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Learning from Best Practice

Reality, Truth, and the Novel as a Vehicle of the 'Liberal Narrative'

Abstract: Die Sehnsucht nach einem neuen verbindenden Narrativ, das den allgemeinen Partikularisierungs- und Polarisierungstendenzen innerhalb der westlichen Demokratien entgegenwirkt, ist groß. Beiträge, die das Problem, dem es zu begegnen gilt, dabei vor allem oder ausschließlich in ‚Feindnarrativen' oder ‚Katastrophenerzählungen' sehen, machen es sich zu einfach. Ausgehend von der These, dass es sich beim realistischen Roman um ein zentrales Vermittlungsorgan des – heute von vielen als altersschwach oder grundsätzlich problematisch empfundenen – ‚liberalen' Narrativs handelt, spürt der Aufsatz der Frage nach, worin die besondere Wirkungsmacht des Romans lag und vielleicht immer noch liegt. Dabei werden epistemologische und ontologische Aspekte fiktionaler Weltentwürfe ebenso in den Blick genommen wie die historische Wandlungs- und Anpassungsfähigkeit der Gattung.

1 The 'Grand Narrative' – Old and New

Ever since 2016, the year of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump, fake news has been perceived as a serious threat to Western democracies. Like 'fake news' and 'alternative facts', the terms 'narrative', 'narration', 'story', and 'myth' are buzz words in socio-political discussions; in fact any or all of these words often appear together. But they have different resonances. Everyone – even Donald Trump, the great master of alternative facts – associates 'fake news' with lies, untruthful political propaganda and moral corruption.[1] On the whole, the terms 'narration', 'narrative', 'story' and even 'myth' have no such unequivocally negative connotations.

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1 As when he blamed CNN reporter Jim Acosta for producing fake news, for example, and refused to take a question from him during a White House press conference in November 2018.

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The last few years have seen the publication of many scholarly analyses of the phenomenon of fake news and the construction of countless websites dedicated to explaining the phenomenon. In contrast, the exact meanings of 'narration', 'narrative', 'story' and 'myth' remain comparatively vague in popular discourse. These terms have precise definitions in academic contexts, where they have travelled through many disciplines, accrued different meanings in different scholarly fields and enabled complex discussions among experts. In public discourse, as well as in many interdisciplinary research projects, however, they tend to shed their academic armour. Here they are generally used to invoke the postmodernist concept of the "grand narrative"[2], and as such nowadays regularly serve speakers to express their desire for 'a new narrative' that will provide Western societies with positive visions of our communities' future.

Yale historian Timothy Snyder has recently argued, for example, that democracies will only survive if they continue to imagine and reimagine their futures by reflecting on their pasts. He suggests that in order to do so, the dangerous "politics of eternity" must be countered by a new narrative that neither interprets all facts by translating them into the well-established "story of progress" nor "classif[ies] every new event as just one more instance of a timeless threat" (2018, 8). Journalists and political advisers such as Stefan Kornelius or Alex Evans also stress the power of 'narratives' to mould the social imaginary when they deplore that 'our society lacks a shared narrative, a consensus on what is happening to it and where it wants to go' (Kornelius 2018, 4; my translation), or when they more generally point out a dangerous "myth gap" (Evans 2017). Not only individual scholars and journalists but also political institutions are driven by such a desire for a new narrative. The European Union issued a call for a "New Narrative for Europe" in 2015, for example. As the EU website dedicated to this project explains, this new narrative should

> *articulate what Europe stands for today and tomorrow.* The purpose of this is to contribute to bringing Europe closer to its citizens and reviving a 'European' spirit [...] Central to this is the ***aim to identify a new, encompassing narrative*** that takes into account the evolving reality of the European continent, as well as highlighting that the EU is not solely about the economy and growth, but also about cultural unity and common values in a globalised world. Europe's core values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality,

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2 The *OED* explanation of this term refers to Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi's translation of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984): "*grand narrative* n. (after French *grand récit* [...]) a story or representation used to give an explanatory or justificatory account of a society, period, etc." ('narrative', 2.c., *OED online*).

and respect for human rights are an essential part of the European project. (European Commission; emphases in original)

With this article, I aim to contribute to this general search for a new political narrative by drawing on an understanding of narrative theory and narrative fiction in its historical and cultural context. Like economist Robert J. Shiller in his latest study, *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral & Drive Major Economic Events* (2019), I hold that there is much to learn from understanding the mechanisms and the social attraction of the old popular narratives that have helped to establish, and still to some extent drive, the most recent, but now crumbling and increasingly less attractive grand narrative of and about our community.[3] The question I seek to answer, therefore, is not so much: What does the new narrative for our community look like?[4] But rather: What made the old narrative so successful and what can we learn from an analysis of this success for a narrative that might shape our own future?

2 The Myth Gap

I will take my starting point here from a non-scholarly booklet that briefly trended in the media after its publication in 2017 when the 'fake news' discussion had reached one of its climaxes: Alex Evans's *The Myth Gap*. As the title of his book announces, political adviser Evans, who has worked for the British Government's Department for International Development and as an "expert on climate change in the UN Secretary-General's office" (Evans 2017, 153), is convinced that our society lacks a utopia for the twenty-first century. His reasoning revolves around the currently much-vaunted thesis that radical forces win elections because they tell more popular, emotive stories. While the established parties rely too much on dry facts that do not reach the masses, right-wing and

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3 Shiller, however, is less interested in analysing the old or in envisioning a new 'grand narrative' but, like many other scholars – see, for example, Christian Baier's contribution to this volume; or Foroughi et al (2019) – focuses on the proliferation of 'narratives' in recent decades. As will become clearer later in my argument, it makes sense to assume that the old 'grand narrative' of the Western world draws much of its strength and allure from its capacity to integrate a plurality of individual(s') stories. In other words, the 'grand liberal narrative' allows for and invites the pluralization of narratives.

4 The exact contours of "our community" must remain annoyingly vague throughout this article, I'm afraid. Until a new narrative which serves to define it has replaced the old it cannot be adequately identified. Ideally, this community will be truly inclusive.

left-wing populists continue telling the old, all too successful stories. Prominent among these is the "collapse myth" (e.g. Evans 2017, 34), a narrative in which everything is inevitably heading for a major catastrophe. Such collapse myths are socially detrimental not only because they cause panic, deny the power of human agency and tend to turn into "self-fulfilling prophec[ies]" (36), but also because they often trigger and intersect with "enemy narratives" (16–23). The latter are driven by the 'clash of cultures' principle and suggest that whatever problems a society must deal with can be solved by excluding, devaluing and, if the worst comes to the worst, eradicating those 'others' who are allegedly causing them. Like many other commentators, Evans is convinced that these old myths, which have led to so much suffering in the past, will not help to shape a better, more just and more peaceful world in the future.

However, Evans is not content simply to demystify the old narratives and deplore the current myth gap. Unlike most scholars who contribute to the debate (myself included), he refreshingly dares to outline some features of his postulated "Myth for a New Century". In order to end the fixation of the old myths on individual characters who usually reflect an 'us vs. them' ideology, the new narrative must imagine "a larger us". And the new myth must create a setting that conceptualizes a "larger now". Explicitly referring to the truth claims that the new myth should establish, he explains further that

> as with the need to prompt people to think in terms of a larger *us*, the role of prompting people to situate themselves in a longer *now* is one that used to be played by religious institutions – themselves no strangers to epic building projects that encourage people to think in long timescales. (Evans 2017, 52)

Driven especially by his concern for the ever-present global ecosystem, but also with an eye to social peace, Evans emphasizes that the new narrative must give precedence to long-term perspectives rather than the short-term profit cycles that rule our neo-liberal capitalist present. Most importantly, the new myth must offer a new concept of the 'good life'. While remaining rather vague with regard to what such a good life could look like, he offers some ideas regarding the plot structure of the new narrative. Drawing on theologian Walter Brueggemann's analysis of the roles of "the prophets of Israel", he explains that the new myth must, first, "describe reality as it [is]", second, "help people face and deal with [...] despair" (64) and, third, give "hope for the future amid the carnage of the present" (65).

3 The 'Grand Narrative' – Myth and the Novel

So far so good. When reading *The Myth Gap* and similar texts, I keep asking myself: Do we not have plenty of such stories – stories that imagine a 'larger us', a 'larger now', an alternative 'good life'? Can we not find them even in popular bestsellers and blockbusters, i.e. in contexts that have an enormous potential to "prompt people to think" along the lines that Evans suggests and, thus, to implement a new 'grand narrative' (Evans 2017, 52). This question arises also because Evans himself invokes many examples from literary history and contemporary culture to illustrate his ideas, such as C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) or Disney's *Frozen* (2013). But if these stories already exist and – as bestsellers or blockbusters – have reached a wide audience, why are we still looking for *the* 'new myth'? – Well, I think because even though Evans has astutely enumerated some of the new myth's characteristics, the main challenges that we face on our quest have not yet been described properly. So, let's look back and start from scratch again.

I am convinced that to see more clearly and to realize the enormity of the task we are facing, it will help us to take more seriously – and learn from the success of –the Western world's old, decrepit 'grand narrative', and also to seriously ask ourselves whether we really want to say farewell to it yet. (Within the confines of this essay, I can only do the former and invite you to do the latter, of course.) So, what exactly is (or was) this grand narrative? And where exactly do we find the stories in our culture that have created, supported, and disseminated the prevailing myth to which our society no longer uncritically subscribes? Far from being an enemy narrative or collapse myth, the last enormously successful narrative in Western culture, I am not alone in contending, is that of democratic capitalism, generally organized in liberal nation states. Drawing on and further abbreviating Andreas Reckwitz's shorthand of 'the liberal narrative of progress' ("das liberale Fortschrittsnarrativ"; 2019, 11, my translation) I will use the term 'liberal narrative' to refer to what many see as the dying core myth of the West. This 'liberal narrative' transports the general "'project of modernity'" (11)[5] and is often associated with a "culture of individualism" (e.g. Mishra 2018, 12) and the "liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition" (Fraser 2019, 12).

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5 Reckwitz summarizes, "Modern society, which has developed slowly but steadily since the eighteenth century in the course of industrialization, democratization, urbanization, humanization, emancipation and scientification, has been inseparably linked to the vision of working on progress from the beginning – to the 'project of modernity'" (11; my translation).

In the tradition of thinkers such as Hans Blumenberg, Georg Lukács or Walter Benjamin, I am convinced that this old narrative manifests itself powerfully in the realist novel – and in genres that are recently taking the novel's place, most importantly the phenomenon of the 'epic' TV series that blurs the boundaries between television and film. If this is true, we must reconsider what we know about the epistemological and ontological basis of the novel in order to properly define the challenges we are up against on our quest for a new narrative for our society.

At the heart of the novel's power to serve as the prime vehicle of the 'liberal narrative' lies the groundbreaking realignment of a modern epistemology with a modern ontology. Ever since the 1950s and 1960s, when the novel began to be taken seriously as an object of academic study, the eighteenth-century novel has been recognized by context-oriented researchers as a key "cultural instrument designed to mediate the transition to modernity", a transition that concerns both "the epistemological [and] the socioethical realm of experience" (McKeon 2002 [1987], xxi). Ian Watt has successfully established the claim that the rise of the realist novel not only paralleled but also facilitated the rise of the middle class. Critics of Watt, such as Michael McKeon or Nancy Armstrong, who have identified various methodological problems and pointed to a number of blind-spots in his seminal *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) have nonetheless substantiated Watt's central claim of the novel as a vehicle that realizes and transports the core values of the 'liberal narrative'. In *The Origins of the English Novel: 1600–1740* (2002 [1987]) McKeon, for example, takes his cue from Bakhtin's theory of the novel as "the *modern* genre" par excellence. Defined by "heteroglossia" and the "dialogic quality of novelistic discourse", he argues, the genre "militate[s] against traditional modes of structural coherence" (McKeon 2002 [1987], 11–12), and in doing so reflects the "historical conditions" of the time of its emergence. As such the novel not only offers a cultural tool that enables its authors and readers to tackle the parallel "crisis in attitudes toward how social relations are most aptly and justly organized" by providing "a fluid model of social identity composed of disparate factors and submerged in shifting, internal dynamics of subjectivity and self" (xxiii). In addition (or rather in the process) – and this is particularly relevant in our own historical context – it negotiates the "early modern crisis in standards of truth" (xxii).

4 The Modern Construction of Truth

Let me consider this last point a little more closely. There are many examples of the "crisis in standards of truth" that become virulent as early as in the sixteenth century. A passage from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) illustrates the construction of truth by Renaissance intellectuals as established through texts other than the Bible. In a letter from More to his friend Peter Giles in Antwerp in the opening pages of the book, the author persona relates a pseudo-problem which serves less to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction (as many critics argue) than it does to differentiate between two different concepts of truth. More's alleged reason for writing this letter is to ask Giles for support in verifying a detail about the Utopian world which Raphael Hythloday had reported to them when they last met in person:

> [...] as I recall matters, Hythloday said the bridge over the Anyder at Amaurot was five hundred yards long; but my John says that is two hundred yards too much – that in fact the river is barely three hundred yards wide there. So I beg you, consult your memory. If your recollection agrees with his, I'll yield to the two of you, and confess myself mistaken. But if you don't recall the point, I'll follow my own memory and keep my present figure. For, as I've taken particular pains to avoid untruths in the book, so I'd rather make an honest mistake than say what I don't believe. In short, I'd rather be truthful than correct. (More 1516, 110)

Three aspects of More's recapitulation of his attempt to describe "the bridge over the Anyder at Amaurot" correctly are noteworthy in the present context. First, what guarantees that an account of something is truthful is the narrator's memory. What must be retrieved in the process of producing a truthful narrative is the experience of an individual who has learned something in a conversation (as More allegedly had when Raphael told them of 'his journey to Utopia') or the something-actually-experienced on which that conversation was based (what Raphael allegedly saw, felt and maybe even measured when he 'walked across the bridge'). Second, since human memory can be unreliable, truth must be intersubjectively negotiated and moulded in democratic dialogues (John's word counts as much as Giles's). And this, thirdly, gives rise to a meta-level of discussions of the philosophical issues of transparency, reliability and intersubjectivity. Eventually, the truth is revealed to a larger audience in narratives that play by the rules thus established, an example of which is More's *Utopia*.

There is a rub, however. Neither Hythloday nor the bridge, nor the Anyder nor Amaurot actually exist. They are all inventions, fictive phenomena; and since More himself has invented them, it would seem rather silly to raise the

problem of their truth value at all, except that the ending of the passage comments explicitly on the intersection of the question of truthfulness with the fact / fiction divide. In doing so it points to another epistemological issue entailed in the discussion of the length of the bridge over the Anyder at Amaurot: There are two different ways of providing two categorically different, but (potentially) equally reliable accounts of the world. As an author one can strive to *correct*ly represent aspects of an empirically verifiable reality or attempt to establish philosophical and abstract *truths* about it. Preferring to be "rather [...] truthful than correct", More sets out to do the latter.

While More deals in abstract political and philosophical truths conveyed both in philosophical dialogues and in Raphael Hythloday's Utopian narrative, the modern concept of truth only gains full force, as Hans Blumenberg has shown, in the realist novel. This integrates the Renaissance idea of textually and intersubjectively established truths with a new concept of reality ("Wirklichkeitsbegriff"). For Blumenberg the modern "concept of reality denotes the *realization of a context which is in unison with itself*"; hence it understands "*reality to be the result of [such] a realization*". (Blumenberg 1964, 12; my translation; original emphases) Blumenberg's concept of reality focuses, then, on the challenges of the realization or mediation of truth / reality which, as a consequence, only ever constitutes itself successively and partially, and hence reflects the contingency of a world which is only ever momentarily graspable. In line with this principle, modern communities conceive of their truth / reality as a 'liminal concept' ("Grenzbegriff"; 13) which serves to confirm experiences and realizations of the world that are essentially intersubjective. As such, this concept of truth has a "quasi 'epic' structure which seeks not to exclude [...] other contexts of experience and thus other *worlds*." (13) In contrast, its power lies partly in integrating a plurality of different, even mutually exclusive, perspectives.

5 Truth, Reality and the Novel

5.1 Epistemology, Ontology

This modern concept of reality, Blumenberg continues, finds its prime medium in "the novel as the genre which is most successful in containing and representing the world by projecting a context that is finite, but presupposes and refers to infinity" (1964, 21) and which tends not just to represent (and in doing so establish) complex and contingent truths / realities but also to reflect on their epistemological and ontological assumptions. (Think of *Tristram Shandy*, but also of

the editor fiction at the beginning, or even just the full title of *Robinson Crusoe*, or the integration of a travel report which draws on Aphra Behn's own journey to Surinam with conventional romance elements in her *Oronooko*). As Blumenberg emphasizes, all historically manifest variations of the modern concept of reality (that supports its construction as truth) – from its early focus on the experiential, to an emphasis on the "resistance of the given" (24)[6] and "the absurd" – had always been an integral aspect of the genre's epistemology right from its beginnings: "The novel had overcome the foundation [in its worldliness ("Welthaftigkeit")] – and with it the contrast between reality and fiction – much earlier [i.e. before the aesthetics of the absurd] and much more naturally because it had advanced as its topic its own possibilities not as fiction of realities, but as a fiction of the reality of realities." (27)

Recent critical interventions in the post-factual debate that comment on the significance of the novel as the carrier of a modern truth / reality concept have elaborated further on the kinds and mechanisms of worldmaking the genre undertakes. Elena Esposito, for example, concentrates on disentangling and evaluating the relationship between the probable and the real as unfolded in the novel, in comparison to mathematical probability calculus, which fulfils a similar cultural function. Further investigating the "doubling of reality" (2014, 7 etc.; my translation) characteristic of both the novel and probability calculus, she demonstrates how such complex processes of worldmaking contribute to establishing a "simultaneity of contingency and absence of arbitrariness" that "represents the modernity of the construct" (2014, 68; my translation). In his defence of poststructuralist notions of constructivism, Christoph Reinfandt's brief literary history of the novel as cultural history makes a similar point by approaching the same issue from a systems theory perspective. Reinfandt claims that

> as the most complex medium available for handling [...] 'soft realities' (i.e. realities 'whose observation has at least the potential to modify the object of observation' [Simon 2017]), the novel has retained its function, laid down in the eighteenth century, of making private individual experience and practice publicly accessible. (Reinfandt 2018, 65; my translation)

What I want to stress here is, first, that – despite (or maybe precisely because of) its ability to 'double' and, indeed, multiply realities of different kinds – one of the secrets of the social power of the novel lies in its fusion of 'the real' with 'the true'. No other literary genre weds its promise to convey social truths so closely

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6 For more detailed reflections on the "Widerständigkeit des Gegebenen" also see 13–14.

to the claim that it is the best available tool to adequately represent reality. One could even argue that the current trend to treat facts and truths as synonyms has its origin in the novel genre. In Blumenberg's historical overview the modern concept of reality succeeds the medieval concept, after all, which finds its reliability guaranteed by a (divine) "third instance" accessible to human thinking via "complicated metaphysical strategies" (12).[7] Secondly and on the basis of these reflections on the epistemology of the novel, I want to take a closer look at what kind of "reality of realities" the novel realizes (by fictionalizing them). In what follows, my concern, to use McKeon's terms, will therefore no longer be with the 'epistemological' but with the 'socioethical' realm of experience charted by the realist novel.

While the structure and aesthetics of the novel make it the ideal vehicle to transport a modern epistemology, its ontological power and the kind of worlds it creates are of equal importance. It will again be useful here to put some old wine in new bottles and reconsider another well-established insight about the novel in our present post-truth context. The fascination of the realist novel (which still dominates the book market of the Western world in the twenty-first century) not only rests in a captivating aesthetics that gives form to modern truths about the fundamental contingency, fluidity, and self-reflectivity of the human experience of the world. It also lies in the novel's thematic focus on the relationship between the individual and society, which it depicts as an exciting, often productive conflict resolved within its pages into an enormously attractive concept of the 'good life'. Using the terminology of political adviser Alex Evans, one could say that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Frances Burney's *Evelina*, J. W. von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and Jane Austen's novels of manners have all "stir[red] things up" and contributed to creating "[social] spaces where these stories can be incubated and lived out" (2017, 12). Using the terms of contemporary identity theory, one could say that, by reiterating certain truths / realities and reproducing certain kinds of protagonist – protagonists whose self-reflectively fluid identities are shown to be constructed on both the individual and group level by 'living out' the ever-same plotlines – these novels provide highly attractive scripts for their readers' real-life performances of identity.

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7 For Blumenberg's reflections on the relationship between truth and reality also see 10, 20–22.

5.2 Old Vintages?

Robinson Crusoe (1719), for example, relates what will become the prototypical success story of the *self-made homo economicus*, who – even though his merchant father's business offers financial security and a life in peace and comfort – embarks on risky adventures and travels the world, where he proves that he can create a whole civilization out of his own resources. On the desert island Robinson acts diligently, works hard, and practises modesty and a wholesome fear of God, displaying exactly the bourgeois values his father sought to impart to him. The paradoxical consequence is that Defoe's adventurer is rewarded with personal and social advancement for *both* having acted against his father's advice – taking an irrational risk (which is thus shown to be indispensable for capitalist success) – *and* for being a conscientious merchant. Moreover, this personal success story of the self-made man is shown to significantly contribute to the greater good of British society, as Crusoe's venture expands the colonial sphere of the kingdom. The negative consequences of this colonial project, revealed by postcolonial critics over the last three decades are understandably not at the centre of attention of Defoe's autodiegetic novel, which focuses on the experiences of the eponymous hero. They were and are always already there (e.g. in the figure of Friday), however, as "other contexts of experience and thus other *worlds*" which the novel cannot but include (Blumenberg 1964, 13).

Goethe's novel of development, *Wilhelm Meister* (1795), offers similar solutions for his middle-class intellectual protagonist, who sees no attraction in following the predestined path of the man of business, to enact a self-made masculine identity by carving out new public spaces in the realms of culture and education. With *Pamela* (1740), Samuel Richardson had already provided roughly half a decade earlier what would become the dominant social script for the formation of an ideal female middle-class identity: the romance plot. The female protagonist's adventure in Richardson's, Burney's or Austen's novels consists in finding and forming – or, indeed, very often reforming – a man to serve as a husband she can truly love and respect and, of course, who offers financial security in marriage. Within this marriage the heroine may then fulfil important social tasks and continue to wield quite some social power as the moral guide of her family and her neighbourhood.

The eighteenth and early nineteenth-century novel thus offers extraordinarily attractive scripts for a 'good life'. With its realistic characters, romance plots and plots of development it provides its readers with the 'truth / reality' that if you take a risk here and there without (permanently) compromising (other) bourgeois values, if you educate yourself, work hard and remain virtuous, not only will your personal dreams come true but you will also become an influen-

tial and respected member of your community. This is the mythical promise which is the secret of the enormous success at the heart of the "old narrative of Europe". ('Are you, dear reader, not trying to live this dream?' I am tempted to ask, in imitation of the narrator of *Tristram Shandy* or Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.) Much more so than 'enemy myths' or 'collapse myths', the romance and *Bildung*-plots of the realist novel encapsulate and transport variations of the powerful 'liberal narrative' that those who are today searching for a new narrative for Europe and beyond must compete with.

In his *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (2017), Pankaj Mishra argues that "the unprecedented political, economic and social disorder that accompanied the rise of the industrial capitalist economy in nineteenth-century Europe, and led to world wars, totalitarian regimes and genocide in the first half of the twentieth century, is now infecting much vaster regions and bigger populations" (2018, 10). Not claiming that history simply repeats itself ("despite many continuities with the past"), he contends that the main problems arising in our present are those of "the global age of frantic individualism" (11). They do not lie in a clash of right-wing vs. left-wing politics or the West vs. the East but are, rather, caused by our societies' "extensive failure to realize the ideals of endless economic expansion and private wealth creation" (13) – a failure that disappoints and 'angers' all those "self-seeking individuals" (12) whose "longings for wealth, status and power, in addition to ordinary desires for stability and contentment" (12) were sparked by the promise of universal liberal individualism.

The very doubts which drive many of us who have grown skeptical of the truths / realities of the liberal narrative and which have sent us on the quest for a new narrative, have of course also been stirred up by novels (as Pankaj Mishra's *Age of Anger* testifies). True to the self-reflective processes that have characterized the novel from its very beginnings and as a consequence of its inclusive nature, many examples of the genre (and their feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, LGBTQIA readers) have contributed to unveiling many a noble ideal of the 'liberal narrative' as inherently problematic and its representation of the good life as an ideologically dubious fiction. Novels such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), with its vision of a global pandemic that destroys all human life, unfolded the disastrous consequences of the liberal good-life fantasy for the global eco-system already in the early-nineteenth century. The romance and development plots of the sensation-seeking novels of Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon or Ellen Wood that boomed in the 1860s disentangled the dark corruption, madness and human suffering that lay at the heart of what only ever appeared as domestic bliss. Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy and Henry James (to name only three of the most frequently canonized male authors of the *fin de*

siècle) drew their readers' attention to the plight of those who could not or would not pursue the liberal good-life fantasy: colonized subjects, destitute (seduced or raped) 'fallen' women, or 'closeted homosexuals' (to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term).

The great modernist novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf further contributed not only to debunking the enlightenment idea of the autonomous, self-present subject, but also represented the dignified, ineluctable pain and psychological strain of those for whom the liberal narrative provided no more than precarious – or only seemingly attractive – subject positions, such as that of the Dublin Jew Leopold Bloom, or the sceptical, cosmopolitan artist Stephen Dedalus, Septimus Warren, the shell-shocked veteran of the Great War, or the elderly upper-middle class Mrs Dalloway, who struggles with the shallowness of her existence. Finally, the internationally bestselling (historiographic) metafiction of authors such as Peter Ackroyd, Margaret Atwood, Salman Rushdie or Philip Roth has popularized the very insight that our notions of truth and reality are narratively constructed. And this insight, among other factors, certainly plays a key role in the growing societal conviction that we need a 'new narrative for Europe' (and beyond) in the first place (cf. Reinfandt 2018).

5.3 Rewritings of the 'Liberal Narrative'

What the novel does not seem to offer, however, is a new myth. Or does it? To be sure, one of the novel's strengths is that it has proven immensely flexible as the form that establishes and keeps establishing the truth / reality of the liberal narrative in all the different shapes this has taken since the Enlightenment. For the novel has moulded, and been moulded by, various versions of mercantilism, industrial, financial and digital capitalism, colonial and economic imperialism, social welfare initiatives, racism and misogyny, and wars between and within nations, as well as different forms of national dependence and independence, international union and economic and political co-operations across nation states. The realist novel has excelled not only in criticizing and debunking the liberal myth but in continuously rewriting its narrative and demonstrating its seemingly universal and eternal validity, integrating new concepts of nature, society and the self, not least through formal innovation. The introduction of free indirect discourse or the communal 'we' in the nineteenth century novel, of stream of consciousness techniques in the modernist novel, new genres such as the metahistoriographic novel or magical realism, the recent proliferation of present tense narration – all these formal trends can be regarded as so many

interventions that help to epistemologically and ontologically process social, political and cultural change.

Any list that seeks to illustrate this point within a single paragraph will seem inadequate. Still, here are some, more or less randomly chosen examples that demonstrate how the novel has contributed to reforming and to constantly up-dating the liberal master narrative over the centuries: Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854), set in a fictional industrial city, an imagined Manchester, narratively accompanies the restructuring of the British social fabric during the industrial revolution. Gaskell envisions a larger (but not categorically new) self, in so far as she integrates members of the working class into the liberal narrative. Like the self-made manufacturer, Mr. Thornton, the factory worker and union leader, Nicholas Higgins, is also given the opportunity to prove himself as a man who can integrate his personal desire for better working conditions and a more comfortable life with the greater good of society, i.e. with a prospering British economy. Under the moral guidance of the female protagonist, Margaret Hale, the two male protagonists learn to cooperate and thus both earn the ennobling title of 'gentleman', which comes to designate – in this new industrial world – any man who is committed to the community-building ideal of liberal progress, peaceful cooperation and economic prosperity. In a similar vein, Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875) adjusts the realist novel's character constellation and its integration of romance plots and plots of development in order to represent the liberal truth / reality of financial capitalism. Similarly, the 'black *bildungsroman*' has contributed to "carving out and claiming space[s]" that construct subject positions for black British and American citizens in society (Stein 2004, 39). Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country* (1992) and Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998) contribute to breaking up the heterosexual matrix and integrating androgynous sexuality, transsexualism and other forms of sex and gender bending into the 'liberal narrative' (see, e.g. Kilian 2004). In most recent bestselling realist fictions – such as Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018) – neither the fact that women embark on their own careers nor same-sex relationships serve any longer as conflictual issues that drive the plot; rather, they have become part of the everyday normality of these novels' cosmopolitan (Dublin) setting. The typical 'millennials' in Rooney's versions of the novel of manners (with its plots of development and romance) must constantly negotiate their various desires – for intimate relationships with men as well as women, for private bliss and well-paid, fulfilling jobs, for the respect of their conservative rural families as well as their academic urban peers – in multiple (traditional and digital) media. The 'doubled reality' of the novel has grown incredibly com-

plex. Still the template for the good-life fantasy remains the same: if, and only if, the individual succeeds in integrating her or his identity performances smoothly into the latest version of the liberal narrative will they lead a happy life across the public-private divide – which, by the way, is shown to be thoroughly reorganized in our times of (neo-)liberal digital capitalism.

6 Conclusion: A New Myth?

Yet, while the novel has proven very flexible in adapting – and adapting to – different versions of the modern liberal narrative, what it has not yet provided us with is a new, alternative concept of the good life with the convincing allure of truth / reality: a good-life that not only propagates but also actively cultivates and enforces the "core values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and respect for human rights" proclaimed by the European Commission. There is a felt need for a concept of the good-life that does not inevitably establish new abject 'Others' whenever it includes former outsiders into the hegemonic group of the 'happy few' – or to put it with the Commander in Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*: "Better never means better for everyone [...]. It always means worse, for some" (2017, 211). There is a need for a good-life narrative that does not, ultimately, "reduc[e] equality to meritocracy" as Nancy Fraser (2019, 13) has aptly put it, an idea of the good-life that could be within the grasp of everyone who wants to live it. What the novel does not seem able to establish is a new narrative template that tackles the inevitable limitations, exclusions and inherent contradictions of the liberal narrative that has, for several centuries now, "stir[red] things up" (Evans 1917, 12), shaped its readers' desires, and provided them with scripts of how to live a life that can make their dreams come true.

Why is that? Well, ultimately, I would suggest, the rub lies not only in the fact that the novel has lost its truth-value in an age of post-truths (even though this may, as e.g. Reinfandt argues, be part of the problem). With regard to the socioethical realms of experience, we must not forget that the novel's "prime criterion was truth to individual experience which is always unique and therefore new" (Watt 2000, 13) and that until today "the novel has kept up its original function of making private individual experience and practice publicly accessible" (Reinfandt 2018, 65; see above). The experience of one (or several) individuals is key to the novel's 'mythical power' on three distinct but intersecting levels: its power to establish truth / realities, its realist aesthetics, and its plot structure – which, in turn, develops the central 'good life' fantasy. All of these factors vitally contribute to the novel's 'universal' allure. Pankaj Mishra holds

the "frantic individualism" of our present (11), which simultaneously invites to and excludes so many "newly created 'individuals'" (13) from the global "individual pursuit of happiness" (15), as being ultimately responsible for the deep feeling of "*ressentiment*" that "lingers and deepens, poisons civil society and undermines political liberty, and is presently making for a global turn to authoritarianism and toxic forms of chauvinism" (14). If this diagnosis is correct, then the novel seems to be part of the problem of modernity rather than a tool that may contribute to finding a solution.

So what does this excursion into the cultural history of the novel and its critique tell us about our desire for a new narrative in an age of fake news and post-truth? Well, it demonstrates that the task is, indeed, awe inspiring, because to establish a new myth it is not enough to conceptualize "a better good life" (Evans 54–60) and then mechanically readjust the individual ingredients of the narrative that transported the old myth – i.e. to imagine a 'larger us', 'a larger now' and a restorative plot. We must also find ways to suggest that the new narrative conveys acutely needed truths and find a form to mediate these new truths that is so alluring that the recipients of whatever it is that it transports will adapt their lives to live the myth.

If we follow the logic of Hans Blumenberg, any socio-cultural and political paradigm change will go hand in hand with a new mode of appropriating the world. A new concept of truth must find expression in a new medium. From this perspective, the very quest for a new *narrative* might be leading into a cul-de-sac, as it rests on a categorical error. Nancy Fraser, one of the most clear-sighted analysts of the political dilemmas of our time, who also seeks to offer pragmatic advice to those who are looking for "an authoritative picture of social reality, a narrative in which a broad spectrum of social actors can find themselves", seems recently to have given up the hope that we can refashion the liberal narrative. She is now calling for a more radical break: "[W]e must break definitively both with neoliberal economics and with the various politics of recognition that have lately supported it – casting off not just exclusionary ethnonationalism but also liberal-meritocratic individualism" (2019, 39). As for the 'new narrative', she is well aware of the fact that her recommendation to embrace the "progressive populism" that she describes in *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* does not propagate the political vision of a "stable endpoint" but "rather a way station en route to some new, post-capitalist form of society" (2019, 39). The famous quotation from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* that Fraser uses to emphasize her understanding of the current political crises of the Western world as a "crisis of hegemony" may serve to summarize my own literary-historical contri-

bution to the debate: At present, it seems, "The old is dying and the new cannot be born." (Gramsci 1971, 276)

However, as a literary critic who specializes in (and loves) narrative fiction, I still hesitate to draw such radical conclusions and continue to put my hope in the transformative epistemological and ontological power of narrative fiction to represent and initiate social change. Nineteenth and early-twentieth-century "narratives of community", such as Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village* (1824–1832), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851–1853), George Sturt's *Change in the Village* (1912), or Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), which give up the novel's plot that is driven by individual protagonists in favour of non-linear, episodic explorations of the "daily procedures [that shape] the collective life of the community" (Zagarell 1988, 512; see also Rennhak 2011), may not have appealed to the masses and developed the power to tip the individual-society balance of our grand narrative in favour of the social. But the aspiration and the effort to do so continues. The recent more wide-ranging success of integrated short story cycles – or 'composite novels' (see Dunn and Morris 1995; D'hoker 2018) – such as Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park* (2006), John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012), or Donal Ryan's *From a Low and Quiet Sea* (2018), which experiment with narrative forms in order to contribute to the "larger cultural debate about forms of human connectivity" (D'hoker 2018, 17), demonstrates that contemporary writers of narrative fiction keep striving to envision a truth / reality and a new concept of the good life that will allow us to find a balance, however precarious, however fluid, between individual, societal and planetary needs.

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