of the testifying subject” (ibid, 163). This originally oral and fundamentally personal move of testimony makes it always a part of a dialogue, a feature which comes apparent in Anna Blume’s testimony. Testimonies, of course, can be and are suspected, thus they are always met with some sort of controversy. Yet, for Ricoeur, “the availability of the witness to repeat his testimony […] makes testimony akin to promise-making, more precisely to the promise […] of keeping one’s word” (ibid, 165). In this sense testimony may be understood as a social institution and a “security factor of in the set of relations constitutive of the social bond” (ibid, 165). The maxim of testimony is: “First, trust the word of others, then doubt it if there are good reasons for doing so. In my vocabulary, it is a question of a competence of the capable human being” (ibid, 165).

In sum: there is no historiography without testimonies, and yet, testimonies need to be questioned. Now, it is time to move from a theory of testimony in historiography to the use of testimony in literary fiction.

4. The dilemma of action

Let us begin with a confusion. Anna Blume, the protagonist and primary narrator of Paul Auster’s In the Country of Last Things (Auster 1987, in what follows, Country), says something rather odd and perplexing. Anna has travelled to a strange and secluded country to find her missing brother,
yet his destiny remains a total mystery throughout the novel. The city where Anna has arrived in is governed not only by contingency but an extreme randomness. Things, ways, houses, rules, even words disappear without warning. In this context, Anna says the decisive, puzzling words:

Faced with the most ordinary occurrence, you no longer know how to act, and because you cannot act, you find yourself unable to think. The brain is a muddle. All around you one change follows another, each day produces a new upheaval, the old assumptions are so much air and emptiness. (Country, 20)

In what follows, I will discuss the genre of Anna’s letter and compare the alternatives of dystopia, journal and testimony. As a testimony, the work has a number of connections with Primo Levi’s account of Auschwitz. But rather than suggesting one and definite context of the novel, I ponder the possibility of a hybrid image of the twentieth century history. As a key to Anna Blume’s dilemma I suggest the intimate relationship between narrative, action, and thinking, in particular the way Paul Ricoeur (1984) has discussed the theme under the title of “semantics of action” in his theory of triple layers of narrative mimesis. Following Ricoeur, I suggest that the capacity to act depends both on a cognitive capacity to analyse action and world in terms of stories, and the emotionally vital possibility to account traumatic experiences in narrative form. Not quite incidentally, the novel portrays the figures of narrative social worker and narrative doctor as the last possible helpers of the inhabitants of the doomed city.

5. The dilemma of genre

Aliki Varvogli (2001), who has by and large been one of the best informed interpreters of Paul Auster’s work, characterizes the novel sometimes as “a journal” (ibid, 10) or “a diary” (ibid, 89). Yet the novel tells very explicitly that Anna’s letter, covering a period of several years, was written within merely a few days ahead of the end of the novel. As regards memory, accuracy, reliability, and the committed speech act, the difference is far-reaching. Anna pronounces the problem clearly: “I sometimes wonder how much I have left out, how much has been lost to me and will never be found again, but those are questions that cannot be answered” (Country, 182). No illusion of accurate, daily notes.
The letter is addressed to “you,” and we are informed of a reader, but not of his or her reactions. We don’t even know whether the actual reader is the same “you” the letter was written to or someone else. Very early in the letter, Anna pondered her unclear motivation to write in the first place. As she says: “To be honest, I have barely thought of you since I got here. But suddenly, after all this time, I feel there is something to say and if I don’t quickly write it down, my head will burst. It doesn’t even matter if you read it …” Her final point is: “I am writing to you because you know nothing.” (Country, 3.)

From the perspective of narrative as a potential way of thinking, there are here several points of interest. From the beginning, this is not “my diary” or a message to an unknown audience, it is indeed a letter to “you,” who for a long time was forgotten but came back to Anna’s mind. Parallel to this forgotten and then remembered “you” is the re-found need, even an urge, to tell. Indeed, why and how did Anna Blume recover her need to tell? She reminds “you” of their joint childhood: “You could never get enough of my stories, of the words I used to make up for us to play inside of. The Castle of No Return, the Land of Sadness, the Forest of Forgotten Words” (ibid, 10). The title of the novel thus has a double reference to childhood’s harmless storytelling and the motto adapted from Nathaniel Hawthorne. Still the crucial point resides in the last sentence: “I am writing to you because you know nothing.” Why then was “you” firstly forgotten and later again so important?

This simple sentence, to my reading, frames the letter generically as a testimony, and suggests thus similarities with other important testimonies. In terms of Auster’s early work, the novel indeed is exceptionally non-experimental of its outlook. The genre of testimony may safely be characterized by the fact that the testifier herself, as actor, viewer, and reflector (Fludernik 1995) is far from intact but strongly restricted and pressed by the circumstances testified.

In the early reception of the novel, it was often characterized as a dystopia. This is a reading Auster keeps intently resisting: “As far as I’m concerned, the book has nothing to do with science fiction. It’s quite fantastic at times, of course, but that doesn’t mean it’s not firmly anchored in historical realities. It’s a novel about the present and the immediate past, not about the future. “Anna Blume walks through the twentieth century.” That was the phrase I carried around in my head while I was working on the book.” (Auster 1997, 320) But what exactly are the “historical realities” the novel is anchored in?

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1 "Not a great while ago, passing through the gate of dreams, I visited that region of the earth in which lies the famous City of Destruction".
The siege of Leningrad, Warsaw Ghetto, the slums of metropolitan cities are elements mentioned by Auster. Yet there are still other aspects that exceed these usually listed contexts. There are the Euthanasia Clinics of the city, to begin with. The city also receives most of its scarce energy by burning the valuable dead bodies: “All around the city are the crematoria – the so-called Transformation Centers – and day and night you can see the smoke rising into the sky” (Country, 17). The allusion to crematoria, day and night smoke rising, does not leave much space for guessing: the traces of holocaust/Shoah are distinctive in the novel.

And there is more to come. One day, again by chance and in despair, Anna Blume happens to escape into the closed National Library. There, in a room whose door she incidentally opens, she meets a group of Jewish men. Her astonished words divulge something she has not articulated earlier: “I thought all the Jews were dead” (ibid, 95). This is a slightly perplexing comment. Although the novel repeats the reign of contingency and even indicates several changes of government, there must have been some organisation and perpetuity of persecution to warrant Anna’s presumption. A sort of indirect totalitarianism rules in the city. Be it as it may, she blurts to the Rabbi, again the first time in her letter, to be a Jew herself. The rabbi becomes a friend and trustee, but things do not last in the country. Not so long after the first meeting, when Anna again returns to the room, she only finds an arrogant ethnographer who is busy to study a row of skulls on his desk. As he irritably retorts, the Jews had just lost their permit to stay in the Library. The reply to Anna’s query about the whereabouts of the rabbi is curt and sardonic: “On his way to the promised land, no doubt” (ibid, 113).

6. A hybrid city

The crucial problem in understanding the city is the way it is ripe of conflicting allusions. The form of letter allows for an aphoristic, even poetic style: “These are the last things. A house is there one day, and the next day it is gone. A street you walked down yesterday is no longer there today. Even the weather is in constant flux. (...) When you live in the city, you learn to take nothing for granted” (Country, 1-2). The city is extremely unproductive. Burning of human bodies and recycling of past utility articles seem to be the only flourishing businesses in the city. It is hard not to see this figure as a mirror: the huge and unending productivity of modern industrialism is inverted in this image into an endless circulation of remains.
“All around you one change follows another, each day produces a new upheaval…” (ibid, 20). These words have an odd familiarity of style and message. Marshall Berman (1982) published an influential book *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* five years before Auster’s novel. The title and one of the key inspirations of the book come from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Berman repeats the famous words of the *Communist Manifesto*:

> All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face…their relations with their fellow men. (Marx & Engels, cit. Berman 1982, 21)

All that is solid melts into air. This could well be the other motto of the novel. Auster, however, is totally devoid of Marx’s optimism about the future of social relations. The pressing contingency, the burden of change turns out to be the enemy of all lasting relationships. Relations require living past and visions of future, both of which are jeopardized by the pressing weigh of immediacy in the city. The image of industrialist capitalism gives way to more extreme experiences of concentration camps.

In his *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi has an ominous sentence: “Death begins with the shoes” (Levi 1996, 34). Shoes are a crucial issue and worry in Anna Blume’s city as well. When Anna’s precious shoes wear finally out, she lets herself to be coaxad into a human slaughterhouse, gets almost killed and loses her child. All these clues encourage me to read Auster and Primo Levi together. Levi’s account of his Auschwitz experiences seems to arrive at oddly similar conclusions as Anna Blume about the limits of thinking:

> (O)ne loses the habit of hoping in the Lager, and even of believing in one’s own reason. In the lager it is useless to think, because events happen for the most part in an unforeseeable manner; and it is harmful, because it keeps alive a sensitivity which is a source of pain, and which some providential natural law dulls when suffering passes a certain limit. (Levi 1996, 171)

In this passage, Levi is not concerned about freedom of thought in the conventional meaning of the term, in the sense of freedom to express and share thoughts publicly. His concern goes deeper to the cognitive and emotional preconditions of thought. Thinking in the camp may be hopeless, painful
and even harmful. In the Third Reich, the freedom of thought was severely curtailed, whereas in the camps, the whole capacity to think was jeopardized.

The difficulty to think seems to beget similar and paradoxical criticism of wishful thinking in Levi and Anna Blume’s letter. Anna’s description of the language of the “Ghosts” could be compared with Levi’s analyses of the naïve newcomers, or even the “muselmen” of the camp. “All this belongs to the language of ghosts. There are many other possible kinds of talks in this language. Most of them begin when one says to another: I wish” (Country, 10). Elsewhere, Anna expresses this attitude of thinking and not thinking succinctly: “Now I am common sense and hard calculation. I don’t want to be like the others. I see what their imaginings do to them, and I will not let that happen to me” (Country, 11).

Both recognize the consequences of extreme hunger. For Levi, “the fight against hunger, cold and work leaves little margin for thought, even for this thought. (p. 125) In similar terms, Anna Blume registers the lack of politics and resistance: “For there are no politics in the city as such. The people are too hungry, too distracted, too much at odds with each other for that” (Country, 17). Auster’s emphasis is not on direct oppression of controversial action but on the pressing circumstances.

How do these austere conditions relate to narrative thinking, and is there any way to understand better Auster’s thought about the necessity to act for the capacity to think? I suggest a detour which begins with Mark Turner’s version of cognitive narrative theory portrayed in his Literary Mind (Turner 1996). Turner maintains that “most of our action consists of executing small spatial stories: getting a glass of juice from the refrigerator, dressing, bicycling to the market” (p. 19). He adds that we are able to “recognize small spatial stories on the basis of partial information” (p. 17). Through extended understanding of such spatial stories, he argues, “narrative imagining is our fundamental form of predicting” (p. 18).

One problem in Turner’s argumentation is that he does not theorize the difference between enacting spatial, behavioural stories and proper action. Yet, even this simple behavioural level of following cultural and acquired scripts is by no means as trivial as Galen Strawson (2004, 439) has suggested. Strawson criticizes the idea that “human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort” (p.428), and maintains that it is untrue in any non-trivial sense. He continues: “Well, if someone says, as some do, that making coffee is a narrative that involves
Narrativity, because you have to think ahead, do things in the right order, and so on, and that everyday life involves many such narratives, then I take it the claim is trivial.” (p. 439).

In learning narrativity and accounting own experiences, such cultural scripts are the basic step. For example, when “young children recount routine, scripted events, their narratives tend to be more detailed than those depicting less common incidents” (Ochs and Capps 2001, 78). When children grow up, the focus moves towards unexpected and unusual aspects of experience. These first steps may look trivial but they are still integral parts of the “phenomenology of the capable human being,” as Ricoeur (2005, 89-104) has it. There are two separate problems of (non)triviality. First, what happens when the right and capacity to make coffee is challenged? Second, where is the decisive borderline between trivial and non-trivial? The script of “going to restaurant” is widely known and shared example. When situated in the context of racial segregation or actual risk of suicide bomber, the script is far from trivial, but yet not without the elements of the more basic script (Schank and Abelson 1977).

In extreme conditions, the loss of basic scripts is tangible. As Anna Blume notes:

"Bit by bit, the city robs you of certainty. There can never be any fixed path, and you can survive only if nothing is necessary to you. Without warning, you must be able to change, to drop what you are doing, to reverse. (Country, p. 6) But everything happens too fast here, the shifts are too abrupt, what is true one minute is no longer true the next. (p. 25)"

Certainty seems here to be intimately linked to the capacity to execute routinely the kind of scripts Strawson called trivial. The extreme randomness of the city life robs a great deal of the most elementary cognitive tools in orienting oneself in everyday life. Without the necessary backing of cultural scripts and the capacity to properly imagine more than the next step, the capacity to think is “so much air and emptiness” (p.20), or brains simply are far too overburdened to work properly. At least a moderate reliance on these trivial-looking scripts and schemata seems to be a pre-condition for more severe thinking and planning in social context.

7. The semantics of action
Paul Ricoeur (1984) and Monika Fludernik (1996) take a more helpful step from behavioural level into action in the context of narrative understanding. In theorizing the relationship between experience, action, and narrative, Ricoeur invites the Aristotelian idea of mimesis as an “imitation of action”. Narrative, in this horizon, is about understanding, orienting and accounting of human action. In order to create a basic phenomenological relationship between these operations of narrative, he introduces the idea of “semantics of action.” This semantics is presented as a precondition for understanding one’s own action, perceiving action in a meaningful way, and the capacity to narrate. Fludernik adapts the very same mimesis (1) as the first element of her own model of narrativity (“My level I […] is therefore identical with Ricoeur’s Mimesis I”, p. 43, bold replaced).

What is new in Fludernik’s reception of Ricoeur is the reading of semantics of action explicitly in terms of cognition and even includes the aforementioned “scripts” in Ricoeur’s thought. Fludernik takes more distance from Ricoeur’s theory on the level of emplotting and configuration, by arguing that Ricoeur’s emphasis on temporality leaves the “dynamic of narrative experience” oddly out of picture (p. 24). I quote the same passage as Fludernik:

The intelligibility engendered by emplotment finds a first anchorage in our competence to utilize in a significant manner the conceptual network that structurally distinguishes the domain of action from that of physical movement […] Actions imply goals, the anticipation of which is not confused with some foreseen or predicted result, but which commit the one on whom the action depends. Actions, moreover, refer to motives, which explain why someone does or did something, in a way that clearly distinguish from the way one physical event leads to another. Actions also have agents, who do and can do things which are taken their work, or their deed. As a result these agents can be held responsible for certain consequences of their actions. In this network, the infinite regression opened by the question ‘Why?’ is not incompatible with the finite regression opened by the question ‘Who?’ To identify an agent and to recognize this agent’s motives are complementary operations. We also understand that these agents act and suffer in circumstances they did not make that nevertheless do belong to the practical field, precisely inasmuch as they circumscribe the intervention of historical agents in the course of physical events and offer favorable and unfavorable occasions for their action. (Ricoeur 1984, 54-55; Fludernik 1996, 23.)
For Fludernik, this level is both “pre-textual” and “pre-narrative,” and provides the “cognitive basis for story comprehension at its most elemental level” (p. 23). At the same time, I add, it provides the cognitive basis for comprehension and orientation of action. The proposed role of human action at the core of narrative theory can be easily countered by noticing the human ability to narrativize even such phenomena as movements of geometric patterns (Battersby 2006, 38). The metaphorical power of narrative is truly remarkable. The cognitive point of the semantics of action, however, is that geometric patterns or theoretical abstractions do not understand or account for their movements in terms of this vocabulary. The mimetic circle concerns only the sphere of narrative and human action.

There are a number of points I want to make by reading this passage. First is the recognition how deliberately Ricoeur makes his distinction between his “semantics of action” and the sphere of mere physical, behavioural movements. Narratives are thus about proper and complex action. Next is the realization how Ricoeur adopts concepts and perspectives from the early narratology, starting from Vladimir Propp’s (1958) work, but rather than delving into the deep structures or functional models, he is fascinated by the semantic network of action as such. The language acts of asking Who? What? Why? and attributing responsibility, honour and guilt become relevant in terms of narrative and action alike. Finally the triple way this semantics of action is supposed to work: it orients the agents to understand their own actions; it orients the spectators to perceive other’s action in meaningful ways, and finally it offers the core vocabulary of actual telling, accounting for action.

My purpose is not to define or confine narrative in strict Aristotelian terms as representation of action. Rather, I consider the option that we should possibly take more seriously the practical and cognitive relevance of this semantics of action. Indeed, Ricoeur links the cognitive and pragmatic aspects intimately: “To master the conceptual network as a whole” he says, “and each term as one member of the set, is to have that competence we can call practical understanding” (p. 55). Should we consider this particular field of acting, thinking and telling even as a particular form of life, or at least as its cognitive basis? At least, I suggest that this idea of semantics of action as a practical field could make Auster’s and Levi’s ideas about the difficulty of thinking more understandable.

8. Thinking without space

Semantics of actions is radically curtailed in conditions of holocaust or Anna Blume’s city. As a matter of fact, Primo Levi rather explicitly accounts his expulsion from the field of action. This is
the illuminating moment just after his transportation to Auschwitz, in a terrible thirst, when he tried to catch an icicle:

I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. ‘Warum?’ I asked him in my poor German. ‘Hier is kein warum’ (there is no why here) he replied, pushing me inside with a shove. (Levi 1996, 29)

Open a window, stretch a hand, take an icicle and suck it. This is truly a trivial script, but a script whose interrupted execution has derogatory consequences. How degrading this short incident was, may be approached with the help of Turner and Ricoeur. Turner discusses what he calls ‘the source-action stories’ that help us to understand more complex and abstract events. He writes: “Grasping a physical object so as to control it is a common body action performed by an actor. If we grasp a physical object, we can do what we want with it: We can put it into our mouth, throw it, throw it away, give it away…” and so on. (Turner 1996, 33). In other words, Levi was out of control of his most elementary bodily movements, he was reduced to the position of a helpless infant. But the statement about the lack of “warum” reflects the fact that he also was derailed out of the field and semantics of action. If there is no why, there is no responsible agent, thus no who either, there is no need for reasons and motives of commands. In a prisoner’s suit, and as reduced to the tattooed number, he indeed was not meant be a distinct who. It is noteworthy that Anna Blume experienced a similar reduction of identity and mutilation of her appearance, because she “was too pretty for daily contact with the streets” (Country, 59).

There is no need to exaggerate this argument about lacking thought into absurdity. Of course both Primo Levy and Anna Blume did hard thinking every moment they were able to do so. The topic seems rather to be impaired and restricted thought. At first, Levi’s fellow Italians met on Sundays, but they soon stopped due to their reducing number: “It was better not to think” (Levi 1996, 37). Only after a good day, and for a few hours, was it possible “to think of our mothers and wives, which usually does not happen” (p. 76). Here the obstacle is emotional, and the content of thinking is about thinking the past and the loved ones. No wonder then that Anna Blume had not thought “you” for years before her letter. Both Levi and Anna Blume make an significant distinction between “emotional thinking” and “thinking as hard calculation”. Anna’s older friend Isabel gave her a hard lecture on the survival on the streets:
Never think about anything, she said. Just melt into the street and pretend your body doesn’t exist. No musings; no sadness or happiness; no anything but the streets, all empty inside, concentrating only on the next step you are about to take. (Country, 57, italics mine)

Thinking of emotional topics and giving space to emotions has a very particular role both in Levi and Anna’s letter: this is version of thinking that must be consciously confined in terms of time (to minimally short periods) and place (to exceptionally protected ones). Of course, it is impossible to carry out this task without concentration and the other kind of thinking, the “hard calculation” of Anna Blume.

But Anna Blume’s original dilemma about thinking concerned thinking about the immediate future. How narrow the space for this category of thinking was, is curtly expressed by Levi: “Although we do not think for more than a few minutes a day, and then in a strangely detached and external manner, we know that we will end in selections.” (p. 103) Even here, the emotions are dangerously close, thus the need for “strangely detached” thought.

Anna Blume ponders this “strangely detached and external manner” in slightly different words. In addition to all kinds of emotionally charged thinking, the ethical sensitivity on thinking is challenged:

That is the dilemma. On the one hand, you want to survive, to adapt, to make the best of things as they are. But, on the other hand, to accomplish this seems to entail killing off all those things that once made you think yourself as human. Do you see what I am trying to say? In order to live, you must make yourself die. (Country, 20)

This passage captures several parallels between the two books. As in the ninth chapter of Levi’s account (“The Drowned and the Saved”), the chosen tense is present. The moral dilemma is similar: “Survival without renunciation of any part of one’s own moral world (…) was conceded only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints (Levi 1996, 92). The “you” of the passage quite obviously no longer is the addressee of the letter. It vacillates between Anna herself and a generalized you facing a more general human dilemma. But if you look at the passage more closely, you can realize the sudden absence of any concrete reference to the specific city and specific situation. With this play of “double-deicted you” (Herman 2002, 338-345), the actual reader (at least this reader) is invited to contemplate his or her own survival and adaptation.
9. Narrative recovery?

Just after her severe injury and miscarriage, Anna Blume was – by coincidence - found by the staff members of a hospital and charity institution called **Woburn House**. Entering the house means a dramatic change: now she has protection and care, and is surrounded by people who have names, histories, and normal emotions. Boris Stepanovits, a collaborator of institute, and a playful caricature of post-modern personality, keeps telling her fictional and fantastic version about his past, most of all to cheer her up. After her partial recovery, Anna starts working for the house. Normally, the house provided a shelter for a two weeks period. Anna’s job is to interview the potential patients. The interview

…never took more than a couple of minutes, but it was the rare interview that stopped at that point. They all wanted to tell me their stories, and I had no choice but to listen. It was a different story every time, and yet each story was finally the same. (…) I heard hundreds of these stories, and there were times when I didn’t think I could stand it anymore. I had to be sympathetic, to nod in all the right places, but the placid, professional manner I tried to maintain was a poor defense against the things I heard. (Country, 143-144)

The mere transition from the chaos of the streets to the temporary shelter of Woburn House opens the gates of storytelling. As a traumatized person herself, Anna has real difficulties in enduring and being sympathetic at the same time. Some stories are too much for her, like those of girls who worked as prostitutes in the Euthanasia Clinics. But the main point is that after her hazardous years in the city, Anna is now partly protected and thickly surrounded by stories.

Anna’s reflections on stories grow deeper when his lost partner, Sam Farr, also finds his way to the House. At that time, the House has neither a doctor nor drugs left. For this acute reason, Victoria Woburn, the owner and director of the house, has the idea of converting Sam into a fake doctor. He shall just have a white coat, placid manners, and then he just listen patiently. For Anna, the plan is at first a riotous fraud and betrayal, yet it is instituted. The outcome is an impostor-cum- narrative doctor, who, to Anna’s initial dismay, is a great success: "He had a way of listening to them that made them want to talk, and words came flooding their mouths the moment he sat down to be with them.” (p. 167). In comparison with Anna, he has his training of journalist, and he has his white coat and the fake title as doctor to keep himself within the confines of a role. He is thus better
equipped to protect himself against the overflowing, transferential trauma. Sam’s success had further consequences:

His pose as a doctor had suddenly given him access to the intimate thoughts of others, and these thoughts now became a part of who he was. His interior world grew larger, sturdier, more able to absorb the things that were put into it. (Country, 168)

Anna reckons that other people’s narratives created more space in Sam’s mind, and changed the way’s he was thinking. The difference between Anna’s and Sam’s reactions to their storytellers might be restated with the help of Domick LaCapra’s thought (2004). Even a historian whose work comprises the experiences of victims of trauma, LaCapra maintains, needs an emphatic and not just a professionally detached attitude. However, the risk of empathy is to slide into a full identification, with all of its traumatizing consequences. He therefore suggests an intermediary attitude of “emphatic unsettlement.” The heard stories, he would say, must not leave the listener intact but should indeed raise questions about his or her own identity; yet the receiver has to be able to return to him or herself, without fully identifying with the victim. With the help of his fake title, imposed identity and white coat, Sam is able to receive the traumatizing stories without too deep identification or too detached coolness: he nevertheless is unsettled, and thus his “interior world grew larger.” This emphatic unsettlement, however, is precisely one of the attitudes both Levi in the camp and Anna in the streets wanted to avoid and control, since all kinds of unsettlements were simply life-threatening. Under the conditions, it simply was wrong kind of thinking. In Woburn House, Anna is thus working through and unpacking her whole model of “common sense and hard calculation.”

Being a narrative doctor, however, was not Sam’s first narrative project in the city. At the time Anna met him in the National Library, Sam was more or less writing an oral history of the country. He had some money left, and he was paying a small fee to everyone who could tell something about the Troubles of the country. At first, Anna recons the project both ridiculous and dangerous way of getting rid of money, but finally gives her own scanty resources to help Sam. A huge fire in the library – at the same time with Anna’s nearby death – destroys the whole manuscript and Sam’s lodging. No systematic history of the country will thus be available. But there is another problem here. Why did this earlier work not to cause his “interior world” to grow larger? Was he earlier too much a professional journalist, too far detached to be “emphatically unsettled”? 
Let me summarize the sequence of events. Anna is rescued from the streets, and she gets care and food. She is cuddled up with the stories of the friendly person of the Woburn House. She is, in a manner speaking, back within the field of semantics of action but not yet rescued from the atrocities of the country. She starts interviewing and listening to the would-be-patients. She has difficulties in reception of worst stories. Sam starts working as a narrative doctor. Anna sees that Sam’s interior grows bigger by listening to stories. “Now I am all common sense and hard calculation,” she says in early on in her letter, but she already is deeply altered when coming to the conclusion (Country, 11). The whole sentence, pronounced in present tense, can be best understood as her return to re-live her past in the streets of the city. Being exclusively common sense and hard calculation would, first of all, exclude her project of writing the letter in the absence of any concrete reason or benefit at hand.

It is a few weeks after the realization of Sam’s new role that Anna finally, and apparently by chance, finds an old and unused notebook. This is the time when the remaining members of the Woburn House staff have decided to try an escape from the country by their old car. Anna does not expect much. “Anything is possible, and that is almost the same as nothing, almost the same as being born into a world that has never existed.” (Country, 188) Still the point is that the group of friends will take action. During this hectic preparation of escape, Anna is finally and fervently writing her letter. The whole narrative embeddedness, the slight possibility to escape, the realization of the relevance of stories – all of this invoke the memory of “you,” and the urge to write.

The Anna, who arrived in the city and lived there for many hard years, had no time or no need to write. As she was outside the reign of the semantics of action, she could not care less. Diary would have bee a part of her past bourgeois foolishness, and had nothing to do with hard calculation. Diary orients us to study the representation of the city; the idea of testimony directs us to ask about the performance of writing, and Anna’s slow growth to the narrative way of thinking, and narrative way of telling “you” her story. The idea of a “total representation” of the city, in the form of Sam’s huge manuscript, was burned to ashes years before. Anna is writing partly because the other people, as well as “you” as the escaping team, grew important as fellow humans.

10. Layers of thought

Both Primo Levi and Paul Auster study the limits and necessities of thought in extreme conditions. To perform this task, they seem to utilize a thoroughly paradoxical language of thinking hard and
not thinking at all. These paradoxes can be at least partly interpreted in terms of different meanings of thought both authors use in these works. Both indicate how thinking about the whole moral consequences of one’s deeds may be disastrous, and still the exclusion of ethically oriented thinking may entail “killing off all those things that once made you think yourself as human” (Country, 20). Emotionally charged thinking of one’s relations, past events and wishes about future may as well be a life-threatening diversion. Indeed, Anna Blume let herself to be hoaxed into a human slaughterhouse, as she says, because “I was (…) too lost in my own thoughts to be thinking about anything except how glad Sam would be when I returned” (Country, 124).

Yet, at the core of the dilemma is the risk of losing the capacity to think altogether. As Anna says:

Faced with the most ordinary occurrence, you no longer know how to act, and because you cannot act, you find yourself unable to think. The brain is a muddle. (Country, 20)

Action does not need to follow any prescribed policy or a Platonic idea of the result of the action. Yet knowing and action are circularly connected. Anna is concerned about “how” to act, not about not knowing an acceptable objective. This is the point when even the hard calculation is at risk. Thinking does not have any repose or any help of cultural scripts. This is the point when the person is furthest away from any narrative organization of situation, and from her own future, reduced to a panicky immediacy. As I maintain, in these extreme circumstances the person is excluded from the culturally significant field of semantics of action, and in short of basic cognitive scripts of spatial stories. The withdrawal from the field of action engenders at first necessary restrictions of ethical reflection and personal, emotional commitment to be a character who considers responsibility, guilt and praise.

But what happens to the inhabitants of the city after their return back to the streets? As a matter of fact, Anna considers the whole temporary shelter and care as cruel and inhuman play without a genuine chance to give a new course of life, even a start of such. Many a resident commits suicide rather than returns to the streets. Temporary care and a possibility to tell your story do not change the harsh conditions of the country. This not an easy self-help book on benign storytelling.

To me, Auster writes about the tight and difficult connection between action, thinking and telling in the difficult and risky endeavour of being a human being. Primo Levi wrote when the Nazi camps were historically destroyed, and in that limited sense belonged to the past. Auster’s city denotes to
the whole twentieth century, as he has it. The city is still there, and the conundrum is all but solved. Anna Blume does what is possible: tries to escape and writes to testify, to document at least some traces of the doomed city. In the same sense, the author leaves us without any indication of the attitude of the obvious reader of the letter. Why does he or she not react to this letter? Why is he or she just silent? This uneasiness encourages the actual reader to take the role of “you,” taking a stance as regards the atrocities of twentieth century.

The very last words of the novel are remarkable. “Once we get to where we are going, I will try to write to you again, I promise” (Country, 188). In fully admitting the radical openness of her future, Anna nevertheless enforces her commitment to be a responsible agent who has a future, who continues to be herself. This, if anything, testifies her return to the field of semantics of action.

References:


2 “…I shall entrust to promise making the burden of bearing the destiny of ipseity, in defiance of circumstances that threaten to ruin the identity of the same. The proud assertion “I will do it” expresses in language the risky posture of ipseity, as self-contingency that goes beyond the safety of mere sameness” (Ricoeur 2005, 103). Promise-making is the key tool to control the unforeseeable consequences of human action in Hannah Arendt’s theory of action (Arendt 1958).
Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press.


