Rethinking Narrative Identity

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Rethinking Narrative Identity. Persona and Perspective
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Rethinking narrative identity

Persona and perspective*

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> Narrative. Perhaps that's the word that I'm looking for. Where is the grand narrative of my life? The one I could spread out and read for signs and clues as to what to expect next. It seems to have run out, if such a thing is possible.
>
> (Mengestu, 2008, p. 147)

It may seem ironic that the concept of a narrative identity became prominent in the 1980s and 90s, a time when both of its contributing terms, "narrative" and "identity" had just undergone a phase of severe attack or had at least been seriously problematized; the practices and phenomena they tried to capture were in a state of crisis and transformation. Narrative identity was a concept embraced by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur when personal identity was seen either as an empty category, which could not be upheld analytically with any philosophical rigor (Parfit, 1984; Ricoeur, 1992, pp. 129ff.), or an ideologically suspect term, which reduced plurality and heterogeneity in a totalistic (if not totalitarian) way (Hall, 1996, pp. 281–291). Ricoeur's use of the *adjective* narrative complicated and enriched the analytical approach to identity and, at the same time, suggested that personal identity may be understood not as the opposite *to*, but rather as a certain temporary and precarious management *of* plurality and heterogeneity. Consequently, Ricoeur phrased the concept with caution: narrative identity was to describe "the sort of identity to which a human being has access thanks to the mediation of the narrative function" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 73).

However, the concept of narrative had itself come under fire in post-structuralist theory as a noun mistakenly suggesting closure, unity, fixity, and stability against the play of textuality. In Ricoeur's usage as a function, a qualifier, it became a processual tool or an agent of construction, weaving and unweaving differences. As such it also reinforced the narrative turn in the social sciences, in

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which the narrative function promised to create and sustain forms of knowledge other than the logico-scientific mode (Czarniawska, 2004, pp. 1–16; Bruner, 1990, pp. 111–123). Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition,* his influential report on knowledge, pointed out that while the time of the "metanarratives" with their teleological promise (and ostensible certitude) was indeed over (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv), quantitative-scientific methods were in fact themselves based on various narrative modes of legitimization. Suggesting that on an individual scale, as a "small narrative," the power of the narrative function might still be unbroken, Donald Polkinghorne wrote in 1988: "we achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story" (Polkinghorne, p. 150).

Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh have even more provocatively asserted that "the very idea of human identity – perhaps we can even say, the very possibility of human identity – is tied to the very notion of narrative and narrativity" (Brockmeier/Carbaugh, 2001, p. 15). The idea of such a symbiotic relation between personal identity and narrative was ironically supported by what could be called the "twin crisis of identity and narrative" in the twentieth century. The sociologist Heinz Abels has suggested that radicalized modernization in the past century, which Max Weber anticipated as early as 1904/1905 and which consisted of accelerated individualization, increased rationalization, growth in mobility, deteriorating traditional ties, heightened competition and diversification and pluralization of accepted lifestyles not only led to an increase in personal freedom (that too!) but also to a certain loss of reality and a concomitant "permanent crisis in identity" (Abels, 2010, pp. 404–406, pp. 421–440). Ulrich Beck has dated the decisive moment in this radicalization – the transition to a second phase in modernization (which he called "reflexive modernization") – to the 1960s (Beck, 1983, 1986). At the same time, modernist innovations in narrative resulted in a "literature of silence" (Hassan, 1987, pp. 3–22) or a "literature of exhaustion" (Barth, 1984, pp. 62–76), in which, to use Dinaw Mengestu's words, narrative seemed indeed to "run out." "Reflexive modernism," as we could call the boost of innovative and deconstructive play with narrative techniques and instances in postmodernist aesthetics after the 1960s,[1] seemed to threaten the very validity of narrative as a solid category.

Ricoeur himself pointed to the analogy between a crisis in identity and a crisis in narrative by drawing attention to what he calls "unsettling cases" of narrative (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 149). In Robert Musil's modernist *The Man without Qualities*

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1.   The best description of early postmodernist aesthetics is still to be found in McHale (1987).

(1930–1943), he wrote, "the decomposition of the narrative form paralleling the loss of identity of the character breaks out of the confines of the narrative and draws the literary work into the sphere of the essay" (p. 149). For Ricoeur narrative identity is first and foremost a means for individuals and communities to render their lives "more intelligible" in the sense that: (1) "knowledge of the self is an interpretation"; (2) narrative is a "privileged medium" for this interpretation; and (3) in the act of mediation, narrative "borrows from history as much as fiction" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 73). Clearly, if knowledge of the self becomes a problem, the medium may first be stretched and then prove inadequate to the task of interpretation; just as, if the medium becomes suspect, knowledge of the self may become a difficult endeavor. Perhaps it was exactly this constellation of a (perceived) diminished self and the (perceived) inadequacy of radical modernist and postmodern narrative to represent experience that made scholars sensitive to the collaboration of narrative and experience in the individual and collective knowledge of the self.[2]

While the late 1980s and 1990s saw a renaissance in narratological research[3] and a renewed scholarly interest in formations of identity,[4] of which the concept of narrative identity was one (rather consequential) result,[5] both the momentum of interdisciplinary research and the worldwide acceleration of socio-cultural transformations during the 1990s and 2000s have not been without repercussions for the narrative understanding of personal identities. These processes are the underlying themes of this book: in light of recent developments in the various disciplines (philosophy, psychology, anthropology, education, sociology, history, literary and cultural studies) and in light of the transformations of lifeworlds (globalization, continued migration, advances in technology and medicine, the transformation of gender roles and exploration of non-heteronormative sexualities etc.), how do

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2. The link between a crisis in identity and "the loss of a unifying framework or grand narrative" is (with reference to Charles Taylor) also commented on by Kerby (1991, p. 60).

3. See among many other publications the surveys in Kindt/Müller (2003) and Olson (2011). Scholars speak of a "postclassical narratology." The term "renaissance" was used by John Pier in Olson (2011, p. 343).

4. See among a host of publications Abels (2010); Eickelpasch/Rademacher (2004); Keupp (1999); Taylor (1989).

5. Galen Strawson writes: "Talk of narrative is intensely fashionable in a wide variety of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, theology, anthropology, sociology, political theory, literary studies, religious studies, psychotherapy and even medicine. There is widespread agreement that human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort […]" (2004, p. 428). Daphne Erdinast-Vulcan refers to narrative identity as a "buzzword in those disciplines" (2008, p. 1).

we have to re-think the concept of narrative identity? What do new concerns in narrative literature, new arguments in philosophy and psychology and new approaches in narratological research add to our notion of narrative identity?

The present volume presents essays by scholars from various disciplines exploring to which extent and with which modifications the notion of narrative identity is productive in their field of expertise. Naturally, the resulting mosaic is not a neat, homogeneous one. The concept of narrative identity is rewarding not because of its unambiguous nature, but because of its interdisciplinary reach and connectivity. No one scholar can fully grasp the developments in all of the involved disciplines. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to point to some tendencies which strike me as possibly significant for future work in the field. I propose to undertake this from the vantage point of literary and cultural studies, as these are my own areas of expertise. I will start with the original impetus for the concept, which is the power and significance of narrative for processes of interpreting the self, and then work my way through various questions that have been raised about these processes: what are the limits of narrative in producing a "figured self?" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 90). How can the concept be historicized? Which constraints do the cultural specificities of narrative set for the concept? What is the relation of the body to Ricoeur's idea of a narrative configuration? To what degree is narrative configuration a performance (to use Judith Butler's term) that iterates particular patterns or protocols? And finally: if the interpretation of the self can be imagined as the appropriation of a fictional character, as Ricoeur suggests, can we fruitfully describe the "figured self" as a play of perspectives or an exploration of masks (personae)? Far from summarizing or anticipating the arguments of this collection, these thoughts should be understood as initial impulses, which are meant to open up a dialogue with the explorations that follow.

The power and reach of narrative

Why narrative? The question is indeed not trivial because it is contingent on the definition of identity. If we define identity purely as an empirical/material relation of sameness as uniqueness ($\neq$ plurality), similarity ($\neq$ difference), and continuity ($\neq$ discontinuity) we could make do with logical or quantitative arguments. Using the Latin term for "same", Ricoeur calls this notion of identity "idem-identity". However, there is a fourth sense of sameness, namely permanence over time ($\neq$ diversity). Permanence over time may not always be a matter of logical or quantitative arguments; it may belong to an entirely different dimension of identity, which Ricoeur calls ontological. If we define identity as the "assignation of an agent to an action" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 75), i.e. the identification of an agent ("who did this?")

to whom then the (moral) responsibility for the action may be imputed, we have to argue with notions of possession, connectedness or, as Ricoeur does, invoke Heidegger's mode of "Dasein" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 75). Using the Latin term for "self", Ricoeur calls this notion of identity "ipse-identity."

The difficulties start at the point where the "self" (ipse) intersects with the "same" (idem) in regard to permanence over time. According to Ricoeur, it is exactly at this intersection (or failure of intersection) that the term "personal identity" becomes meaningful – and potentially disturbing. While permanence over time as sameness designates continuity and excludes plurality, as selfhood it designates constancy or fidelity and excludes disconnectedness or disownership. Personal identity, Ricoeur suggests, can be understood as the relation between the two modalities. Loss of (personal) identity would then entail the complete dissociation between identity-as-sameness (idem-identity) and identity-as-selfhood (ipse-identity). It is this relation between the two modalities, the "dialectic of ipse and idem" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 79) that can only be mediated through narrative: it is, in the end, a narrative configuration.

Ricoeur was fascinated by the "puzzling-cases" of fictional narratives because "the imaginative variations of fictional narratives deal with the variable relations between ipseity and sameness" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 79). Or, to put it in the words of philosopher Anthony Kerby: "The 'I' of today is not necessarily the 'I' of tomorrow" (Kerby, 1991, p. 34). Understood in this way, personal identity is the mediation between two extremes: a person may have the strongest sense of self, of being a presence, of momentarily experiencing her/his actions as a fully conscious agent, but simultaneously disown her/his past selves and future accountability; or, a person may have an overwhelming sense of continuity and similarity, but hardly feel like an agent: an acting character who 'owns' her/his connectedness to the moment. Kerby cites Hannah Arendt, who suggested: "*Who* somebody is or was we can only know by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero […]" (Kerby, 1991, p. 35; Arendt, 1958, p. 186). The emphatic question: "*who?*" links the experience of story and hero; Kerby says: "persons are such only if (among other things) they can be considered to have a history, a history of acts and involvements" (Kerby, 1991, p. 35).

The model for such a relation is supplied by narratives, "plots – borrowed from history and fiction (drama or novels)" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 73). As Kerby explains, this implies a narrator or storyteller, anthropomorphic characters and a series of events, which through the imposition of "some form of closure or completion" (the structure of beginning, middle, and end) are moulded into "a meaningful temporal whole" (Kerby, 1991, p. 39). According to Ricoeur, who follows the Aristotelian tradition, it is indeed the plot which dynamically generates the characters and their identities, "by the competition between a demand for concordance and the

admission of discordance which, up to the close of the story, threaten this identity" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 141). In other words, narrative is defined by a number of mediations enacted by the plot: "between the manifold of events and the temporal unity of the story recounted; between the disparate components of the action – intentions, causes, and chance occurrences – and the sequence of the story; and finally, between pure succession and the unity of the temporal form, which, in extreme cases, can disrupt chronology to the point of abolishing it" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 141). Mediation thus refers to a retrospective prevention of contingency, a negotiation between the "episodic dispersal of the narrative and the power of unification unfurled by the configuring act constituting poiēsis itself" (Ricoeur, 1992, pp. 141–142). Again, what is crucial in Ricoeur's model is the correlation between plot and character, postulated by Aristotle and adapted by French structuralist narratology in actantial theories (Bremond, Greimas). There is no character without (or before!) the plot. In narrative, the configuration of events brings forth the characters. And this is why the principle of "discordant concordance," which refers to the plot and describes its "synthesis of the heterogeneous" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 141), is the basis for the construction of narrative identities.

Narrative psychologist Michael Bamberg describes this mediation as the navigation of three identity dilemmas: (1) the dilemma of constructing "sameness of a sense of self across time in the face of constant change" (Bamberg, 2011, p. 6); (2) the dilemma of viewing "the self as special and unique vis-à-vis others in the face of being the same as everyone else" (Bamberg, 2011, p. 8); (3) the dilemma of constructing "agency as constituted by self (with a self-to-world direction of fit) and world (with a world-to-self direction of fit)" (Bamberg, 2011, p. 6).

The philosopher Norbert Meuter, using a systems theoretical approach, explains in his essay in this volume how narrative has the ability to manage improbabilities: "Once caught up in a story, one soon – after a few changes of circumstances or peripeties – reaches a point one would have never considered possible" (see "Improbability", p. 36 in this volume). Narrative has the ability to bridge identity dilemmas because it is able to link the ostensibly incommensurable. Like Ricoeur, Meuter emphasizes that characters are formed by the plot and not the other way around: "subjects are not the sovereign creators of their stories but – just like their actions – their effects" (see "Self-organization", p. 38 in this volume). Meuter points out that narratives are self-organizing structures; they have their own intrinsic dynamic, which cannot be completely controlled. Even though individuals have access to their identity through the narrative function, they do not fashion it autonomously.

It is no coincidence for Ricoeur that the models for such configurations are taken from fiction: "It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared

to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction or from history" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 162). The narrative identity of a real person always has a projective aspect, is always to a degree borrowed: no living person can know her/his beginnings or death (see also Butler, 2005, p. 37). Nevertheless, the projection of a beginning will be of relevance as will the projection of an ending: "among the facts recounted in the past tense we find projects, expectations, and anticipations by means of which the protagonists in the narrative are oriented toward their mortal future [...] In other words, the narrative also recounts care. In a sense, it only recounts care" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 163).[6] After all, Mengestu's character in the opening quotation desperately attempts to find "signs and clues as to what to expect next."

The retrospective and prospective nature of the act of narration reminds us that, in the act of narration, the "'I' does not fully coincide with itself" (Kerby, 1991, p. 38). Obviously every act of self-reflection effects a certain distance from oneself; every narrative of oneself includes a narrating self and an experiencing self. In a certain sense, the narrating self can exceed the experiencing self, just as the experiencing self may elude the narrating self. Narrative identity cannot yield a true or seamless self. Moreover, "as we change week by week, year by year, so do our narrations of the past" (Kerby, 1991, p. 38). From this vantage point, narrative identity is never stable. But that does not necessarily mean that narrative produces merely a rendering, a version of some deeper, hidden, real self. Kerby argues (against Louis Mink) that the "self is not some precultural or presymbolic entity that we seek simply to capture in language" (Kerby, 1991, p. 41). Paul John Eakin once made a similar point rejecting the idea "that self is some sort of innate, transcendental endowment, something we are born with, something we somehow just 'have'" (Eakin, 2008, p. 65).[7] If, instead, "self" describes a relation to myself (an awareness of myself), then form (figuration of this awareness) becomes part of this self. Thus, any interpretation (any telling) is fed back into the experienced self and in turn pre-structures any future configuration.

The last point leads to a final assumption underlying especially Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity (but also, for instance, Kerby's or Meuter's). The suggestion that the interpretation of the self "finds narrative, among other signs and symbols, to be a privileged mediation" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 73) is based on the conviction that human experience in its temporal dimension is itself structured by a narrative principle. For Ricoeur, human time is fundamentally narrated time, born of the "'interwoven reference' of history and fiction" (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 101).

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6. For this point see also Bruner (1990, p. 121).

7. Eakin modified his position in his book *Living Autobiographically* (2008)*,* differentiating between stages of the self.

This is, as Kerby explains very lucidly in *Narrative and the Self* (1991, pp. 41–48), because human time grows out of a mediation of experience through three moments of mimesis: human action is "always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms," it is always already "symbolically mediated" to the degree that it is grounded in a "pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character" (Ricoeur, 1984, pp. 57, 54). In other words, experienced time is always pre-figured by what Clifford Geertz calls the "webs of significance" of a culture (Geertz, 1973, p. 5): social practice, even before narrative, contains a cultural semantics of action, a system of symbols and a specific temporality that calls for narration.[8] Pre-figured experience (mimesis$_1$) undergoes emplotment in histories and fictions and is thus con-figured, indeed with the help of the above-mentioned techniques. Finally, con-figured time or emplotment (mimesis$_2$) in the act of reading re-figures human experience and becomes a condition of temporal existence (reception, application). Thus, the appropriation of the text to the world of the reader (mimesis$_3$) re-sets the patterns and expectations pre-figuring practice (mimesis$_1$).

Kerby agrees with the suggestion that "[n]arration draws a figure out of the materials of everyday life, but only, finally, in order that the story it unfolds returns back to and reconfigures that life" (1991, p. 44). The experience of time and the story of the self in time is a recursive process:

> We cannot say of recollection that here is the bare content, and here is where interpretation and meaning start. This situation is a primary problem for those who would maintain with Mink that there is experience on the one hand and narrative interpretation on the other. Rather, interpretation has always already started.   (Kerby, 1991, p. 44)

Narrative has the power to articulate such interpretation and in articulation to re-configure it. Again, Polkinghorne describes the process well:

> […] we achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self, then, is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into an historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be.
> (Polkinghorne, p. 150; quoted in Bruner, 1990, pp. 115–116)

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8. Ricoeur describes this temporality with Heidegger's notion of *Innerzeitlickkeit* (within-time-ness) – the notion of reckoning with time in the sense of care or anticipation. For the description of pre-figured time see Ricoeur (1984, pp. 54–64).

The limits of narrative: Decomposition

In two different ways the limits of narrative come into play: on the one hand, within Ricoeur's paradigm, literary models (namely modernist and postmodernist narratives) have repeatedly enacted possible losses of identity. On the other hand, Ricoeur's paradigm as such has been accused of overrating the power of narrative. I will start with the first point.

As Dinaw Mengestu's character Sepha says, the grand narrative of an individual life seems to have run out. In this sense, the narrative function has its limits in inverting "the effect of contingency" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 142). Contingency, of course, is always a given in the narrative paradigm, as emplotment (the retrospective configuration of concordance and discordance) would simply not be needed otherwise. However, if contingency becomes the all-dominating condition in life and no configuring principle has the capacity to invert it, if, in other words, a human life becomes "unreadable" because it produces radically different selves at different times or no sense of self at all, then the character in the story loses her or his traits, qualities or properties:[9] "What is now lost, under the title of 'property,' is what allowed us to equate the character in the story with lasting dispositions or character" (Ricoeur, 1992, pp. 149–150). As a result, given that plot and character are inseparable in Ricoeur's Aristotelian poetics, the narrative form decomposes "into the literary genre with the least configuration – the essay" (1992, p. 149).

A considerable part of the more experimental modernist and postmodernist novels can be said to explore these boundaries of the narrative form in order to bear witness to a growing experience of contingency. James Joyce's Leopold Bloom, Robert Musil's Ulrich, Marcel Proust's narrator in *À la recherche* as well as Thomas Pynchon's Tyrone Slothrop or Paul Auster's Daniel Quinn can be read as characters in search of Dilthey's "connectedness of life," which is the underlying desideratum to Ricoeur's discordant concordance (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 141). To the degree by which they fail, their fictional worlds are indeed marked by decomposition. If the diagnosis of a "permanent crisis in identity" (Abels, 2010, p. 430) is fair and, indeed, goes along with a crisis in narrative,[10] then the possibility of a general transformation of the experience of the self's permanence over time may have to be considered.

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9. Ricoeur's example is, as already mentioned, Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*.

10. The diagnosis of a permanent crisis in narrative seems to be at least questionable. Novels such as Franzen's *The Corrections* or *Freedom* and Eugenides's *Middlesex* show the fictional biography to be well and kicking. In fact, there appears to be almost a boom in new family narratives, both in literature as well as in serial format in television (think of *The Sopranos* or *Six Feet Under*).

As a consequence, some critics argue for a loosening of Ricoeur's relatively tight description and an expansion of our "cognitive repertoire" (Nielsen, 2011, p. 86) – as does Rüdiger Heinze in this volume (pp. 117–127). Heinze refers to innovations in narratology, namely the notion of "unnatural narratology", in order to extend the reach of the concept of narrative identity. "Unnatural narratology" explores narratives which go beyond real-world experiential parameters; and Ricoeur certainly would not object to this notion per se, as he emphasizes the "elusive character of real life," which necessitates "the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 162). Perhaps, Ricoeur would not even object to Galen Strawson's notion of "episodic" self-experience, in which "[o]ne has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future, although one is perfectly well aware that one has long-term continuity considered as a whole human being" (Strawson, 2004, p. 430). It seems to me that Strawson's "episodic" (who, if I understand Strawson correctly, does not completely disown her or his past selves) bears a close resemblance to characters responding to the postmodern mode of "situationalism" described by Gerhard Hoffmann with reference to Thomas Pynchon's narratives (1988).[11] Situationalism abounds with incoherence, discontinuity, simultaneity, ellipses, spatial arrangements, openness, and loose ends, and thus extends the gamut of modernist techniques. It privileges the situational condition, the episode, over any more extended, diachronic development. As long as the "episodic" or situational character feels that the "past can be alive – arguably more genuinely alive – in the present simply in so far as it has helped to shape the way one is in the present" (Strawson, 2004, p. 432), there is no categorical break with Ricoeur's concept. The experience of sameness is reduced to opposing the experience of selfhood, the plot veers towards more episodic structures, the sense of necessity is weakened, but an awareness of some configuration ("shape") still persists.

In fact, some empirical studies support a development towards more situational or "episodic" narrative identities. While both Jens Brockmeier and Wolfgang Kraus have noted that social practices in the Western world still favor nineteenth century models of narrative identities, subtle shifts are conspicuous.[12] Brockmeier, quoting Umberto Eco's remark that despite all contingencies "we are all the more inclined to think of [life] in terms of *The Three Musketeers* than in terms of *Ulysses*," asserts: "In the realm of plots we still live today in the age of conventional wisdom, entrenched in stereotyped romances, television soaps,

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11. Strawson himself does not make a historical argument.

12. Kraus has undertaken an empirical study with narrative interviews. He speaks of "conservative" strategies, which favor "normal" identity projects, but frame them in interesting ways (Kraus, 2000, p. 205).

obituaries, comic strips, presentations of persons and events – despite all quantum leaps in the narrative construction of modernist and postmodernist literature, film, theater, music, and other arts" (Brockmeier, 2001, p. 249). Yet, in psychologist Wolfgang Kraus's study of young adults in Germany, the relatively smooth narrative configurations are additionally framed with markers of skepticism, irony, explicit contradiction, openness (bordering on aimlessness) and situational restriction (Kraus, 2000, pp. 183–184, pp. 195–236). The test subjects appear to tag nineteenth-century models with paratexts that have a decidedly reflexive/playful tone reminiscent of a situationalist aesthetics.[13] These results indicate a palpable awareness of the constructedness of narrative identity, of its openness to radical revision, of its status as a project, as well as acute doubts about any sort of predictability or personal agency. They do not indicate a failure or the test subjects' loss of narrative identity, but forcefully underline the precariousness of the concept.

Precariousness does of course imply that narrative identity *can* fail, that the narrative *can* "run out." Within Ricoeur's concept, the desired discordant concordance is an achievement of poiesis, of a configuring act. Loss of the narrative structure means a loss of the connection between sameness and selfhood, which also implies a loss of orientation not least in regard to care (as Mengestu's character attests to in the epigraph). Apart from the personal pain involved in this loss, the ethical dimension of the failure of narrative identity hinges on Ricoeur's conception of the self's permanence over time, the aspect of self-constancy:

> Self-constancy is for each person that manner of conducting himself or herself so that others can count on that person. Because someone is counting on me, I am accountable for my actions before another. The term "responsibility" unites both meanings: "counting on" and "being accountable for." It unites them, adding to them the idea of a response to the question "Where are you?" asked by another who needs me. This response is the following: "Here I am!" a response that is a statement of self-constancy.   (1992, p. 165; see also Butler, 2005, p. 11)

In this sense, a failure of narrative identity is an ethical calamity. Philosopher Kim Atkins agrees with Ricoeur: for her, narrative identity is "the source of recognition, self-respect, and moral obligation" (Atkins, 2008, p. 3). Loss of narrative coherence, then, compromises the ability to answer to the needs of life and of society. But is it only through the narrative function that individuals can gain recognition, develop a sense of self-respect, and engage in moral obligation? In other words: are there limits to the degree to which narrative gives access to the various facets of personal identity, which extend beyond Ricoeur's paradigm?

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13. A good example for this sort of "tagging" in literature would be Dave Eggers *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) with its multiple paratexts.

The limits of narrative: Multiplication

Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity has been criticized because of his strong, Aristotelian sense of narrativity, in which characters, events, time, and plot form a composite whole that defines a life. James Phelan remarks on this strong version of the concept: "The narrative identity thesis simply doesn't correspond to my experience of my self and the plausible stories I can tell about that self" (2005, p. 209). To Phelan, the accounts of Ricoeur, Bruner, Kerby, Polkinghorne, and others have overstretched the relation between narrative and identity "to the point that we lose sight of what is distinctive about [narrative]" (2005, p. 206). Galen Strawson, the most outspoken opponent of the concept, distinguishes a weaker (and, in his view, trivial) version of narrative identity, in which storytelling merely facilitates identity work, and the stronger (and, in his view, interesting but by no means always valid) version, which explicitly entails the question "what have I made of my life?" (2004, p. 438).[14]

Ricoeur certainly argues along the lines of the strong version, modeling his concept on complex literary fictions in which "the question of identity is deliberately posed as the outcome [*l'enjeu*] of narration" (1991, p. 77). While Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the first and most forceful advocates of the power of narrative, finds his models in stories told in the midst of life (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 210–219), Ricoeur explicitly turns to more epic forms. For Ricoeur, the narrative function powered by literary fictions makes life readable exactly because fictions are not life, because they offer, instead, a horizon of expectations and of patterns to negotiate the questions: "What have I made of my life?" and "What do I want to make of it?" In Ricoeur's conception, selves do not become narratives, they interact with narratives; selves are not coherent, unified and without contradictions; they interact with models of coherence, unity, and concordance; selves are not plots, they interact with plots. These interactions provide them with coordinates in terms of their relation to lifetime, to others and to themselves. These coordinates, as we have seen, can indeed become blurred. But if the course of a person's life is of no interest whatsoever to her or him, and/or it is really the life of several selves/I's (Strawson, 2004, p. 433), who merely bear the same name, it makes no sense to speak of a narrative identity. I will come back to this point in a moment.

There are more heuristic and modest ways to define narrative identity. One has been used by Norman Holland when he described it as a pattern of response to narratives. It describes a specific text-reader interaction, a particular identity-of-reception, which tells much about a reader but does not necessarily exhaustively

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14. John Paul Eakin has replied to Strawson's and Phelan's essays in Eakin (2006).

describe her or his personal identity (Holland, 1975). The physician and psychologist, Gabriele Lucius-Hoene, defines narrative identity from the vantage point of discursive (or narrative) psychology. In therapeutic practice, the significance of narrative lies in its potential for coping in concrete situations. The emphasis is not so much on the comprehensive interconnectedness of life, as it is on the ability to forge meaningful connections for the purpose of reducing painful contingencies. "A decisive achievement of autobiographical story-telling," she writes, "resides in our opinion in 'narrative coping'" (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2004, p. 11). As a result, narrative identity is here defined as "the way or mode in which a person engages (through concrete interactions) in identity work as a narrative presentation and construction of situationally relevant aspects of his or her identity" (p. 55). The therapist will, in this case, be more interested in the specific *style* of the narrative than in its well-roundedness from beginning to end.

Norbert Meuter also speaks of a style rather than an accomplished story. Stories introduce structure, and thus a degree of certitude, into the flow of events. "A narrative identity understood in this way is, however, not a static or seamless identity but a dynamic one that is undergoing permanent change and development and implies contradiction" (see "Identity", p. 37 in this volume). Lucius-Hoene's and Meuter's understandings of Ricoeur's concept emphasize the transitoriness (or plasticity) and processual character of narrative identity, which Ricoeur downplays in his description.

In a similar vein, Joachim Renn and Jürgen Straub insist on the dynamic character of identity: "The actual self-image of a person is never 'the last word'. It remains dependent on contingent practices, on the occurrences and actions which keep a person in motion and situate the person in a temporal, dynamic and pluralistic space of opportunity" (Straub & Renn, 2002, p. 14). They point out that identity realizes itself in practice, that is: in action or in practical convictions relevant for action. In this sense, identity is always future-oriented (and implies care, as Ricoeur has it). According to Renn and Straub, there is no accomplished or completed identity; it remains an "aspiration": it remains transitory (Straub & Renn, 2002, p. 17). Nicole Frey Büchel shares a similar understanding of narrative identity as an "open-ended performance" in her interpretation of Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *Middlesex* in this volume (p. 129 in this volume).

In light of these interventions, the difference between Strawson's weaker and stronger versions of narrative identity evens out. Any action, in Renn's and Straub's sense, implies the question "what have I made/will I make of my life," even if it is only selectively relevant. But what if, to come back to Strawson's more provocative statement, the 'I' that takes an action or makes a decision sees her- or himself as a completely different 'I' from the ones in the past or the future? To Strawson, this sort of claim sounds ultimately more truthful and honest than any token of

constructed coherence. The creation of coherence via narrativity (poiesis), says Strawson, "risks a strange commodification of life and time" (p. 450).

The idea that the construction of narrative (or any other form of) coherence in a person's life history amounts to an act of violence and/or falsification has become rather widespread. Renn and Straub explain: "Personal identity has become philosophically suspect: a person cannot and should not be unified, except by force and compulsion and to the detriment of him- or herself and others" (Straub & Renn, 2002, p. 27). Strawson, to be sure, does not base his objection on an ideological argument. Renn and Straub, however, point to the critique against enlightenment subjectivity as a source of the suspicion:

> Postmodern authors […] attribute the task (imposed on the individual) to synthesize contradictory situations, experiences, expectations, desires and impulses into a unified whole not to a concession to individual freedom; instead they find a subtle mechanism of power, which becomes effective through the internalization of dispositives of discipline and control and lay the responsibility for accountability on the individual.   (Straub & Renn, 2002, p. 28)

In other words: postmodern sceptics attribute the very idea of identity to a certain discourse of power or a form of interpellation (Althusser) through ideological apparatuses.

Stuart Hall asserts instead (a bit like Strawson): "If I think about who I am, I have been – in my own much too long experience – several identities" (1989, p. 15). Jarmila Mildorf's essay in this volume also invokes the growing conviction "that we in fact have several identities which we constantly renegotiate with the world surrounding us" (p. 103 in this volume). Interestingly, at this point a gap seems to be opening up between cultural critics, who tend to embrace the idea of multiple identities, and sociologists and psychologists, who strongly argue against the notion. Heiner Keupp and his colleagues warn that "coherence is crucially important for the daily identity work, which people do; its absence can lead to grave consequences regarding their well-being" (Keupp et al., 1999, p. 59). Joachim Renn and Jürgen Straub also reject a premature dismissal of the concept of identity (Straub & Renn, 2002, p. 29). And philosopher Kim Atkins argues that identities have to be coherent precisely in order to avoid being other-directed: "Because embodiment makes us composite beings, we have to be unified in order to have a normative outlook and to exercise autonomy" (Atkins, 2008, p. 6). But even Hall finds ways to integrate his different identities. Rejecting "the extreme version of postmodernism" (which rejects the concept of identity altogether), he suggests that we cannot do without identity (1989, p. 15). Instead he opts for a reconceptualization, in which identity and difference are no opposites. Identity, he writes, is not complete; identity is not stable; identity is not outside of representation; and therefore identity

depends on recognition. Within these parameters Hall comes close to Ricoeur's paradigm: "Identity is a narrative of the self; it's the story we tell about the self in order to know who we are. We impose structure on it" (1989, p. 16).

When Hall speaks of having had several identities, he is speaking of cultural attributions, masks imposed from the outside, which deeply influence the way individuals can tell their own stories: "The question is whether you are *culturally, historically, politically* Black. *That's* who you are" (1989, p. 15). He also speaks of identity-politics and self-attribution:

> There was a politics of identity in 1968 in which the various social movements tried to organize themselves politically within one identity. So the identity of being a woman was the subject of the feminist movement. The identity of being a Black person was the identity of the Black movement.   (1989, p. 17)

In this regard, people have learned that they have multiple cultural identities (not all of them voluntarily), such as being black, gay, male, an immigrant, a Muslim or a senior citizen; and, clearly, some of these cultural identities may come into conflict with each other. Moreover, Hall suggests that the growing emergence of identities that draw on different cultural traditions and positions is "fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject" and poises her or him in transition (1996, p. 274, p. 310). This multiplicity and state of transition, however, far from dismissing the question of *personal* identity, poses it with even greater urgency. "People who have been *dispersed* forever from their homelands," Hall writes, "are not and will never be unified in the old sense, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and the same time to several 'homes' (and to no one particular 'home')" (1996, p. 310). Thus Hall raises the question of historical change and the effects of several interlocking (hi)stories on a personal identity 'in a new sense.'

The origins of narrative identity: Biography generators, schemata, protocols

Obviously, narrative identities did not and do not exist in the way Ricoeur envisions the concept through all historical times and places; the concept is tied to the idea of the European novel and the Bildungsroman or novel of manners; as such it is as young and specific as the age of reason. So how did the practice of narrative identity evolve? Sociologists agree that the idea (and normativity) of an individual biography and the concomitant self-reflexivity about one's own life story in the Western hemisphere is co-evolutionary with early modern developments such as Humanism, the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment and a new (capitalist)

economic order.[15] Stories about historical figures have existed throughout time and, probably, in all places. But the sort of interiority, self-examination and self-reliance which constitutes a crucial ingredient in the ability to "own" one's actions and even intentions in the form of a comprehensive, self-attributed individual story, is a specific historical development.[16] According to sociologist Alois Hahn, a significant factor in this development was the rise of institutionalized forms of self-examination and confession in early modernity: "The appropriation of forms of memory, which symbolically register a full vita, depends on the existence of social institutions that allow such a reflection of one's own being" (Hahn, 1987, p. 12). Hahn calls such institutions "biography generators" and enlists as examples the religious confession, psychoanalysis, the diary, memoirs, medical anamneses, and confessions or testimonials at court.

Hahn emphasizes the difference between a certain course of life (a unity of events, experiences, and perceptions) and a biography, which registers and examines a course of life. "This examination should not be misunderstood as a mirror. After all, the metaphor of the mirror suggests, that the totality of the given is represented. This is certainly not the case" (Hahn, 1987, pp. 12–13). The practice of biographical representation, after all, includes acts of selection and fictionalization. In selecting and combining elements into a specific autobiographical pattern, the particular forms of linkage depend on the available schemata, which are implied and determined by the biography generators.

Hahn shows that the confession, one of the most significant biography generators in early modern Europe, went through a number of transformations. One of them was the shift in the determination of sin from actions to intentions during the 12th century, which produced an interest in motivations, interiority, and subjectivity (p. 20). Another shift was the idea of the general confession, which evolved during the Counter-Reformation and examines the entire life of the sinner (p. 21).[17] The Calvinist conversion narrative and the spiritual autobiography in the tradition of Bunyan had similar effects.

In this sense, Hahn affirms the suspicions of critics that modern dispositives of discipline and control have played a crucial role in the making of narrative identities: "Especially Foucault, but also, in a different way, Elias have demonstrated that

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15. I say co-evolutionary because a causal relation would be oversimplifying. Important elements in this story have been explored by Charles Taylor in his *Sources of the Self* (1989), but note Taylor's warning in his chapter on "historical explanation"! (pp. 199–207).

16. For a historical sketch of this development see also Richard von Dülmen, *Die Entdeckung des Individuums 1500–1800.* Frankfurt: Fischer, 1997.

17. For these religious practices see also Hahn (1982).