Narrate It Until You Become It

Abstract
Research in phenomenology and philosophy of psychiatry has suggested that psychopathological disturbances of experience often involve an alteration of one’s “sense of possibility”, dependent upon the presence of specific “existential feelings” (Ratcliffe 2008, 2012a). In this paper I argue that the engagement with certain narratives can lead to a transformation of one’s sense of possibility in virtue of its ability to trigger emotions which are in tension with the person’s existential feelings. In particular, I claim that, even when a restricted sense of possibility makes it difficult to experience some types of emotion, the ability to engage affectively in story-telling may enable the experience of such emotions in response to particular self-narratives, and I provide an account of how this dynamic can lead to enduring and wide-ranging affective changes.

Introduction
In contemporary phenomenology and philosophy of psychiatry it has been claimed that various forms of mental illness involve an alteration of the person’s “sense of possibility” (Ratcliffe 2012a). More specifically, it has been suggested that a person’s sense of what it is possible for her to experience or achieve is in these cases dramatically restricted (e.g. Fuchs 2007; Slaby 2012; Ratcliffe 2015), a dynamic which has been shown to be closely related to the presence of certain disturbances of affectivity (e.g. Bortolan 2017; Ratcliffe 2008; 2015). In particular, attention has been drawn to the role that a particular type of background affective orientation - which Matthew Ratcliffe has identified and described through the notion of “existential feelings” (e.g. 2005; 2008) – play in this context. Existential feelings are conceived as a particular set of bodily feelings which are not directed at any particular
object, but are rather experiences of one’s relationship with the world as a whole, and it is claimed that the sense of possibility fundamentally impinges upon them.

Ratcliffe’s work provides numerous illustrations of how alterations of existential feelings and related affective experiences may have a plurality of effects, for example impacting upon the person’s motivation, experience of time, and social perception and interaction. The disturbances of affectivity at issue have also been argued to have the potential to influence the way in which the person conceives of herself and her story – her narrative self-understanding - limiting or distorting it in various ways (Bortolan 2017; Ratcliffe 2016). This is of particular importance because narrativity has been conceived as being closely related not only to a particular form of self-consciousness, but also to a specific kind of selfhood - the so-called “narrative self” (e.g. Bruner 2002; Zahavi 2005). As such, alterations of this dimension have to be seen as significant threats to the integrity of the person’s mental and practical life.

However, the elaboration and modification of certain self-narratives has been seen as a central aspect of treatment and recovery processes (Bortolan 2020a; Pickard 2015), and something that may have the power to trigger enduring affective transformations. This is the idea at the core of various narrative approaches to psychotherapy (Angus and Greenberg 2011; Payne 2006), where emphasis has been posed on the role played by narratives in self-regulation and on how changes to the way in which one’s life stories are conceived and recounted can have wide-ranging effects on mental health.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to research on the role of narrative self-understanding in the recovery from mental illness through the investigation of how narratives can contribute to restore and expand one’s sense of possibility. I argue that the engagement with self-narratives of a certain kind can lead to transformations of existential feelings in virtue of the ability of these narratives to trigger the experience of emotions which are not consonant with the person’s background affective orientations, a shift which has the potential to lead to more enduring cognitive and affective changes.

To support my point, I draw on research in the field of aesthetics, and in particular, on Noel Carroll’s work on the affective relationship between the audience and characters of fictional works (2001, 2011). I maintain that there is a parallel between the way in which we relate to fictional characters in a story and the way in which we respond to ourselves as the protagonists of our self-narratives, and, expanding
on previous research on the topic (Bortolan 2020b), I provide an extended account of the relevant dynamics. To be more precise, I claim that, even when a restricted sense of possibility makes it difficult to experience certain emotions in relation to ourselves, the ability to engage affectively with fictional characters may enable the experience of these emotions in response to particular self-narratives, paving the way to broader modifications of one’s existential feelings and sense of possibility.

1. Affects and Possibility

In the phenomenological literature a connection has been established between certain forms of affective experience and the possibility space we inhabit – namely what it is possible for us to experience and what we experience as possible.

A notion which is closely related to this question is that of “existential feelings”, which is inspired by classical phenomenological research on “moods” (Heidegger 1962). Within this framework, attention has been drawn to the fact that the ability to entertain intentional states is rooted in the experience of particular affects with a non-intentional structure. In other terms, it has been suggested that cognitive, emotional, or volitional states directed at particular objects stem from a specific type of object-less affective experience. In the work of Heidegger this experience is characterised through the notion of “moods”, namely ways of being ‘attuned’ or ‘situated’ in the world which make it possible for us to encounter things as significant in certain manners, enabling specific sets of affective responses (cf. Elpidorou and Freeman 2015; Ratcliffe 2013b). From this perspective - and contrary to what is often the case in the contemporary psychological literature – moods are not conceived as “inner” mental states which only occasionally come to colour our experience. Rather, they are viewed as ways of relating to the world which are constantly present and cannot be done without.

Ratcliffe’s notion of “existential feeling” has various aspects in common with Heidegger’s concept of “mood”. One of the key features of existential feelings is indeed that they shape our experience, by enabling things to matter to us in characteristic ways. In other terms, existential feelings modulate what kinds of significance can be experienced by us: they are “presupposed spaces of experiential possibility” (Ratcliffe 2005: 45) that enable us to perceive ourselves, other people, and the world as
salient in various manners. Like Heideggerian moods, existential feelings do not have specific intentional objects, but rather determine “what kinds of intentional state it is possible to have” (Ratcliffe 2010: 604). On this account, Ratcliffe suggests that existential feelings have a “pre-intentional” rather than a merely non-intentional structure: they constrain the range of intentional states we can undergo. This means that, depending on the particular existential feeling(s) we are experiencing, there will be certain thoughts, emotions, and desires that we have the possibility to entertain, and others that will be precluded to us.

A very telling example offered by Ratcliffe concerns (existential) feelings of hopelessness (2013a). According to Ratcliffe’s account, we can distinguish between intentional and pre-intentional forms of loss of hope. Often, losing hope entails losing hope with regard to particular possibilities (e.g. that one will achieve something, or that a particular event will take place). In these cases, hopelessness is a feeling with a particular intentional structure. However, Ratcliffe observes how in certain circumstances (for example, in certain instances of severe depression), the loss of hope may have a deeper and wide-ranging character. Here the feeling of hopelessness is no longer directed to particular possibilities, but rather is to be understood as the loss of the capacity to hope itself. This is an existential feeling, as it does not have an intentional structure, but it constrains the set of intentional states that one can undergo. When in the grip of existential hopelessness, the experience of feelings of hope directed at particular possibilities is precluded to the person.

While existential feelings can have such a dramatic impact on one’s experiences, it is important however to note that they are not an “all or nothing” phenomenon. For example, one may lose the capacity to hope for oneself, but still be able to feel hopeful about other people’s prospects. In other terms, existential feelings have different degrees of depth (Ratcliffe 2010), depending on how extensive the range of possibilities that they ‘open up’ or ‘close down’ is.

Background affects like moods and existential feelings are thus attributed a key role in our mental and practical life, and this is highlighted also by their centrality to various psychiatric disturbances (Ratcliffe 2008; 2015). Given this, it is important to understand how such forms of affective experience can be regulated: are we in control of our moods and existential feelings? And if so, what are the means
through which these states can be modulated? In other terms: can we change the background affective orientations that have the power to shape our sense of possibility in the ways described above?

The phenomenological literature does not provide us with a clear account of how this may happen. We know that moods and existential feelings change, thus modulating the possibility space we inhabit, but there are different positions in the literature as to whether, and how, we can regulate these experiences.

Heideggerian moods are not states over which cognition, and volition, appear to be able to exert a direct influence. Moods, Heidegger suggests, can be mastered by means of “counter-moods” (1962: 175), thus drawing attention to how the modification of our background affective orientations depends on the emergence of other states of the same kind. As explained by Guignon, “I can only overcome my fearfulness […] by fixing myself in a mood of equanimity or indifference” (1984: 187).

This may suggest that we are rather powerless in front of our moods and existential feelings. If these are affects that constrain the range of intentional states that we can entertain and they can only be swept away by affects of the same type, then it would seem that thoughts, emotions, and desires – due to intentionality being an essential aspect of their structure – would not by themselves have the power to change our background affective orientations.

However, it is also recognised that sometimes it is possible to undergo intentional states which trigger processes that can result in the transformation of the moods or existential feelings which are in the background of the intentional states themselves. An expression of this idea can be found in Stephan Strasser’s work on moods. As he explains:

“One can take as a theoretical model the image of a fountain. The water in the basin forms a unitary, undifferentiated mass; it would be comparable to the formerly state of mind. The fluid is then divided into sets and ejected in different directions; the sets are – in Husserl, Scheler, and Pfänder – an image of the separate and directed intentional performances. The finely atomized drop of water sink back unnoticed into the basin: this process would be comparable to the self-mixing, self-obliterating and self-canceling of experience” (Strasser 1977: 186-187).
The idea that, despite being radically shaped by our background affective orientations, intentional states can also influence such orientations, emerges clearly also from Ratcliffe’s own work. As he highlights: “[…] in some cases, an intentional state with content p affects existential feeling q in such a way as to remove the conditions of intelligibility for intentional states of that type” (Ratcliffe 2015: 151).

The question that is immediately raised by these claims concerns the ways in which intentional states can exert such an influence on the pre-intentional ones in which they are rooted. This is explicitly considered by Ratcliffe, who suggests that the answer may not fall within the remit of a phenomenological account. In his words:

“But how could an intentional state somehow ‘act upon’ its own conditions of intelligibility? It is not clear to me that much more can be said from a phenomenological perspective – it simply happens, just as existential changes can happen when one is sick, tired or intoxicated. Perhaps, at this point, we need to switch to a non-phenomenological approach. For instance, there is a neurobiological story to be told” (2015: 151).

I agree with Ratcliffe that an account of these dynamics may exceed the boundaries of phenomenology, and should investigate, for instance, the neurobiological processes which underlie existential transformations. However, I also believe that it is possible to expand our phenomenological understanding of these processes, offering a finer-grained account of how such transformations are triggered and how they may unfold over time. In particular, it would be fruitful to clarify both which intentional states are relevant in this context, and the processes through which their experience can engender existential changes.

The next sections of this paper will aim to shed light on these questions, by exploring in particular the role that intentional states like emotions may play in this context. Here I will investigate how one may come to experience emotions that are in contrast with existing background affective orientations, and how these may trigger changes that have the capacity to modify one’s existential feelings themselves.
2. The Role of Narratives

Emotions have been argued to be able to influence in fundamental ways the stories we tell about ourselves, and on the other hand, a certain type of engagement with certain self-narratives has been seen as having an impact on emotion regulation. These ideas, for instance, are the core of the theoretical and methodological framework of “Emotion-focused therapy” (EFT) (Angus and Greenberg 2011). Within this framework, it is acknowledged that self-narratives are rooted in the experience of certain feelings, and that the modification of such narratives can feed back into affective experience, a dynamic that is seen as central to the processes through which positive transformations can be promoted. Outlining the “dialectical constructivist model” of therapeutic change at the core of this approach, Greenberg and Angus highlight the mutual, recurrent, influence between the relevant levels of self-experience:

“The self is viewed as a multiprocess, multilevel organization emerging from the dialectical interaction between ongoing, moment-by-moment experience and higher-level reflexive processes that attempt to interpret, order and explain elementary experiential processes. In this view, affectively toned, preverbal, preconscious processing is seen as the major source of self experience. Articulating, organizing, and ordering this experience into a coherent narrative is the other major element” (2004: 332).

There are however some problems that may be faced when we think of narratives as the potential means for the transformation of our background affective orientations. The particular “moods” or “existential feelings” we experience seem indeed able to shape in important ways also our narrative self-understanding. As argued by Bortolan (2017), due to their pre-intentional structure, existential feelings can modulate both the form and contents of the autobiographical narratives we construct, leading us to create life stories that are consonant with the background affects we experience.

Ratcliffe himself recognises that narratives are integral or “inextricable” from the structure of existential feelings (2016). For example, as previously mentioned, in the case of severe depression a
loss of hope that things could ever be different may be experienced. As a result, Ratcliffe claims, the
depressed person is unable to conceive of alternative self-interpretations and her autobiographical
stories lack “narrative openness”. In addition, on the basis of an examination of first-person accounts
of grief, Ratcliffe maintains that certain alterations of existential feelings - involving for example
disruptions of the way in which temporality is experienced - can even make it impossible to engage in
the construction of autobiographical narratives.

One could thus wonder whether the impact that narratives can have on affects is limited to changing
some of the emotions that are allowed for by certain existential feelings, rather than changing the
existential feelings themselves. If we consider an existential form of hopelessness, for example, this
would entail that a narrative could influence which of the emotions compatible with this background
orientation are undergone - for instance, sadness, resignation, or dejection – but it would not have any
power over hopelessness itself.

However, the positive outcomes of narrative therapy and the role of narrative changes in the recovery
from psychiatric illness (Bortolan 2017) suggest a different picture. EFT, for example, has been used
in the treatment of severe depression (cf. Angus and Greenberg 2011), the overcoming of which requires
a broadening of one’s sense of possibility and thus a transformation of existential feelings.

In light of this, and of the inextricability of affects and story-telling previously discussed, it may be
expected that the narratives themselves can have an impact on moods and existential feelings. In other
terms, while background affective orientations incline us towards the construction of certain stories, it
is arguable that stories too can exert an influence on the affective grounds from which they stem. In the
following section I will illustrate the dynamics through which this can happen.

3. Self-Narratives and Fictional Narratives

As outlined above, some phenomenologists have suggested that the experience of particular intentional
states may lead to a modification of one’s moods or existential feelings. It remains to be clarified,
however, what are the processes through which both the intentional states and the changes may be brought about.

My working hypothesis is that this is possible in virtue of the emotional responses\(^1\) that are triggered by narratives, and, in particular, self-narratives, and the way in which these are, subsequently, cognitively and intersubjectively elaborated. Before further exploring this point, however, it is important to clarify what kind of narratives I have in mind, especially as a wide range of definitions have been given of this notion (see, e.g. Goldie 2012; Lamarque 2004; Schechtman 2007; Slors 1998).

Here I adopt a rather minimal account, considering as a self-narrative one which focuses on events that involve the narrator, and which can be told or just “thought through in narrative thinking” (Goldie 2012: 2). Such narrative can cover different time spans, focusing on events that took place over the course of years, months, or just a few minutes. The stories which are relevant here, therefore, are not necessarily those which report the events of an entire lifetime or which span significant periods of it. On the contrary, they can focus on circumscribed or isolated episodes, and these may be located at different points in time. For example, a narrative may report a past event, describe a present situation, or anticipate something that will happen in the future.

Given my interest in the relationship between narrativity and one’s sense of possibility, and the relevance of both to psychiatric illness, treatment, and recovery, in this context I am particularly interested in narratives which provide an account or interpretation of the recounted events in a way that challenges or is alternative to the person’s prior or predominant views (Bortolan 2020b). For example, these can be narratives about past events which offer an evaluation of them which is different from the interpretation generally given by the person. A past event in which the person has been involved can for instance be re-narrated not as a personal failure, but rather as something that was determined by circumstances beyond one’s control, or as a situation that involved a temporary set-back, but that is a positive, successful experience in the long-term. Alternatively, the relevant narratives can be future-focused and include experiences and evaluations which would be precluded by the patients’ current

\(^1\) I adopt a characterisation of emotions as states which possess both intentionality and a distinct phenomenology (Slaby 2008).
predicament. More broadly, the narratives relevant in this context may involve imagined events. For example, for someone who experiences pervasive feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness, a relevant narrative may involve imagining to be in circumstances in which s/he achieves something of value to her and feels empowered.

In order to shed light on the emotional effects that engaging in the construction and modification of self-narratives may have, it is helpful to consider the way in which we can respond affectively to stories more broadly, as it is plausible that some of the key dynamics would be the same or similar in the case of narrativity and self-narrativity more specifically.

Research in philosophy of emotion and aesthetics has identified various forms of affective relation between the audience and the characters of the stories they engage with. Carroll (2011), for example, has put forward a classification which includes the following categories: identification; coincident emotional states; vectorially converging emotional states; sympathy; solidarity; and mirror reflexes. Elaborating upon previous research on the topic (Bortolan 2020b), in the following I will claim that there is a parallel between the affective responses to fictional characters discussed by Carroll, and the way in which we can relate to ourselves as the main characters of our life stories, and I will suggest that this explains why engaging in narrative activities can trigger a process of affective transformation.

My focus will be on cases in which one’s sense of possibility is altered in ways that preclude the experience of certain emotions in relation to oneself but not in relation to others, or certain types of emotion but not others. In particular, the processes I will discuss presuppose the capacity to affectively respond to fictional characters, even when the range of self-focused emotions that one can entertain is radically restricted.

One could wonder, as a result, how significant such an account might be, as it could be claimed that the deepest alterations of one’s sense of possibility involve the incapacity to experience kinds of emotion - for example, hope, excitement, or trust - independently of whether these are directed to fictional or real persons, to oneself or others. In other terms, one might object that we must be able to explain how someone who has lost the capacity to hope, not only for oneself, but for anyone and anything, can overcome this predicament and be hopeful again.
In response to this potential concern, I wish to highlight two things. First, the complete loss of the capacity to experience a particular kind of emotion is a comparatively rare event. Often, the transformations of experience engendered by the presence of a certain existential feeling are more circumscribed, and these cases are the ones that my account has the potential to shed light on. Secondly, even when one has lost the ability to undergo specific kinds of emotions, it might still be possible to experience other emotions of the same valence. The loss of the capacity to hope, for example, may be incompatible with some positive emotions - for example excitement or relief - but not with all of them. One, for instance, may be unable to hope while still being capable of feeling love, or gratitude towards others. This residual capacity for emotional resonance is what is leveraged in the narrative activities that are the focus of this paper, thus making the analysis developed here relevant to a diverse range of experiential configurations.

Carroll’s account and Responding to Oneself as the Protagonist of a Self-Narrative

The first form of affective relationship between the audience and the characters of fictional works discussed by Carroll is identification or the “infection model” (2011: 167). By this, Carroll refers to cases in which the audience experiences the same emotion as the character in the story, and the cause of this experience is the fact that the character experiences such an emotion. For example, a character may be feeling happy or sad, and we feel happy or sad because of the character’s own experience.

Carroll establishes a causal connection between the emotional experience of the character and the emotional experience of the audience; however, he does not specify what makes this connection possible. In other terms, he tells us that in identification, the audience undergoes an emotion which is type-identical with the emotion of the character, and that the latter is that in virtue of which the former is brought about, but he does not make explicit why this is the case. A possible explanation, however, draws upon the notion of identification itself, expanding the role it plays in accounting for the type of circumstances that Carroll has in mind.

As highlighted above, the form of identification that Carroll refers to is emotional identification. This amounts to the audience experiencing an emotion of the same type as the emotion experienced by
the character *because* the character experiences it. As such, the identification at issue concerns mental states and not individuals. It can however be argued that, in order for the emotion of the character to be the cause of a type-identical emotion in the audience, another form of identification should be in place, and, more specifically, that *the audience should be identifying with the character*. It seems indeed plausible that it is because the audience, albeit briefly, ‘puts themselves in the shoes of the character’ or ‘take their perspective’ that the emotion of the latter can be the cause of the emergence in the former of the same emotion.²

Carroll acknowledges that the idea that there can be a form of emotional identification between audiences and fictional characters has been rather popular. However, he is sceptical about the persuasiveness of this account, as, in his opinion, once we dissect the specific dynamics which are in play in these cases, the sources of our affective responses are often not the ones identified by the infection model. More specifically, he doubts that the character’s emotions are always the cause of the audience’s emotion, and that the audience’s emotions tend to be type-identical with the emotions of the characters.

*Coincident emotional states* are the second form of relationship between the audience and fictional characters identified by Carroll. He characterises these as emotional responses which are analogous to the emotions undergone by the characters, and which are motivated by a description of the characters’ circumstances which emphasise specific aspects. In these cases, the audience experiences an emotion not because the character experiences it, but rather because the features of the situation which are stressed in the narrative “are those that are criterially apposite to the emotional states intended to be excited by the work”, a dynamic which Carroll refers as “criterial prefocussing” (2011: 169). He

² Carroll (2001) appears to attribute this view to Plato, with whom he disagrees, as “rather than character identification, it is our own preexisting emotional constitution […] that accounts for our emotional involvement with narrative fictions” (228). When spelling out different possible meanings of the notion of “identification”, Carroll mentions that the notion of identification as “perspective-taking” differs from that of emotional identification (2011: 166), and expresses doubts concerning the extent to which it is really possible to take the perspective of another, rather than simply ‘projecting’ one’s perspective onto them. I agree with Carroll with regard to both points: identification (as perspective-taking) is different from emotional identification, and the former can involve a significant degree of projection. However, I believe that an audience’s ability to emotionally identify with a character (in the way outlined by Carroll) depends on the audience having preliminarily identified with/taken the perspective of the character (even if this involves projection).
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considers as an example a narrative featuring the possibility of an atomic conflict between the US and China. The president of the US who features in this narrative is anxious and so is the audience. Carroll suggests that - contrary to what would be maintained by the infection model - the audience is not anxious because the President is in such emotional state, but rather in virtue of the circumstances, which have been described as marked by various anxiety-eliciting features (e.g. mention of jet bombers and their explosive power, uneasy diplomatic relationships etc.).

While in coincident emotional states the audience and fictional character experience an emotion of the same type, in *vectorially converging emotional states* - the third set of cases discussed by Carroll - the audience and the character experience emotions which have the same valence, but are not of the same type. In these cases, the emotional state of the audience is experienced in response to one of the emotional states of the character herself, and, contrary to the case of coincident emotional states, it is not a response to the described circumstances. As an example, we can consider a character who is feeling grief because of the death of a dear one, and an audience who feels sad for her. The emotions here at issue, grief and sadness respectively, are both negatively valenced and one is a reaction to the other, but they are instances of different types of emotion. Otherwise said, in this type of affective relation, the emotion of the audience is a response to the emotion of the character, and the two “converge vectorially” in the same direction of the affective spectrum (Carroll 2011: 171-172).

*Sympathy* and *solidarity* are more complex ways in which an audience can relate affectively to the characters of fictional works. *Sympathy* is characterised by Carroll as an emotional state motivated by a “pro-attitude” or a form of caring about the character, and which inclines the audience to experience feelings which are not necessarily aligned with the feelings of the character. For instance, the character may be happy about something that happens to her, but as the audience fears some unpredicted consequences, or is in possession of information that is unknown to the character, they are concerned or sad about how the character may be affected by the event in question. According to Carroll, sympathy is experienced if the person it is directed to is appraised as being “worthy of our emotions” (2011: 174), something which in popular fiction is achieved through a depiction of the character as “morally good”, but which, in real life, “we tend […] to extend quite readily to most of those around us by default”
Sympathy is conceived as an essential aspect of solidarity, as this is a way of relating to multiple characters which involves both sympathy for the protagonist and antipathy for the antagonists.

The last form of affective relation between the audience and fictional characters considered by Carroll is what he discusses under the heading of mirror reflexes. Carroll’s account here relies on the acknowledgment that we tend to imitate both the facial expressions and postures not only of real people, but also of fictional characters (2011: 178). Such imitative responses, as he notices, are not full-blown emotions, but may be constitutive parts of them, as certain bodily, expressive, and postural changes are integral aspects of specific affective reactions. On this basis, Carroll suggests that the dynamics triggered by these tendencies can contribute to our understanding of other people’s emotions, and perhaps also provide the grounds for emotional contagion. This is relevant to the understanding of the affective reactions we experience when we watch someone, so it applies to audio-visual narratives, for example in films and theatrical performances. However, it has been shown that overlapping neural areas tend to be activated both when certain actions are performed or observed, and when they are simply imagined (cf. Gallagher and Zahavi 2012: 198), which would be compatible with the dynamics considered by Carroll being in place also in the case of non-visual narratives.

The affective reactions listed by Carroll are undergone by an audience in response to the emotions experienced by fictional characters or their circumstances. As such, Carroll is concerned primarily with cases in which the protagonists and audiences of a story do not coincide. However, it is arguable that some of these dynamics may be in play also when the characters in the story are not fictional, and, more specifically, when the narrator and the protagonist coincide, as it is the case in self-narratives. In other terms, there may be a parallel between some of the ways in which we relate to the characters in fictional narratives and the way in which we relate to ourselves as the main characters in our own narratives. If this is the case, provided that we have retained the capacity to undergo certain types of emotional response towards fictional characters, engaging in self-focused forms of story-telling may be a way to trigger emotions and other intentional states involved in the transformation of one’s background affective orientations.

In order to illustrate how this may be the case, let’s consider for instance what may happen when a person who feels radically powerless, hopeless, and lacking in self-confidence - in a therapeutic or non-
therapeutic setting - engages in the construction of a narrative involving experiences and events that appear to be largely unattainable given the patient’s existing affective orientation. As highlighted previously, the story-telling in question may involve a past event which is given a different interpretation, or it may focus on a future possible scenario (Bortolan 2020b: 200). For example, the person may be prompted to re-tell the story of a past performance that she considered as an example of her inability to do anything good, and re-tell it as a story in which something of value was achieved. Or, the person may simply imagine a new story, not related to a past event but having a connection with her life circumstances, in which she does something valuable – for instance, she gives a good talk at a public event, wins a sport competition, or successfully campaigns in support of a moral cause important to her.

While not all forms of affective relation towards fictional characters highlighted above may be available to the person who engages in the construction or communication of such self-narrative, my suggestion is that some of them will, and that this may be the starting point for the affective transformation that may lead to expand the person’s sense of possibility. In other terms, the narrative that has oneself as a protagonist will be able to trigger various forms of affective response, in a similar way to what a fictional narrative does, and this may start the process which will lead to the modification of the background affective orientation.

Let us consider emotional identification first. As highlighted above, this is how Carroll characterises cases in which the audience experiences an emotion which is type-identical with the emotion of a character, and the cause of the experience is the character’s emotion itself. I have suggested that this dynamic may depend on the identification of the audience with the character. On this basis, we should now ask: is it possible for the narrator of the self-narratives considered here to identify with her narrated self?

We have hypothesised that the self-narratives in question contain experiences and events that exceed the person’s sense of possibility. In other terms, these are narratives that depict as possible experiences and events that appear to be precluded to the person by her existential feelings. As such, it could be argued that any form of identification between the narrator and the narrated self is ruled out. How could
someone who feels radically worthless and powerless “identify” with the protagonist of a story undergoing experiences and events that appear completely unattainable?

It seems indeed unlikely that the person in this example could in any meaningful sense “put herself in the shoes” of the protagonist of this self-narrative. However, provided that something like “identification” is at all possible with fictional characters, perhaps there could still be the possibility for the person in the example to identify with her narrated self. This may perhaps be the case if the person relates to the narrated scenario not as a potentially “real” one, but rather as an entirely “fictional” one. In other terms, she may not think that the person in those successful narratives is a realistic version of herself, but she may well see it as an alternative one, a fictional character with whom she just happens to have some features in common. If this is the case – and provided, as highlighted above - that identification between audiences and fictional characters is indeed a possibility – the narrator could still be able to identify with her narrated self, and, as argued by the infection model, experience certain positive emotions because her narrated self experiences them.  

However, even if emotional identification with her narrated self was precluded, I have suggested (Bortolan 2020b: 202) that the person could still respond to the experiences of her narrated self with coincident emotional states. Recall that, according to Carroll, these are states which the audience undergo as a result of how the circumstances are depicted, and not as a consequence of the experience of the character. This dynamic does not require any form of identification, but rather an emphasis in the narrative on certain emotion-eliciting factors, and this is something to which the individual in our hypothetical example would have access to.

The person would indeed react emotionally to the imagined scenario, not because she identifies with her imagined self (this, as we have just recalled, is indeed not a requirement for coincident emotional states), but rather because she reacts to the circumstances in which the narrative places her imagined self.

3 While I acknowledged that it is possible to relate to one’s narrated self as a fictional, rather than a real version of oneself, I previously argued that emotional identification with the protagonist of one’s self-narratives in the cases at issue is unlikely to take place (Bortolan 2020b: 201-202). However, I am now more open with regard to this possibility. The reason for this is that suspending our belief in the reality of what we are witnessing can enable us to have a range of experiences that we would normally not undergo. For instance, we can experience towards fictional characters emotions that we would not experience – or even consider acceptable to experience – towards people in real life (Kieran 2010). So, as ‘pretense play’ can lift the constraints that we are bound by in relating to others, it can also lift the constraints that apply to the way in which we relate to ourselves.
self. For instance, if she imagines herself giving a successful talk, what may trigger a reaction would be imagining an audience that is raptured in listening to her, or that responds with an enthusiastic applause, and relevant and supportive questions. Here an emotional state of excitement, expectation, enthusiasm, and also empowerment may emerge, and not because the person identifies with herself as a character, but rather because this is the type of emotional state that is triggered in such a context. Confidence, optimism, and pride may exude from the situation, and not just from the person who is the center of attention in it.

In addition to this, also vectorially converging emotional states could be undergone by the person in this example. Within Carroll’s characterisation, these are emotional states that the audience experience as a response to the emotions of a character, but, contrary to what is the case in identification and coincident emotional states, the audience and character’s experiences are not type-identical. Vectorially converging emotional states, however, have the same valence, that is, they are both negative or positive affective states.

This dynamic too seems to be within reach for the person who engages with what appears to her as a fictional version of herself, and may be even more easily undergone than coincident emotional states or emotional identification. The narrated self in our example is someone whose experiences, behaviours, and achievements exceed the narrator’s sense of what is possible for her real self. As such, some of the emotions she undergoes are beyond the realm of what the narrator perceives herself as capable of attaining. However, even if the narrator was not able to “join” in with the emotions of her narrated self – namely to experience emotions that are type-identical to the ones of the protagonist of her self-narratives – she could still respond with emotions of the same valence. For instance, the self in the story she narrates is successful, confident, and in control of her circumstances, and, while she may not be able to share these feelings, she may still feel gladdened, or enlivened, or relieved by what is recounted, similarly to what would happen if the protagonist of the story she is engaging with was someone else. As highlighted above, we can indeed say that, in the relevant example, the self which is narrated is indeed to an extent “fictional” for the narrator, and, as such, it is to be expected that the reactions she could undergo towards fictional characters, are also reactions she could undergo towards her narrated self.
Sympathy and solidarity for one’s narrated self also seem to be responses of which the protagonist of the example we are considering would be capable. In Carroll’s account, also the form of caring for a character that these responses require does not rest on the identification between the audience and the characters. On the contrary, in these cases, the perspective of the audience and the characters may be markedly different, as the former, for instance, may be responding with a negative emotion when the latter is undergoing a positive one. Caring about a character with which one does not identify – and, in our set up, for a narrated self which is perceived to be to a degree fictional – again seems to be something within the affective reach of the narrator. As long as her capacity to care for others is intact, also the ability to care for the other which is one’s narrated self should be present.

At this point, however, one could wonder to what extent those whose sense of possibility is radically restricted might be able to care for what befalls their narrated self. Once again though, it is helpful to remember that what is presupposed by my account is the presence of the ability to be minimally concerned with others and, more specifically, fictional characters. If this is present, the engagement with certain self-narratives is the means by which one’s own self can become, qua fictional character, the object of one’s concerns. In addition, it is not necessarily the case that significant restrictions of one’s sense of possibility go hand in hand with the loss of ability to care for oneself. One might lose hope that things will ever be different, but still be concerned that this is the case, experiencing a series of emotions – for example, anxiety or fear – towards this perceived state of affairs.

Furthermore, independently of whether and to what extent she is able to identify with her “narrated self”, the person may still be inclined to experience some of her emotions due to mirror reflexes mechanisms. This is the case as she may involuntarily imitate, at the personal or sub-personal level, some of the physical manifestations associated with those emotions. Imagining someone, or oneself, laughing in happiness may put a smile on one’s face, while imagining someone, or oneself, crying in despair would likely result in the assumption of a rather sombre look.

As Carroll observes, the bodily responses which are triggered as part of a mirror mechanism are not to be confused with the emotion itself; and as such, undergoing them, should not be equated with experiencing a full-fledged emotional state. However, these responses may facilitate the experience of
the emotion at issue, and thus play a role in the emergence, for instance, of emotional identification and coincident emotional states.

4. The Power of Narrativity and Enduring Affective Transformations

These dynamics are closely connected to the role played by the imagination in story-telling, and the effects that this can have on the person’s mental activities. Catriona Mackenzie (2008), for example, argues that imaginative processes and, in particular, imaginative projection, are key to narrative thinking and the processes through which we achieve change over time. More specifically, she suggests that, by imagining our future selves in the scenarios generated by certain decisions, we get an understanding of how we would feel if certain courses of action were pursued, thus acquiring key information to guide our choices. Mackenzie highlights that this is the case in virtue of certain features of the imagination, and, in particular, of what Wollheim (1984) calls “cogency”.

Wollheim distinguishes between two forms of imagining – central and acentral imagining – and claims that both have the power to shape the person’s affective and cognitive experience, although to different degrees. When I centrally imagine something, I do it from the point of view of one of the characters in the imagined scene. The character whose point of view I take could be either myself – if I am one of the people who feature in the imagined scene – or someone else, but the key feature of central imagining is that there is an individual perspective which is represented within the scene. In acentral imagining, on the other hand, the scene is not imagined from the point of view of any of the characters in it.

Wollheim observes that cogency is a property of central imagining and he describes it in the following terms:

“As I centrally imagine the protagonist’s thinking, experiencing, feeling this or that, so I shall tend to find myself in the condition – cognitive, conative, affective – in which the mental states that I imagine, were I actually to have them, would leave me” (1984: 79-80).
What is described here by Wollheim is consonant with what illustrated previously with regard to cases of *emotional identification*, as it was argued that these are cases in which the audience and the character experience the same emotion due to the latter taking the perspective of the former. According to Wollheim, however, imagination can be “cogent” (even if to a lesser extent) also in cases of acentral imagining (1984: 80), an insight which is of particular relevance for the investigation of some of the other forms of affective relation between audiences and characters discussed before.

Acentral imagining is a form of ‘a-perspectival’ imagining, and, as such, it does not rely on the person’s capacity to ‘put herself in the shoes’ of any of the characters, thus being a form of experience that could be undergone also by those who cannot identify with/take the perspective of the characters. As I have argued, this could be the case with self-narratives where the narrator may not be able or willing to identify with her narrated self. If Wollheim is right, however, by being able to acentrally imagine the narrated situation, the narrator would still tend to experience the same affective (and cognitive and conative) states of their ‘fictional’ self, which is indeed what appears to be the case in instances of *coincident emotional states*.

The idea that engaging in activities like imagining and story-telling can have a positive and transformational impact on one’s affective experience is consonant also with some of core tenets of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) (see e.g. Beck 1967; Lambert and Bergin 2013; Sheldon 2011). At the basis of this psychotherapeutic approach is indeed the idea that certain modifications of one’s cognitive processes can lead to emotional changes which are health-enhancing. Action-related dynamics are central to these processes, as what is considered to play a therapeutic role in CBT is not only the modification of one’s thoughts, but also the challenging of dysfunctional thoughts through the implementation of certain behaviours.

Engaging with particular self-narratives can be relevant in this context as narratives provide us with scripts for thought and action, and, more specifically, for thought and action associated with emotions. Stories often involve depictions of the reasons which lead characters to act in certain ways, and emotions are very powerful motivational factors. In addition, emotions themselves are often the focus of stories, as it is the events and situations which are affectively significant that tend to be narrated (Hardcastle 2003; 2008). Through stories we thus get a portrayal of what the experience of certain
emotions typically look like, and this includes the behaviours that people tend to display when experiencing those emotions. Stories provide us with “templates for action and action-sequences” (Herman 2013: 246), namely with scripts indicating what one should do, where, in what order, etc.

This is very relevant to the case of psychiatric illness as the restriction of one’s sense of possibility and the range of affective experiences one is likely to undergo may diminish the familiarity with the patterns of behaviour which may ensue from the experience of certain emotions. If I am used to feeling powerless, the ways of behaving which are associated with confidence and empowerment will be (or become) something that I am less acquainted with, they won’t come natural to me – either in thought or action. A story that shows me how one usually behaves when feeling confident or empowered will thus provide me with models I can imitate, so that not only certain emotions can be more easily triggered, but these can be followed by further consistent actions and thoughts.

In other terms, engaging in story-telling that involves the narration of positive emotions may provide the narrator with examples of how that emotion can be “enacted” or “acted upon”. This can make it easier for the narrator to act and think in ways that are consistent with those positive emotions, thus bringing about the affective transformations that, as highlighted by the CBT framework, are facilitated by the performance of certain actions and the modification of certain thoughts.

These dynamics are clearly illustrated by some first-personal reports of patients suffering from depression, to the treatment of which both narrative and cognitive-behavioural approaches have been applied (e.g. Beck 1967; Angus and Greenberg 2011). For example, in describing the experiences and practices which were key to her recovery, Tracy Thompson provides an account in which the transformational power of both words and actions emerges clearly. As she explains:

“[…] the single most valuable tool was the one that sounds the most mindless: rote repetition. 

[…] When I felt the familiar hollowness in the pit of my stomach, the first prickling of my skin, I would quickly try to come up with a phrase to repeat. It had to be a concrete, positive message, not a nonsense mantra but something that would help me through a bad moment. Sometimes I would write it down, as if I were a student kept after school; other times, I just repeated it to myself.
“Every day, I’m a little bit better.”

“I will have a family someday.”

Over time, I found the most effective way of doing this was to combine the message with some physical action – so that, for instance, walking down the street to work, I could time the words to the sound of my heels on the pavement. […]

The words reinforced the action; the action reinforced the words. Taken together, it was as if a bulldozer were crashing through the under-brush of neurons in my brain, creating a new road, obliterating the paths that had been there before. Those old paths had been the automatic negative thoughts – “I am defective” or “I am not worth loving” (Thompson 1996: 233-234).

So, a particular self-narrative can provide the framework within which certain thoughts are articulated and certain actions are modelled, thus anchoring the cognitive and behavioural changes which are conducive to more positive emotions. As hinted at above, this further illuminates why, by responding affectively to narratives which have herself as the main character, a patient may become able to experience emotions previously precluded to her by the presence of certain existential feelings.

However, it may be observed that occasionally experiencing an emotion that is in tension with one’s existential feelings is certainly not enough to lead to a transformation of these feelings, and relatedly, of the person’s sense of possibility. Even admitting that, in the midst of existential feelings of hopelessness, one may be able to see some light, it is very uncertain that this experience could even scratch the surface of the background affects with which it is in tension.

This cautionary consideration correctly draws attention to the fact that change, in the circumstances that we are examining, is a complex and lengthy process, and a careful exploration of its various aspects should be developed. Nevertheless, the phenomenological accounts from which this analysis has moved, are explicit in suggesting that the experience of a single intentional state can “act upon” or “sink back” into the moods or existential feelings which are in its background, thus highlighting its transformative power. I believe that the best way to interpret this idea is to claim that the intentional state does not bring about the transformation by itself, but rather that it constitutes a first step in a
process which has the potential to lead to a long-lasting change of moods or existential feelings. This, I think, is the case for multiple reasons.

The first has to do with the influence that the emotions triggered by certain self-narratives may have on future affective reactions. According to Hogan (2011: 240ff), for example, strong emotional episodes are likely to be stored in emotional memory and to influence responses in future situations. It may be easier to experience emotions with which we are familiar, and a recent occurrence of a positive affective response may facilitate the experience of analogous responses in the future.

This dynamic reflects an aspect of the relationship between language and affectivity more broadly, and has been investigated by Colombetti (2009) with reference specifically to the impact that emotion labels and classifications can have on the structure of the affects themselves. Colombetti suggests that linguistic expression enables us to “condense” complex experiences in simpler terms, thus making them more “accessible” (2009: 20). Through linguistic labelling and description some emotional experiences can thus acquire more visibility, which makes it easier for people to be aware of their existence and to undergo them. By virtue of their being narrated, certain emotions may thus become more salient for the person, and their experience be perceived as a concrete possibility.

A further insight relevant in this context comes from the investigation of the role of narrative and imaginative thinking in the learning of skills and virtues. Goldie (2012: 91ff), for example, argues that imagining ourselves in certain situations – which may involve imagining the emotions that we would experience in said situations, and/or undergoing an emotion as a response to what we are imagining – is how we can shape our dispositions to act in certain ways. Gradually and through practice, emotions and the actions that may follow from them come to form a new “routine”, they become so to speak “automatic”, making the imaginative effort no longer necessary. Similarly, the transformative power of emotions which are in tension with one’s background affects may be dependent upon their repetition and the gradual formation of new dispositions to think, feel, and act in ways that are at odds with existing background affective orientations, ultimately leading to their overcoming.

Conclusions
This study has explored how one’s sense of possibility, and the existential feelings in which it is anchored, can be modified by the engagement with certain self-narratives. More specifically, I have argued that, provided that one has maintained the capacity to respond affectively to fictional characters, similar affective responses can be engendered by the engagement with one’s narrated self.

I have suggested that while emotional identification with oneself as the protagonist of one’s self-narratives may not always be achievable, the construction, imagination, or communication of these narratives can trigger the experience of emotions which are “coincident” or “vectorially converging” to the emotions of the narrated self, towards whom also emotions rooted in sympathy and solidarity can be experienced. Through these dynamics the narrator can come to undergo emotions the experience of which is made unlikely by the presence of certain background feelings, and I have shed light on the factors – including imagination, memory, and the influence of narratives on behaviour, that make this possible.

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