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Narrative Coherence, Co-incidence and Listening In-between (Book Review)

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Abstract
This collection of essays explores the challenges of researching personal narratives and the many levels of ambiguity that beset such an endeavour. The volume aims to disturb the dominance of an interpretive and ethical paradigm that privileges 'narrative coherence'. As such, it immediately invites meditation on where (in)coherence lies – the teller, the tale or the listener, or the in-between relations among them. The collection is framed as an attempt to move away from or beyond the conventional structure of narrative form as following a beginning, middle and end. It argues for a more generous sense of narrative possibilities, ones not confined by what the editors characterize as Aristotelian conceptions of narrative coherence that favour linear sequencing and thematic closure. Of course, fictional narratives take many forms – they play, subvert, parody, delight in and disappoint conventions – but so too do personal narratives, as the authors elaborate in their diverse examples. Related to this, the editors propose to question what they see as a dominant presumption that 'persons live better and in a more ethical way, if they have a coherent life-story and coherent narrative identity' (p.2). There is, then, a strong voice questioning perceived assumptions about narrative form and effects, and a corresponding interest in elaborating some alternative ways of recognizing and writing about narratives that may take different a form, or struggle to be recognized. I have some mixed responses to these ambitions, in part because I had thought that the conceptions of narrative coherence which the editors dispute had already been profoundly unsettled – by, among others, modernism, psychoanalysis, memory studies, and numerous variants of post-structural theorizing. It was, however, with somewhat of a refreshing jolt that I encountered reflections on the authority of narrative coherence and its necessary undoing, making me think again about making meaning from personal or identity narratives and the constellation of aspirations animating narrative enquiry.

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NARRATIVE COHERENCE, CO-INCIDENCE AND LISTENING IN-BETWEEN.

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Book Review

Beyond Narrative Coherence M. Hyvarinen, L.C. Hyden, M. Saarenheimo, and M. Tamboukou, eds. 2010. John Benjamins Publishing Amsterdam.

This collection of essays explores the challenges of researching personal narratives and the many levels of ambiguity that beset such an endeavour. The volume aims to disturb the dominance of an interpretive and ethical paradigm that privileges 'narrative coherence'. As such, it immediately invites meditation on where (in)coherence lies – the teller, the tale or the listener, or the in-between relations among them. The collection is framed as an attempt to move away from or beyond the conventional structure of narrative form as following a beginning, middle and end. It argues for a more generous sense of narrative possibilities, ones not confined by what the editors characterize as Aristotelian conceptions of narrative coherence that favour linear sequencing and thematic closure. Of course, fictional narratives take many forms – they play, subvert, parody, delight in and disappoint conventions – but so too do personal narratives, as the authors elaborate in their diverse examples. Related to this, the editors propose to question what they see as a dominant presumption that 'persons live better and in a more ethical way, if they have a coherent life-story and coherent narrative identity' (p.2). There is, then, a strong voice questioning perceived assumptions about narrative form and effects, and a corresponding interest in elaborating some alternative ways of recognizing and writing about narratives that may take different a form, or struggle to be recognized. I have some mixed responses to these ambitions, in part because I had thought that the conceptions of narrative coherence which the editors dispute had already been profoundly unsettled – by, among others, modernism, psychoanalysis, memory studies, and numerous variants of post-structural theorizing. It was, however, with somewhat of a refreshing jolt that I encountered reflections on the authority of narrative coherence and its necessary undoing, making me think again about making meaning from personal or identity narratives and the constellation of aspirations animating narrative enquiry.

As I read these thoughtful essays, I was struck less by questions of coherence than by experiences of co-incidence and the power of colliding narratives and events in shaping how one reads and makes meaning in and out of the stories from others. By night, I was reading Coetzee's 'fictional memoir', *Summertime*, caught up in the shifting form and voice of the 'teller', which in that book cuts through any simple notions of narrative and temporal coherence and disturbs genres of autobiographical writing. With quiet ease, the narrative moves from the voice of the biographer of a dead author – who is and is not Coetzee – to the recollections of friends and acquaintances being interviewed for the biography, whose responses unsettle the firmly-held ideas of the fictional biographer. In the novel, time and perspective shift, and readers are taken back and forth between the past and the present, over memories, clarifications and corrections, and between different vantage points onto the imagined life of an apparently well-known author. By day, I was conducting oral history

interviews with former school students and teachers, inviting them to tell me their memories of being at school, of things that mattered to them. In retrospect, I see now that I was inviting them to give a kind of coherence to the jostling mix of memory, nostalgia and forgetting that made up their narratives of growing up and schooling. These personal narratives were inevitably told and heard through powerful even if muted cultural narratives – Bildungsroman 'coming of age' narratives, stories of class mobility through teaching. From time to time, these stories of the self were cut through with moments of almost unspeakable poignancy, of simple losses, enduring injuries, and bursts of joy. I read this volume of essays with the echo of such irruptions – both dramatic and seemingly mundane – and a sense of how they complicate notions of coherence and narrative form.

Eight essays addressing different types of personal narratives are bookend-ed with an Introduction explaining the methodological and theoretical motivations of the group's project and an Afterward reflecting on themes and questions raised by the volume overall. This is a strong and generous sense of a collective intellectual project characterized by diverse theoretical commitments and disciplinary traditions, but which nevertheless share some common interests in understanding how meaning is made in personal narratives, and the meaning such narratives have, biographically and culturally. The Introduction documents then debunks the idea of narrative coherence, showing how such an idea has accompanied conceptions of the coherent self – itself a cultural construction – and in doing so has marginalized those whose identities and narratives do not conform to normative visions. It offers a useful synthesis of debates on this topic, and a valuable discussion of the persistent hold of notions of coherence and linearity, in the face of radical and fundamental dispute of these notions coming from many quarters, which the Introduction and the Afterward elaborate. The chapters in the main body of the volume are sequenced according to themes and type of interpretive challenges. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 explore the challenges of generating and interpreting personal narratives from people experiencing neuropsychological and cognitive difficulties (e.g. dementia, aphasia, learning problems). Chapters 4, 5 and 6 follow the 'broken narratives' of female artists, and the intertwining of art-work, intimacy and sense (and becoming) of self and of self-as-artist. Chapters 7 and 8 examine narratives that attempt to speak about traumatic events, to give expression to what might be in some senses inexpressible, not simply beyond coherence, but possibly beyond narrative representation, or at least according to the terms with which narrative is conventionally characterized.

From this brief overview of the foci of the chapters it is clear that certain conceptions of 'coherence' and narrative form structure the arguments and analysis, providing the point of analytic departure for most of the discussions. At times I found the argument with coherence a little overdrawn, a consequence in part of many of the chapters rehearsing the reasons for its abandonment and for pursuing other directions. The Introduction does this so comprehensively that I was somewhat impatient to leap into the different responses to this dilemma and the alternative conceptual and interpretive approaches – and it is in this area that the richness of the volume lies.

The Afterward distils a question that puzzled me as I read through the collection. Mark Freeman wonders: 'nearly every chapter in this book seeks to show that the behind the *manifest* in-coherence or 'a-coherence' of the narratives in question a *latent* coherence lurks' (p.167). This tension is raised most potently for me in chapters 2 and 3 and 4, where the narrators' cognitive and psychological challenges mean that their personal narratives defy the normal categories and conventions of coherence. Yet, the underlying message I take from

these accounts is that careful listening, and being open to listening outside normative conventions, will give glimpses into another kind of coherence; in such ways 'in-coherence' is assimilated into potential coherence. In the case of an aphasic man who has trouble remembering and sequencing words, Tara Aaltonen (Chapter 4) advocates a kind of 'mind reading' to help construct the meaning and infer the words in the gaps. This is not mind-reading in a literal sense, but a kind of contextual, inter-subjective and collective work of co-constructed meaning: 'communicative partners attempt to support the smooth flow of conversation and try to resolve the problems created by aphasia' (p.57). Further, the collective construction of a 'storyworld provides the presuppositions that enable the reader to the listener to construct a coherent understanding of the story that is told' (p.63). Here coherence is allied to listening, to open and inferential listening that is able to impose or extract some coherence on a narrative that might at first appear jumbled or incomplete. The contextual and interactive dimensions of meaning production are also explored by Lars-Christer Hyden (Chapter 3) in his discussion of understanding the narratives produced by people with dementia or brain injuries. Here the emphasis is not so much on the content or the missing bits from the stories themselves, but on 'the way stories are *told',* and to whom, such that 'narratives and story telling [are seen] as *performance* and *social action'* (p.47).

An emphasis on narrative genre and the context of narrators' life worlds is also part of Maria Medved and Jens Brockmeir's account (Chapter 2) of personal narratives told by people with neurological or psycho-neurological problems. They suggest that despite initial appearances as 'weird stories', such narratives can be interpreted to show their coherence and incoherence; this requires attentiveness to the contexts of the story, and to the particular contexts that matter for each narrator. In my understanding of the argument, this involves a situated reading that demands knowledge of the biography and history of the narrator; 'when cast against the backdrop of the life story of this woman, her weird sort-of-narrative begins to make more sense' (p.26). And, 'Studying sense of self-continuity and identity in people with serious brain injuries and disabilities we found that the discursive net of one's social environment, with one's family in the center, plays an essential role in holding together the sense of a coherent self even when individuals cannot rely on this kind of self-knowledge and autobiographical memory anymore' (p.27).

In these three chapters, then, there is a sense in which coherence is recuperated. Incoherence is not a playful intervention or a literary device to disturb formalist norms, or a riposte to Aristotelian strictures, but instead is an artifact of psychological and neurological difficulties that demands a different way of reading. The possibility of coherence – presented mostly as a kind of synonym for recognizable meaning – is asserted in the face of narrative gaps and disconnections. Here coherence has a political and ethical salience that stands against narrow readings of narrative that would preclude the possibility that such stories are meaningful and reveal something of the teller.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 take a different focus, and are more explicitly motivated by philosophical debates about subjectivity – Deleuze, Ricoeur – and interests in the productive and creative possibilities arising in the breaking up of personal narratives, temporality and narrative forms. Maria Tamboukou (Chapter 6) brings a Deleuzian reading to letters written by the Welsh artist Gwen John, seeing the letters as 'events', phenomena 'which stick out from the ordinary' and mark 'historical discontinuities and opens up the future to a series of differentiations' (p.70). These letters are read not to capture the sum of a life – 'John is not reducible to the contents of her letters' (p.84) – but to push other ways of reading the 'unfolding of broken narratives'. Such narratives are interpreted not as a pathological

breakdown of identity, but as a mode of nomadic subjectivity and of becoming. In contrast to the concerns of the preceding chapters, where the analytic drive is to locate coherence in apparent incoherence, this chapter looks to the enticements of the 'inconsistent, non-sequential and irresolute' (p.84). In a more psychological vein, Vilma Hanninen and Anja Koski-Jannes (chapter 7) explore temporal dislocations and discontinuities in the personal story of a female artist writing about trying to give up smoking and drinking. In a narrative punctuated by self-reflexive doubt, the artist moves back and forth between memories, current motivations and her 'finely tuned inner life', avoiding a chronological ordering. The authors suggest that this discontinuous structure reflects the ambivalence of the artist towards her addictions and that the 'broken narrative' serves pragmatic purposes in helping the artist to disengage from one story about herself in order to create another. While the close reading of the narrative draws out interesting narrative twists and turns, I found the concluding observations were perhaps too cautious, and appeared to reinstate the imperative for (narrative and identity) coherence as the desired norm (p.117).

Drawing on Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity as 'the dialectic of sameness (*idem*) and change (*ipse*-) identity', Linda Sandino explores the 'trope of incompleteness' in the life stories of two women artists (Chapter 6, p.87). Artists are under the expectation of a recognizable identity invested or reflected in their work; artists themselves, Sandino suggests, see 'narratives about their objects [as] narratives of identity' (p.88). Against a prevailing romanticism of the artist identity – autonomous, creative – Sandino attempts to show in the life history excerpts how the 'presumed coherent identity of artists is subject to breaks and re-fraction in stories about encounters with others' (p.88). Again, the point of debate pivots on this perplexing question of coherence – and I am beginning to wonder why so much must turn on this notion. For me, the most interesting aspect of this essay was the account of inter-subjectivity and the power of encounters with others and with objects: 'Artists lives, bound up as they are with the lives of the work they produce, are situated in a network of other works, other artists, recounting a narrative identity where work and person are enmeshed with each other' (p.101). The importance of this insight for understanding personal narratives more generally is evident in the following two chapters which explore narratives told about the encounter with traumatic events.

In Chapter 8, Alison Stern Perez, Yishai Tobin and Shifra Sagy undertake a close reading of narrative interviews with Israeli bus drivers talking about their direct experiences of a terror attack while driving their bus. Acknowledging the wider context of terror attacks within Israel, the authors chart the communicative strategies employed by the drivers to convey their feelings and ways of coping with trauma and fear. Focusing on an in-depth interview with one driver, they develop a semiotic linguistic analysis to show how language use – in particular the shifting use of personal pronouns – in recounting an experienced terror attack reflects processes of distancing and immersion and shows how the drivers negotiate their feelings of fear and responsibility. The analysis reveals how 'these individuals feel compelled by their community and society to be strong'; the consequences of this were 'revealed in the "broken" discourse of the interviewees, in the form of ambivalence and word play' (p.144). This is an impressively detailed analysis, which illuminates the interplay of cultural context and collective and individual feelings through examination of narrative coherence at the linguistic level. It also raises the dilemma of looking for coherence and a kind of functionalism lurking behind an apparent inconsistency. Here the researchers identify a glitch or inconsistency in the use of pronouns and then offer a persuasive explanation of how this

glitch works and in doing so give a-coherence to the narrative. A related issue is raised by Mark Freeman in his Afterward:

> I have referred to latent and manifest meanings of the text itself. Important to emphasize in this context is that the latent properties eventually to be disclosed only emerge in and through *interpretation*; only then, after the fact, can we speak of what exist beyond the *seemingly* incoherent. (p.180)

Molly Andrew's compelling discussion of the 'shape of traumatic testimony' (Chapter 9) confronts the dilemma experienced by many survivors of torture in needing 'to tell their stories and yet their stories cannot be told' (p.147). This takes us not so much to the space of interpretation but to the very (im)possibility of articulating a narrative about 'limit events' that seem not able to fit within the confines of conventional narrative form and to be inexpressible in almost any form. Of particular interest to me – and it brings another dimension to Freeman's reflections on interpretation – is how readers and listeners incite and project the narratives they want to hear from survivors of trauma, including the deeply held idea that telling stories is 'healing', the desire for a 'whole' account of what really happened, implicitly calling for a chronological, linear sequence. As readers and listeners, we are 'prone to over-interpret both what we are told and what we are not told. And we refuse to accept that we can neither understand nor represent that which has been told to us; that in many ways the experiences themselves are not capable of being understood or represented' (p.149). This discussion returns to some of the questions I raised in my opening remarks regarding where coherence lies, and the significance of the reader/listener and the space in between the teller, the tale and the telling of the tale. Here the listener wants a certain kind of story, desires a certain plot, wants assurance that lessons can be learnt from unutterable trauma, and, in a therapeutic culture, believes that confession can cure or at least ameliorate pain. Andrews leaves us with a more unsettling sense of narrative desire while also allowing the possibility that the act of testimony – no matter what or how it is said – is part of a process of reconnecting with others.

In this, as with many of the narratives discussed in this thought-provoking volume of essays, memory and temporality are central to how meaning is constructed and how the significance – coherence or incoherence – of the narrative is interpreted. Narratives are told with an imagined or actual listener, they are stories about now or the past, but in the act of telling they cross between past and present and anticipate the future. Listening to and heeding broken narratives and narratives that defy conventional forms, and even narratives imagined as inexpressible, shows us the richness afforded by narrative analysis. I began reading this volume with a simple sense of narratives as not intrinsically coherent or incoherent, and with an analytic emphasis on the space and process of interpretation, the space in between the teller, the tale and the listener, where meaning and significance are provisionally created. I was struck by co-incidence in the sense that how certain narratives can be expressed, heard and made intelligible depends as much on the teller and listener and on what is noticed and why. The cultural location of meaning does not simply reside in formalist breaks and disruptions, but it is a situated, culturally-located response where the striving for coherence is both unsettled and emboldened.

In combination, the essays juggle the critique of overt coherence and the search for latent or alternative forms of coherence/incoherence, or for another language and imaginary to illuminate what is happening in and with personal narratives. The volume also invites us to

dwell more in the desires of readers and the co-incidence and collision of narratives in which meaning arises in the 'in between', and not (only) in the text and texture of any one narrative.