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## NARRATING A LIFE

*Between Diachrony and Synchrony*

**ABSTRACT:** The point of departure of this study is the temporal multilayeredness of our narrative constructions of life and identity, both in fictional and factual genres of life writing. The question of “historical sequence” and “morphology” – the central issue of the 2019 Turin conference – is reformulated as a question of life and narrative. I argue that narrative plays a crucial role in juggling the many balls of identity, at least in Western traditions of identity formation. Put differently, narrative combines diachronic and synchronic perspectives, orders of sequentiality and orders of simultaneity. This combination or, perhaps better, synthesis is not only at the heart of our narrative identity projects, it is inherent to the very narrative process. I explain and illustrate this view by examining an extract from an autobiographical narrative.

**KEYWORDS:** Narrative, Autobiographical memory, Diachrony, Synchrony, Narrative identity, Simultaneity.

I approach the central theme of the 2019 Turin conference “Morphology and historical sequence,” organized by the Centro Studi Arti della Modernità of the University of Turin, in view of a special subject and field of research. In this case, there even are two subjects and two fields: memory and narrative. I begin with some remarks on my interest in the nexus of memory and narrative; I then outline how I frame this interest in terms of the conference focus; and finally, I explain and illustrate all this using an example, an autobiographical narrative by the Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje.

### At the Same Time: On Psychological and Narrative Simultaneity

Although I have been concerned with the relations between narrative and memory, particularly autobiographical memory, for quite a while, I am still fascinated and puzzled by the many ways in which they can be entangled. Probably we are not always aware of the fact that there is no such thing as a neurobiological or psychological entity “memory,” nor is there a pure memory. There is no pure memory – by this I mean that whenever we remember we are at the same time engaged in a variety of mental (or cognitive or psychological) activities, as we typically are involved in a variety of physical activities and processes. Many of these activities take place simultaneously: they occur at the same time – parallelly, overlapping, and intermingling each other.

I am exploring this very idea and experience of simultaneity from psychological, narratological, and philosophical perspectives, all of which I take to be closely interrelated. On this view, simultaneity is a fundamental feature of human existence – even if I examine it in the present context only as a phenomenon of consciousness and language. Now, narrative plays an important role in this context because of its creative potential to evoke scenarios of simultaneity. My question is: in which ways does narrative give shape to the simultaneity of the various temporal layers of our lives and minds. An instructive example for this co-presence of past, present, and future in our life is the autobiographical process, the process in which we remember and interpret our past. In this process, as I have outlined elsewhere, narrative plays a central role (Brockmeier 2018).

### The Garden of Science and the Wilderness of Literature

The two main fields of research on which I draw are psychology and the study of narrative. One of the astonishing new insights we owe to recent neuroscientific research is that an autobiographical (or episodic or personal) memory is a psychological (or mental or cognitive) state or process that cannot be properly distinguished from other mental or cognitive states or processes. What is more, an experience, memory, or dream cannot be distinguished from the imagination of such experience, memory, or dream.

This is not to say that under laboratory conditions we cannot reduce the complex and holistic process of our mnemonic activities (including autobiographical ones) to, well, *pure* memories or recollections, that is, to recall that can be registered and measured. Measured it can be, for example, in terms of length, detail, imagistic or emotional qualities, and of course in view of correctness, falseness, distortedness, as so on. This in fact is what most scientific memory research in the past has tried to do; and this is what scientific psychologists view as the hallmark of the “Ebbinghaus tradition” of memory experimentation. There is, however, a problem once we leave the well-prepared and well-isolated neurocognitive lab and turn to the open biotopes of episodic remembering in the context of real life. Here we do not deal any more with conditioned lab rats but are confronted with non-domesticated human reality; that is, we are confronted with processes of remembering embedded in complex life worlds – with remembering in the wild. How do we know how people remember in the wild? Well, there are various possibilities, one is offered by narrative literature. Psychology is a garden, literature is wilderness, as Daniel Albright (1994) put it.

Still, one can love both, gardens and wilderness. To figure out how autobiographical remembering works it is helpful to be familiar with both types of landscapes, intellectually and otherwise. It has often been noted that

literature is a rich and indispensable terrain for the study of the intricacies of human experiences, including their temporal multilayeredness. It allows us to envision a kind of complexity of mind and memory that scientific psychology misses all too often. The wilderness of literature is both an ally and a subject of psychological investigation; it contributes in a unique way to capturing and creating the multilayeredness of human existence, the laminarity of our being in the world.<sup>1</sup> Of course, simultaneity is only one aspect of narrative's potential to evoke time; yet it is the one I am interested in.

### Diachrony and Synchrony: Opposing or Complementary?

As already indicated, the scenarios of simultaneity can become rather complicated, if not downright messy. To bring some structure to these scenarios, I want to use the central categories of this conference, morphology and historical sequence, as coordinates. To do so, I take both categories as temporal descriptors. Accordingly, historical sequence appears as an aspect of what more generally is called diachrony, a change or development extending through time. On the other hand, morphology occurs as an aspect of synchrony that refers to simultaneous constellations or actions. Typically, diachrony and synchrony are regarded as mutually exclusive viewpoints, though sometimes they are also viewed as complementary.

Take, for instance, linguistics, a field where the synchronic study of language aims at the state of a specific language at a given moment in time,

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<sup>1</sup> Readers of modern autobiographical literature and, more generically, life-writing have for long been familiar with these insights. Modernism is generally credited with exploring the mutual entanglement of narrative literature and remembering. Writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, and Marcel Proust brought the idea to its fullest expression that the remembered self is unavoidably intermingled with the remembering self and that both are intimately linked to the process of narrative. Since Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the narrative nexus of these two "selves" has become a concern at the heart of innumerable writers. At the same time, it also has become an established topic in the academic world of letters (e.g., Olney 1998; Saunders 2010; Smith and Watson 2016). Autobiographical literature either explicitly deals with the lives and minds of the writers themselves, with their selves in time – that is, in various times – or it indirectly draws on and exploits the dramas of their lives. If we want to know what it means to look at one's own existence and the existence of others and to give sense and meaning to it, we find here a privileged site for investigations of this sort. Modern autobiographical writers, as Ender (2005) has remarked, are writers who have "a vocation for remembrance" and are highly aware of its "subtle complexities" (5). Many writers have emphasized what seems to be true for all autobiographical remembrance: that autobiographical remembering and reflection include the simultaneous configuration of scenarios and selves in very different times, and that these "times" are inextricably tied to the narrative fabric of the autobiographical stories in which they gain their meaning.

without taking into account its history. Reversely, the diachronic study considers the historical development and evolution of a language. Following de Saussure's privileging of the synchronic point of view in linguistic studies, structuralism and its descendent narratology have for a long time privileged the synchronic approach. However, as far as narratology is concerned, this focus has shifted and narrative and its forms and practices have increasingly become historicized. Within the conceptual framework of "diachronic narratology," narrative techniques are viewed in relation to the changing parameters of historical periods (Fludernik 2003; Jong 2014; Contzen 2019).

In contrast with the traditional structuralist juxtaposition of diachrony and synchrony, the phenomena involved in the autobiographical dynamic are both diachronic and synchronic. Autobiographical remembering is often taken to be a diachronic process in which past experience is brought back to the present. In fact, both psychologically and narratively the autobiographical process is at any moment a diachronic activity that connects the past with the present, and often this is done in the light of the future. However, at the same time, it is also related to other synchronic activities and processes, for example, the simultaneous interpretation of an autobiographical memory. The fact that we understand a mental state and its content as a memory – rather than as a figment of imagination, an association, or dream – is already the result of a simultaneous interpretation.

There is no such thing as a memory that is not interpreted and identified by the rememberer as a memory. Most of the time, there is even more involved: the perception and evaluation of a memory as an emotional experience. We often feel this emotional charge during the very process of remembering. Also, a memory can be subject of social communication and discursive self-positioning, especially, when the act of autobiographical recall takes place in conversational and other interactive contexts. All of this can happen at the same moment.

My work is concerned with the function of narrative in such scenarios of simultaneity. More specifically, I am interested in the synthesis of diachronic and synchronic aspects carried out in the autobiographical process (e.g., Brockmeier 2015). For such synthesis, I believe narrative is pivotal not only in representing certain temporal scenarios but also in evoking and creating them.

### Winter in the Jungle

After this theoretical sketch, I turn to what Goethe called the opposite of grey concepts and theory: the golden tree of actual life that supposedly springs ever green. In the next part, I further explore the synthesis of the diachronic and synchronic dimension realized in the autobiographical

process by examining an autobiographical memory told by Michael Ondaatje in his memoir *Running in the Family* (1982). The memoir is about Ondaatje's return to his native island of Sri Lanka, once called Ceylon, in the late 1970s. He left Sri Lanka as a child to go to school in England before relocating to Canada. Not least meteorologically, this must have been quite a change – moving to Ontario with its long and harsh winters from the jungle world of Ceylon with its druglike heat and intoxicating fragrances, with the golden trees of wilderness not only as a metaphor but a metonymy. The opening paragraph of Ondaatje's memoir brings it all together:

What began it all was the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto. I was sleeping at a friend's house. I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them were screaming and barking into the tropical landscape. The noises woke me. I sat up on the uncomfortable sofa and I was in a jungle, hot, sweating. Streetlights bounced off the snow and into the room the hanging vines and ferns at my friend's window. A fish tank glowed in the corner. I had been weeping and my shoulders and face were exhausted. I wound the quilt around myself, leaned back against the head of the sofa, and sat there for most of the night. Tense, not wanting to move as the heat gradually left me, as the sweat evaporated and I became conscious again of brittle air outside the windows searing and howling through the streets and over the frozen cars hunched like sheep all the way down towards Lake Ontario. It was a new winter, and I was already dreaming of Asia. (Ondaatje 1982, 21-22)

What is this paragraph about? Obviously, it is about an autobiographical memory (AM 1), an event (*I was sleeping at a friend's house*) remembered by a narrator in what we might assume is a past some time ago. The narrator makes it clear that he is in a different time when he tells this story, a time from which he looks back at *What began it all*. What began it all, we learn, is a dream (D) that he had in the house of a friend. He remembers this dream, a dream that carries out an act of remembering; it visualizes a memory – a psychoanalyst might say, it condenses a memory – in which the narrator remembers his father back in Ceylon, situated in a tropical landscape, presumably when the narrator was a child. Strictly speaking, this dream-memory is a second autobiographical memory (AM 2), distinct from the first memory (*sleeping at the friend's house*). Furthermore, there is a third memory told in this little autobiographical story (AM 3), one in which the narrator recalls the situation in which he finds himself in that very night immediately after he woke up. Why did he wake up? Because of “the noises” of the screaming and barking dogs he heard in his tropical childhood dream-memory. Technically, this third memory is a short-term memory, it took place right after his dream-memory.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> From a narratological and rhetorical point of view, this shift is realized by a *metalepsis*, a figure of speech in which a scene within a given world (in this case, the tropical dream world) appears outside of this world in a new context. In this case, it operates as something that ends the dream, as it often happens in nightmares. At the same time, this trope is related

And there is more. Waking up from his dream, the narrator continues to be in the same mindset, lingering in the atmosphere of the dream-memory (*I sat up ... and I was in a jungle, hot, sweating*). This psychological state (PS 1) seamlessly transforms into a another one (PS 2). In mingling the snow bouncing off the street lights, which the narrator glances at, we imagine, through the window of his friend's house – through *hanging vines and ferns at my friend's window* as if it were a spot in a jungle, a vestige of the tropical dream memory. This perception adds an element of fantasy or daydreaming and, perhaps, hallucination (FDH) to the scene. This is further enhanced by an “external” element, the dull light from the fish tank that *glowed in the corner* (EE). All these aspects must have had a strong emotional impact on the narrator: *I had been weeping and my shoulders and face were exhausted* (E). We learn about these emotions only in hindsight, without knowing exactly what kind of emotions are aroused.

At this point, the psychological landscape changes. As *the heat gradually leaves* the narrator, his *sweat evaporates*, which marks a change along the diachronic axis, a small one, perhaps only a few seconds or minutes, but a clear one. Still, we do not leave the synchronic dimension because at the same time the narrator *becomes conscious again of brittle air outside the windows* (BA, like bodily awareness). In an instant, the events lose their dreamlike tropical air. The narrative I becomes more active (*I wound the quilt around myself...*), shifting – another small diachronic move – from a bodily awareness (*the brittle air*) of where he is to a reflexive awareness *for most of the night* (RA).

From this reflexive perspective, the scene of the first and overarching memory (AM 1 or *I was sleeping at a friend's house*), as well as all other states and processes, are localized anew. Where? In a Canadian winter landscape of *frozen cars hunched like sheep all the way down towards Lake Ontario*. Here, as we now realize, the narrator has been all the time. This stratum of his synchronic existence touches on an “outer individual reality” (OIR). From here, then, his dream appears to be anticipating his journey to Ceylon (*It was a new winter and I was already dreaming of Asia*), a journey that will be narrated in the memoir of 200 pages that follows. The paragraph we have read, it becomes clear, is a prelude to this journey, represented in hindsight, a self-interpretation (SI) based on the knowledge of what the *all* means with which, as we remember, the first sentence started: *What began it all...*

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(in this specific context) to an act of remembering. What makes this metaleptic shift interesting for the issue at stake is that it shows in which ways the various but simultaneous layers of the autobiographical process are permeable and mutually entangled.

## Diachronic Synchrony, Synchronic Diachrony

How can this short text condense such a differentiated charge of psychological life? My analysis has thrown into sharp relief the dynamic of diachrony and synchrony that is in play in autobiographical narrations. Like the autobiographical process, the process of telling one's life or some of its episodes extends at any moment along both a diachronic and a synchronic trajectory. The first trajectory lays out a historical or temporal sequence, which does not, however, have to be a chronological sequence; in fact, it rarely is. The second trajectory opens a scenario of layeredness and simultaneity.

As for the first, in the extract from Ondaatje's memoir we have discerned a variety of diachronic strata: from short-term time spans like the remembering of moments and minutes, to events that take a few hours, and to experiences that are remembered over longer time spans like a year or possibly a life. Regarding the synchronic strata – on which I have concentrated because my main interest is in understanding the workings of simultaneity – there are a number of different mental and emotional states, activities, and processes implicated in what at first sight appears to be one act of autobiographical remembering. In my close reading of this text, I have distinguished a number of these states and their transitions, but a more comprehensive investigation could doubtless expose more.

Layers of the autobiographical process:

- AM1 (Autobiographical Memory 1: "I was sleeping at a friend's house")
- AM2 (Autobiographical Memory 2: in Ceylon)
- AM3 (Autobiographical Memory 3: "I sat up on the uncomfortable sofa")
- PS 1 (Psychological State: "in a jungle")
- PS 2 (Psychological State: "streetlights bounced off the snow")
- D (Dream/Dream-memory)
- FDH (Fantasizing/Daydreaming/Hallucinating: "I was in a jungle, hot, sweating")
- EE (External element: the "fish tank that glowed in the corner")
- E (Emotions: "weeping" and "exhausted")
- BA (Bodily Awareness: "conscious again of brittle air")
- RA (Reflexive Awareness: "for most of the night")
- OIR (Outer individual reality): Winter in Ontario
- SI (Self-interpretation)

These states and processes range from remembering activities in the past (including an act of remembering) to a dream-memory (that is, more precisely, a memory of a dream that realizes a memory), forms of daydreaming (or fantasizing or hallucinating), and emotions. They also include forms of bodily awareness and reflexive awareness. Especially the last sentence, indicating a different reflexive and self-interpretive mode – *It was a*

*new winter and I was already dreaming of Asia* (SI) – begins with a little deferral. As if there were a short pause in a piece of music, an intake of breath before the events go on to extend far beyond the temporal frame of this sequence, anticipating the time in which the narrator looks back and tells his story.

It is a unique potential of narrative that allows for the smooth intermingling of the diachronic and synchronic dynamic of this process. Examining this dynamic within the context of an autobiographical process outlined by Ondaatje, I have retraced it as an emerging narrative synthesis. Viewed in this light, we gain a deeper understanding of the temporal density and narrative intensity that characterize this scene. Cinematographically speaking, we follow a zoom, a zooming in and a zooming out, a gliding movement of which we hardly are aware. But the closer we look at this narrative sequence – with the dream-memory at its heart – the more it becomes a magical interplay of diachrony and synchrony, a code of simultaneity to be deciphered in the middle of ordinary life, a work of art to be understood, little by little.

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