

CLAUDIA HOLLER and MARTIN KLEPPER (EDS.), *Re-Thinking Narrative Identity* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2013), 209 pp.

The concept of narrative identity has made a remarkable career in the past few decades. Philosophers, psychologists, and literary scholars as diverse as Paul Ricoeur, Donald Polkinghorne, and Paul John Eakin have contributed to its wide transdisciplinary proliferation, and it is hard to imagine what literary and cultural studies would look like without it. One might even argue that “narrative identity” is by now so firmly established in contemporary narrative theorizing and analysis that many of its once innovative, provocative assumptions have turned into shopworn slogans—“life as narrative” (Jerome Bruner), “how our lives become stories” (Eakin), the “storied self” (Dan P. McAdams), and so forth. The present volume takes its departure from these interdisciplinary certainties and asks whether we have to revise and expand the concept in the wake of recent disciplinary approaches as well as far-reaching changes in our life-worlds that include matters of globalization and migration, bio-technological developments, and gender-related transformations. The volume thus sets out to reinvestigate and reframe narrative identity in the light of these issues as well as with regard to “new concerns in narrative literature, new arguments in philosophy and psychology and new approaches in narratological research” and asks how these may “add to our notion of narrative identity” (4). In short, the volume addresses the precariousness of the concept of narrative identity at a moment in time at which identities seem more fragmented, pluralized, relational, and de-essentialized than ever before.

*Rethinking Narrative Identity* zeroes in on these questions by suggesting a conceptual framework that highlights the significance of perspective and persona in research on narrative identity. The volume’s ten chapters present contributions from a variety of (inter-)disciplinary angles, from psychology (Mark Freeman, Gabriele Lucius-Hoene) through philosophy (Wolfgang Kraus, Norbert Meuter), and linguistics (Jarmila Mildorf), and has a strong foothold in literary and cultural studies (Martin Klepper, Rüdiger Heinze, Kim L. Worthington, Eveline Kilian, Eva Brunner, Nicole Frey Büchel). While the discussed material includes a number of non-fictional texts

(e.g., narrative interviews), the majority of the articles are concerned with literary fiction and autobiography, very much in keeping with the Ricoeurian notion that literature often provides the aesthetic and ethical models for all other forms of identity construction through storytelling.

The volume’s conceptual framework is laid out in Martin Klepper’s substantial introductory chapter on “Rethinking narrative identity: Persona and perspective,” which alone is worth getting the book. In it, Klepper outlines the crises that the notion of narrative identity has undergone as well as the challenges and aporias it has produced within the field of postmodern theorizing from which it has arisen. He then goes on to trace the origins of the concept—most notably in the works of Paul Ricoeur—as well as the historical social practices from which it derived. In this context, narrative identity is described as a genuinely modern phenomenon, which found its first manifestations in early modern discourses and genres such as the confession, diary, memoir, and testimonial. Klepper then pays particular attention to the changing habitual schemata for identity narratives and argues that we are currently confronted with an unprecedented proliferation of such culturally available schemata and thus a multiplication of social protocols for identity formation. Moreover, he asks whether there is an ongoing shift from temporal models of narrative identity to spatial models, which organize life stories along places rather than squeezing them into a temporal framework. Consequently, questions about embodiment and ethics are shown to be crucial for any discussion of narrative identity, since it is our vulnerable bodies which situate us in “a spatial, temporal and social environment” (27) and thus require constant (re-)employment.

While one of the central concerns of the introduction (and the collection at large) revolves around the general question as to whether and how it is possible that narratives can still provide an adequate form for identities—which are increasingly understood as situational, ephemeral, and contingent—the introduction also establishes the two other central concepts of the volume: persona and perspective. Narrative identity is understood as a “play with personas and perspectives” (28) that produces rather than represents a sense of selfhood and coherence. Perspective is a keyword in the discourse on narrative

identity, Klepper argues, since “it serves both as a transitionally stabilizing and a dynamic destabilizing function in the interpretation of the self” (27). As we create our selves in and through narratives, we play with personas and perspectives, taking inspiration from existing, often literary narratives, yet never arriving “at a final configuration” (28).

While the volume as a whole certainly succeeds in the rethinking of narrative identity, some articles are arguably more compelling than others in pushing the limits of the concept, also with regard to methodological questions. For this reader, four chapters in particular stand out in terms of their conceptual and, respectively, methodological richness and innovation, namely Norbert Meuter’s chapter on “Identity and empathy,” Mark Freeman’s intriguing reading of Keith Richards’s autobiography, Wolfgang Kraus’s meditation on heterotopic self-positioning in “The quest for a third space,” and Rüdiger Heinze’s narratological analysis of “Strange perspectives” in contemporary literary fiction.

Norbert Meuter’s essay explores the ethical dimensions of narrative identity by focusing on the interrelationship between identity, empathy, narrativity, and morality. Meuter’s contribution is essential to the volume in so far as it provides a concise critical discussion of several key concepts such as narrativity, temporality, subjectivity, and meaning. His conceptualization of narrative identity and empathy as two sides of the same moral coin establishes a very stimulating framework for mediating notions of self and other by foregrounding what Levinas referred to as the ethics of alterity: Through narrative symbolization, the value of the self *and* of the other are constantly negotiated and redynamized. Narratives enable us to transcend our own perspective, as narrative ethics not only take seriously the reality and plurality of perspectives, but also the “fundamental significance of the emotions that underlie morality” (45). Meuter conceives of narratives as systemic, self-organizing structures, which are not controlled by any one agent (e.g., the narrator), but essentially involve the possibility for dynamic, intersubjective, and entangled processes of meaning production and the negotiation of subjectivities.

Mark Freeman, in “Axes of Identity: Persona, perspective, and the meaning of (Keith Richards’s) *Life*,” discusses the Rolling Stones guitarist’s critically acclaimed autobiography,

applying to it a theoretical framework based on William James’s notion of social and spiritual selves. What Freeman sees at work in Richards’s text is the interplay between Jamesian social selves or personas on the one hand, often construed by public images like the “Prince of Darkness,” and his ‘spiritual self’ on the other hand, which he detects in Richards’s narrative self-conception as an artist. The theoretically rich chapter fuses James’s theory of self with Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity and Martin Buber’s (and, to a lesser extent, Levinas’s) ethics of otherness and relationality, as well as Charles Taylor’s notion of “authenticity.” The result is a theoretically dense yet at the same time very perceptive reading of Richards’s *Life* that teases out the many “big” and “small stories” (*sensu* Alexandra Georgakopoulou’s) of which the text—and thus Richards’s identity—consists.

In “The quest for a third space: Heterotopic self-positioning and narrative identity,” Wolfgang Kraus suggests that we need to expand common notions of identity construction which are primarily focused on the temporal dimension by also taking into account the spatial dimension. Identity construction, Kraus argues, always takes place and is negotiated in social spaces and, more often than not, involves the positioning of the self by others—or simply “other-positioning”—which frequently amounts to stereotyping and social degradation. As a response to this, Kraus discusses various “identity strategies” and expressive identities, which often take place in what Foucault called heterotopias, “third spaces” in which socially transgressive practices and identities are acted out in such a way that they transcend the typical binary structures and “open up a space for the experience of otherness” (77). Kraus examines two very instructive examples in which migrants, to a greater or lesser degree, perform such “heterotopic positioning,” thereby probing ambiguities in interview settings: By telling “small stories” in which the other-positioning of the self is challenged and new subject positions are explored. Heterotopic self-positioning thus allows the subject to reopen the discourse of identity construction and acknowledge the fragility and fleetingness of narrative identity.

Rüdiger Heinze’s “Strange Perspectives” is concerned with cases of “unnatural” perspective, i.e. perspectives that “transcend the experiential theories of interpretation” and thereby “open up new horizons and narrative

identities.” Drawing on the approach of an “unnatural narratology,” Heinze thus sets out to expand traditional notions of narrative identity, which are usually grounded in realistic, mimetic conceptions of storytelling, e. g., with regard to principles such as unity, coherence, and consistency as the basic parameters of narratives (as found, for instance, in the classic model of autobiography). Heinze instead is concerned with “unnatural” instantiations of consciousness in fiction, impossible perspectives that broaden the aesthetic range and possibilities and, consequently, the conceptual framework of narrative identity.

While these four articles exemplify the interdisciplinary scope of the volume and, at least for this reader, constitute the most compelling examples of how the concept might be revised in the light of both empirical and theoretical developments, all of the remaining contributions combine into a very coherent and informative contribution to the study of narrative identity. Gabriele Lucius-Hoene’s and Jarmila Mildorf’s articles address non-fictional stories of the self by applying sociolinguistic and socionarratological frameworks. While their material and approaches differ significantly, both demonstrate how a conscious self-positioning of the narrator serves to create a particular relationship between the storyteller and his or her listener and thus is essential for the negotiation of moral and ethical issues. Eveline Kilian, with her insightful reading of Quentin Crisp’s autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant* adds a queer perspective to the volume that complicates heteronormative notions of narrative identity. Nicole Frey Büchel and Kim L. Worthington offer detailed critical analyses of two popular contemporary novels: While for Frey Büchel, Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex* foregrounds the performative dimension of narrative identity and thus presents it as an unfinishable process that contradicts and critiques essentialist claims about identity, Worthington argues that Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* is concerned with the “impossibility of attaining either truth or self-forgiveness via acts of (confessional) self-writing” (147).

Confessional writing is also a feature of Eva Brunner’s piece on Anne Sexton’s poetry. While Brunner’s narratological approach to poetry follows notable examples and certainly has its merits, one might still ask whether it might not be even more fruitful to read poetry as an alternative model to “narrative identity.” Brunner herself offers good arguments for this, e. g., when she emphasizes the emotional dimension of identity construction that is foregrounded in Sexton’s texts. The question is thus whether it wouldn’t make sense to speak of a “lyric identity” rather than incorporating the “genre-typical difference of poetry” (200) into the dominant and maybe even slightly cannibalistic concept of narrative identity.

To conclude, the present volume succeeds in offering a fresh look at a well-established concept in interdisciplinary narrative research. All of the contributions depart from an organic model of narrative identity which—by foregrounding aspects of coherence, consummation, closure, and the almost limitless power of narrative—has arguably marred the concept from the very beginning. While most of the contributions thus agree in their basic understanding of narrative identity as something that only exists in the sense that it is realized in, or constituted through, narrative discourse, and is therefore necessarily ephemeral and open to renegotiation and performance, some of the most urgent issues and contexts in this respect still need to be explored. For instance, one might think about recent developments like Facebook’s *Timeline*, or more generally the increasing mediatization (and even automation) as well as the multimodal expression of (narrative) identity in the context of social media, a context that is entirely missing from this collection. Nevertheless, the articles in this volume raise a number of important questions and offer a treasure trove of theoretical and methodological suggestions for anyone working on narrative identity from either psychological, literary, linguistic or philosophical perspectives.

Gießen

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