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When not to tell stories

Unnatural narrative in applied narratology ¹

Interest in literary fiction and literary theory from other academic fields and professional practices of storytelling has often been limited to what we could call an Aristotelian narrative approach, with its emphasis on coherence and closure. In this paper, I critically assess interdisciplinary applications of narratological theory as being too limited. After all, literature also offers an alternative narrative tradition, that of, anti-mimetic or ‘unnatural’ narratives. This tradition could enrich what is referred to in this paper as ‘applied narratology’: the transfer of narratological methods and findings to professional practices of narrative. When faced with the confusion of border experiences (Bühler), the institutionalised exclusion of otherness or traumatic experiences, we can greatly benefit from unnatural narrative, which exemplifies how coherence and closure can become oppressive. I also explore the example of *The Long Awaited*, a novel by Dutch-Moroccan author Abdelkader Benali, which together with *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass and *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie forms the minor literary tradition of ‘the tragic picaresque’, a specific type of unnatural narrative. It is argued that such literary narrative experiments may offer interesting models for interdisciplinary applications of narratological theory.

Keywords: Unnatural narrative; Applied narratology; Picaresque; Tragic picaresque; Narrative ethics

“The powers that be [...] love a good story”

- Roger Waters -

1 Introduction

In recent decades there has been great interest from beyond the field of literary criticism in narrative fiction as a “vast laboratory in which we experiment with estimations, evaluations and judgments of approval and condemnation” (Ricoeur 1992: 148). Fields such as psychology, counselling, journalism and management studies have all used insights from narratology. Outside the academe, these have also been used to inform professional practices, often under the catchy and trendy term ‘storytelling’. It is therefore surprising that the field of narratology and narrative theory has shown little interest in establishing and maintaining what I would like to call an ‘applied narratology’, either within the academe or in collaboration with other social or economic institutions. Within such an applied narratology, narratology’s theoretical insights and methods could be made available to those engaged in storytelling practices. An applied narratology could also remedy the fact that the interdisciplinary interest in literary fiction and its scholarly criticism has often limited itself to what we could call an Aristotelian approach to narrative, which foregrounds coherence and closure as necessary elements of an ethically sound narrative.

I will critically assess these interdisciplinary applications of narratological theory and propose that literary fiction can teach us the value of narrative as well as showing us when not to engage with it – and at times to even actively resist it by exploring or going beyond the limits of traditional narrative. After all, literature also offers an alternative narrative tradition, that of, anti-mimetic, experimental or ‘unnatural’ narratives, a tradition that has been largely ignored by interdisciplinary narratologies. In this paper I will defend the thesis that this tradition could enrich professional narrative practices.

¹ I would like to thank Liesbeth Korthals Altes. This paper has profited much from a helpful conversation with her about its main argument.

I will then discuss the example of *The Long Awaited*, a novel by Dutch-Moroccan author Abdelkader Benali. This novel illustrates how, when faced with the confusion of border experiences, the institutionalised exclusion of otherness and traumatic memories of migration, we can greatly benefit from unnatural and experimental narrative, since it shows us when coherence and closure themselves become oppressive and therefore unethical. I will argue that such literary narrative experiments may offer interesting models for interdisciplinary applications of narratological theory.

2 Applied narratology

These days, a book with the phrase *Storytelling Handbook* in its title is not necessarily geared towards creative writers – it may just as likely contain a narrative teaching method for language acquisition (Ellis and Brewster 2014), a guide to help medics and paramedics use narrative for injury prevention (Golden 2016), or a handbook for narrative in change management (Tesselaar and Scheringa 2008). As mentioned above, there has been little direct contact between these floundering practices and the field that is most fundamentally concerned with the study of narrative, narratology. That is not to say that insights from the academic study of narrative and literature have not reached these practices: David Hermans's adaptation of Bakhtin's notion of dialogicity in literature into the Dialogical Self Theory and the vastly popular work of Joseph Campbell, most notably his notion of the "hero's journey", are but two examples of the multidisciplinary adaptation of scholarly work on literary narrative. However, from within the field of narratology, there is little structural interest in making its insights available and little valorization of academic knowledge. In other disciplines, such valorization is a matter of fact: the fields of law, medicine and psychology, for example, all have easy and institutionalised links between fundamental, theoretical research, applied research and professional practices that mutually exchange research issues, insights and methods. In contrast to a field like applied psychology, where psychological methods and findings are continuously being transferred to professional practices, there is no such thing as applied narratology.

The term 'applied narratology' does occasionally appear, but generally in reference to the use of "existent narratological categories as a toolbox for looking at texts" (Erl 2009:221), either literary or – in transdisciplinary settings – non-literary texts. Thus, Matei Chihaia sees the term 'applied narratology' as referring to the practice of narratologists, which he defines as either "the reading of given texts according to its categories, the precise description of a structure" or the adaptation of narratology "to new corpuses and disciplinary contexts" (Chihaia 2012). My own definition of the term comes close to that of Matei's second definition (which corresponds to its use by e.g. Nünning 2009: 54; Heinen 2009: 196; and Erl 2009: 221), in that it proposes to take the narratological 'toolbox' beyond the field of literary criticism. However, in analogy with my definition above of applied psychology, I also define applied narratology as the transfer of narratology's methods and findings to professional practices of narrative. This entails more than merely using the narratological toolbox for non-literary texts. It also involves actively looking for opportunities to make positive contributions to these practices. Thus my view of applied narratology is a methodological reflection that mediates between narratology as a theory of narrative on the one hand and narrative practices on the other. In other words, it is a poetics in the practical sense of a manual for writing narrative, a storytelling handbook (as Aristotle's *Poetics* has often been misunderstood to be, but – and this is important to note here – not without fruition), rather than an investigation into the general principles of narrative.

The next question is what shape this mediation could take. I have been involved in research that uses insights from narratology in educational design (Moenandar and Huisman 2017; Huisman and Moenandar 2015) and in research methodology for the human sciences (Moenandar and Basten 2015). In all of this research, applied narratology is very much a case of doing what it says on the tin: applying narratology to fields of practice, with the spread of

storytelling meaning those practices can now be found far beyond the more obvious field of creative writing. Especially within the European context, where the valorization of knowledge – to make knowledge available and useful to the economy or society – has become a prerequisite for most research funding, applied narratology is a promising endeavour. However, if academic integrity is as much a concern as proving to our funders that our knowledge can be valorized, there is reason to approach the valorization of narratological knowledge with caution. Again, a field like applied psychology can serve as an example. Research in social psychology has, of course, always been of interest to the marketing world, political campaigners and anyone else involved in the profession of persuasion. The valorization of knowledge generated by social psychology to them is found in methods to ever more effectively manipulate customers and citizens. In world in which storytelling has become so ubiquitous, seeking the valorization of narratological knowledge and methods could easily lead us to the money. Storytelling has become a favourite among marketers and politicians. An important tool in these fields is the viral narrative – a simple story that catches people’s imagination and spreads like wildfire. It has also been used in political campaigns, such as Donald Trump’s 2017 presidential campaign, the 2016 Brexit campaign and the campaign by Dutch populist Geert Wilders. The success of these campaigns can largely be explained by the ability of their protagonists to create attractive, compelling and encompassing narratives: they knew how to tell a story that appealed to a large segment of the voting public. We should therefore ask ourselves whether applied narratology should not be just as much about spreading knowledge on how to resist narrative as it is about using the insights of narratology to help people construct appealing narratives. Valorization can also be found in the responsibility that the academe has towards society, beyond contributing to its economy. This is the responsibility to critically assess how society functions, or, more importantly, to give its members the means to critically assess how society functions. In this case, by providing training in what Liesbeth Korthals Altes² has called “narrative savviness” – drawing a parallel with the often-stressed need to train people’s media savviness, or their ability to critically assess media products as filtered representations of reality, rather than reality itself, and to be aware of their quality and truth value.

3 Applied narratology and unnatural narrative

In short, in my opinion, applied narratology should not only aim to increase the effectiveness of storytelling, but it should also increase awareness of how seductive effective storytelling can be. An ethically sound applied narratology would include the endeavour to raise awareness of the tendency of stories to present what is fragmented as complete, to present a selection of events as inclusive, and to turn messy, incomplete and unfinished human experiences into rounded wholes. Applied narratology could remind people that the relationships created between the different events of a narrative “are not [...] immanent in the events themselves” (White 2014: 1548). That is to say, emplotment is not something dictated by the experiences that are narrated, but something that is applied to those experiences by the storyteller. Thus, to narrate experiences is to give meaning to them. This is what makes storytelling so attractive as an instrument of persuasion. Emplotment – the merging of events into the form of a plot – allows us to deal with the unsolved contradictions and frictions of how those events are originally experienced. This is a process in which, as Fredric Jameson described it, “the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure” comes to function as “the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction” (Jameson 2002: 62). Thus, storytelling functions as a summoning of ghosts in order to lay them to rest. It is through plot that our world becomes meaningful, because within the plot all narrated events become purposeful: this happened because that happened. The chaos and ‘plotlessness’ of life turns into the order of the narrative.

² In private correspondence.

This is exactly how the narratives work in slogans such as “Make America great again!”, “Take back control” and “Make the Netherlands ours again”.

It is important to remind the public that a story is not discovered, but constructed: “the events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others”, as White wrote. This is done through what Collingwood called “the constructive imagination” (White 2014: 1529).³ Ricoeur acknowledged this necessary imaginative element in stories rather blatantly when he claimed that emplotment could be seen as the decisive difference between history (in the sense of a series of moments, or ‘nows’, the formalists’ *fabula* and White’s chronicles) and fiction (in the sense of a composed or reconfigured series of events, the *syuzhet* or story). All narrative is therefore fictional to a certain extent, even though there remain, of course, important differences between fictional narrative and historical narrative, not in the least regarding the truth claim of the latter (Ricoeur 1984: 64). However, the notion of emplotment as an act of composition and reconfiguration does modulate that truth claim. Strictly speaking, the resolution and wholeness that storytelling offers is, indeed, imaginary.

For similar reasons, Galen Strawson has taken issue with one particular branch of applied narratology, an interdisciplinary endeavour between narratology, psychology and philosophy, where narrative is seen as a model for identity. He opposes the notion, current among those involved in this endeavour, that the best way to narrate life experiences is to present them as a coherent whole. Citing, among others, Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum and Paul Ricoeur, Strawson rejects their notion of “narrative identity” and its inherent claim that we cannot lead ethical lives if we do not turn those lives into meaningful wholes by narrating them. He particularly attacks the idea that “we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a ‘quest’” (Strawson 2004: 436). He argues that there are also lives that consist, instead, of endless exploration and perpetual doubting and therefore resist narrative as a “discordant concordance” (i.e. the story of a life that may point out its continuities and discontinuities, but still reaches the endpoint of a unified whole – Ricoeur 1992: 141). These never reach Ricoeur’s ideal of an endpoint from which all that precedes it makes sense, and thus remain episodic and fragmentary. According to Strawson, it is too limited an interpretation of the good life to argue that such lives are less ethically sound or even immoral.

However, as Liesbeth Korthals Altes has rightfully pointed out, one could question whether Paul Ricoeur (on whose work many of those who Strawson attacks base their ideas and who is himself also rejected in his essay) really demands “coherence and cohesion” in our narrative identities (Korthals Altes 2014: 46). Granted, he clearly discusses his notion of a narrative identity in the light of a narrative tradition that originated with Aristotle, a tradition that is markedly realist and rejects episodic, fragmented narratives. Aristotle, after all, dismissed the episodic plot as bad, both in an aesthetic and in a moral sense, because it fails to bring about the kind of closure that makes narratives such as the tragedy, with its cathartic endpoint, valuable for individual and society (cf. *Poetics* 9:145b). It must be said, though, that Ricoeur is well aware of the existence of an anti-realist alternative narrative tradition, which includes types of hopelessly fragmented and contradictory narratives, that has always existed alongside the Aristotelian tradition in which most of his own work on narrative and identity can be placed (Ricoeur 1984: 73).

Ricoeur called this the tradition of the “anti-novel”, which seems too limited a term. It is, arguably, more fruitful to conceive of this tradition as an alternative narrative mode, alongside the more common Aristotelian narrative. It is certainly not confined to the novel and has taken different shapes throughout the ages, ranging from playful metalepsis in traditional storytelling to experimental modernist prose. The notion of “unnatural narratives” seems more

³ As White points out, Collingwood himself failed to see this.

useful here, especially when we conceive of these as constituting, as Brian Richardson describes it, “an entire alternative history of literature [outside] the narrow limits of mimetic practice”. As Richardson characterises it, unnatural narrative contains:

conspicuous antimimetic events, characters, settings, or frames. By antimimetic, I mean representations that violate mimetic expectations, the canons of realism, and the conventions of spontaneous nonfictional conversational natural narrative, and defy the conventions and expectations of existing, established genres (Richardson 2015: 3-4).

Numerous debates have followed Richardson’s introduction of both the notion of “unnatural narrative” and the need for an “unnatural narratology”. Also a recent special issue of *Style* (2016 50 (4)) on unnatural narrative theory contains a good cross-section of the positions among narrative theorists vis à vis unnatural narrative and its accompanying theories. The current paper is not meant to be a contribution to these debates. What is useful for my purpose here – to argue for an applied narratology that takes note of the alternative narrative tradition mentioned above and the theoretical inquiries concerning its products – is the notion of unnatural narrative as a narrative mode that resists the sense of wholeness established by ‘normal’, natural narrative. It shows itself to be a constructed (rather than a naturally occurring) version of the truth, thereby drawing our attention to the problematic nature of the notion of truth itself and how statements that are purported to be true are created. This alternative tradition has been largely ignored by those who have tried to apply the insights of narratology to fields of practice such as research, counselling and education. As such, the perception of what can and cannot be categorised as storytelling might have become too limited, leaving out models offered by the blatantly and less blatantly unrealistic storytelling of authors such as Samuel Beckett, Salman Rushdie and Cervantes.

I would argue that the ignorance of this alternative tradition among those who make the insights and methods of narratology available to professional practices is unfortunate. If narrative theory is “partial, incomplete” as Richardson states (2016: 386-388), because of its “strong bias in favour of mimetic or realistic concepts”, then applied narratology would be too. One can certainly imagine instances where an applied unnatural narratology could make a valuable contribution. Unnatural narratives and more traditional ones share the attempt, through emplotment, to create meaning and coherence – they just utterly, and often gleefully, fail to do so. Interestingly enough, this is exactly what makes such narratives valuable, according to Ricoeur (1984: 73): they show that narrative “is never the simple triumph of order”, and that a harmonious whole is not its necessary outcome. In fact, they enable reflection on the limits of the concordance that narrative normally tends to establish and are especially fitted to represent “disorganised experiences”. A naturally narrated story tends to work towards a resolution, as I described above. Unnatural narratives can show us that not everything has or should have such a resolution – and thus, engaging with them may improve what I called “narrative savviness” above.

4 Border experiences and the tragic picaro

In the case of narrative identity and its use in fields such as counselling, narrative therapy and education as one example of applied narratology, unnatural narratology offers alternative models for stories of becoming so we do not have to argue, as Strawson does, “against narrativity” when we want to resist the notion that such stories must always be conclusive and create a sense of wholeness. Unfortunately, Ricoeur does not integrate the alternative tradition he mentions into his work on narrative identity. He does mention, as Korthals Altes (2014: 46) phrased it, that “such narratives enable emphatic engagement with experiences that eschew emplotment and coherence, or transgress accepted norms”, but he does not discuss this at much

length. This is a missed opportunity, because – and in this Strawson is correct – it is rather restraining to say that narrative identities must fit the Aristotelian narrative tradition. If literature is indeed, as Ricoeur (1992: 176) has it, a “laboratory for thought experiments in which the resources of variation encompassed by narrative identity are put to the test of narration”, it seems strange and unsatisfactory that we pay attention to only one particular type of these experiments: the mimetic.

I would like to explore one specific example of how unnatural narrative models cooked up in the laboratory of literature may help to expand the theoretical and exemplary wealth of practices of applied narratology: that of how people deal with ‘border experiences’. Border experiences, a term originally coined by developmental psychologist Charlotte Bühler (1935), are encounters with situations, events, notions or people that are radically different from what we know. In a border experience, our sense of identity is tested (Weijers 2014: 26). Faced with the border between the known and the unknown, we are confronted with different ways of being – and the possibility of becoming something different, a potentially bewildering experience that undermines our notion of our ‘self’ as constant and reliable. Ricoeur (1992: 141) argues that it is through narrative that we mitigate such border experiences and the threat they pose to our sense of self: border experiences represent possible rifts in our narrative identity, but we can maintain a sense of unity throughout and beyond such a transition through emplotment – the selecting and linking of our life events in such a way that we reach Ricoeur’s “discordant concordance”: a unified narrative that tells the story of a life by pointing out its continuities and discontinuities. Thus, narrative may help us to negotiate a new narrative identity encompassing both the ‘self’ before and the ‘self’ after the border experience. This is the basic assumption underlying much narrative coaching and narrative therapy: the fractured, episodic ‘self’, shattered by the trauma of a border experience, needs to be made ‘whole’ again through storytelling. But what if Strawson is right and some of us simply do not need ‘healing’ because we are fundamentally ‘episodic’ to begin with? In the remainder of this paper I will look at one literary thought experiment that yields a possible model for resisting the coercion into the wholeness that natural narrative models imply: the Dutch novel *The Long Awaited* (*De langverwachte*) by Abdelkader Benali (2002).

Elsewhere (Moenandar 2017), I have placed Benali’s novel in a literary tradition of the tragic picaro. This figure is developed throughout three novels, starting with *The Tin Drum* (*Die Blechtrommel*) by Günter Grass (1959), followed by Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and again taken up by Benali’s novel *The Long Awaited*. Limitations of space mean I cannot delve too deeply into this literary tradition (which is certainly not a closed one, with roots in earlier literary attempts, mostly in German literature, but also in a novel like *Tristram Shandy*, to marry the picaresque with the Bildungsroman), something I do extensively in another paper.⁴ Suffice it to say here that there is strong, deliberate intertextuality between these three novels, with each building on its predecessor to create a narrative form that can solve the trauma of transition (from the life of the German minority in Poland to post-war West Germany in Grass’s novel, from colonial rule to independence in Rushdie’s book and from village life in Morocco to city life in the Netherlands in Benali’s book). Oscillating between the nonchalance of the picaro and the need for belonging that drives the plot of the Bildungsroman, and between the ethics and values that each of these imply, the novels establish a tradition of ‘tragic picaros’ that show both the necessity and futility of resisting nationalism and history through narrative. Narrative typically works towards an endpoint that is always oppressive as it subordinates all earlier events, so any resistance to oppression through narrative becomes oppressive itself.

What is relevant here is that unnatural narrative is a vital element in these three novels, foregrounding the oppressive nature of all narrative and facilitating a continuing resistance to

⁴ Cf. Moenandar 2017.

it. The narrators of these three novels all claim to possess a special gift. A voice that can shatter glass and the ability to summon the past through his drumming in the case of Oskar Matzerath in *The Tin Drum*, telepathy and later an uncanny sense of smell in the case of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* and a magic thumb that allows her to stitch people's life stories together in the case of the eponymous narrator of *The Long Awaited*. In all these three novels, it is this special gift that supposedly enables the narrator to make the preposterous claim of being "handcuffed to history", as Saleem Sinai phrases it (Rushdie 2006: 3): a claim of being the central figure in history. This is the history of the Third Reich for Oskar Matzerath, of postcolonial India for Saleem Sinai and of Moroccan migration to the Netherlands for the Long Awaited – note how border experiences form the backbone of the plot in all these novels. It is also the claim of being both cause and effect of large national histories that are normally seen as subjecting the everyday person, rather than the other way around. The fact that they need this bizarre gift to make this claim – and their frequent attempts to persuade the reader to believe in their gifts while protesting just a bit too much – makes for a continuously jarring reading experience, as does the fact that things often do not completely add up. Further undermining a smooth reading experience in which a coherent narrative whole can easily be detected, is Oskar being both a dwarf and a simpleton whom other characters clearly see as retarded, Saleem Sinai claiming towards the end of his narrative that he is literally cracking up, and the Long Awaited telling her family's history and her own future *in utero*. As such, these novels fit Richardson's description of "antimimetic or unnatural fiction", a fiction that "requires a partial belief in the fictional world and also sabotages that belief" (2016: 393).

In the remainder of this paper, I focus on the last of these three novels, and explore how it can function as a narrative model for dealing with border experiences – and how an analysis of it could enrich the use of applied narratology in narrative coaching. *The Long Awaited* (*De langverwachte*) was published in Dutch in 2002, and has no English translation. It describes the migration of Moroccans to the Netherlands. Moroccans are the sixth largest ethnic minority in the Netherlands and their migration, starting in the 1960s, was relatively large. Long Awaited presents herself as an endpoint of this migration, which started with her grandparents leaving a magical homeland (clearly not Morocco as it was, but as it is dreamt up in a mix of migrant nostalgia and Western orientalism) and ends in the Western metropole in which she will be born. The Long Awaited integrates the whole of multicultural Rotterdam into her personal story, continually stressing the overwhelming muchness of the Netherlands' second largest and arguably most metropolitan city. The novel's main narrative is quite straightforward: the Dutch girlfriend of a teenage Moroccan boy becomes pregnant and their child is born at twelve o'clock on New Year's Eve 1999. Before that can happen, however, the unborn child feels she must tell her family's history, interweaving the lives of her Dutch, Moroccan and American parents and grandparents and their many friends. Thus, the novel clearly constructs what Ricoeur calls a narrative identity, in which a "synthesis of the heterogeneous" (Ricoeur 1991: 21) takes place – although I would argue that this synthesis is as much unmasked as a farce as it is established as a possibility, since the narrative used here is an unnatural narrative.

This has an ideological dimension too, because the novel's setting is so clearly a "clash of civilisations", with Samuel Huntington's often misunderstood work of that name being read by one of the novel's characters to stress this for the reader (Benali 2002: 339). Whenever civilisations clash, they do so because there is a border between them. Only a clearly demarcated culture can collide with another culture and much of this novel is concerned with borders and the people who patrol them: borders between 'Islam' and 'the West', between 'migrant culture' and 'Dutch culture', between a homogenous 'Dutchness' and a heterogeneous 'Otherness'. On the one hand, the Long Awaited's narrative establishes that these categories can all be the building stones of one coherent narrative identity that is as valid as the lean and mean identities of 'Muslim' and 'Dutch', which other characters in the novel see as the only available and

mutually exclusive choices open to her. On the other hand, it is quite telling that the only way in which this identity can be established is through unnatural narrative.

Within this narrative perspective, the language – a mix of discourses and styles – and the images that the narrator uses while merging what lies on each side of these borders also function as a kind of evidence of this validity. Here, everything comes together. Take for instance a passage such as this:

Ik wilde dit hoofdstuk eerst “Ik kom net terug uit de hel. Gun me een minuutje rust” noemen, maar kwam er aan het einde achter dat er noch hel noch rust in voorkomt, toen bedacht ik dat het iets met “vader” en “vergeving” moest zijn, maar toevallig heb ik die titel al een keer gebruikt, dat is de reden dat ik dit hoofdstuk titelloos – zoals soera acht als enige een aanhef mist – heb gelaten (207)

[At first, I wanted to call this chapter ‘I’ve just returned from hell. Allow me a moment of peace’, but at the end of it I discovered that it contains neither hell nor peace, so I thought up something with ‘father’ and ‘forgiveness’, but as it happens, I have used that title before [in the eighth chapter, ‘Father forgive them; for they know not what they do’], which is the reason why I left this chapter without a title – just like sura eight is the only one without an introduction] (all translations are mine).

The protagonist’s knowledge of Luke 23:34, of a “sura” being a chapter in the Koran, and of the entire Koran only having one sura that lacks the introduction “In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful”: it is all part of the matrix of the *e pluribus unum* discourse that Benali has given his narrator and it all represents a possible border experience for whomever this is not given knowledge – which arguably includes most people, considering the disparity of the sources from which this information stems.

In this way, the Long Awaited embodies, as it were, the hybrid solution (both in the sense of ‘dissolving’ and ‘bringing to a satisfying end’) for the “clash of civilisations”. However, this solution remains highly suspect because it is brought about by the special gift in the narrator’s thumb – a reference to the Dutch expression that ‘something is sucked out of one’s thumb’, meaning that it is made up. Thus, only through not being truthful, the narrator can present herself, her birth, as the logical outcome of the story that she tells. Here, history finds its destination:

Iedereen probeert op zijn manier aan de geschiedenis te ontkomen [...]. Vanaf het moment dat ik er was moest alle aandacht gericht zijn op mij en moesten mijn ouders weten dat ze het verleden met een gerust hart achter zich konden laten, zodat ze mij, hun levende fossiel, konden omarmen en koesteren (14).

[Everyone tries to escape history in their own way [...]. From the moment I arrived, all attention had to be directed at me and my parents had to know they could leave the past behind them with an easy mind, so they could embrace and cherish me, their living fossil].

As in a “fossil”, history is simultaneously turned to stone and kept alive in the character the Long Awaited. This fits her name, which is a literal translation of the Arab name for the Muslim messiah, *mahdī*. And she does indeed fulfil the role of a messiah, by taking on other people’s history and delivering them from it. The Long Awaited, to whom the characters can direct their attention – and who thus becomes their point of orientation – ‘saves’ them from their identity crises, from the disorientation and loss of direction caused by border experiences. In combining

both sides of the border that divides ‘Dutch’ and ‘Muslim’, she is after all a synthesis of the clashing cultures.⁵

On the surface, therefore, the narrative of the Long Awaited creates exactly what Ricoeur expects of a ‘good’ narrative identity, creating oneness across dividing borders, turning border experiences into meaningful events that together make up a good, rounded narrative whole. However, since the approach so blatantly unmasks itself as a fiction, as make-believe, the unity that the narrator creates is also blatantly presented as mere appearance. Benali has her describing herself, with typical picaresque swagger, as “een ongeboren Langverwachte die met een duim in de mond zijn tijd beidt en nog even de hele wereld aan elkaar breit” [an unborn Long Awaited who knits the world together while biding his time with a thumb in his mouth] (123). However, because of its blatant fictionality, the resulting story is only a temporal solution and the Long Awaited stresses this by saying that, in order to be born, she has to give up her special gift: “Nu pas weet ik dat [...] de gaven voorgoed worden opgeruimd [...]. Het wordt tijd om het leven in te springen” [Only now I realise that [...] the gifts have to be put away [...]. It is time to jump into life] (337). Outside the shelter of the womb – that is, beyond the artificial endpoint of the story – there is reality, where no narrative wholes exist in and of themselves, and if there are any to be found, they must surely be fictions.

5 Concluding remarks

In this paper, I argued for applied narratology as a bridge between narrative practices and the scholarship generated in the field of narratology and narrative theory. Obviously, I am not the first to suggest that the insights of narratologists may interest those engaged in storytelling. However, as I discuss here, academics have made little effort to systematically valorize their work by actively helping to establish and maintain applied narratology, either within their institutions or in collaboration with other social or economic institutions, and nor has applied research gained much foothold within the field of narratology. I have also criticized how much of the applied narratology that does take place – albeit not under that name – tends to align itself too much with a simplistic project of ‘improving’ existing practices of storytelling. Although that is certainly one way to valorize narratological knowledge and methods, it comes with two caveats. It runs the risk of aligning itself too easily with economic and political powers that use storytelling as a forceful tool of persuasion, whereas an equally valid – and arguably more ethically sound – valorization of the insights of narratology would be to train people’s narrative savviness so they can actively resist such persuasion. It also tends to ignore the alternative anti-mimetic narrative tradition in favour of the mimetic tradition that also dominates academic narratology.

My discussion of Abdelkader Benali’s *The Long Awaited* illustrates how unnatural narratives and their scholarly analyses could be used within applied narratology. My reading of this novel also makes two points that I argued throughout this paper as well. First, that a possible use-value of unnatural narrative is its ability to train our narrative savviness: the blatant fictionality of the narrative whole that is established may serve to stress that all narratives are more or less made up. Second, that creating a coherent whole when faced with border experiences is but one strategy when narrating one’s narrative identity. What is needed now is applied research that establishes whether unnatural narratives and unnatural narratology do indeed have the use-value for applied narratology I believe they have. Much suggests that applied narratology would be a much richer endeavour if it stopped neglecting these types of unnatural narratives.

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⁵ Cf. Moenandar 2007 where I discuss how a new-born child presenting the solution for and deliverance of a community is a returning theme in literature about migration and memory.

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