

Boundaries of the Narrative, Boundaries of Identity: How Can a Narrative Text Influence the Reality of the Reader?

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Der Vortrag untersucht die gegenseitigen Beziehungen zwischen schriftstellerischen Texten und der Leserwelt. Die Autorin vertritt die These, dass es äußerst schwierig ist, eine klare Trennlinie zwischen unserer Narration und unserem Leben zu bestimmen, weil die beiden in ständigem Dialog bleiben. In ihrer Reflexion stützt sie sich einerseits auf die Konzeptionen der narrativen Identität von Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor und Paul Ricoeur. Andererseits stellt Mieke Bals Theorie der narrativen Subjektivität einen wesentlichen Ausgangspunkt für weitere Überlegungen dar. In ihrem Vortrag argumentiert die Autorin, dass der gegenseitige Einfluß möglich ist, weil Identität als Narration gesehen werden soll. Somit weisen reale Personen (d.h. wir) eine gewisse Ähnlichkeit mit fiktiven literarischen Figuren auf. In den gängigen Vorstellungen bedeutet Mimesis immerhin "Nachahmung der Wirklichkeit" und somit etwa die Nachahmung von Aktionen realer Menschen. Anknüpfend an Martha C. Nussbaums und Wayne C. Booths ethical criticism versucht die Autorin zu zeigen, dass sowohl Erzählungen als auch literarische Texte unsere Persönlichkeit gestalten und deswegen die Quellen des Selbst und der Identität werden. Dabei gibt es kein natürliches unerzähltes Ich – das Ich ist immer schon erzählt. Es ist unsere narrative Identität.

Keywords: identity, life-story, narrative, self, subjectivity

1 Introduction

In this paper, I would like to focus on the relationship between a literary/narrative text and the real world of the reader. I want to prove that there is much difficulty in marking out an explicit boundary between our narratives and our lives, as they are in constant dialogue and permanent exchange. In order to demonstrate it, I would like to show that such a mutual influence between literary narrative on the one hand and the reader's reality on the other is possible, because according to the concept of narrative identity, the reader's self is a kind of (life-) story that likens him or her to the novel's character and permits entry into a dialogue with the so-called narrative subjectivity of a text. Moreover, literary works influence private life-stories of real people as they imitate their true actions, social roles and choices in the real world.

2 The Reader's Narrative Identity and the Identity of a Novel's Character

How can a narrative, literary text influence the reality of the reader? The answer is to some extent complex and not obvious, because our human world – that is to say, our culture, our common human reality – consists mainly of various texts of different

genres, themes, origins, forms and so on. Its boundaries are marked out by a massive variety of stories and literary narratives which are a part of our literary heritage and without which perhaps we would not be able to be who we are.

Therefore, the question concerning the connection between literature and reality is, in fact, the question about our identity, or as Wayne C. Booth (1988: 265) puts it, about “the very sources of our being”. This is the reason why the problem of our identity – namely of the reader’s identity – is so important when we begin to discuss the mutual relationship between texts and the so-called real world of those who write and read them. As Booth (1988: 227) puts it, “everyone who has read a lot of narrative with intense engagement knows that narratives do influence behaviour”. The books we read shape our character, provide us with patterns of activity, make us sensitive to certain problems, values and so on – in a word, they are not indifferent with regard to the problem of good and how to live.

Our narratives resemble Stendhal’s (2015: 360) *mirror carried along a high road*. They reflect our lives, our customs and the hierarchy of values that makes us who we are – so, in consequence, they never have a neutral value, even when they depict fictitious choices and actions of fictitious heroes. In the indirect way they talk about us and show us our own image, which is always dependent on the time and epoch in which it takes place. As such they become a part of our own life-stories, that is to say, at the same time they become a part of us, of our identity.

In order to explain this, I would like to refer to Alasdair MacIntyre’s, Charles Taylor’s and Paul Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity. According to MacIntyre’s (1984: 205, 212) views, this is

a concept of a self, whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative, which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end. [...] we all live out narratives in our lives and [...] we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out [...]. Stories are lived before they are told – except in the case of fiction.

Or, as Paul Ricoeur (1988: 246) puts it in the “Conclusion” of the third part of “Time and Narrative”:

What justifies our taking the subject of an action, so designated by his, her, or its proper name, as the same throughout a life that stretches from birth to death? The answer has to be narrative. To answer the question “Who?” as Hannah Arendt has so forcefully put it, is to tell the story of a life. The story told tells about the action of the “who”. And the identity of this “who” therefore itself must be a narrative identity.

The third of the thinkers mentioned above, Charles Taylor, also considers our self within the frames of the life-story. As he puts it, in order to understand who I am, I have to know my “own place relative to the good at all” (Taylor 1992: 47). In other words, in

order to tell such a personal narrative, I must know where I am coming from and what kind of good or which value I would like to fulfill in my life. This aim and this endeavor, after making it real, is something which defines myself as myself – and without such “an orientation to the good”, self-understanding, acting and having an identity is not possible at all.

Moreover, in such a personal life-story, I am the only person who can be a narrator or a story-teller, because when we ask “Who am I?”, “only an answer that favours the first-person standpoint does justice to such a first-person question” (DeGrazia 2005: 84). Or, as Marya Schechtman (2007: 95) claims,

An identity in the sense of the characterisation question, is not [...] something that an individual has whether she knows it or not, but something that she has *because* she acknowledges her personhood and appropriates certain actions and experiences as her own.

In other words, this is the kind of story which may be told only by a person whose life is its matter and nobody can replace him or her in it. Only I myself know what I want to achieve, what I feel or desire and what it means for me, so in this particular case, in which my subjectivity is at stake, a so-called objective, purely external point of view is simply not possible at all, because it is not cognitively valuable (as for this problem, see also for example Atkins 2004: 341–342).

Though such a personal narrative always has to some extent an open character, nevertheless it remains a story and is shaped according to the same rules and the same poetics as every other narrative – true, as well as fictional. As such, it is also a sort of a narrative text which imitates the real actions of a real person, whose life is being told (or perhaps I should say here, who is the story-teller and tells his or her own life). In other words, in such a story our real actions, feelings, endeavours and so on are “after the fact” transformed into a narrative, which is “an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience” (Ricoeur 1992: 162). Such a conflation with fiction and emplotment helps us understand them by making them a part of a greater, intelligible whole.

Moreover, such a personal life-story, which according to MacIntyre’s, Taylor’s and Ricoeur’s concept of self, constitutes somebody’s narrative identity coincides with the identity of the character. As Ricoeur (1992: 141) puts it, “Understood in narrative terms, identity can be called, by linguistic convention, the identity of the *character*”. Thus, I can understand my life in the terms of a literary story. I am the hero of my own personal narrative in the same way as Julien Sorel is the hero of “The Red and The Black” or Werther is the hero of “The Sorrows of Young Werther” and so on. The only difference is the fact that my narrative refers to the real life of a real person – namely myself – while Stendhal’s or Goethe’s novels talk about the fictitious experiences of invented people.

Such an identity of the character “is constructed in connection with that of the plot” (Ricoeur 1992: 141). As Ricoeur underlines, the character is a very important narrative category without which an emplotment – and in consequence, the story as such – would be impossible. He explains it by referring to the theory of action. As he puts it, “A character is the one who performs the action in the narrative” (Ricoeur 1992: 143), that is to say, is the subject of the action or actions which compose the plot and therefore “characters (...) are themselves plots” (Ricoeur 1992: 143). Hence – and this is a very important moment in Ricoeur’s theory of narrative and narrative identity – there is no difference between the story which is being told and the identity of its hero, that is to say, of a person whose actions are its matter. Or, as Ricoeur (1992:147–148) puts it, “The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character”.

In other words, a story which tells about the actions of a given character is one and the same thing as his or her narrative identity. In the narrative conception of self we have to deal with exactly the same problem but applied to the real story of a real person. I am the narrator and at the same time the hero of my own life-story, which constitutes my narrative identity in the process of being told. Hence, my identity has a dynamic character and unfolds in the course of my deeds, activities and situations in which I participate. In contradistinction to traditional theories of self which defined identity only as “sameness or preservation of some essential quality of a person” (Deciu Ritivoi 2010: 231), such a conception takes into consideration the characteristic for the human life element of time and continuity, thus giving us the possibility of understanding ourselves as “historical agents whose lives have temporal duration, with beginnings, middles, and endings” (Deciu Ritivoi 2010: 231) and who are not entities “distinct from” their empirical acts and experiences (Ricoeur 1992: 147).

As derived from the identity of the character, such a personal life-story is created in the same way as every mimetic work of art – that is to say, according to the rules of mimesis. In order to shape a story, a narrator first of all has to compose a plot which helps him or her to organise successive events “into a system” (Ricoeur 1984: 33), in other words – into a complete whole with a beginning, middle and end structure. Such a narrative whole has a dialectic character – as Ricoeur (1992: 141) puts it, it is not characterised by pure concordance, but is rather a sort of discordant concordance, that is to say, “the synthesis of the heterogenous”, which mediates

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.

Moreover, every narrative text and every story is tied to the real world in many different ways. According to Ricoeur’s theory of so-called threefold mimesis, the story has its

origins in a given human and cultural reality, functions within its frames, remains in a permanent dialogue and exchange with other texts, stories and narratives, and ultimately always comes back to those among which it was born. This is the so-called Circle of Mimesis, which consists of three successive phases – mimesis I, mimesis II and mimesis III. As I have mentioned above, in order to tell a story, a narrator has to compose a plot or initiate the process of emplotment, but as Ricoeur (1984: 54) puts it, such a “composition of the plot is grounded in a preunderstanding of the world of action”, namely “its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character”. In other words, no narrative exists in a total vacuum. Every narrative comes into being in some social, cultural and linguistic environment, refers to a certain tradition, poetics, to other narratives or texts which are also a part of it and so on. Someone who wants to tell a story which will be understandable for the audience must know such a cultural background – otherwise there is a risk that no one will be able to grasp its sense.

Mimesis II refers to the configuration or to the emplotment in the proper sense of the term, namely to the process of shaping the story. As Ricoeur (1984: 64) puts it, “[w]ith mimesis II opens the kingdom of the *as if*”, that is to say, also “the kingdom of fiction” in the case of typically literary narratives, such as for example the mentioned above “The Sorrows of Young Werther” or “The Red and The Black”. Finally, mimesis III concerns the process of refiguration and “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality” (Ricoeur 1984:71). In short, this third and last phase of emplotment refers to the reception of a given narrative work of art. In the case of literature and literary narrative, mimesis III takes place in the act of reading, when the reader in a certain way recreates a given story, repeating by this means the author’s or narrator’s act of creation.

This last phase is to some extent crucial for my own thesis, because here narratives meet the reader’s reality and get the chance to influence and change it. Such a possibility of a mutual exchange is an effect of the fact that the reader’s self also has a narrative character and remains a sort of life-story. In other words, this is also narrative, whose structure is similar to those which are the matter of the books we read and to all the stories which are a part of our world and mark out its boundaries, all the stories by which we, as Barbara Hardy (quoted in MacIntyre 1984: 211) put it, “remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love”, dream and daydream.

We are also heroes of our own life-story, the main characters in our own, autobiographical narrative. We also act, love, hate, suffer and look for luck, we have to fight against the reversals of fortune, to overcome obstacles and make choices very similar to those depicted in the stories and novels we read. Or perhaps I should rather say – literary characters act, make choices and overcome difficulties similar to those we

sometimes have to face up to, because literary narratives imitate our experiences and our real actions in the real world.

Characters are similar to us, real, living people, but they at the same time are not real. Who – or what – are they exactly and how do they function within the frames of a text and beyond its boundaries? As I mentioned earlier, referring to Ricoeur's views character is "the most crucial category of narrative" (Bal 2009: 113). According to Mieke Bal's theory of narrative, although "characters resemble people" they are not real people with flesh and blood. They are "fabricated creatures made up from fantasy, imitation, memory" (Bal 2009: 113). What is most important, though the character has "no psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act" he or she "does possess characteristics that make readers assume he or she does, and makes psychological and ideological descriptions possible" (Bal 2009: 113).

To sum up, characters are strongly "anthropomorphic figures" – to the extent that although they do not really exist, they are able to produce a so-called "character-effect", which occurs when, as Mieke Bal (2009: 113) puts it,

the resemblance between human beings and fabricated figures is so great that we forget the fundamental difference: we even go so far as to identify with the character, to cry, to laugh, and to search for or with it, or even against it, when the character is a villain.

In other words, characters are a part of so-called narrative subjectivity. What is and where can it be found? According to Mieke Bal's theory, this is a textual network which includes all aspects of the subject one may distinguish in such a story. As she puts it, "the subject is implicated in diverse features of narrative semiosis. It is as much the *source* (of the action) as the *start* (of the process) and the *centre* (in its position)" (Bal 1991: 159). This is, in short, the totality of the definitions and designations concerning all the persons and all the sources of activity and utterance, in other words – all the elements of a narrative which can be treated as "the medium of semiotic actions" (Bal 1991: 157), in every sense of the term.

Bal distinguishes several aspects of narrative subjectivity. First of all, she talks about so-called **roles** which mark out the sources of semiotic actions, such as speaking, seeing and acting. Here we can mention: 1. the speaker, who "assumes responsibility for what he says" thus becoming "a point of reference, of authority" (Bal 1991: 161) or the subject of the voice, such as for example God in the Bible; 2. the focalizer or the subject of the vision, someone who is the answer to the question "Who sees?"; and finally 3. the actor or someone who acts in the narrative.

The second group of problems is related to the **positions** which "deal with the structure that the different roles form in relation to one another" (Bal 1991: 162) and mark out the centres of semiotic actions. The difference between roles and positions is not great

however sources and centres “do not always coincide” (Bal 1991: 162). Moreover, while roles usually concern a particular subject or subjects in the case of positions, we have to do with a more general perspective which embraces the network of speakers, focalizers or actors in a given text/story. Bal enumerates three types of positions: linguistic, cognitive and pragmatic. The first lets us figure out the relationship between the grammatical subject and the centre of predication, and refers especially to such situations in which “the grammatical subject is not the subject causing the action” (Bal 1991: 162). Such a problem often takes place in the case of grammatical passive voice, where the grammatical subject is in fact not the subject but the object of the action. The second type of position, namely the cognitive one, refers to the network of visions and sights. Keen and deep analysis of a game of sights and points of view and their mutual relationship may let us fix the ideological centre of given text. Finally, the third type refers to the centre of action or the centre of initiative and answers questions such as “Who guides the action? Who takes the initiative?” (Bal 1991: 164), though considered not in isolation but in relation to other positions and “to the narrative program(s)” (Bal 1991: 164), to the whole subjectal network.

At the end Bal discusses “the activities carried out in the three domains” (Bal 1991: 165) of textual subjectivity mentioned above, namely speech, focalization and action, behavior and conduct. In this last section, she considers questions related to textual subject’s activity such as for example “Do the respective speakers speak much? Do they speak well? Does their speech have the desired success, that is to say, is it able to obtain the required answer? How do the actors behave?” and so on (Bal 1991: 165–166).

What is at stake in such a process of interpretation? As Mieke Bal (1991, 148) claims, literature like psychoanalysis is “a practice of speech.” And as every instance of speech, it is also a kind of action – such one “which is characterised first and foremost by publication: it goes public”. As belonging to the public domain, the story loses its primordial innocence and opens itself to a process of reading, re-reading, reception, social discussion and so on – in short, to all those practices which Ricoeur identifies as mimesis III. Here the text which primarily – in the act of creation, emplotment and so on – was in the stage of unconsciousness becomes a part of the world of universal, intersubjective rules, which constitute culture and society. In such a way, the narrative, textual subjectivity enters into a relationship with the reader’s subjectivity (that is to say, his or her identity) and becomes part of an unlimited mutual exchange between other texts, stories, people and so on.

And, as Mieke Bal (1991: 149) puts it, “What is lacking in the primary process of the unconscious is the *subject*, defined as agency, capable of wanting, desiring, projecting, and acting. The rules of the public domain come to constitute this subject by offering it the possibility of conforming to them”. Hence, applying all the rules of interpretation, the reader may figure out the text’s subjectivity, thus gaining the ability to get the story

back to the language reality in which he was born, to make it meaningful and capable to enter into dialogue and exchange with all other stories – among them also the reader's personal narrative.

3 How Can a Narrative Text Influence the Reality of the Reader?

What is the mutual influence between the narrative text on the one hand and the reality of the reader on the other? As Wayne C. Booth (1988: 268) puts it, "I am not an individual self at all, but a character, a social self, a being-in-process". And as such, I play many different roles which make me who I am – for myself, as well as for other people living in the same society. Sometimes they belong to the usual repertoire of social roles, such as for example a mother, father, child, teacher, local judge, priest, doctor and so on. In so-called heroic societies or groups which are based on some kind of a heroic narrative, I could probably become a hero, a fighter or a martyr. As a person who lives in a society, I play according to the screenplay which is not only my own, but is always to some extent a part of greater social or cultural narratives among which it came into being. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1984: 213) puts it,

We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others.

Or, as Margaret R. Somers (1994: 606) states, "it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities".

I am a social actor but at the same time also, as Alasdair MacIntyre claims, the (co-)author of my own narrative. I have my own particular life-story, which is only mine and which constitutes my identity, but as a typically social entity I am a living being amidst other, similar beings and all of them also have their own life-stories and all of those personal narratives are also derived from the same common cultural narrative which is constitutive for a given group. Every such story is to some extent unique, but is at the same time shaped according to certain poetics characteristic for a given culture and a given group of people. It employs ready narrative patterns, popular themes or motifs derived from the collection of social mythologies and so on, hence it is never totally individual, but remains in a permanent dialogue with other stories, narratives and plots.

In other words, as Wayne C. Booth (1988: 229) puts it, "we cannot draw a clean line between what we *are*, in some conception of a natural, unstoried self, and what we have become as we first enjoyed, then imitated, and then, perhaps, criticised both the stories and our responses to them". In consequence, our so-called "real life" is always already narrated, as it is "lived *in* images derived in part from stories" (Booth 1988: 229), from

the common, collective repertoire of social roles, myths, symbols, literary metaphors, ready patterns of thinking and valuing and so on.

To sum up, we are the heroes and narrators of our own life-story, which is always exclusively ours, but at the same time is strongly dependent on the innumerable quantity of other stories among which we live, dream, love and hate, suffer and feel lucky, and on invented experiences of fictitious characters who are their heroes. Our personal narrative is in fact not a straight, direct story which begins with our birth and ends when we die, but remains always to some extent, as Ricoeur claims, discordant, inhomogeneous – in such a way that contains material for many other narratives we might also tell and for many other roles we might also play. As Wayne C. Booth (1988: 288–289) puts it,

the turns in my life, embracing and sloughing off successive “characters”, produce a life story that is uniquely “my own”. I implicitly “tell” that story as I play my various and perhaps contradictory roles. Its uniqueness provides the only individuality that will still interest me: my story has its own plot line. Though most of what is “me” will be traceable to previous story-tellers, the particular sequence of roles will be mine, all mine: of this time, of this place, of this person and no other.

Though as a being among beings I cannot avoid influences and I cannot draw a clear line between my life and life-stories of other people, between my personal narrative and other literary and mythical narratives which function within the frames of my culture and define my world, I can despite of it try to “build a life-plot that will be in one of the better genres” (Booth 1988: 268).

The stories we live in are not indifferent with regard to our character, moral choices we make, and finally – to our “very-being”. They shape our identity, provide us with instructions on how to live, widen our cognitive as well as moral horizon, and sometimes very literally make us who we are. Narratives, literary works and fictitious characters influence our life and our identity as they belong to exactly the same reality as real actions, choices and experiences of real people they imitate. As Martha Nussbaum (2008: 243) puts it, they “show us general plausible patterns of action, things such as might happen in human life”. This is the reason why they provide us with “a potential space in which to explore life’s possibilities” (Nussbaum 2008: 238). As an “extension of life”, literature brings “the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met” (Nussbaum 1992: 48) and gives “the reader an experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life” (Nussbaum 1992: 48).

Although literature presents fictitious occurrences and actions of invented people, it is in fact always very close to our human world in which we live, work, love, suffer, hate and even die. It does not present a completely different reality with no relationship to this real one, but rather its different, hidden, abandoned side or sides. What is more, literature is cut from the same cloth as the so-called real world, is derived from it and

finally always comes back to it, so sometimes it is very difficult to mark out an explicit boundary between stories and life, all the more my life, my identity also has a narrative structure. Reading about actions and choices, I may identify with fictitious characters who are always only “an improved version” of “the flesh-and-blood creator” (Booth 1988: 254) and – what is more important – of the reader. Feeling pity and fear, I may have compassion for them, make moral choices and decisions together with them and in such a way gain the ability to know who I really am or might be or what I might do in an alternative world or at least in a different state of affairs, such as the state depicted in a given story. As Paul Ricoeur (1992: 164) puts it, “in the unreal sphere of fiction” we also value and have an excellent occasion “of exploring new ways of evaluating”: “The thought experiments we conduct in the great laboratory of the imaginary are also explorations in the realm of good and evil. Moral judgement has not been abolished; it is rather itself subjected to the imaginative variations proper to fiction”. Confronting myself with such new roles and difficult, unavailable in my usual, everyday life situations, I have an opportunity to discover unknown dimensions of my personality and to rethink and re-tell my own personal narrative.

4 Conclusions

As Booth (1988: 257) claims, “our character [...] changes, grows, and diminishes largely as a result of our imaginative diet”. In the so-called real world I am also a hero of various narratives and screenplays. As MacIntyre (1984: 211) puts it, “Narrative is not the work of poets, dramatists and novelists reflecting upon events which had no narrative order before one was imposed by the singer or the writer; narrative form is neither disguise nor decoration”. What I call my “natural” self is always already narrated. Though we usually treat such a story as something evident, simply as our being, as ourselves – and we are to a great extent right because such a story, in fact, constitutes ourselves, our being – we should remember that this self-reality has a narrative and therefore also to some extent textual character.

As Wittgenstein said, the boundaries of our human world are represented by our language – that is to say also by narratives we tell and by which we feel, value and think. “There is not a story-free world” (Booth 1988: 280), our reality is narrated, hence the only thing we can do is choose a sort of narrative which is to be told. Narratives “implant or reinforce patterns of desire” (Booth 1988: 272) and behavior, and enlarge life’s possibilities by showing us such ways of thinking, living and experiencing which may be far from our everyday practice. In such a way, they become real sources of our very being, our true identity as well as “our best antidote against any one thoughtlessly adopted role” (Booth 1988: 282).

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