



## **Narrating Agency and a Reflective Self in Lisa Halliday's *Asymmetry***

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### **Abstract**

Advancements in modern “post-classical narratology” have undergone unprecedented growth in the last two decades, giving rise to various directions of narratological research within the cognitive and diachronic domains. One such approach is biosemiotics, which appeared at the crossroads of semiotics and cultural biology and combines a set of definitions for meaning-making and agency construction in philosophy, linguistics, culture, and all complex systems. Agency here represents any kind of subject activity (e.g., epistemic, cognitive, etc.) that can be determined by the indices and icons of subjectivity at the level of the storyline development and then compared at the level of the discourse. From the biosemiotic approach, the narrative discourse as a complex system is characterised by the meaning emergence and telic behavior of all its constituent parts striving at closure and a certain goal, i.e., having some agenda. Thus, the agency is supplementary to the acting of the self-reflecting subject in terms of intentionality, self-referentiality, and self-governing activity. Following the above definition of agency, this paper examines the possible ways of applying Peircian triadic sign theory to narrative agency construction in the contemporary novel “Asymmetry” (2018) by Lisa Halliday, operating with the notions of bodily and biosemiotic agency. Seeing subjectivity related to perspective-taking in the narrative discourse, it is important to trace the distribution of the icons and indexes of subjectivity on three levels: semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic.

**Keywords:** narrative, agency, autopoiesis, biosemiotics, reflection

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### **Introduction**

Modern post-classical narratology has undergone unprecedented interdisciplinary growth in the last couple of decades, giving rise to several new and transformed approaches incorporating methods and mixed research designs of so-called “hard” sciences and “soft sciences”. This change, inspired by the “narrative turn” and discovery of DNA in the social sciences, resulted in a new humanitarian tradition to see communication as a semiosis at all levels of human activity, including the cultural domain per se. As language and culture represented then different levels of communication (semiosis) and human modelling, the semiotic theory has

also evolved from structural semantic analysis of the text to cognitive semiotics and biosemiotics, merging cognitive linguistics with evolutionary biology, cultural theory, and semiotics under one big umbrella approach. As cultural sign units, fictional texts report something to someone via narrating somebody (self). The position of the narrator's self within the story world is viewed as a meaningful agency, mediating the meaning-creation of the side of the reader. In this fashion, texts represent instances of semiosis, and it seems viable to approach a literary discourse through the study of signs in general. To fulfil this task, one should start with the essential issue of agency and the narrating subject's functions in the so-called classical and post-classical narratology.

While traditional structuralist terminological apparatus operates with the notion of the narrator, designating a speaking subject, cognitive semiotics and biosemiotics, in particular, operate with the notions of agency to represent any kind of subject activity (e.g., epistemic, cognitive, etc.) in the narrative discourse. Thus, a closer look at the communicative activity of the speaking and narrating subject in the context of the biosemiotic approach necessitates the acquisition of the notions of agency, subjectivity, and reflective selfhood in their relation to meaning-making in the narrative discourse. To proceed with this goal, we will begin with a short overview of the biosemiotic approach in literature to outline the conceptual framework of the agency analysis in the narrative, looking at the notions of embodied or bodily agency (Caracciolo&Kukkonen, 2021) and biosemiotic agency (Tønnessen,2015). Following the definition of agency, we will then examine possible ways of applying Peircian triadic sign theory to narrative agency construction in the contemporary debut novel "Asymmetry" (2018) by Whiting Award winner, Lisa Halliday,

### **Narrating self and agency in autopoietic systems**

The intention to integrate "second-generation" cognitive science with narratology has been in use for about the last twenty years. Inspired by the notions of autopoiesis (Maturana&Varela, 1972), coupled with the discovery of the genetic code, modern textual linguistics looks at a text as an autopoietic system, maintaining its self-organization and self-creative function. Following the definition of Maturana and Varela:

(...) a system whose organization defines a domain of interactions in which it can act with relevance to its maintenance, and the process of cognition is the actual (inductive) acting or behaving in this domain. *Living systems are cognitive systems, and living as a process is a process of cognition.* (italics in original) (Maturana&Varela, 1972)

Autopoiesis, according to Maturana and Varela, is what characterizes all living systems and organisms, and it serves as the basis of life itself. If so, then all systems, including social ones, are autopoietic in their nature and can maintain their organization and self-creation as a cognitive system does, i.e., via the process of cognition. This idea was so appealing to the scientists that they attempted to apply it in various research domains, going far beyond its primarily biological interpretation (see Luhmann,1995; Gornev, 1997).

The idea of autopoiesis happened to be that necessary bridge-making notion between the literary and cultural concepts of self-reference and performativity, and the purely biological notion of autopoiesis in self-organizing and self-referring dynamic systems. An inspiring attempt at making a certain *interzone* for autopoietics of literature and biosemiotics research has been conducted by Ira Livingston in the book "*Between Science and Literature. An Introduction to Autopoietics*" (2006).

Autopoietic ideas are quite revolutionary in the sphere of narrative poetics. They have stimulated the findings in complexity theory and evolutionary developmental biology, culminating in the poetics of nature in general. This led to the second-generation cognitive

science, the so-called E4 paradigm of embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended cognitive semiotics.

What roughly unites the interdisciplinary research in this domain is their attention to the experiencing subject as an embodied-poetic one, contrary to a purely mechanistic causal approach. By the poetic nature of semiosis, they mean the ability of the natural signs to exercise coordinative and subordinative relations by analogy and similarity, reminding those in a narrative complex system with metaphoric and metonymic connections. Indeed, the agency of signs may equal meaning generation and give rise to semiosis on several levels of discourse simultaneously; on the levels of human perception via all the senses and embodiment. Thus, the 4E cognitive semiotics hypothesis views the human body as a determiner of the cognitive lines of meaning-making in the narrative discourse, putting it at the centre of the narrative autopoietic complexity. Post-classical narratology has witnessed a few effective attempts at analyzing the role of the body and embodiment in the process of meaning generation in the narrative.

For instance, in their recent book “With Bodies: Narrative Theory and Embodied Cognition (Theory and Interpretation of Narrative). (2021) Caracciolo, M., & Kukkonen, K. are looking into the narrative discourse from the positions of, what they call, "embodied narratology," trying to incorporate research on the reader's embodiment with storytelling. The context of the work in this direction concerns the so-called 4E approaches to cognition: embodied, enactive, embedded, and extended nature of mind. According to these approaches, taking an embodied nature of self, a human mind emerges in the course of body interaction with the definite environment (they call it “embedded cognition”) which engages perceptual, affective, and intersubjective patterning, “enactive cognition”.

The findings of cognitive semiotics unanimously report that the readers enact the meaning of the narrative in the course of reading when they construct their poetic world through the lens of the given structure and the environment. Recognition of enactment is important while, on the one side, it highlights the importance of the context for meaning-creation, and it serves a certain boundary, separating the observing "self" from its environment, on the other. It may also partially explain why different readers have different poetic worlds, or the same reader may have various poetic worlds over the timeline. This function of the observing “self” becomes an index of the reflective semiosis, necessary for the notion of the double observer in the Peircian triadic sign definition. We will return to it later in the section on «Reflective Self as an Observer”.

To avoid any terminological confusion, it is important to start with the definition of embodiment or at least to give some innate characteristics of this popular notion. According to Johnson (2008), there are five dimensions of embodiment:

- 1) Biological (the body as the organism)
- 2) Ecological (the body in its relation to the material environment)
- 3) Phenomenological (the body as the site for the lived experience)
- 4) Social (the body as intersubjectively linked to other individuals in the social group)
- 5) Cultural (the body as entangled with cultural practices and meanings).

From a biosemiotic perspective, these five aspects of an embodiment may correspond to the experiences of the subject in relation to the Umwelt as a meaningful surrounding.

The notion of Umwelt, as suggested by biologist Jakob von Uexkull, lies in recognizing the active role of an organism in constructing the meaningful world around him. The term

Umwelt is a conceptual bridge between the two approaches: the enactivists and ecological psychology (Feitón, 2020). Inspired by Kant, Uexküll's *Umwelt* describes how the physiology of an organism's sensory apparatus shapes its active experience of the environment.

Narrative as an autopoietic system incorporates these relations in the form of experiences on several levels, too: 1) on the level of bodily experiences; 2) on the level of perceptions; 3) on the level of emotions; 4) on the level of higher cognitive functions; and 5) on the socio-cultural level. Thus, a narrative as a special literary genre also maintains autopoietic functions, and as with any autopoietic system narrative system is dynamic and reciprocal. It means that individual narratives are embedded in the memory of the individual inasmuch as they are part of a larger poetic milieu, proto-narratives, and other narrative texts. The meaning of the narrative arises from the interactions with the reader's subjective Umwelt, and the narrative itself is seen as a meeting place of two Umwelten (Cobley, 2010). In this fashion, the meaning is not given by the narrative but emerges in the process of interaction with the reader's conceptualized experiences, and, thus, the narrative becomes a cognitive tool for the process of meaning-making, i.e. semiosis.

For the purposes of our narrative analysis by the agency, we mean any kind of subject activity (e.g. epistemic, cognitive, etc.) which is possible to determine by the indices and icons of subjectivity on the level of the storyline development, and then compare at the level of the discourse. Particularly, we should trace how the narrative is mediated via certain narrative agents like authors, narrators, and characters. The range of terms referring to the narrating agents is rather wide, as it may cover various instances of the narrating centre manifestation on the axes of the author – the reader, the implied author – the implied reader, narrator – narratee, character – characters (Seymour Chatman's model, 1978).

In Genette's model of the narrative agents (1980), the distinction is made between a *homodiegetic narrator* and a *heterodiegetic narrator*, according to the degree of knowledge and the narrator's involvement in the story itself. The other term for the heterodiegetic narrator is the *omniscient author*, who is not taking part in the events of the story but knows and comments on the actions and the thoughts of the character/s. If the narrator is also the protagonist of the narrative, he is an *autodiegetic narrator*. As has been noticed by M. Ball, Genette's terms of homodiegetic/heterodiegetic narrators roughly correlate with Franz Stanzel's distinction between first-person narrative situation and authorial narrative situation (cited in Bal, M., & Lewin, 1983).

As underlined by S. Chatman, narrators may bear a different level of "narrator-hood" (cited in Kukkonen&Caracciolo (2021) often related to the notions of the "voice" of the narrator or "mood" and narrator's bodily presence in the story world. Depending on the degree of the narrator's presence in the fictional world, one may speak of weak (like a voice from nowhere) or high (or vividly presented) narrator-hood (Kukkonen&Caracciolo, 2021), looking at definite levels of diegesis and the degree of the involvement of the narrator into the narrative storyline flow. The narrating agent makes so-called choices about what the reader will see and will focus his attention on, i.e., who is the *focalizer*, giving rise to "joint attention" (the term introduced by Kukkonen&Caracciolo, 2021, Chapter 2). Thus, the agency of the narrating subject is "foregrounded" and put into the focus of the reader intentionally, as well as the turn of the choices of the speaking subjects enacts a definite reality that emerges from the interaction with the environment (i.e., context). Therefore, the agency of the narrating subject acquires characteristics of intentionality and emergence, typical for complex systems investigated in biosemiotics too. Intentionality and meaning emergence, centered around the subject's bodily experience thus become common points of interest for narrative research and biosemiotics.

While the bodily presence of the narrating subject serves the spatial and temporal localization of the speaking agency (i.e., whether the events represented in the main storyline

or before or after it), its orientation to the reader's Umwelt creates a semiotic process between the narrative as a system and its environment via observing entity of the narrator. From the biosemiotic approach, the narrative discourse as a complex system is characterized by the meaning emergence and telic behavior of all its constituent parts striving at closure and a certain goal, i.e., having some agenda (Mendoza-Collazos&Zlatev, 2022). Thus, the agency is supplementary to the acting of the self-reflecting subject (the narrator) in terms of intentionality, self-referentiality, and self-governing activity. The section below will look at this relational process as a reflective semiosis.

### **Reflective Self as an Observer**

Traditionally recognized view of a 'storyworld' sees it as a kind of cognitive action on the side of the reader, who 'builds up some version of the diegesis, or spatiotemporal world, and creates an ongoing story (fabula) occurring within it' that is instigated by the narrative techniques utilized in an audio-visual work (Bordwell1989, 8). The intensity of story world creation, as mentioned above, is rooted in the discursal bodily localization of the speaking and narrating agency, complimented by the affective, intersubjective enactment on the side of the reader. Being purely semiotic by its nature, the process of meaning enactment in narrative reflects a model of semiosis typical for all autopoietic systems, in terms of self-reflectivity, self-reference, and self-creative capabilities, as has been mentioned above.

This function of the observing "self" becomes an index of reflective semiosis, necessary for the notion of "the double observer" in the Peircian triadic sign definition, which was described by Barbara Sonnenhauser (2008). In her interpretation of Peirce's subjectivity, Sonnenhauser speaks about the double layers of interpretation performed by one of the three aspects of the sign (i.e. the interpretant) actualized in the form of a predictive hypothesis (PH) on the side of the reader/perceiver. Mechanistically it is performed, according to Ch. Peirce, via cognitive hypothesizing in the form of abductive reasoning. The process of abduction incorporates roughly four stages: an encounter - hypothesis – application – repetition. In practice, it looks as follows: we encounter an unusual event or notion, making us produce suppositions and hypotheses to the best explanation (HBE) on it, which are commensurate with our experiences. Then we are trying to test our presuppositions and hypotheses in order to see if they are true or false. When the result is discarded, we move again to the phase of hypothesizing. Thus, it becomes an endless process of semiosis, where a new interpretant leads to another object, and so on. What makes this process dynamic, according to Peirce, is the energetic (or emotional, as Peirce calls it) interpretant which brings the hypothesizing procedure to a closure at one point, and gives rise to another object for interpretation, at the next position. Therefore, the dialectical process moves from the representamen (R1) to the object (O1) and from the interpretant (I) to the second object (O2) which appears because of hypothetical reasoning (i.e., abduction).

This dialogicity is made possible due to the interaction of two consciousness, as Peirce names the interrelation between the author's embodied "self" and the possible "self" of the reader/addressee. According to Peirce, one talks of consciousness not as knowledge of something but rather as a relational phenomenon between the inner and outer worlds, fulfilling a self-controlling role (Peirce, 1967: 318). This interaction of signs gives rise to new communicative agents of semiosis (cf. Maturana and Varela, 1980), thus supporting an emerging dynamic system, capable of producing and reproducing itself in a continuous exchange with a new context (i.e., environment) as a part of a bigger sign universe (Scheibmayer, 2004, p. 323). By stressing the dialogic of meaning-making, Peirce's model posits a clear explanation of the dynamics of semiosis too, which is the active inference process

on the parts of the communicants. At the same moment, recent research in 4E literary cognitive studies shows that applying only reasoning on the side of the reader doesn't suffice to explain the processes going through while perception.

In a predictive processing (PP) model, based on the 4E conception of mind: embodied, embedded in the social context, extended into the environment, and enactive (Newen et al., 2018), the subjective experience of an embodied cognitive agent is reconsidered in terms of presence, social presence, and narrative absorption. The general idea which describes this model is the following: "...subjects experience presence when they are able to correctly and intuitively enact (i.e., without the involvement of reasoning) their implicit (predictive processing) and explicit (intentions) embodied predictions" (Pianzola et al., 2021).

This predictive processing model puts into its core the idea of agency and intentions to define the reader's presence during reading. It is based on Searle's definition of action as a sum of intention and movement (Searle, 1983), i.e. "intention "describes" the conditions that must be met for the action to be satisfied" and movement concerns how the success of the intention to be verified" (ibid). In this fashion, it is possible to link the reader's presence as agency and the intentions that activate and guide human movements (Pianzola et al., 2021, p. 11).

The authors of the predictive processing model have also identified a hierarchy of predictions performed by the subject and his various multisensory stimuli (Riva, 2018). The number of predictions include *exteroception*, the perceptual information originating outside the body; *interoception*, the sense of the physiological and emotional condition of the body; *proprioception*, the sense of the relative position of body segments; and vestibular input, the sense of body movement (Pianzola et al., 2021). Though being centred around the bodily input and within the bodily experiences, to our perspective, there is some lacking element in the model, making it dynamic and dialectical. As Peirce himself mentioned, humans have no power of intuition, but they have the power of habits as a human tool for learning and evolution (Peirce, 1868 p. 141). Habit, as a set of neurological reactions, determines the way humans process information based on their knowledge and prior experience. The notion of habit in Peircian definition marks the borders of human reasoning necessary for generating a new hypothesis, that's why habit by Peirce is the final logical interpretant.

"Peirce calls the final logical interpretant our habit of attributing a certain signification to a certain sign in a certain context with which we are familiar. The force of habit temporarily freezes the infinite recursivity of one sign to other signs, which allows interlocutors to quickly reach consensus on reality in a given communication context" (Hebert, 2011:194).

What Peirce is talking here about resonates with the notion of "linguaging" introduced by Maturana and Varela to denote the process of meaning creating in communication (Maturana&Varela, 1980). This process of semiosis is dialogical as it serves consensual purposes, i.e. the communicative agents are negotiating the meanings via abduction reasoning in their predictive processing model (PPM). Bodily input and location play central roles as only through bodily experience humans can exercise the functions of habits necessary for such a consensus.

While our experience of the world is embodied, any cognitive approach to textual and poetic analysis should not disregard our reflective and affective knowledge, which are essential for the enactment of narrative experiences. Our affective knowledge, associated with emotional experience, is the primary source of meaning when we interact with the surrounding world. The more emotional this type of interaction is, the more neurological connections will appear and the more colourful the person's language will be. Thus, meaning per se resides in the relations between the human emotional reaction and their Umwelt, building that meaningful surrounding necessary for living. Following this purely biosemiotic principle of relational coupling, one can prove that meaning emerges only when a certain set of neurobiological conditions is met,

governed by the teleological principle, i.e., having a certain type of agenda, characterized by a goal-oriented behaviour. That is where the agency of the reflective self shows its capacity for action in meaning generation. In the analogy with the self-governed and self-maintained systems in biosemiotics, the narrating subject exercises agency on different levels of the system (the micro level of semantic relations within the narrative text, and the macro level of the global narrative discourse organization).

Therefore, we can define the agency of the reflective subject, following Kalevi Kull's definition as "[a] unit system with the capacity to generate end-directed behaviors" (Kull et al., 2009 p. 171) By this, we mean that the agency is ascribed to the features of self-governing autonomy, goal orientation, and the ability to make choices depending on the environment. Though there is a tendency among the biosemioticians to differentiate between the notion of "self" as referring to a human subject and the notion of "agent" as any subject generating activity to reach definite goals, we will use these notions interchangeably, naming the subject performing any agency in narrative discourse an agent (i.e. the author, the narrator, the narratee etc.), and calling the operations conducted by the semiotic interpretant as an agency of the reflective "self". Adhering to the above-mentioned definitions, we will trace the semiotic activity of the narrating agents in Lisa Halliday's novel *Asymmetry* (2018).

### **Narrating Agency in "Folly"**

The novel consists of three parts, with very concise names given to the first and the second: "Folly", "Madness", and "Ezra Blazer's Desert Island Discs". In the first part of the novel "Folly," Lisa Halliday starts with the non-diegetic narrator talking about Alice, whom the reader does not know yet, but whose thoughts about her character and the future life can be seen through the eyes of the narrator and her meeting with a famous writer Ezra Blazer:

*Alice was beginning to get very tired of all this sitting by herself with nothing to do: every so often she tried again to read the book in her lap but it was made up almost exclusively of long paragraphs, and no quotation marks whatsoever, and what is the point of a book, thought Alice, that doesn't have any quotation marks?*

*She was considering (somewhat foolishly, for she was not very good at finishing things) whether one day she might even write a book herself when a man with pewter-colored curls and an ice-cream cone from the Mister Softee on the car sat down beside her. (Kindle Edition, 2018)*

The experience of the narrator rendering the feeling of boredom is initially embodied and centered around the state of so-called "shallow reading" when the person cannot concentrate on the content of the material accompanied by simultaneous interruption by the character's distant thoughts regarding the absence of quotation marks in the book she was reading. At the same time, the reader sees Alice's thoughts on her future writing career, from a vague perspective though, while the comments of the character empathize that "...she was not very good at finishing things". In this narrative episode the introductory phrase in the indirect speech "She was considering" serves indexing perspective of the character, whose agency is presented at the level of storyline development, while the words in brackets following this phrase fulfil the commenting and clarifying function on the side of the narrator-author, who knows the drawbacks of Alice and wants to add to the erroneous thinking of the character. The blending of these two selves of the narrator, the one rendering the thoughts of the main character and the one, commenting on the thoughts of the main character is realized via a reflective transition to another level of the narrative discourse and identification when the narrator's voice becomes distinct from the voice of the character.

Therefore, Lisa Halliday's novel illustrates how the narrative is sensitive in terms of perception change and its reflection of the physical states of the characters. This change is utterly oriented and centred around the embodied consciousness of the narrator, whose "narrator-hood" causes swift transportation of the reader's attention from the level of storyline to the level of the reflective ubiquitous author, capable of commenting on each detail that the character thinks is true. Though the narrator is not directly involved in the fictional world and the body of the character doesn't coincide with that of one of the narrators, the narrator's agency is given preference in representing the states of the characters (i.e., Alice's in this case). From the biosemiotic perspective, this function of the observing "self" becomes an index of reflective semiosis, necessary for the notion of "the double observer" in the Peircian triadic sign interpretation. This semiotic *asymmetry* arises from the incongruences of the indices marking two different semiotic perspectives: the observing self of the narrator in a free indirect discourse and the observing self of the second loop observer's interpretation, the omniscient author, who is located on the global level of the discourse.

The introduction of the second-level narrating observer is essential when one looks at the third level of the narrative discourse, mainly, the process of book writing in our real world, where we deal with the result of Liza Halliday's novel. Then the role of the double observer and its high degree of narrator-hood regarding the personality of Alice (who is reportedly considered a prototype of Liza Halliday herself) can be explained by the necessity to estimate one's own feelings and emotions regarding some facts in the past. In the case of "Folly", one can see a young Alice (supposedly a young author of the novel) and the grown-up Alice (who looks at her thoughts from the present) on the level of real book creation.

To our interpretation of the second-order observer fits the later admitted by Alice fact that she knew who the man was:

*Alice knew who he was – she'd known the moment he sat down, turning her cheeks watermelon pink – but in her astonishment, she could only continue staring, like a studious little garden gnome, at the impassable pages that lay open in her lap. (Kindle Edition, 2018)*

One more important index, connected with the representation of bodily feelings is the colour of embarrassment on Alice's cheeks – "turning her cheeks watermelon pink". The man, she was talking to, was a famous writer and that fact made Alice so embarrassed in the first place and so startled in the second one. This new type of relationship which is the object of the representation in the first chapter of the novel develops into an *a-symmetrical* relation between a young student Alice, willing to write a book in the future, and a well-renowned, well-praised writer, whose fame is imposed on Alice's life. That is why, the need for the narrator's active position and distance is an important strategy employed by Liza Halliday to render consciousness of the unexperienced young student in comparison to her feelings and expectations at the present. The second layer of the observing narrator serves as the interpretant in the Peircian model of semiosis, by creating a necessary distance for the reader between the character, his story world, and the narrative itself. Thus, the agency of the narrating subject regulates the distribution of information and transition between different levels of embedded narratives.

### **First-Person Narrating Agency in "Madness"**

Unlike Alice's heterodiegetic narration in the first chapter, Amar's storyline in the second part "Madness" commences with the first-person homodiegetic narration telling the reader the story of the suffering and deprivation of the Arabic immigrant with two passports and three languages, who was born on board the airplane just above the USA.



*So: two passports, two nationalities, no native soil. I once heard that, perhaps as compensation for their rootlessness, babies born on planes are granted free flights on the parturitive airline for life.* (Kindle Edition, 2018)

The role of the first-person narrator in the second chapter of the novel is better perceived in contrast to the third-person narration of the first chapter through its focus on the different styles of lives of the protagonists. The story of Alice, who has everything in her life to build her career on and cherish the boldest dreams changes rapidly into the story of Amar, an immigrant of Arabic descent who has to prove to the world his very right for existence. On the level of rhythmical organization of the narration: the slowness and reflexivity of the all-knowing author's agency in the first part turned into a quick rhythmical interrogation of Amar at the airport. The agency of the first-person narrator who is also the protagonist of the fictional world is much more powerful, compared to the third-person agency in "Folly", commenting on Alice's ambiguous feelings and thoughts. The boldness of the narration of Amar makes the agency of the homodiegetic narrator a powerful first person, who has to stand for his own at every step of his life. Not accidentally, chapter 7 commences with the dialogue, showing the impartial attitude of the police towards the immigrants of Arabic origin:

- *Where are you coming from?*
  - *Los Angeles.*
  - *Traveling alone?*
  - *Yes.*
  - *Purpose of your trip?*
  - *To see my brother.*
  - *Your brother is British?*
  - *No.*
  - *Whose address is this then?*
  - *Alastair Blunt's.*
  - *Alastair Blunt is British?*
  - *Yes.*
  - *And how long do you plan to stay in the UK?*
  - *Until Sunday morning.*
  - *What will you be doing there?*
  - *Seeing friends.*
  - *For only two nights?*
  - *Yes.*
  - *And then?*
  - *I fly to Istanbul.*
  - *Your brother lives in Istanbul?*
  - *No.*
- (Kindle Edition, 2018)

In Amar's first-person narration, the reader feels less distance from the storyline as there is no one standing and commenting on the thoughts of the protagonist behind him in the form of the all-knowing center. The reader is suggested only one version of events which is told by Amar, and he has to accept it without any doubt, as the tension of the events rises without leaving any space for reflectivity. In the second part of the novel the narrator is not only located in the story-world, but he is also embodied via his actions and perceptions. The reader doesn't have to disentangle the voice of the character from the voice of the narrating subject, as they are forming one focalized perspective through which the events are reported.

Therefore, the agency of the homodiegetic subject is a strong tool for the empathetic feelings on the side of the reader. Concurrently, it leads the reader to the global level of the

narrative discourse, where the storylines of two protagonists of the novel: Alice and Amar, are taken as immediate objects of semiotic modeling. Interpreted with the help of semiotic scaffolding and abductive reasoning, they are brought to the level of emotional blending with the help of emotional habit. This habitual reasoning is hard to predict when the reader deals only with the eventual and factual information of the fabula. This "narrowing of the distance effect" is realized by locating the voice and the body of the narrator to the agentive position in the second part of the novel. When the perspective of the protagonist's agency comes to the fore, the story of Amar gains more personal specifics and becomes palpable in relation to the narratee.

The reader can perceive the outer perception of events through the eyes of the narrator (i.e. in exteroceptive mode) and the inner bodily feelings and states come into focus via interoceptive mode (Caracciolo&Kukkonen, 2021). In the case of Amar's representation, we deal with the multimodal stream of embodiment multiplied by the reflective loops of interpretation with the emotional interpretant in the theory of biosemiotics. On a more global theme one can speak on the role of empathy in philosophical and existential dimensions, quoting the words of Amar:

*We all disappear down the rabbit hole now and again. Sometimes it can seem the only way to escape the boredom or exigencies of your prior existence – the only way to press reset on the mess you've made of all that free will. Sometimes you just want someone else to take over for a while, to rein in freedom that has become a little too free. Too lonely, too lacking in structure, too exhaustingly autonomous. Sometimes we jump into the hole, sometimes we allow ourselves to be pulled in, and sometimes, not entirely inadvertently, we trip. (Kindle Edition, 2018)*

On the discursive level, it leads the reader to a global question of the importance of asymmetries in human life and the meaning of empathy. Following the words of Katy Waldman in her review article in the *New Yorker*, „“Asymmetry” poses questions about the limits of imagination and empathy - can we understand each other across lines of race, gender, nationality, and power?“ (Waldman, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

A literature review of the theoretical sources in narratology and biosemiotics suggests that agency here represents any kind of subject activity (e.g. epistemic, cognitive, etc.), which is possible to determine by the indices and icons of subjectivity on the level of the storyline development, and then compared at the level of the discourse. From the biosemiotic approach, the narrative discourse as a complex system is characterized by the meaning emergence and telic behavior of all its constituent parts striving at closure and a certain goal, i.e., having some agenda and teleological character. Thus, the agency is supplementary to the acting of the self-reflecting subject in terms of intentionality, self-referentiality, and self-governing activity. Following the above definition of agency, the paper looked at how Peircian triadic sign theory and the theory of the emotional interpretant reflect the activity of the narrative agency construction in the contemporary novel "Asymmetry" (2018) by Lisa Halliday. Operating with the notions of embodied or bodily agency and biosemiotic agency, it was possible to define subjectivity related to perspective-taking in the narrative discourse; it is important to trace the distribution of the icons and indexes of subjectivity on three levels: semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic. The minimum unit for agency analysis in narrative discourse constitutes a narrative situation, which represents the direct speech of the characters and embedded narration. Dynamic agency emerges from the asymmetry arising between the position of the iconic, i.e., story level signs, and the symbolic meaning of the minimal discourse units via the predictive

processing (PP) performed on the side of the interpreter with the help of mechanism of abduction, suggested by Peirce.

The agency of the homodiegetic subject is a strong tool for the empathetic feelings on the side of the reader, placing him to the global level of the narrative discourse, where the storylines of the two protagonists of the novel Alice and Amar are taken as immediate objects of semiotic modeling, interpreted with the help of semiotic scaffolding and abductive reasoning, and brought to the level of emotional blending with the help of emotional habit. This habitual reasoning is hard to predict when the reader deals only with the eventual and factual information of the fabula. This shortening of the distance effect is realized by locating the voice and the body of the narrator at the agentive position in the second part of the novel. When the perspective of the protagonist's agency comes to the fore, the story of Amar gains more personal specifics and becomes palpable for the narratee. The perspectives of the future research will be in applying the biosemiotic methodology to agency analysis in different genres of the narrative discourse, where narrative agents take different positions and perform not formalized scenarios.

### Material for analysis:

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