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Re-imagining the narratable subject

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Abstract:

In this paper I problematize sequence as a necessary condition for defining and making sense of narratives and argue that it is to the consideration of process that the interest in narrative research should shift. Process as an organizing plane focuses not on what stories are but on what they do and how their meaning is ceaselessly deferred, breaching the narratological conventions of coherence and closure. Drawing on my work with Gwen John's letters, I trace three methodological movements in narrative analytics: a) creating an archive of stories as multiplicities of meanings, b) following the emergence of the narratable subject and c) making narrative connections in the political project of re-imagining the subject of feminism

KEYWORDS: narratable subject, nomadic narratives, process, letters, multiplicities, feminist imaginary

What is narrative?

One of the most frequently posed questions in the burgeoning field of narrative research in the social sciences is the simple ontological one: what is narrative? Drawing on the tradition of narratology, but also distancing themselves from its structuralist obsession, narrative theorists in the social sciences have attempted to address this question and have indeed come up with a wide variety of answers and definitions.¹ Despite the different angles that narratives have been looked at from, however, there seems to be a consensus as to the importance of the ontological question, which needs to be continuously raised and explored. I shall interrogate this consensus around the primacy of the ontological question by tracing first its expressions and second its causes, or rather its conditions of possibility. In this context, the ontological question is put in brackets, while new questions emerge as more pertinent and in need of exploration: What does a narrative do? How does it express its causes? In what way is it a sign of its conditions? What are the possibilities of its becoming other?

In tracing conditions of possibility that have historically shaped conceptual understandings of what a narrative is, sequence emerges as a dominant theme. Drawing on the sequential canon, social scientists in narrative research have suggested that narratives should be understood as organizing a sequence of events

into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole. The following definition is exemplary of this approach:

Narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it. (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997, cited in Elliott, 2005:3)

The triangle of sequence—meaning—representation creates a conceptual framework within which narrative research is being placed. This framework seems to be shaken, however, within the postmodern image of thought, where the sequential condition is interrogated, meaning is decentred and representation is problematised.² In this light there has been a shift of interest from the ontology of *what is* to the historical ontology (Foucault, 1986) of how it has emerged and historically constituted, further moving to the ontogenesis (Simondon, 1992) of how it works, with what effects and what are its possibilities of becoming other. It is I argue on this transitional ground from ontology to ontogenesis that the conceptual triangle of sequence—meaning—representation should be interrogated and narratives should be theorized as entities open to constant becomings, stories in becoming. In this light, it is to the consideration of process, rather than sequence, that the interest in narrative research should shift.

Process as an organising plane in narrative analytics derives from a conception of time as simultaneity and duration, an immeasurable concept of time where past, present and future co-exist. In this light the attention to process brings in

heterogeneous space/time configurations and invites the virtual to fill in the gaps and ruptures that appear in the sequential delineation of the actual³. Narratives are therefore taken as discursive events that express only a limited set of lines of thought interwoven around *moments of being* temporarily crystallized into narrative forms. These actualised narratives, however, create conditions of possibility for more stories to emerge. As Hannah Arendt has poetically put it, ‘The world is full of stories [...] just waiting to be told’ (cited in Cavarero, 2000:143). Moreover, what is not actualized or expressed in a narrative form, the virtual, the silenced, the non-said, still inheres in what has been said, expressed or articulated, creating within the narrative itself a depository of forces that can take it elsewhere, divert it from its initial aim or meaning, create bifurcations, sudden and unexpected changes, discontinuities and ruptures in the sequential structure.

In focusing on process I will now turn to my on-going research of writing feminist genealogies to offer some trails of methodological movements, particularly drawing on my work with Gwen John’s letters and paintings. Analytics is taken here from a Foucauldian vocabulary, not as a closed methodological framework, but as a project examining how power/knowledge relations and forces of desire are intertwined in the form and content of narratives. In writing a genealogy of the female self in art, however, I am going beyond Foucault’s configuration of the self as an effect of power relations interwoven with certain historical and cultural practices or *technologies* (Foucault, 1988). In following Deleuzo-Guattarian (1988) lines of flight I am considering the self as a threshold, a door, a becoming between multiplicities an effect of a dance between power and desire, nomadic and yet narratable, as I will further argue.

Gwen John: A narratable subject

The life and work of the Welsh artist Gwen John has been narrated, examined and interpreted from a variety of authors, perspectives and disciplinary interests and fields,⁴ offering a rich example of how lives are caught up in stories (Israel, 1999) and of how culturally embedded stories shape perceptions, meanings and understandings producing the real and the subject herself. In line with my discussion so far, my work with John's letters is being taken as an event in retracing some paths of narrative analytics.

One of the problems that I encountered while working with John's letters concerned the clichés surrounding the ways her life and work have been read and interpreted. The discourse of the recluse who escaped the bohemian circles of London and the tyranny of her brother Augustus' extravagant personality, only to submit herself to a torturous life of unconditional love for Rodin, seems to saturate or at least effect the stories about and around her life, then and now. As briefly summarised by Langdale (1987: 1) in the very first line of her monograph on John: 'Sister of one flamboyant genius and lover of another, Gwen John was herself a recluse who created in artistic isolation'. Similarly John's paintings of interiors and portraits of solitary women have been used as the visual background for the discourse of the recluse.

In a parallel movement, John's art has been discussed and appreciated in close interrelationship with her letters: decontextualised extracts or even lines of her letters have literally been used as captions for her paintings and as starting and/or concluding points for exhibition catalogues. 'Gwen John: An Interior Life' was indeed the title of

a catalogue of an exhibition series⁵ drawing on an extract from John's letters to Ursula Tyrwhitt: 'I may never have anything to express, except this desire for a more interior life' (NLW MS 21468D, ff.72b-73). This extract has become the master phrase, supposedly encompassing all that John was and did.

In preparing my research with John's two extended bodies of correspondence—her letters to her life-long friend and fellow student at the Slade, Ursula Tyrwhitt (National Library of Wales) and to Augustus Rodin, her lover and mentor for over a decade (Rodin Museum Archives)—I read all these accounts and immersed myself in the pleasure of viewing her paintings by visiting galleries⁶ and studying exhibition catalogues (Langdale and Jenkins, 1985; Jenkins and Stephens, 2004) and other art publications on her work (Taubman, 1985; Langdale, 1987; Foster 1999). I was therefore able to create a rich archive of stories, paintings, letters and academic essays wherein I mapped my genealogical inquiries.

John's letters vividly convey experiences of a young woman's interrelationship with patriarchal relations, the tyranny of heterosexual love, the difficulties of becoming an artist and the paradoxes of inhabiting the urban spaces of modernity, moving in-between the contested boundaries of the private and the public (Tamboukou, 2007). The letters are further rich in terms of the stories they recount and the narrative tropes they draw on to convey passion and meaning. It is no surprise that Chitty's (1987) biography has been written by literally paraphrasing long extracts from John's letters, which have been reshuffled to create the sequentially ordered biographical life of the recluse. These letters have lent themselves to a variety of interpretations and uses from a wide range of authorial positions and intentions. Small and sometimes

chopped extracts have been used to create larger meta-narratives around the constitution of women artists' spatiality or theoretical discussions around the possibility of the flâneuse (Wolff, 1994).

Situated within this archive, I have worked with John's letters as 'fluent' narrative texts producing multiplicities and difference and creating intense fields of narrative forces (Gibson, 2006). In moving beyond representation, I have read them, not in terms of the patriarchal or heterosexual segmentarities that they often depict, but mostly in terms of their vectors, the lines of flight from these segmentarities, the forces they release, the explosions they allow to occur. Confronting the intensity of John's pain as momentarily crystallized when writing to Rodin that 'I am nothing but a small piece of suffering and desire' (MGJ, B.J5, undated), what I have followed from these lines is not the inscription of pain within an immobile patriarchal and heterosexual segmentarity, but rather narrative traces of pre-individual singularities: John writing herself not as a subject, but as 'a piece of suffering and desire'.

Not having been attached to a subject, the force of this narrative moment creates virtual conditions of possibilities for explosions to occur, lines of flight to be released that would de-territorialize John's desire, her will to paint and ultimately herself. These lines of flight have been traced and followed in different letters of John's extensive correspondences. My work therefore reinforces and confirms Liz Stanley's (2004) argument that narrative sense emerges as an effect of the exploration and juxtaposition of wider collections of letters and bodies of correspondences, what she has theorized as the epistolarium. In my work with John's letters I have actually identified *epistolaria*, since her two extended bodies of correspondence to Rodin and

her life-long friend Tyrwhitt have created differentiated planes of consistency wherein nomadic lines of her epistolary narratives have been mapped.

By having access to John's *epistolaria*, I had a sense of how Marie,⁷ the model/lover/protégée who writes to Rodin that 'I had desired to be a distinguished artist; I wanted my part in the sun [...] But now I am in love, I don't envy being known' (MGJ, B.J4/Spring 1906), is at the same time Gwen John, the artist who keeps painting, exhibiting, selling her pictures and writing to Tyrwhitt about her excitement of getting feedback about her work: 'I had a letter from Rothenstein—a letter of praise that took my breath away for some time, so unlimited it was' (NLW MS 21468D, ff.21, 29/5/1908).

Further working with John's paintings alongside her letters has been an on-going experiment which keeps unsettling my textual innocence, despite the fact that I have for years tried to problematise texts and the ways lives and subjects are entangled within them. It is beyond the limitations of this paper to expand more on methodological strategies of working in the interface of the visual and the textual and I have written elsewhere about this (Tamboukou, 2007). What I have found fascinating, however, in the textual/visual interface is that it has created conditions of possibility for forceful encounters between the actual and the virtual and has created a space where process in narratives can be further explored.

In working with stories as multiplicities, I am obviously not interested in capturing *the truth* about John's life or even recovering her as a historical subject. My task as a genealogist is to excavate layers of *regimes of truth* in the construction of stories

around the life and work of women artists, revealing what Kali Israel (1999) has richly theorized as the complex interrelationship between lives, names, images and stories.

Beyond this, however, what my work has brought forward is a suggestion for an analytics of becomings. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy my project is about freeing thought from deterministic essentialisms and showing that what has been actualized in women's lives cannot close down possibilities of other ways of being or rather of becoming a woman. Indeed the study of singularities, *moments of being* enfolded within John's epistolary and visual narratives, has shown that women's condition is not so much defined by molar formations and their dialectic oppositions as by what has escaped them, not the molar socio-cultural entities — patriarchy, heterosexual love — but the molecular counter-formations, its lines of flight. As Deleuze and Guattari have put it: 'There is always something that flows or flees, that escapes the binary organizations, [...] things that are attributed to a "change in values", the youth, women, the mad, etc ' (1988:216). This interest in singularities is attentive to the effects of differentiation and scrutinizes the heterogeneity, meshworks and flows of stories and subjects. My work with narratives is therefore placed within a feminist political project, albeit not that of recovering voices or subjects but of re-imagining the subject of feminism as a nomadic narratable self, the second move in narrative analytics to which I am now turning.

Narratability

The very act of narration is immanently political, relational and embodied, as Cavarero following Arendt has forcefully shown. To the Arendtian view that human beings as unique existents live together and are constitutively exposed to each other through the bodily senses, Cavarero adds the narratability of the self. The self emerges as narratable in that it is constitutive of the very desire of listening to her story being narrated. This desire is interwoven with what Cavarero (2000: 35) conceives as ‘the unreflective knowledge of my sense-of-self through [which] I know that I have a story and that I consist in this story’. Moreover, the narratable self is not reducible to the contents of the story either as ‘a construction of the text or the effect of the performative power of narration’; in this light, narratability is not about intelligibility, but about familiarity with the ‘spontaneous narrating structure of memory’ (Cavarero 2000: 35, 34). Narration is therefore a process at once ontological—constitutive of the self as narratable—and political in the Arendtian sense—exposing the vulnerability of the self and its dependence on others from the very moment of her birth.

The *unique existent* in Cavarero’s philosophy therefore has nothing to do with the universal subject of the dominant philosophical discourse. Although unique and unrepeatable, the narratable self emerges within collectivities and carries the marks of multi-leveled differences. Embedded within the fluidity of its social, cultural and political milieu, the narratable self is always provisional, intersectional, and unfixed. It is not a unitary core self, but rather a system of selves grappling with differences and taking up subject positions, not in a permanent way, but rather temporarily, as points of departure for nomadic becomings (Braidotti, 2006). The stories of the narratable self can thus be seen as events, prisms refracting actual and virtual

possibilities of becoming. and in this sense I have called her the nomadic narratable self.

Returning to John's letters, the study of her *epistolaria* raises the force of her own narratability. Her letters are unbelievably rich in expressing *the unreflective sense of her self* as having a story and her desire for this story to be told. As Cavarero (2000: 40) has pithily noted, autobiography and biography are bound together in the desire 'for the unity of the self in a form of a story'. In this light, John's letters to Ursula Tyrwhitt about her wild walking adventures in the French countryside create a backdrop for the nomadic narratable self to emerge in recounting her experiences of walking all day, painting or singing in cafés for a meal and sleeping rough. What I want to stress, however, is that in reading these long detailed letters my interest is not *the truth* of the recounted facts or even John's feelings. What I am following here instead is the force of her desire for her stories to be written and maybe told and retold, 'the laval flow of her sentences' (Woolf, 2007: 50), the process of her narratable constitution.

John's desire for narration would later be transferred to her letters to Rodin, writing to him almost every day, repeatedly rendering her daily routine into stories:

I did not sleep well tonight either and after having tried to draw, I finished my housework, took my book and went out to the country [...] now I feel better since I have been out for a long walk in the country. It is strange how walking for long relieves my heart! [...] (MGJ, B.J4)

These letters cover a wide variety of themes: her immense love for him and the unbearable pain of their separation, financial difficulties and her loathing for having to work as a model, the struggles of finding a room in Paris and the pleasures of making it feel like home. There are long letters filled with dreams, detailed adventures of walking the Parisian streets, gardens and the surrounding countryside, long references to her cat, the anxiety of being a foreigner in Paris and finally reflections upon life, art, nature, womanhood, gender relations and love.

While immersed in her daily correspondence with Rodin, John went on writing letters to her friend Tyrwhitt until the end of her life. These letters were fewer but forceful in expressing her desire of becoming an artist, a theme that would never come up in her letters to Rodin. As clearly and briefly put in a letter written on February 4th, 1910: ‘As to me I cannot imagine why my vision will have some value in the world - and yet I know it will.’ (NLW MS 21468D, ff.39b)

John’s letters are certainly creating an assemblage, a narrative matrix (McQuillan, 1996:10) for the narratable self to emerge. However, following Cavarero, John’s self is not reducible to the contents of her letters, their textual practices and/or narrative tropes. What her letters do, is to open up a field of forces for the question of *who one is* to be explored, and also for the researcher to become familiar with processes of her own narratability, and to immerse herself in the pleasures of working with narratives. This point brings me to the final move of the narrative analytics explored in this paper.

Narrative connections

Narration is always a relational experience, even if the recipient of the story is an imagined one. In this light, John's desire for her story to be told has made forceful connections with my own auto/biographical desire as a feminist researcher in what I have identified as the pleasures of doing narrative research. Indeed, my work with John's epistolary and visual narratives has facilitated leaps into women's space/time blocks—past, present and future—heterogeneous and yet surprisingly contemporaneous. Reading her letters and looking at her paintings but also living and working in the places and spaces of her own actuality,⁸ has triggered the sense of my own narratability and facilitated connections with her stories. These connections however, have not been about identification with John as a historical subject. They were space/time connections that made me realize that my own present as a feminist researcher is a system of actualized moments, surrounded by a multiplicity of virtualities emerging from my work with John's and indeed other women's narrative moments (past and present), opening up possibilities for life yet to be actualized in a feminist future that is radical and open. Working with narratives creates an assemblage of power relations, forces of desire and intense pleasures for narratable selves to make connections, sense their vulnerability and become exposed to their dependence on others. This is Arendt's conceptualization of the political, which in my case has become the political project of re-imagining the subject of feminism, my own sense of the feminist imaginary.

Tentative conclusions

In this paper I have problematized sequence as a central axis for making sense of narratives. I have developed the idea of nomadic narratives, stories that need not have

definitive beginnings or ends but rather unfold in the intermezzo of a variety of literary genres and auto/biographical documents—letters in the case of this paper. In this light, the project of narrative analytics focuses on the process of how narratives evolve as stories in becoming and meaning emerges in the flow of narratives rather than in their sequential structure. There is a shift of interest from how experience is represented to what emerges as an effect of power/knowledge relations and forces of desire at play, and the analysis is finally attentive to the fluidity and openness of narratives, the virtual forces that surround them, the silences and the unsaid. In this context, Gwen John emerges as a narratable subject constitutive of her desire for her stories to be told but not reducible to the content of these stories. It is within this process of narratability that connections are being made between narratable selves that are ontologically and politically constituted as relational.

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National Library of Wales, Archives, Gwen John's papers (NLW MS)

Rodin Museum, Marie Gwendolen John's boxes (MR/MGJ)

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¹ For a rich discussion about the different conceptualizations of narrative, see McQuillan, 2000, particularly the introduction, pp.1-33 and part 3 on taxonomies, pp.309-345.

² See McQuillan, 2000, particularly the section on post-narratology, pp.128-174 and Gibson, 1996.

³ The conception of time as duration derives from Bergson's philosophy wherein the conceptual pair of the virtual/actual is contrasted to that of the possible/real. While the possible/real pair is governed by the principles of resemblance and limitation, the virtual/actual opens up numberless possibilities of future becomings. See Grosz, 2005 for a rich discussion of the actual and the virtual in Bergson's and Deleuze's thought, particularly chapter 6 'Deleuze, Bergson and the virtual'.

⁴ See Chitty, 1987; Foster, 1999; Langdale, 1987; Lloyd-Morgan, 2004; Roe, 2002; Taubman, 1985; Wolff, 1994.

⁵ Barbican, 1985; Manchester, 1985-1986; Yale, 1986.

⁶ Quite incidentally the Tate Gallery held a retrospective exhibition on Gwen John and Augustus John (September 2004-January 2005) which gave me the opportunity to see a wide range of her paintings.

⁷ John was signing her letters to Rodin as Marie, the French version of the middle part of her full name: Gwendolen Mary John.

⁸ I refer here to the time I spent in Paris, working at the archives of the Rodin Museum (May-June 2005) I am indebted to the University of East London for funding this visit.