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**Towards a Hermeneutics of Narrative: Exploring Hanna Meretoja's *The Ethics of Storytelling Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (2018)**

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**Abstract**

*The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (2018) by Hanna Meretoja presents a groundbreaking approach to reforming literary studies and criticism through the lens of hermeneutics. This article examines how Meretoja bridges the gap between textual interpretation and ethical implications of storytelling, particularly focusing on the first four chapters of her seminal work. The book establishes a new paradigm that combines narrative theory with hermeneutical methodology, emphasizing how narratives both expand and constrain our sense of the *possible*. Through rigorous examination of theoretical frameworks and practical literary analyses, Meretoja demonstrates how storytelling serves as a crucial medium for ethical discourse and cultural transformation. Her work draws upon German hermeneutical traditions, particularly the works of Heidegger and Gadamer, while incorporating contemporary narrative theory to develop a robust framework for understanding the ethical dimensions of storytelling. The analysis in this article reveals how Meretoja's approach offers innovative solutions to current challenges in literary criticism and narrative studies, ultimately advocating for a new *poesis* of literary comprehension. The significance of her work lies in how she reconnects narrative studies with ethical inquiry while maintaining a rigorous theoretical foundation for understanding the complex relationship between narrative, ethics, and historical consciousness, offering crucial insights for scholars in literary studies, philosophy, and related humanities disciplines.

**Keywords:** Hanna Meretoja, Hermeneutics & History, Literary Criticism & Theory, Narrative Studies

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## 1. Introduction

Hanna Meretoja is a pioneer in narrative research. She is the permanent chair of the Comparative Literature department at the University of Turku, where she also studied comparative literature and philosophy as an undergraduate student. Her interest in hermeneutics and literary theory and criticism began with her PhD thesis, entitled *The French Narrative Turn: From the Problematization of Narrative Subjectivity in Alain Robbe-Grillet's Dans le labyrinthe to its Hermeneutic Rehabilitation in Michel Tournier's Le Roi des Aulnes*. Based on her scholarly activities, Meretoja seems to be fascinated by the tension between hermeneutics and literature. Most notably, she is interested in the opportunities that hermeneutics may provide literary academics in the act of interpreting the meaning(s) of narratives and their function(s). *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible*, first published in 2018, is Meretoja's primary and most notable contribution to narratology. The book is divided into eight chapters, and there is a deliberate interplay between all eight parts as they come to intersect and resemble one unity. Meretoja draws her insights from the tradition of German hermeneutics and its approach towards the act of interpretation/understanding of narratives. From this conjuncture, she aimed, in her book, to develop a hermeneutical paradigm to project the necessity of including hermeneutics in studying, theorizing, and making sense of the ethical implications of narratives. Her research is hermeneutical in the sense that it views narratives to be "culturally mediated practices of (re)interpreting experience" (Meretoja, 2018, p. 2). Meretoja's main objective in writing this book is to show how "narratives both expand and diminish our sense of the *possible*" (2018, p. 2). One of her other major aims is to "explicate the relevance of hermeneutics for today's interdisciplinary narrative studies" (2018, p. 11).

The opening chapter of Meretoja's book presents the scope of study she expects to use to achieve her desired results. It is a chapter in which numerous theoretical topics are discussed, beginning with hermeneutics, and progressing towards psychology, cultural studies, history, sociology, and ethics. The same chapter also lays the groundwork for the subsequent ones. The second chapter continues to build narrative hermeneutics as a way of understanding the relationship between *life* and *narration*, assessing the potential that such a paradigm can provide literary studies. The third examines the direct link between *ethics* and *storytelling*. It is a part that discusses six dimensions of narrativity's ethical potential. All these aspects combine to stress the significance of narrative in conveying and becoming an ethical discourse. The fourth chapter is motivated by Nietzsche's (1949) article, "The Uses and Abuses of History". Meretoja applies Nietzsche's critique to history as she analyses both history and moral agency in Julia Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau* (2007, *The Blind Side of the Heart*). In the same chapter, there is also a defense of history as a tool through which narrative projects the sense of the *possible*. According to Meretoja, "how the relationship between the actual and the possible is conceptualized depends on one's assumptions about the fundamental nature of reality and history" (Meretoja, 2018, p.26). She argues unequivocally that the "Nietzschean-Bakhtinian-Foucault" hermeneutical paradigm, which regards story as interpretative and existing "in relations of dialogue and struggle in the world, not merely in some textual universe," is required for her narrative ethics (Meretoja, 2018, p.11). In a nutshell, storytelling "takes part in performatively shaping (the real world)" rather than being merely a portrayal of imagined ones" (Meretoja, 2018, p.11).

## 2. Understanding the Introduction: Setting the Grounds

As previously stated, the first chapter is an introduction in which Meretoja presents hermeneutics as a forgotten ghost in modern theory and calls for a (re)appreciation of hermeneutics as a tool for investigating the dichotomy between narrative and ethics. She also considers the role that storytelling plays in other domains such as psychology, ethics, and history. First, before dealing with the role of hermeneutics in exploring storytelling, we must discuss Meretoja's emphasis on narratives and their individualistic and collective functions. As soon as the introduction begins,

Meretoja declares that narrative fiction draws attention to the “cognitive and ethical significance for our development as human beings, moral agents, and democratic citizens... as it boosts our capacity for empathetic perspective-taking” (Meretoja, 2018, p.3). She, like Aristotle, advocates the potential of narratives to elicit sentiments of empathy, which allow for an ethical discourse to be culturally transferred between the work and the audience that consumes it. She later asserts that “psychological and literary narrative studies have been dominated by an individual-centered and ahistorical perspective when considering the nature of experience, and they would benefit from a richer sense of history” (Meretoja, 2018, p.32). Here, she emphasizes that individualistic approaches to the study of narrative are insufficient and cannot be carried out successfully without considering the collective nature of the self and the complex ethical mechanism that governs not only the individual, but also the nature of narrative itself as it unfolds within different historical and geographical settings. In other words, Meretoja sees storytelling as an important field of study that has lacked a sense of hermeneutical historicity, which she believes might improve the overall process of text/literary interpretation and revolutionize the concept of narrative itself within literary studies.

When dealing with hermeneutics, Meretoja makes it plain that she is referring primarily to Heideggerian and Gadamerian philosophies. Later, she also hints at Paul Ricoeur’s contribution as she believes he aligns with the idea of “narrative imagination” (Meretoja, 2018, p.3). She chooses such hermeneuticians - Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur - because their ideas go hand in hand with the conclusions that Meretoja arrives at from her analysis of the relationship between narrative (as narratology) and history (as the temporal setting where it unfolds). One significant notion that the book focuses on is the historicity of storytelling. This historicity is mentioned repeatedly throughout the first chapter, illustrating how storytelling has the power to disclose the potentials of human existence. This is highly inspired by Heidegger's idea of art as a means for both revealing and concealing truth. Most significantly, as a location where we attend to *truth* (1971, p.38). Similarly, Meretoja believes that all sorts of narratives, not only literature, have a fundamental ability of projecting ethical factors that, while distinct from Heidegger's 'truth,' emerge to be comparable on the level of functionality.

To support her argument for the historicity of narrative, she also draws on Cultural Memory Studies, a discipline that maintains that mankind's cultural identity is always affected by history. There is also a defense of history as a tool through which narrative projects the sense of the possible. According to Meretoja, the way "how the relationship between the actual and the possible is conceptualized depends on one's assumptions about the fundamental nature of reality and history" (Meretoja, 2018, p.26). She argues unequivocally that the "Nietzschean-Bakhtinian-Foucault" hermeneutical paradigm, which regards story as interpretative and existing "in relations of dialogue and struggle in the world, not merely in some textual universe," is required for her narrative ethics (Meretoja, 2018, p.11). In a nutshell, storytelling "takes part in performatively shaping (the real world)" rather than being merely a portrayal of imagined ones” (Meretoja, 2018, p.11).

### 3. Narrative Hermeneutics

In the second chapter, Meretoja continues to focus on theoretical presumptions as she discusses the function, importance, and status of hermeneutics within literary and narrative studies. This portion of the book depends heavily on her study on the possibility of applying hermeneutics to the evaluation of narratives and the understanding of their ethical role. The opening of this chapter presents Susan Sontag's critique of this hermeneutical paradigm and her call for "an erotic of art" (Meretoja, 2018, p.43). Meretoja brings in Sontag’s perspective to demonstrate, once more, the idea that critics have always refused to play/experiment with the tools that hermeneutics provides them, preferring instead to approach literature as something that is only fictional. That is, as something that cannot be meaningful of/for a real lived experience, but only a fictional representation of it. Meretoja challenges this point of view. According to Meretoja, the proper hermeneutic approach views "interpretation as something we do all the time, whether we like it or not" (Meretoja, 2018, p.44).

This serves as the foundation for Meretoja's defence of the significance of hermeneutics in the process of revealing narrative identity. She believes that understanding the meaning of narratives and analyzing them need a Nietzschean hermeneutic approach that enables one to "conceptualize in a non-reductive way the relationship between narrative webs and the individual subjects entangled in them" (Meretoja, 2018, p.44).

In the same chapter, Meretoja delves into an intriguing idea that serves as the foundation for her book's overall claim. She begins to interestingly examine narrative webs and the individual experience from a dialogical standpoint. To enable her narrative hermeneutics' function, she makes it clear that it is essential to grasp how narratives are intrinsically dialogical, meaning that they are "cultural webs...that exist through individual interpretation" (Meretoja, 2018, p.74). More importantly, a dialogical approach to narrative identity implies that "our actions and identities are never entirely ours...but are entangled in meaning systems that precede us and shape our experiences" (Meretoja, 2018, p.75). Such an approach reinforces our claim that Meretoja's book is consistent with German hermeneutical legacy in that it considers individuals to be historical creatures incapable of detaching themselves from the fact of historicity. This specific view shifts the way we interpret narrative as the art of conveying human experience. At the same time, and within the same analysis, narrative itself, as a mechanism, becomes a historical entity with a heritage that it cannot detach from. This legacy then dictates how, why, and to what purpose narratives are formed. Meretoja presents several postmodern perspectives on this dialogic nature, primarily mentioning Foucault's discursive analysis. She, despite her respect for such reading, claims that the "advantage of hermeneutic terminology is that it makes explicit, through the key notions of (re)interpretation and dialogue, the subject's role as an agent of (re)interpretation" (Meretoja, 2018, p.81). In other words, the individual is not regarded as an unconscious agent through whom language operates fictionally. Rather, in the hermeneutics of narrative that Meretoja calls for, the individual is portrayed as actively participating in the meaning making process. It is in this hermeneutical and dialogic network that the "ethical life of society unfolds" (Meretoja, 2018, p.85). Eventually, as Meretoja points out, those who agree on the "ontological significance of narrative for human existence mostly also stress the ethical potential of storytelling" (Meretoja, 2018, p.89).

#### 4. Storytelling and Ethics

In the third chapter, Meretoja uses six ethical categories to explore the narrative-ethics dichotomy, a dichotomy she claims to have identified in her studies. This dichotomy considers, first and foremost, the ethical discourses of narratives to be essential as they "cultivate our sense of the *possible*" (Meretoja, 2018, p.89). Second, narratives, by definition, contribute to the expansion of both personal and collective understandings of life and its underpinnings. The third category expands on how narratives, by displaying other people's lives, allow the audience to have a comparable experience to the fictional characters, affecting and changing the course of their lives and the way they go on about living. Fourth, Meretoja claims that another quality of narrative ethics is the creation of an in-between-narrative space, one that is transformative and where cross-culturalism may rise. Fifth, and relying on such a space, two processes of perspective-taking and perspective-awareness emerge, both of which are necessary for the act of experiencing narratives as both general readers and literary critics. Sixth, being the final category, investigates how narratives function as a mode of ethical inquiry into the nature of Being itself. Being here exists in the true ontological Heideggerian sense. What is crucial and should be highlighted out of Meretoja's treatment of these six categories is that she uses them as the founding ground for a discussion of how a hermeneutic of narrative ethics can benefit today's world in making it a more peaceful and understanding place (Meretoja, 2018, p.143). She believes that interpreting the sense of the *'possible'* helps humans to "transform cultural narrative practices to construct their identities, interpret their experiences, and engage with those of others" (Meretoja, 2018, p.144). Clearly, what Meretoja highlights here is the significance of her hermeneutical project that is not only oriented towards the understanding of narrative's past and present, but, more importantly, its future and the sense of the *'possible'* that awaits in it.



Within this chapter, Meretoja also marks the transition from a separate study of hermeneutics and narrative to a comparative claim for a hermeneutics of narrative ethics. This transition is accomplished through an exposition of how narrative incorporates ethics and how both entities intersect in the making of individual and collective identities. Meretoja begins by stating unequivocally that the ethical part of narratives refers to how they broaden our sense of the 'possible' rather than how they make us good or bad. It is crucial to pause at this point and consider why Meretoja would draw such a difference. Simply put, she is not concerned with the classical claim that some literatures make us good, and others make us bad. She is more interested in how narratives in general and all literature come to form a body of knowledge that allows its consumer to engage in an interpretative act that is concerned with expanding the sense of the 'possible'. Therefore, Meretoja writes that "what is ethically crucial {in narratives} is how they expand or diminish our sense of the possible" (Meretoja, 2018, p.89). As such, it is clear that, for Meretoja, and just like it was the case for Heidegger and the whole ontological school, the power of ethical narratives lies in representing the *potentialities* that an individual may achieve or relate to by exposure to narrative's mechanism(s). This is obviously motivated by Heidegger's view of *Being* and the interpretive existential obligation of individuals in their quest for full authenticity and genuine existence as *Daseins*. In essence, Meretoja's central focus in her chapter on storytelling and ethics is not merely the interplay between these two elements, but their profound impact on the formation of the self and its comprehension of existence. She conceives of narrative as a medium through which our lives and experiences are depicted, inherently historical and deeply embedded in human existence. These narratives serve as representations of our existential experiences and the possibilities they encompass. As we engage with these narratives, our conscious, awakened Dasein, in a Heideggerian sense, is actualized.

## 5. The Uses and Abuses of History for Life

At this point in the book, Meretoja, after having separated between storytelling and ethics, begins to revisit her very own claim and examine the notion that all narratives are endowed with inherent ethical goodness. She uses, once again, Nietzsche's critique of history as an example to demonstrate that, like history, narrative may be utilized for good or harmful purposes depending on who commits it and which ends it sought. At this point, Meretoja has already commented on this issue several times. This is obvious, for example, when she addresses post-modern theories, particularly post-structuralism, and the problem of discursive powers. How can we rely on dialogical narratives to safeguard us from the ideological formulations at work if the same narratives are intrinsically ideological? This is the exact question that Meretoja addresses as she opens the chapter by acknowledging that her title choice "indicates {her} aim to explore, in more concrete terms, both the ethically valuable and the violent effects of narratives on lives" (Meretoja, 2018, p.149). She further conducts a literary study on Julia Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau* (2007, *The Blind Side of the Heart*), a novel that meets the exact characteristics Meretoja is looking for the analysis she carried out. According to Meretoja, such a literary work is capable of foregrounding "how certain people have the power to tell the official, subsumptive functioning stories that define 'us' and 'others'" (Meretoja, 2018, p.160). To prove this, Meretoja no longer engages with her six hermeneutics of narrative ethics categories theoretically, but instead takes them into an applied literary analysis of Franck's novel, testing and demonstrating their reliability and.

Meretoja's study elucidates how identity in Franck's novel is constructed through dialogue yet distorted by the historically ideological context of the rising Nazi regime. The protagonist's Jewish heritage has traditionally anchored her identity, offering a sense of belonging. However, as the Nazi regime consolidates power, she is compelled to adopt a false identity, illustrating how history can shape and manipulate identity. Despite the protagonist's isolation, her identity is a product of historical forces. This leads Meretoja to integrate history into her hermeneutical framework to explore the possibilities of identity transformation. In Franck's novel, history reveals the diverse ways individuals alter their cultural identities to survive, which suggests changes in their narratives and storytelling methods. Meretoja thus describes storytelling as the "art of survival," enabling survival from historical horrors and ideological control (Meretoja, 2018, p.157). She further argues that

Franck's novel facilitates "sharing experiences with others," as "storytelling is a necessary condition for cultivating a narrative sense of self and experiencing life as meaningful" (Meretoja, 2018, p.157). Through this, Meretoja underscores her central argument: narratives are culturally mediated, conveying specific ethical discourses to the audience in a dialogic fashion. Specifically, her work highlights a thorough analysis of how narratives offer possibilities for individuals through the acts of narrating and engaging with stories, ultimately leading to her conclusion that storytelling is an act of survival on both individual and collective levels.

## 6. A General Discussion

What, then, is the central subject of Meretoja's book? While this question may initially seem straightforward, it proves to be far more complex upon closer examination. This section of the review aims to establish key conclusions essential to understanding Meretoja's work. It is evident that the book focuses on the dialectical relationship between narratives and ethics. Furthermore, it advocates for the adoption of a German historical hermeneutic approach to construct a new psychological narrative addressing this dichotomy. By doing so, Meretoja introduces a novel paradigm to narrative and literary studies, as well as to the humanities more broadly. The intersection of ethics and storytelling extends beyond literature into philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, and other disciplines. Meretoja's approach seeks to decouple the ethical dimension of narratives from their traditional literary confines, promoting a hermeneutical framework as a viable means of bridging literature with other humanistic fields. But what implications arise from this innovative perspective? Fundamentally, Meretoja's work transitions the understanding of narrative from being static textual material to a dynamic entity. This shift highlights the historical nature of narratives, which, like humans, prove to be historical beings determined by their specific historical conditions. As such, narratives become sites of exploration rather than mere observation. This perspective aligns with the book's overarching argument: narratives are ethical precisely because they are historical, and their historical nature necessitates a hermeneutical approach to interpretation.

From the four chapters previously discussed and the book's broader objectives, ten key conclusions can be drawn:

1. Narrative is essential to human existence.
2. Narrative inherently communicates ethicality.
3. Narratives, despite their ethical dimensions, can propagate violent ideologies.
4. Despite this potential for manipulation, narratives remain crucial for fostering mutual understanding and preserving individual and communal identities.
5. Narrative is inherently historical.
6. Highlighting historicity requires a hermeneutical approach.
7. Hermeneutics, as a discipline, offers innovative methodologies for textual analysis.
8. The hermeneutics of narrative ethics enables scholars to imagine the *possible*.
9. Hermeneutics can leverage literary studies to refine its premises and advance its scope.
10. By adopting hermeneutics of narrative ethics, scholars can transform the relationship between collective unconsciousness and imagination through dialogic storytelling.

In addition to these conclusions, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* is significant for its ability to present a distinctive and detailed perspective on narrative studies. Few works achieve this level of clarity and depth. The challenges of text interpretation have long plagued literary studies and the humanities, contributing to their perceived academic stagnation. Meretoja's project seeks to rejuvenate these disciplines by proposing a new hermeneutic paradigm. By advocating for an alliance between hermeneutics and narratology, Meretoja directly addresses the persistent issue of textual interpretation within the humanities.

## Conclusion

Put briefly, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, with its sophisticated framework that bridges traditional hermeneutics with modern narrative ethics, represents a pivotal contribution to contemporary literary studies and narrative theory. Meretoja's work fundamentally reconceptualizes how we understand the relationship between storytelling, ethical discourse, and historical consciousness. By establishing a robust theoretical foundation that combines German hermeneutical traditions with contemporary narrative theory, she provides scholars with innovative tools for addressing current challenges in literary criticism and interpretation. The significance of Meretoja's contribution extends beyond literary studies, reaching into broader humanities disciplines by demonstrating how narrative functions as a crucial medium for ethical discourse and cultural transformation. Her framework reveals the intricate ways in which storytelling shapes both individual and collective understanding of possibility, memory, and ethical responsibility. This comprehensive approach not only revitalizes literary studies but also offers new pathways for interdisciplinary dialogue between philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies.

Meretoja's emphasis on the historical dimension of narrative experience provides crucial insights into how stories function as vehicles for cultural memory and ethical reflection. Her work demonstrates that understanding narratives as culturally mediated practices of (re)interpreting experience opens new possibilities for examining how stories shape our sense of self, community, and ethical responsibility. As we continue to grapple with questions of narrative ethics and interpretation in an increasingly complex world, Meretoja's framework offers valuable tools for understanding how stories can both expand and constrain our sense of the possible. Her work ultimately points toward a more nuanced and ethically aware approach to narrative studies, one that recognizes the profound interconnection between storytelling, historical consciousness, and ethical understanding. es of narratives—that is, genres that are not literary per se— have great “potential to cultivate our sense of history as a sense of the possible” (Meretoja, 2018, p.35). The sixth chapter underlines the relevance of content and form for an ethical line of storytelling by analyzing Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* (2006, *The Kindly Ones*). Because of narrative's dialogic structure, the seventh chapter revisits and asserts the premise that storytelling is transformative. It also highlights the power of narratives in opening new modes of experience for individuals and societies alike. The eighth and final chapter is a conclusion in which Meretoja negotiates the soundness of her 'hermeneutic ethics of storytelling' paradigm while also listing the academic possibilities that such a framework opens. In broad strokes, this review covers the entire book, although it focuses on the first four chapters to illustrate how the content and structure of each contribute to the wider aim of the book.

On another briefer note, this article has outlined, in brief, the central concerns of Meretoja's book and the theoretical and practical strategies she employs through her analyses of literary corpora. Readers are encouraged to engage directly with Meretoja's text to gain a deeper understanding of the issues and insights presented. Such engagement is essential for fully appreciating the nuanced arguments and potential offered by her groundbreaking work on narrative ethics.

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