

Narrative Theory Across Cultural Landscapes

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Horváth, Kornélia, Judit Mudriczki, and Sarolta Osztrólczyk, eds. *Diversity in Narration and Writing: The Novel*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022. 299 pages. HB. ISBN 978-1-5275-7716-9. £63.99.

The essays collected in this edited volume explore multiple theoretical dimensions of narrative, ranging from the interplay of forms and modes in verbal and visual narrative structures and techniques to cultural and political critique performed by narrative fiction in multiple historical contexts. The authors, an international contingent of literary scholars, incorporate interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks in their discussions of films and other forms of visual art, classics of world literature, the modern and contemporary literary canon in English, as well as Hungarian and other East European works of fiction. Many of the latter have lately become, in English translation, integral parts of the international canon. As a result of the comparative heuristics of these critical approaches, literary narratives engage in a productive colloquy across geographical and cultural boundaries.

The five contributions making up the first section, “Intermediality and Narrative Theory,” shape the intellectual framework of the volume by interrogating established concepts of narrative theory such as perspective and focalization, narrative speed and rhythm, adaptation and translation. Mieke Bal’s essay “From ‘Madame Bovary c’est moi’ to ‘Emma is Us’: Focalisation as Political Tool” demonstrates the broad implications of narrative perspective in art, culture, and cultural politics. Bal, the author of seminal studies in the field of narratology, argues here that the ambiguous focalization has the potential to manipulate, persuade, and indirectly bring forward a critique of cultural politics. Her case becomes even more convincing as the exploration of narrative perspective is extended to visual adaptations of Flaubert’s novel. *Madame B*, the film and video installation that Mieke Bal co-directed with the British artist Michelle Williams Gamaker between 2011 and 2014, is an experiment in responding to the novel and re-imagining its themes in a way that these acquire contemporary relevance. The intermedial dialogue between novel and film transforms Flaubert’s critical commentary on the social perception of women, an element of the cultural politics of his own time, into a compelling critique of our modern experience. The condition we share with Flaubert and his

contemporary readers, coined by Bal as “emotional capitalism,” raises difficult psychological and moral questions about systemic, collective, and individual responsibility in creating endless loops of desire, fulfillment, and suffering.

Intermediality, focalization, and narrative structures continue to be relevant in the subsequent contributions to this section. Tibor Gintli’s “Narrative and Speed” engages critically with Gérard Genette’s landmark work on narrative theory as well as Mieke Bal and Wolf Schmid’s engagements with the narrative mediation of speed and rhythm. The methodology proposed by Gintli favors qualitative aspects of the narrative over comparing diegetic time of the plot with text quantity. The reader’s subjective experience of speed and rhythm as well as the internal dynamics and poetic structures applied in the narrative are at least as important, if not more so, as the ratio between diegetic time and the corresponding text length. Kornélia Horváth explores the philosophical dimensions of the novel in her analysis of theoretical works by three Central European authors: Milan Kundera, Béla Hamvas, and Géza Ottlik. These writers, whose careers collectively spanned most of the twentieth century, conceptualize the novel as a complex narrative form that centers on human existence and identity in order to grasp the essence of being and historical consciousness. Horváth’s discussion reveals common threads of thought running through Kundera, Hamvas, and Ottlik’s definition of the novel’s fundamental role, which is to explore the ambiguity of all things human, to claim a personal fate, and to model the indeterminate quality of a reality in the process of becoming.

The two essays concluding this section guide the reader into the inner worlds of fictional characters as the authors address some of the difficulties of rendering thought processes by narrative means. András Kappanyos evaluates two classic Hungarian translations of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as well as the recent retranslation of Joyce’s monumental work by a team of scholars (Marianna Gula, András Kappanyos, Gábor Zoltán Kiss, Dávid Szolláth). “Heteroglossia and Inner Monologue: Linguistic Events as Character Traits in *Ulysses*” offers fascinating insights into the challenges of translating the novel’s idiosyncratic voices and inner monologues. Rendering the intricacies of this polyphonic text in another—in the case of Hungarian, a non-Indo-European—language inevitably oscillates between masterstrokes, epic failures, and creative reinterpretations. János Szávai’s “Dream Narratives throughout the Centuries” traverses literary history, examining how dreams were used by authors from ancient times to

modernity to reveal deeper psychological and existential truths. This exploration of the experimental fiction of classic writers such as Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann as well as that of contemporary Booker Prize winning author László Krasznahorkai reflects on the changing roles of dreams in narrative structures, from divine messages in ancient texts to tools for character development and thematic explorations in contemporary literature.

The essays in the section “Classic and Contemporary English Fiction” demonstrate that methodologies focusing on the narrative structure of fictional works often reveal how deeply these works engage with broader cultural and psychological issues. Contributions to this section are arranged in a historical sequence for ease of reference. However, transcending this chronological framework reveals common salient themes and critical methodologies. The essays discussing Lewis Carroll’s Alice novels, Emma Donoghue’s *Room*, Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing*, and J. M. Coetzee’s *Dusklands*, by Antal Bókay, Noémi Albert, Nóra Séllei, and Angelika Reichmann, respectively, address indirect expressions of personal or collective trauma emerging from painful experiences, abusive spaces, or sweeping historical events. Bókay’s “Diverted from Wonderland: Multilevel Trauma Narratives of Lewis Carroll,” based on the definitions of trauma by Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, suggests that traumas experienced in early childhood may find an outlet in the creative output of the traumatizing adult. Thus, Carroll’s language play and quirky nonsense are open to interpretation as entry ways into a secret life sublimated into the ambiguous modalities of the “Alice world.” A related theme, early childhood trauma is approached from a different critical perspective and methodology in Albert’s discussion of narrative voice and focalization in Emma Donoghue’s novel *Room* (2010). She concentrates on the filters through which Jack, an abducted five-year-old boy perceives and makes sense of the world: stories told by his mother and images from a flickering TV screen. These fictional worlds provide the child, the novel’s narrator-focalizer, with the ingredients for creating a liminal reality in which the line between the fictional and the real are blurred.

Narrative structures can also be leveraged to address trauma and abusive environments, collective or individual. Nóra Séllei’s analysis of Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing* shifts the focus from established criticism’s thematic explorations of race relations and gender issues in Lessing’s debut novel to narrative voice and perspective. Séllei discusses Lessing’s versatile use of the third-person omniscient narrator to reveal the

characters' thoughts and feelings and explores the relevance of narrative counterpoints—the juxtaposition of the perspectives of white settlers with those of black field laborers and house servants—in revealing the dark intricacies of colonial life. Angelika Reichmann's "Narration, Colonisation, Intertextuality: J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*" addresses complex themes of colonization, personal identity, and the representation of trauma. The essay highlights the intertextual and metafictional character of the novel's embedded narrative, the "Vietnam Project." This propaganda work by an army psychologist is an attempt to capture and contain the traumatic experience of the war by forcing reality into existing European mythical and literary paradigms. Reichmann argues that Coetzee's metafictional strategies create a maze of intertexts that, ironically, conceal social and psychological realities instead of revealing them, shifting the responsibility to the perceptive reader. Thus, both Séllei and Reichmann explore the psychological underside of colonialism. Other innovative approaches of narrative structure are generated by revisiting semantic and structural aspects of narratives. Gábor Kovács examines narrative parallelism and counterparts, techniques that add layers of meaning to Jack London's "The Law of Life" and "Morganson's Finish" also amplifying the impact of the conventional plot. Approaching narrative structures from a different angle, Yuliia Terentieva's interpretation of a selection of novels by David Lodge reveals that the campus, the obvious narrative environment of the academic novel, can be regarded simultaneously as heterotopia and as a non-place, pointing out the dual nature of the campus as a stage for satirical dramas and a space for short-lived, superficial interactions.

The final module of the volume, "Narrative Discourses and the Hungarian Legacy of Fiction," introduces further comparative elements to the conversation about twentieth-century narrative traditions and emerging contemporary trends. While the essays included in this section focus on specific Hungarian works of fiction, their explorations of literary modes, tropes, and techniques such as irony, metaphor, ellipsis, and narrative disruption, as well as themes like trauma, memory, and identity, demonstrate the common, transnational nature of processing personal and collective experience through literary narratives. Two insightful studies engage with the international theme in novels by high and late modernist writers. Mihály Benda's "Perception and Representation of Paris in Modern Hungarian Fiction by Gyula Illyés, András Hevesi, and Jolán Földes" reveals structural similarities in the deployment of the flaneur's perspective by the three prominent authors. Benda suggests that these novels published during the

1930s and 1940s feature the French metropolis as a dynamic space that shapes the characters' perception and existential perspective, and, in turn, the character of the city is shaped by them. In "Wonders of Telling—Telling Wonders: Sándor Márai's *The Blood of San Gennaro*," Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó explores themes of totalitarianism, emigration, and the search for a transcendental experience in a novel by an author who drew upon his own and his contemporaries' experiences under an oppressive regime. Reflecting on the existential and political dilemmas faced by artists and intellectuals after World War II, Márai, who chose exile from Hungary after 1948 to avoid involuntary collaboration with the totalitarian regime, uses the metaphor of a miracle to contemplate the unpredictable events of revolution and redemption.

Memory, perception, and the artificiality of social life are central concerns for László Bengi, Sarolta Osztroluczky, and Edit Zsadányi, critics whose theoretical explorations of descriptive techniques, narrative structures, perspective, and voice have led to broader insights into the social and psychological dimensions of identity. Bengi's essay on the high modernist writer Dezső Kosztolányi's *Skylark* (1924) dissects the subtle narrative strategies that bring to life an absent character. Ambiguous descriptions of the eponymous heroine reveal the fragmented personality of an unattractive daughter, and the dissonant position she occupies in the life of her elderly parents. Osztroluczky's comparative analysis of late modernist autobiographical short stories reveals the intricacies of memory and introspection conveyed through expansive retrospections in two late modernist short stories. Analyzing instances of homecoming in Wolfe's "The Lost Boy" and Ottlik's "Nothing Lost," Osztroluczky compares instances of narrative mediation that convey shifts in personal identity, the sense of loss, and the passage of time. Edit Zsadányi's essay "Hungarian Voices of the Subaltern in the Interruption of Contemporary Narrative Discourses by Krisztina Tóth, Kriszta Bódis, and Agáta Gordon" further explores how socially marginalized groups articulate their experiences. The analysis references Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's landmark work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to explain that by disrupting traditional narrative structures, contemporary authors enable marginalized perspectives to come to the fore.

Themes of absence and silence emerge from literary works by authors grappling with existential questions raised by unspeakable trauma and marginalization. Three comparative essays address the representation of extreme suffering in literary, theoretical, and philosophical contexts.

Dorottya Szávai's "Figures of Absence and the Poetics of Silence in the Works of Kertész, Kafka, and Camus" examines nuances of literary expression in a wide range of works by the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winning Hungarian author. She points out that the vision of Kertész is akin to the negative theology of Jewish and Christian mystics in his conceptualization of a God withdrawn from creation. This insightful essay establishes a dense web of connections, intellectual and technical, between writers experimenting with literary expressions of the ineffable. A similar approach is undertaken by Sára Tóth in her close examination of one particular work by the prominent Hungarian author. "The God of Auschwitz: A Reading of Imre Kertész's *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* Inspired by Northrop Frye's Vision of Literature" interprets the 1990 novel within the critical framework of the Canadian critic's works on Blake, the Bible, and romance. Tóth's eye-opening analysis of apocalyptic and demonic symbolism along with the narrative patterns of fall and redemption in *Kaddish* enhances our understanding of how Kertész conceives existentialist and theological alienation and internal exile in the post-Holocaust world.

The essays in this volume elaborate on various innovative approaches to storytelling by modern and contemporary authors from Western Europe, North America, and Central Europe, with a particular focus on Hungarian writers. These comparative analyses highlight the transnational flow of narrative themes, techniques, as well as psychological and philosophical concerns. Despite the unique ways writers have addressed historical upheavals, traumas, and other existential challenges of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, common threads are revealed in the most experimental narratives. The editors' careful selection and organization of these contributions illuminate the connections and conversations between literary works by authors who never met but engaged in meaningful dialogues through their shared experiences and observations of global events. This collection broadens the perspective of literary critics and opens up new possibilities for understanding the power of narrative fiction.

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