Beyond Narrative Coherence

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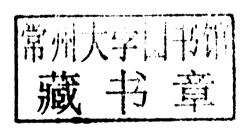
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Beyond narrative coherence

An introduction

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The introduction suggests a paradigmatic turn in narrative studies as regards the coherence thesis. The classical, Aristotelian, notion has been widely shared among scholars who otherwise often disagree, often drastically, from folklore and linguistics to philosophy, psychology and narrativist theory of history. Once and again, the key function of narrative is seen to be the creation of coherence. Recently, this conception has faced increasing criticism both from the ranks of narratology and in particular, from scholars who study "naturally occurring", oral narratives. The normative mission to find and value coherence marginalizes many narrative phenomena, omits non-fitting narrators, encourages scholars to read narratives obsessively from the perspective of coherence, and poses ethically questionable pressures upon narrators who have experienced severe political or other trauma.

The purpose of this book is to suggest and nurture a kind of paradigmatic change within narrative studies. The narrative turn in social sciences, beginning in the early 1980s and gathering momentum in the 1990s, almost exclusively assumed that there is a vital and many-layered relationship between narrative and coherence. Narratives were conceptualized in terms of coherence: linguistic, temporal, sequential and so on. Coherence was considered a virtue — or, alternatively, a mortal sin — and hence the ultimate guarantor of the quality of narratives. Coherence was assumed as a norm for good and healthy life stories and coherence indeed was something that scholars ventured to investigate and to find, for instance, in life-story interviews.

The coherence paradigm generally implies that (i) good and competent narratives always proceed in a linear, chronological way, from a beginning and middle to an end, which also constitutes a thematic closure; (ii) the function of narrative

and story-telling is primarily to create coherence in regard to experience, which is understood as being rather formless (which may be understood as a merit or disadvantage of narrative); (iii) persons live better and in a more ethical way, if they have a coherent life-story and coherent narrative identity (or, in contrast, narrative is understood as being detrimental because it creates such coherence).

Beyond Narrative Coherence challenges this paradigm *theoretically* (positioning it historically; indicating its problems), *methodologically* (in showing its often problematic consequences, finding out new methods with which to approach broken narratives) and *ethically* (by showing how the coherence paradigm privileges middle-class conventionality and marginalizes the experiences of artistically creative as well as politically traumatized people). The volume does this by drawing from a wide range of disciplines and approaches: philosophy, linguistics, sociology, psychology, social psychology, conversation analysis, health research, and historiography.

We go about this by posing some general theoretical arguments, and more particularly by suggesting cases of narratives and storytelling that do not fit into the received and dominant idea about narrative coherence. We invoke cases, for instance, where the storytellers do not necessarily comply with the often implicit norms of narrative theory — persons that are not able bodied or that have severe communicative disabilities; or stories that are told in circumstances and settings that severely constrain the telling; or telling about experiences that do not allow the use of conventional narrative forms. In all these cases people tell stories that are often fragmented, disorganized or where the narrative text is superseded by the performance of the story. In order to be able to listen to these stories it is important that researchers, as well as all other listeners, suspend their preconceived narrative norms and rather treat these stories as invitations to listening in new and creative ways. Sensitivity to these stories also requires new methodological solutions.

Undoubtedly, coherence will remain a useful concept in narrative studies long after this volume, but hopefully in a substantially re-thought manner.

The historical vicissitudes of narrative coherence

As Maria Medved and Jens Brockmeier write in this volume, theoretically the idea of coherence "can be tracked back to Aristotle". While noticing this lineage, it is vital to recognize what Aristotle in fact was doing when he discussed coherence and the role of the beginning, middle, and end. When presenting these concepts, Aristotle was not theorizing narration, *diegesis*, but drama and in particular good tragedy. Of course Aristotle did not have the same generalized concept of narrative that only became possible in the 1960s, thanks to structuralist narratology.

To develop this thought ad absurdum: Aristotle never seriously considered everyday oral stories as a research topic and it never occurred to him to impose his aesthetic and normative concepts on factual statements about narrativity. Over the centuries following Aristotle's death, his normative and aesthetic notions on tragedy started to be used in a way that, in practice, limited the understanding of empirical, factual narratives.

William Labov and Joshua Waletsky (1967/1997; Labov 1972) have a particular merit of beginning the story from the entirely opposite end of the continuum, namely from orally rendered everyday stories. Yet the extremely influential structural model they suggested also presumes a structured whole; a whole that has a distant resemblance to the Aristotelian idea of good tragedy. On the other hand, Dell Hymes has identified traces of more recent literary theories in the Labovian model:

> All this is part of an adaptation and extension of categories from traditional rhetoric. A famous text of the time (Brooks and Warren, 1949) has distinguished four categories: Exposition, Complication, Climax, and Denouement. Labov and his co-workers recognized six categories; Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda. These six are said to constitute a fully formed narrative. (1996, p. 192)

There is of course no problem in using categories from literary theory, but perhaps this adaptation highlights the difficulty in theorizing oral narratives in terms of their genuine characteristics, without the help of aesthetic categories.

It is often argued that the narrative turn in humanities, including literature studies, was strongly influenced by the English translation and publication of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1958. Propp characterized himself strictly as being an empirical researcher. He insisted that he had read all available Russian wondertales and had drawn conclusions on the permanence of the form, functions and agents from this material alone (1968, 1984). Thanks to the impact of French structuralism, this bottom up model was turned around, and introduced in a radicalized form into new areas as a top-down model, suggesting the potential of a universal model of narrative. Because the Saussurean, structural linguistics was understood to be the pilot science for literature as well, the distinction between *langue* (language system) and *parole* (actual and imperfect use of language) informed the study of narratives. Broken, unfinished, or incomplete narratives could only be considered to be less interesting instances of *parole*, whereas the fundamental problem of study was to locate the *narrative form* or the deep *narrative grammar* (Doležel, 1999).

When the narrative perspective came to the field of social inquiry, both narrative grammar and the Proppian model turned out to be widely influential. As

Jerome Bruner writes in his book *Actual Minds*, the earlier discussion "suggest(s) that there is some such constraining deep structure to narrative, and that good stories are well-formed particular realizations of it" (1986, p. 16). Good stories, in this language, no doubt are coherent and complete stories, reflecting the deep structure of language and narrative.

Structuralism and neo-Aristotelianism put an equal emphasis on narrative coherence, although for partly different reasons. The difference, best observable in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) was the Aristotelian emphasis on the normative aspect of narrative coherence. MacIntyre was worried about modern individualism and moral fragmentation, and suggested that understanding our lives as evolving, coherent narratives might make the difference and help us to resolve the modernist dilemma. MacIntyre was obviously the first to introduce the theme and dilemma of narrative identity. Personal identity cannot simply be reduced to its strict categorical meaning (John is or is not Peter's son) but includes a fuzzier aspect of "more or less": your characteristics at the age of fifty are more or less similar to what they were at the age of forty. Mere psychological traits can only account for the strict meaning, says MacIntyre, not the "more-or-less" aspects of identity. Thus he comes to the conclusion that "personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the character which the unity of a narrative requires. Without such unity there would not be subjects of whom stories could be told" (1984, p. 218).

This proposal to use the model of novelistic character to inform the character of personal identity is of course a profound idea, and might even suggest important historical changes in the ways personal identities have been understood. Unfortunately, MacIntyre leaves the idea here and says nothing more specific about the unity of character. More alarmingly, his literary example (*The Count of Monte Cristo*) does not even allude to the complexities and dis-unities of character exposed by such modernist authors as Robert Musil, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and many others who followed them. In other words, MacIntyre does not consider the option that the history of the novel might inform a parallel history on understanding identities. From the beginning, the concept of narrative identity was thematized from the perspective of unity and coherence it was able to afford, not in terms of complexities, contradictions and undecided elements it might include.

Historical narratives

Narrative coherence was an idea that was soon shared by most disciplines and most otherwise competing schools of thought. The narrativist school of thought in historiography (Louis Mink and Hayden White as its most remarkable early representatives) for example, soon established a binary opposition between the

coherence of narrative and the *multiplicity of the facts of life*. The philosopher of history, Louis Mink, summarizes much of the inherited understanding of narrative in an essay written in the late 1970s:

> There are also at a more general level conceptual presupposition of the very idea of *narrative form itself*, and these supervene on its many varieties. Aristotle's comment that every story has *a beginning, a middle and an end* is not merely a truism. It commands universal assent while failing to tell us anything new, simply because it makes explicit part of the conceptual framework underlying the capacity to tell and hear stories of any sort. And in making a presupposition explicit it has implications that are far from banal; it makes clear that our experience of life does not necessarily have to form a narrative, except as we give it that form by making it the subject of stories. (1987, p. 186; emphasis added)

What are the implications of "a narrative form itself"? Mink's choice of words is informative: narrative form was a singular, stable, coherent formation which was already known by Aristotle. Indeed, so obviously strong is the intellectual power of structuralism that even the philosophers of history constitute an entirely a-historicized, essential conception of narrative. In order to criticize naïve narrative historiography, following the worst genres of the realistic novel, Mink postulates a conceptual eternity, immovable narrative that "commands universal assent".

Hayden White, the leading figure of the narrativist school of historiography, conforms to this collapse of history when it comes to the concept of narrative. His often cited, celebrated and criticized passage from the essay "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" repeats this idea of eternally similar narrative form:

> Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with *central subjects*, proper *beginnings*, *middles*, and *ends*, and a *coherence* that permits us to see 'the end' in every beginning? Or does it present itself more in the forms that the annals and chronicle suggest, either as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude? (1981/1987, p. 24; italics added)

Resistance to narrative comes here with the price of presenting a timeless observer of "the world", who either receives the world in the forms suggested by Aristotle's aesthetic theory or in the form of annals or chronicles. In order to criticize narrative foreclosure in history, White employs conceptual foreclosure and a binary opposition between the multitude of life and the full, fixed and eternal form of narrative.

Without going deeper into this debate here (see Hyvärinen 2006) it is noteworthy that philosophers of history have continually rejected the option of *historicizing* narrative when criticizing it. The other ironic aspect of the ongoing debates

is the way critics of narrative almost systematically subscribe to the essentialist, conventional and immovable conception of narrative, as Galen Strawson has recently done. He reminds us that

> The paradigm of a narrative is a conventional story told in words. I take the term to attribute — at the very least — a certain sort of *developmental* and hence temporal *unity* or *coherence* to the things to which it is standardly applied — lives, part of lives, pieces of writing. (2004, p. 439, italics in the original)

Indeed, beginning from such a limited view of narrative it is rather easy to argue that narrative cannot articulate characters' "episodic" experiences.

The Coherent Self

The emerging narrative psychology often followed MacIntyre's example in understanding narrative as an instrument for achieving a complete and intact self or personal identity. Dan P. McAdams, in particular, has emphasized the coherence creating function of the life story:

> It is an individual's story which has the power to tie together past, present, and future in his life. It is a story which is able to *provide unity and purpose* in his or her life. (1988, pp. 17–18; italics added)

> We are all tellers of stories. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories. This is not the stuff of delusion or self-depreciation. (McAdams, 1993, p. 11)

This understanding of the benign role of the coherence-creating narrative can also be found in many other disciplines and subject areas. The overall middle-class orientation of this idea is equally well formulated by Charlotte Linde (1993, p. 3): "In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story." The philosopher Marya Schechtman (1996, p. 96) provides a similar argument considering the social necessity of expressing one's identity in the form of a linear and conventional story, by saying that "this means that constituting an identity requires that an individual conceive of his life having the form and the logic of a story — more specifically, the story of a person's life — where 'story' is understood as a conventional, linear narrative". Because we normally are socially accountable for a certain chronology of events in our lives, Schectman argues, our life stories and identities need also be chronological and more or less conventional. This, of course, is a wrong conclusion in a number of ways, but most of all

it ignores the possibility of self-narrative as a creative study of one's history and its complexities, and transforms it almost as a curriculum vitae demanded by others.

The coherent self further emerges as a cultural construction and an effect of gendered and racialized discourses and practices. In this context it has been richly theorized, discussed and deconstructed in feminist and postcolonial critical studies. Critical feminist interventions in narrative studies have indeed shown that there are many different ways of narrating the female self, ways that are always embedded and embodied and often experimental, transgressing the limitations of coherence and closure. (See Smith & Watson, 1998, for an excellent review of this literature). For postcolonial critics, hybridity and multiplicity have emerged as catalytic factors in the ways we read, analyse, understand and evaluate "coherent" narratives. What happens to the desire for textual coherence when place and location as material coherences par excellence, melt into fluid spatialities, forced displacement and diasporic subjectivities? How can coherence be sustained in narrative texts produced as effects of discourses of colonization? How can "the coherent self" be located across different national territories, ethnic locations and multicultural places when narratives of return cannot be imagined, let alone expressed or inscribed, when there is no material place of origin or beginning? (See amongst others, Bhabha, 1986; Gillroy, 1993, 2000; Hall, 1990; Spivak, 1987.)

In light of the above, it is therefore no big surprise that later critics of narrative and narrativity often criticized the generalized vision of every human individual as a life-story teller (Strawson, 2004) or the outlined life as a "teleological project" (Sartwell, 2000). The profusely cultivated "we" does not exactly invite deviating experiences. Without exception "we each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence" (McAdams, 1993, p. 11).

Can narrative coherence be a harmful phenomenon, how, and in which context? This is a question posed much less frequently, yet the ideological implications of an overtly coherent and linear life story should at least be questioned in the kind of world(s) people have been living in since the First World War. Ian Craib (2000) indeed disturbed the benign understanding of narrative identities by alluding to the possibility of "bad faith narratives". Mark Freeman (2000), using the concept of "narrative fore-closure", showed how an overly crafted and coherent life narrative may actually lead to severe constraints of life options. Freeman (2003) has also directed outspoken criticism at the tendency to idealize the presumed narrative coherence within narrative psychology. The question that has finally been posed in the above-mentioned feminist and postcolonial literatures is not simply why subjects deemed to be different — women and slaves to state but the obvious — have not written "coherent" narratives, but also how the imperative of coherence works to legitimize certain narratives while excluding or marginalizing others from the narrative canon.

Coherence, linearity, and completeness

Thus far we have discussed all aspects of narrative coherence as if they formed a unitary package of temporal linearity (as in Aristotle and in Labov and Waletsky), strong cohering power of the ending (White) and completeness in terms of actantial roles (Bruner). However, if we want to see cracks in the unitary picture of coherent narrative and to re-theorize narrative coherence, we obviously need take these aspects separately, and also see incongruent packages of these elements. The attempt to read these aspects separately and in a more sophisticated way is compelling, of course, for the reason that recent criticisms of narrative often seem to present all these aspects as being necessary and essential parts of the narrative approach in general (Strawson, 2004).

Paul Ricoeur most emphatically was a theorist who early on (1981) resisted the structuralist reduction of temporality into linearity of sequences. Although he understood narratives to be complete, he nevertheless systematically resisted the ideas of temporal linearity and thematic coherence. He did this partly because he did not base his theory of narrative solely on the work of Aristotle, but drew heavily from St Augustine's thinking on temporality and its paradoxes. He also resisted the idea of full causal and thematic coherence by maintaining that "[e]mplotment is never the simple triumph of 'order'" (1984, p. 73). The purpose of narrative according to Ricoeur is not simply to produce coherence out of disorder. It is above all an attempt to cope with the "discordant" aspects of acting and suffering.

It is interesting how Ricoeur's persistent criticism of sequentiality was neglected and pushed away during the early days of the narrative turn. Jerome Bruner (1990, p. 43), for example, argues that narrative's "principal property is its inherent sequentiality," and supports the view by a quote from Ricoeur. In this quotation Ricoeur discusses the sequentiality of "*story*" using the term the way it is used in narratology, as equal to the supposed sequence of events, and not at all as "narrative" per se.

Bruner himself is a contradictory figure in terms of coherence. He draws heavily from the Proppian and structuralist heritage, for example, and often repeats his trust in the sequential structure of narrative. Nevertheless Bruner does not believe in coherence in the same unconditional way as many other narrative psychologists. Indeed, in his article "The Narrative Construction of Reality" (1991) he famously claims that narratives are "designed to contain uncanniness rather than to resolve it" (p. 16). A deeper (potential) deviation from the unilateral understanding of coherence is embedded in Bruner's account of "folk psychology" or the script-like knowledge of common sense. Bruner emphasizes a conceptual distinction between scripts and narratives, maintaining that it is "only when constituent beliefs in folk psychology are violated that narratives are constructed" (1990, p. 40).

By contrast, for example, McAdams' outlines of successfully coherent life stories rather resemble folk psychological expectations than narratives worth telling.

One of the paradoxes of the coherence thesis is that it so obviously contradicts what avant-garde literature and film have been doing with narrative. What, for example, has the sequential, chronological and coherence-oriented model to do with James Joyce, Virginia Woolf or Henry James? In other words, why is it that the paradigmatic models of narrative were so often taken from simplified literary models of 19th-century realism? Monika Fludernik's project to build "natural narratology", meaning narratology based on everyday oral narration and capable of understanding both literary and "naturally occurring" narration, took an entirely different tack (Fludernik, 1996). Fludernik argued that the sequential and linear beginning, middle, and end model of narratives represent only "zero-degree narrativity". Fludernik sees "experientiality" to be the core of narrativity and argues that both the modernist consciousness novels and imperfect oral narratives express this experientiality more fully than the strictly sequential and conventional stories.

In another attempt to displace the discourse on sequence and coherence David Herman in his book *Story Logic* (2002) takes Bruner's proposal of folk psychology and pushes it a bit further. Herman locates narrativity on a scale between, on the one hand, cultural-cum-cognitive scripts, presenting the expected and normal courses of events in a sequential model and, on the other hand, a totally chaotic and idiosyncratic scribble. Herman's proposal is completely fatal for the admiration of coherence and sequence because it suggests that pushing too far in this direction actually leads toward the thinning away of narrativity. The coincidental, unexpected, experimental, even the chaotic, are all necessary and integral aspects of a narrativity that tries to capture an uncharted aspect of experientiality. *Understandability* (resorting to a rich number of cultural expectations) and *tellability* (distance from the scripts and deviations from the expected) work constantly in different directions and create the innate tensions of narrativity.

The impetus to reject and challenge the sequential model came from many theoretical and practical sources. Just to mention a few exemplary studies that did not privilege separate, complete and coherent stories, Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capp's *Living Narrative* (2001) portrayed the lively and fragmented interactional narration in everyday situations. The authors noticed that many conversational narratives are incomplete, and get completed and finally evaluated only within interaction. Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson's *Storytelling in Daily Life* (2004) similarly rejects the idea of separate and complete narratives and foregrounds instead the interactional performing of family realities by storytelling. Similar arguments and findings have been reported by researchers dealing with trauma studies, brain trauma, Alzheimer's disease and other dementias (cf. Hydén

& Brockmeier, 2008). Catherine Kohler Riessman (1990) has challenged the idea of narrative linearity by suggesting the important category of "hypothetical narrative". Narratives routinely play with multiple options, and this is also reflected by Gary Saul Morson (1994; 1998; 2003) and Michael André Bernstein (1994), who have introduced the concept of narrative "side-shadowing". The idea of one single, relatively coherent life narrative has equally been challenged in the study of "small" and conversationally situated narratives (e.g., Bamberg 1997, 2004; Georgakopoulou 2007).

Does it matter?

Above, we have documented the great number of different research orientations that take the idea of narrative coherence for granted. However, has this orientation signified any problems in practical, empirical narrative analysis? Does it matter in terms of research methodology? We would like to argue that it matters. The normative attitude privileging coherent narratives may give rise to at least four kinds of problems.

First, scholars may privilege coherent stories as better and more thickly representational material, and neglect other, more challenging cases. Many chapters in this volume take apparently "incoherent" and defective narratives and narrative situations, and show how meaning is made interactionally (Medved and Brockmeier, Hydén, Aaltonen), as a performance (Medved and Brockmeier, Hydén) or evaluation (Hydén). Narratives that may appear to resist chronology and clear temporal order can turn out to be extraordinarily rich studies about the life course, as argued in the chapter by Vilma Hänninen and Anja Koski-Jännes.

Second, an overly normative attitude towards coherence may lead to a biased reading strategy as the scholar is desperately working towards "finding" the deepest, coherent meaning of the self-narrative. We believe that coherence is not an objective feature of an individual narrative as a text, but rather is something that has always been produced interactionally, thus implicating the researcher as a coherence-creating or coherence-declining agent (Brockmeier, 2004).

Interpretive projects always run the risk of looking for ready-made and overly neat solutions, and this risk is made that much greater if a coherent and complete life narrative is the blueprint. Reading may instead go in the other direction, as for example in Linda Sandino's chapter. Sandino employs Paul Ricoeur's theory of triple mimesis and the dual nature of narrative identity to portray the turning points, the contemplation of art works that mark the turn of a career, the other who becomes part of one's own work and thinking. Similarly Maria Tamboukou offers, in her chapter, both the non-linear and resistant epistolary narratives written by the

artist Gwen John, and a consciously Deleuzian reading of the cracks, hesitations, and formations of insecure identifications when writing and painting self-portraits.

Alison Stern Perez (with her co-authors), in her chapter on the Israeli bus drivers, who have experienced terrorist attacks, takes an obvious incoherence of pronoun use and straightforwardly contradictory statements given by a bus driver about not fearing and having feared, of course, as the starting points of her analysis. Perez's reading of the variable use of the Hebrew gendered 'you' opens up different layers of vulnerability and dominant masculinity, and how the contradictions of the statements are attached to contradicting societal expectations, which render the individual interviews seemingly incoherent.

Third, the biased emphasis on narrative coherence and coherent narratives seems to impoverish the narrative thought and reduce narratives once again more or less to adequate representations of past life, experiences, or thoughts. Many of the chapters in this volume foreground the performative and evaluative roles narration takes. Lars-Christer Hydén, in particular, shows how the performance of a narrative and narrative evaluation may survive the textual coherence in the storytelling of dementia patients. This urge to tell, and to do it interactionally through a network of family members even after severe brain damage or aphasia is analysed in the chapters of Medved and Brockmeier and Aaltonen.

Molly Andrews's chapter on political trauma narratives addresses a *fourth* set of problems with the coherence bias. Extreme political traumas often seem to block the whole capacity to tell, and the ideal of coherent and standard narration stands in cruel contrast to what the victims and witnesses can actually do. As a dramatic example, Andrews recounts how the translation process during the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa often cleaned out important personal details in order to fit the purposes of the national project of unification. All in all, a significant part of the politically and humanly most important narration comes out hesitantly, often incoherently, replete with contradictions and resistant to chronologically smooth, linear progress. Again, as Andrews argues, the *performance* of telling seems to be the most urgent task, where the meaning and coherence of the accounts remain secondary in importance.

In addressing the four sets of problems identified above, the chapters of this volume challenge the sequential, coherence-oriented model of narrative from three major subject areas: illness, the arts, and trauma in the political context. Typical for these areas is that they confront the middle-class normalcy and the vision of life as a teleological project that the narrator-protagonist creates with the same ease as he or she tells it.

Maria Medved and Jens Brockmeier open the volume with a survey on research constituting the coherence paradigm in illness and brain injury research, and show compellingly with their case studies, how this paradigm limits the

recognition of genuine narrative performances. Lars-Christer Hydén, in his article on narrative, self, and identity also foregrounds the performative and evaluative aspects of storytelling, showing how Alzheimer patients whose coherence in narration is far from complete, nevertheless can interactionally produce the desired evaluative point of the story, the affirmation of the suggested identity. Tarja Aaltonen continues with the narrative difficulties of an aphasic patient, and argues that the family members and the speech therapist use "mind reading" as a technique in teasing out the correct interpretation from the very limited and disordered speech of the patient.

Maria Tamboukou begins the section about artistic impediments and challenges to linear and coherent narration. The painter Gwen John, writing postcards and love letters to the leading artistic figure Rodin, is impeded by wrong language (French instead of English), mixed identity (a female artist and model within a male dominated scene), and wrong media (an artist writing), thus constantly struggling with several kinds of evasions in her epistolary narration. Linda Sandino, by contrast, studies interview narratives of British ceramic artists. Sandino works within the Ricoeurian paradigm, reading out the changes and challenges of identity, pointing out how the *idem* (sameness) identity cannot help us to understand the changes artists experience through visiting and receiving artistically explosive work by other artists; and shows the relevance of the identity as temporally evolving and changing *ipse*. Vilma Hänninen and Anja Koski-Jännes introduce the third artist, now in the context of dilemmatic recovery from severe drinking problems. The authors argue that, in contrast to many coherent and conversion-like stories by recovered drinkers, the female artist of this story rejects a linear, chronological, and sequential model of narration, and instead proceeds through large temporal cycles, and only cautiously approaches the most traumatic experiences of her youth. The article presents a marvellous narrative moment of creation and investigation of the self, rather than delivering a repeatedly told, finished and polished narrative of the self.

The last section consists of papers discussing trauma in the political context. Alison Stern Perez, with her co-authors, discusses the oral narratives of Israeli bus drivers who have faced terrorist attacks in their line of work. What could be a more dramatic break and challenge to the linearity and coherence of a life story? Perez goes on to reveal highly telling incongruities in the use of Hebrew pronouns, and focuses her analysis on the obvious factual contradiction of the narrative. Moreover, precisely the departures from the coherent ideal turn out to be the most telling elements of the bus drivers' stories, not a deficiency of the material. Molly Andrews's article on narrative difficulty in accounting for severe political traumas, from the European Holocaust to other genocides and to the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee, foregrounds the utmost difficulty