

Intertextuality, Intersubjectivity, and Narrative Identity

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INTRODUCTION

PÉTER GAÁL-SZABÓ

Intertextuality, Intersubjectivity, and Narrative Identity takes the reader across time and space, from the times of slavery, through modernist to postmodern realms, and from the cultural spaces of Hungary to those of Britain, Ireland, and America, offering different perspectives of and entailing intertextuality and intersubjectivity. The volume, a collaboration of established scholars as well as junior researchers from different disciplines investigates issues of identity in the fields of narrative identity, gender, space, and trauma. The insight provided by the volume is this: despite the difference between the analytical foci, there always proves to be an overlapping of theories that cuts across disciplinary boundaries; and angles that amount to the complexity of the subject matter, thus contributing to the interrelatedness of the parts. As intersubjectivity refers to intrinsic multiplicity and a particular dynamics, it rejects fixity well expressed by the theoretical plethora and fields of analysis encompassed by the volume.

The transdisciplinary essays illuminate thus the multiple embeddedness of intersubjectivity, contributing to the mapping of the field by opening vistas and offering possibilities of theorizing through the interpretation of different subjects across genres, while constructing a space, in this way, for a creative scholarly dialogue and inviting further exploration. The junctions will surely make the reader conscious of the inherent interrelatedness of the chapters. The individual chapters, however, stand in their own right: the particular foci and the close reading of texts grant the reader involved in literary and cultural studies the possibility to benefit from the diverse analyses both intellectually and regarding their professional interest.

The order of the chapters is intended to reflect the chosen foci of the field. In this way, instead of considering chronological or thematic concordance as organizing concepts, the theoretical topoi are meant to determine the structure of the volume. Setting out with issues related to narrative identity, the first two chapters scrutinize the multiple philosophical perspectives, including the revisiting of (meta-)logic and deconstruction

on the basis of the intricacies posed by the Gödel sentence and Derridean *différance*; and of minimalist existentialism in the function of the (re)productive mechanisms of post-industrial capitalism and white, male, heterosexual, lower middle-class identity. In this line of thought, a further chapter addresses narratology and mediality in Nabokov's *The Original of Laura* to investigate how the protonovel contributes to the creation and fragmentation of meaning.

The following chapters go on to problematize the relation between the individual, the nation, and culture by reflecting on the interrelation of modernism and revivalism as well as memory and place. One of the chapters examines John Millington Synge's writerly tactics in the vortex of the Irish Literary Revival and Irish Modernism, shedding light on the unique way he appropriates the two apparently distinct phenomena to find suitable means to express his artistic intentions. Synge's unconventional treatment of traditions, yet his ultimate subsistence on the nation's cultural memory, shows his positioning in both realms, thus presenting him as an intersubjective case. Examining a novel by the contemporary author Kate Atkinson, another chapter also studies the problem of tradition and change: the home infused with national memory and taken therefore as a heritage site is challenged by acts of remembering, laying emphasis on the creative nature of remembering and its power in identity formation.

The subsequent two chapters carry further the role of space and place in intertextual and intercultural discourses. The chapter on Jasper Fforde's *Thursday Next* series investigates the implications of the construction of a narrative world and the evolving spatiotemporality. Inherently a metaleptic construction, the fictional world as dwelling place can be defined by its own rules, while it allows for the intermingling of fiction and reality, overriding the separation between them. The other essay points to the relevance of cultural memory in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons in forming and maintaining a rewarding cultural identity, which in the case of the African American community proves an issue of intersubjective and intercultural negotiation for its embeddedness in a broader cultural discourse. Places of memory, in this way, play a significant role in both constructing and materializing African American cultural space as well as in orchestrating counterhistories.

Issues related to gender are raised in the chapters concerned with the American female Künstlerdrama and women's testimonies of suffering in the First World War respectively. The first essay deals with the experimental theatrical space of Tina Howe and Chantel Aimee Langlinais, a transgressive venture to allow rethinking the opposition between viewing and acting. Spectatorship reconceptualized enables interactive participation

in the drama's development, effecting a polyphony of voices. The following chapter intends to call attention to the insufficient reception given to Hungarian women's experiences who participated in the Great War. By comparing it to that of British war writing by women, the author reconsiders the marginalized testimonies written by Hungarian women, proving the authenticity of female testimonies and thus claiming a voice in the discourse of suffering.

The last two chapters of the volume problematize aspects of trauma as it is often connected to the experience of and relation to others. The first of them addresses the mother/son relationship in John Maxwell Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, presenting cases of parasitical intersubjectivity. The chapter examines whether intersubjectivity tainted with wounds, rejection, lack of communion, as well as bodily defects can yet contribute to a rewarding relationship. The concluding chapter takes two metaphors, that of the port of call and the pulpit, to examine the issue of suffering and multiple captivities in Briton Hammon's slave narrative, while, as ultimately a cultural inquiry, the chapter investigates the cultural dynamics invested in the autobiographical work.

Given the multiple foci and interdisciplinary approach of the volume, it addresses diverse audiences interested in issues related to intertextuality, intersubjectivity, and, in general, identity formation. Even though the volume is primarily intended to contribute to the scholarly investigations in the field, the accessible, yet scholarly language and the range of subjects—all of them pertaining to relevant, current topics—will certainly engage the interest of the general educated public.

CHAPTER ONE

FORMALIZATION, POLITICS, CREATIVITY

JÁNOS V. BARCSÁK

In his 2012 book, *The Politics of Logic*, Paul Livingston examines the effects of formal thought on contemporary philosophy. In particular, he argues for the crucial relevance of the developments of 20th-century formal logic to the major trends of philosophical thought today. He attributes special significance to the paradoxical results that cropped up in the development of logic and meta-mathematics, such as the Russell set, or Gödel's undecidable proposition. These results are generally considered by logicians to be limitations in systematic thought. Livingston argues, however, that in their philosophical consequences these paradoxes are in fact constitutive: they determine some fundamental possibilities of thought and shape the most significant tendencies in contemporary philosophy in important ways.

Livingston provides many instances of the impact of formal logical reasoning on philosophy. One of his most original and insightful examples among these is his comparison of Kurt Gödel's metalogical argument about undecidable propositions in first order logical theories and Derridean deconstruction. This comparison will serve as the starting point for the present argument. Relying on Livingston's insights I will examine one particular aspect of the analogy between Derrida and Gödel's theories, their involvement of what Livingston calls, after Derrida, an "essential crossing of syntax and semantics (2012, 122). After this, I will briefly explain how Livingston uses these purely formal, logical considerations to identify a distinct political position. Finally, I will even more briefly suggest how Livingston's insights may be used to outline a project that Livingston himself does not formulate but that I think is worth considering and pursuing.

The crossing of syntax and semantics

One of the central contentions of Livingston's *Politics of Logic* is that the paradoxical results of 20th-century formal logic cannot be ignored in any serious philosophical enterprise today. He cites many examples both from the analytic and continental traditions of contemporary philosophy where this relation to formal logic is explicitly discussed. Perhaps his most interesting and convincing example of this crucial relation, however, is a case where the connection between formal logic and philosophy is rather just implied than explicitly treated: his comparison of Derrida's key deconstructive terms (such as *différance*, the trace, archi-writing, the supplement, hymen, pharmakon, etc.) and Kurt Gödel's undecidable proposition, with which he proved his famous incompleteness theorems. Although Derrida makes a brief reference to Gödel, his philosophy is clearly not guided by an explicit consideration of the results of formal logic. However, Livingston convincingly argues for a fundamental analogy between deconstructive procedures and Gödel's metalogical argument.

Gödel's undecidable proposition is a highly technical construction, one that applies only to a well-defined, very specific field of study. Many have, however, been intrigued by its claim of a radical undecidability, its apparent power to shake the foundations of the most rigorous systems of reasoning, and by its intricate but elegant construction, and have discovered superficial analogies with other areas of thought (typically in cultural and literary theories), where they frequently refer to Gödel as providing unshakeable evidence for all sorts of spurious theories. Such loose and uninformed references to Gödel's highly technical results have been justly criticized in recent years (e.g., Berto 2009; Sokal and Bricmont 1998; Frenzen 2005) and Livingston concurs with these criticisms. However, while he is well aware of the dangers that a superficial application of Gödel's ideas might incur, he still maintains that an essential structural homology exists between Gödel and Derrida. He starts out from Derrida's brief reference to Gödel in "The Double Session" where the French philosopher explicitly formulates his own notion of undecidability on the analogy of Gödel's meta-logical argument (1981a, 219), and proceeds to point out some crucial analogies between Derrida's undecidables and Gödel's famous proposition. In particular, he mentions three such analogies: 1. that both Gödel's formula and Derrida's key terms derive from a fundamental self-reflexive quality of the respective systems in which they occur; 2. that both are generalizable; and 3. that they both involve what could be termed a "crossing of syntax and semantics." Of these three I will now focus only on the third, bracketing for the time

being the first two analogies, which—as I will briefly hint—can actually be seen as following from the third one.

While Derrida talks explicitly about the crossing of syntax and semantics, Gödel makes no mention of this at all. As a result, Livingston's argument concerning this analogy is largely a recapitulation of Derrida's account in "The Double Session" with a demonstration that this yields a similar result to Gödel's procedure.¹ In what follows I will adopt a slightly different approach. In fact, I will reverse the common conception and rather than treat Derrida's argument as a special case of Gödel's, I will consider the Gödel sentence (the undecidable proposition) and its relation to the system where it occurs as another "non-synonymous substitution" for *différance*. As Derrida explains in his influential essay, "Différance", "*différance* lends itself to a certain number of nonsynonymous substitutions, according to the necessity of the context" (1981b, 12). I will assume, therefore, that the Gödel sentence is one nonsynonymous substitution that *différance* lends itself to. It is a substitution, moreover, where the context is especially well-defined and thoroughly researched. This approach (which is partly implied by Livingston, too) will, therefore, provide a slightly different context for Derrida's ideas and will thus hopefully throw some further light on the foundations of deconstructive procedures.

How then does the Gödel sentence involve a "crossing of syntax and semantics"? What are we to understand by this enigmatic phrase? Instead of describing the Gödel sentence and its effect directly, I will start out with an example that I borrow from Paul de Man. To demonstrate the power of rhetoric (as opposed to grammar and logic) de Man uses an example from popular culture (1973, 29): in one of the episodes of the famous sit-com series of the 70s, *All in the Family*, the protagonist, Archie Bunker is just getting prepared for a bowling evening with his friends. Packing his things for him, his wife asks him whether he wants his bowling shoes laced under or over, to which Archie answers: "What's the difference?" Clearly, this is intended as a rhetorical question: Archie, in fact, wants to assert that there is no difference between having his shoes laced under or over. To his exasperation, however, his wife, in answer to his question, begins to explain to him the exact difference between lacing shoes under and over. She has obviously misconstrued Archie's question to mean that there is a difference between the two and that that difference must be specified. Where does this misunderstanding come from, though? The first thing we

¹ This demonstration is incidentally really interesting and convincing: Livingston uses Graham Priest's concept of the "Inclosure Schema" to show how both Derrida and Gödel's reliance on an encoding of syntactical rules makes them capable of achieving an effect of *diagonalization* (Livingston 2012, 123-25).

must observe is that it cannot come from the syntax, for the syntax is completely straightforward and unambiguous. The problem must lie, therefore, with the semantics: the ambiguity must arise from the way we assign meaning to the otherwise unambiguous syntactical construction. Archie and his wife assign different, directly opposing, meanings to the same syntactical structure and, as de Man emphasizes, there is no syntactical (grammatical) way of disambiguation here: the syntactic structure simply allows both these opposing meanings. But if we examine the semantics, the way the meanings are assigned, we realize that it cannot itself be the source of the problem either, since both the literal and the figurative processes of giving meaning can in themselves be controlled. The problem is that the syntax cannot determine which procedure should be used: it allows both and there is no syntactic way of ruling out either. Moreover, the confusion that arises is also independent of the semantics in the sense that it is in no way related to what the sentence refers to: it merely arises from the fact that the statement both affirms and denies the same state of affairs. It asserts that there is a difference and that there is no difference at the same time. Regardless of the semantic content, this construction would in all cases lead to contradiction, and thus the ultimate problem is revealed to be a formal, logical one—one that emerges on the level of syntax rather than on that of semantics.

Syntax and semantics, therefore, get thoroughly entangled in the ambiguity of what de Man calls rhetoric. A paradox arising on the level of the semantic turns out to be purely syntactic, but we could not discern this syntactic, structural problem without the involvement of the semantic. The addition of the semantic to the syntactic strangely throws the syntax back upon itself. The effect of Gödel's undecidable proposition is very similar to this. The difference is only that it emerges in the context of the logical system that characterizes basic arithmetic. This is a surprising result, since while in ordinary language use we are prepared to accept that paradoxical sentences occasionally crop up, the precision of the language of mathematics seems to rule out such inaccuracies. What Gödel showed, however, is exactly this. He proved that as soon as we make the logic that governs our most basic arithmetical calculations explicit, we will have at least one sentence (the Gödel sentence) which has a similar effect to de Man's rhetorical question: it is a perfectly well-formed construction, whose syntax is unambiguous, and yet it can be interpreted in at least two distinct ways. And when it is interpreted thus, it gives rise to a contradiction, since it seems to affirm and deny the same state of affairs. Once again, therefore, it is just the involvement of the semantic that introduces the difficulties: as soon as we assign meaning to it in a certain

way (a way which is not disallowed by the syntax), the syntactically unambiguous structure becomes undecidable within the system. The undecidability itself, however, is not a semantic one, since the procedures of meaning-giving are totally controlled and legitimate: the problem is just that the syntax is incapable of distinguishing between these distinct procedures. Moreover, just as in the case of de Manian rhetoric, the confusion has nothing to do with the actual referent; it merely arises from the fact that this referent is both affirmed and denied, both meaningful and meaningless, both inside and outside. The problem, in short, is a syntactic one: any statement with the same structure would result in the same ambiguities. This purely syntactic difficulty, however, would not arise without the involvement of the semantic, without the act of assigning meaning to the syntactic structure in a certain way. It seems, therefore, that in the Gödel sentence syntax and semantics inevitably and irrevocably cross each other's ways. And this is true not only of basic arithmetic but of all consistent logical systems which have at least the complexity of basic arithmetic. In all such theories, one can use the same procedure that Gödel used to construct undecidable statements.

Some Consequences of the Crossing of Syntax and Semantics

What conclusion must we draw from this ineluctable and apparently ubiquitous crossing of syntax and semantics? Gödel's own conclusion was that the inevitable existence of undecidable propositions proves that there are truths that the formal system cannot grasp. He argued that since the undecidable proposition can neither be proved nor disproved within the system (its unprovability being the state of affairs that it seems both to assert and to deny), the system is incapable of assigning a truth-value to it. Any meaningful proposition, however, must be either true or false, i.e., insofar as the undecidable proposition is meaningful within the system (which we know it is, since it is a well-formed formula), it must also have some truth-value. This truth-value must, therefore, pertain to the statement regardless of the fact that the syntactical operations of the system are incapable of fixing it. Gödel concluded, therefore, that the undecidable proposition is true, but that its truth goes beyond the intra-systematic, syntactic functioning of the system to grasp. With this move, he simply cut across the Gordian knot of the entanglement of syntax and semantics by assigning the semantic property of truth to the syntactic structure, which the syntactic system itself could not assign. Thus he restored the clear distinction between syntax and semantics and re-establishing their

unproblematic continuity. To achieve this, however, he needed to resort to the presupposition of a (mathematical) reality that existed independently from our reasoning about it. He relied, in other words, on the traditional epistemological view that there are first of all states of affairs in the reality and the function of formal systems is merely to control the production of true statements about these pre-existing states of affairs. In fact, Gödel interpreted this result as a confirmation of his stance of mathematical Platonism, the belief that mathematical objects exist regardless of our reasoning about them.

Put a little differently, Gödel contended that there are more truths in mathematics than any formal system can represent and therefore no consistent logical system can ever encompass the whole of the realm of mathematics: any such system is thus incomplete. This interpretation of the consequences of the inevitability of undecidable propositions proved to be really influential and inspired a number of powerful philosophical arguments about the limitations of computers and the superiority of the human mind (e.g., Lucas 1961; Penrose 1989; Penrose 1994), as well as about the ultimate incompleteness of science (Jáki 1966, 127-30). Gödel's conclusion, however, is clearly unacceptable if we try to make sense of the undecidable proposition as another nonsynonymous substitution that Derridean *différance* lends itself to. It is unacceptable because it relies on the presupposition of an objective reality existing in its self-presence, independently of any context, whereas deconstruction hinges on the assumption that "there is nothing outside of the text" (Derrida 1997, 158; Derrida 1988, 148). Everything, according to Derrida, can only be present or absent, true or false, provable or unprovable, meaningful or meaningless in the context of some system. Any state of affairs, in other words, can only exist as represented within some system. Moreover, any of Derrida's undecidable terms (such as supplement, hymen, pharmakon, etc.) can only function as a nonsynonymous substitution that *différance* lends itself to if we examine it within the immediate context where it emerges. This is so precisely because it is not these words themselves that result in the undecidability that Derrida is interested in. It is not their inherent, context-independent meaning that brings about their special status, but their position within the particular context in which they function. It is just this structural placement that provides them with their constitutive undecidability (Livingston 2012, 114-16). If therefore, we want to examine Gödel's undecidable proposition as another nonsynonymous substitution that *différance* lends itself to, if we want to see how it functions intra-systematically, we must confine ourselves to the context of the system within which it is produced. Once we do so, however, Gödel's

conclusion that the undecidable proposition is “in fact” true, though we cannot see this within the system becomes untenable. We cannot simply rely on an easy access to the outside to solve the difficulties that arise with the crossing of syntax and semantics, but must proceed much more carefully and draw a different conclusion.

Must we conclude, then, that since the system is incapable of assigning a semantic value to it, the undecidable proposition is completely meaningless? Not quite. For if the system is really all that there is, then the undecidable proposition comes to mark a unique point within it: the point where the syntax exceeds the semantics. As a completely unproblematic syntactic structure, the undecidable proposition should have an unproblematic semantic value. As Gödel proved, however, it cannot be assigned any semantic value within the system: it can neither assert nor deny the state of affairs that it makes reference to and thus its reference, its signifying function is itself undermined. In this way, however, it comes to mark a distinct and well-defined point within the syntactic system that does not signify anything; a point, in other words, which unambiguously belongs to the syntax but which is still entirely independent from any semantics. By marking thus a semantic void the undecidable proposition attests to the independence of syntax from semantics, or—as Derrida puts it—it marks “the irreducible excess of the syntactic over semantic” (1981a, 221). And in this way, Derrida argues, it inscribes within the system the possibility of signification, of reference itself, which, he adds, is also its impossibility (e.g., Derrida 1988, 129).

This latter statement requires further explanation. Why and how does the excess of syntax that the undecidable proposition marks constitute the condition for the possibility of signification and how is this possibility also the impossibility of signification? To answer these questions we need to take a look at how formal systems work in general. A full account of this is beyond the scope of the present article, but we do not need to go into the details to understand Derrida’s claim that the point of syntactic excess is the condition of the possibility and the impossibility of signification. What, then, is the purpose of formal systems? To put it simply, formal systems function to control signification in a strictly mechanical way, and they do so by means of formalization. Any statement about the reality (or a specific portion of it) is translated into a string of symbols whose meaning is strictly fixed by the rules of the formal system, and these strings are then manipulated in a rigorous, rule-governed way to form other strings of symbols. The reason why we need formalization, the rigorous manipulation of these symbols is to preserve the signifying value of the original statements. In an informal argument, misunderstandings—such as that

between Archie Bunker and his wife—may easily arise as we move from one statement to the other. The power of formal systems lies in their capacity to eliminate such errors from the process of signification. Since the meaning of the original string of symbols is strictly fixed, the formal method makes sure that this meaning is not lost or adulterated as we pass from one statement to the other.

What is more, formalization provides a method by which the signifying validity of potentially any statement can be ascertained. This is so because if any given statement is well-formed (that is, formulated according to the rules of the given system), its validity can be shown by its derivability from the *axioms* of the formal system. The axioms are very simple statements whose signifying value is taken for granted. In Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory, for example, the axiom of extensionality is this statement: “two sets are equal to each other if and only if they have exactly the same members.” Such a statement is self-evidently true and if one can derive an arbitrarily complex statement from this and other such axioms in the fully controlled way described above, one can be sure that the complex statement itself is also true, since the starting axioms are evidently true and the method of manipulating them necessarily preserves this truth.

This method has been an immensely influential and fruitful approach as is witnessed by the revolutionary development of meta-mathematics and meta-logic from the turn of the 20th century. Let us consider for a moment, however, what would happen if the formal method attained its end and all true statements about the reality (or even about a certain portion of it) could be derived from axioms in a perfectly controlled way. This would indeed settle the issue of reference and signification once and for all. Only those statements could signify appropriately which can thus be formally derived from the axioms. Could we, however, talk about signification and reference in such a case? What would signification signify or reference refer to if correct reference were unambiguously fixed once and for all by the formal system? The reality that the system purportedly signifies would be indistinguishable from the signifying system itself. Thus the truth of a statement would have nothing to do with how things are in the reality, but would be entirely determined by the formal reasoning about it, and thus the founding assumption of signification, the signifier/signified, system/reality opposition would collapse. In this sense, therefore, the complete success of formalization would have a disastrous effect on signification. Fortunately, however, Gödel showed that such a collapsing of the reality is impossible even at the level of basic arithmetic. He showed it precisely by formulating his undecidable proposition, a statement which belongs to the system, but

whose truth or falsehood the system cannot decide. In this way, the undecidable proposition becomes the intra-systematic guarantee that the system is not the reality and can thus be looked at as an explicit formulation of this fundamental assumption of any signifying system.

This assumption is silently ignored at the foundation of the axiomatic system, when we think of the axioms as unproblematically and directly representing self-evident truths, yet it never ceases to be the grounding assumption of any concept or theory of signification. It is in Gödel's undecidable proposition that this assumption becomes explicitly formulated, for the undecidable proposition shows that the completely controlled manipulations of the axioms do not only produce truths about the reality, that the signifying system is more or other than what it refers to. It is thus that the undecidable proposition becomes an explicit formulation of the condition of the possibility of signification. As such, however, it is also the expression of the impossibility of signification, since it marks that point within the system where the syntax loses its link to the semantics, where the formal system fails to control signification. The condition of the possibility of signification is, therefore, this very impasse, it is the impossibility of signification.

What is more, this impossibility as the condition of the possibility of signification also marks the possibility of self-reflexivity. The undecidable proposition, as we have seen, has no intra-systematic semantic value, but as such it comes to signify the excess of the syntactic over the semantic. In this proposition, therefore, we have the fundamental possibility of reference made not to the reality, a state of affairs in the world, but to the syntactic system itself, as distinct from any reality that it is supposed to signify. Moreover, since the undecidable proposition, as we have also seen, expresses the very possibility of signification, the self-reflexivity which it makes possible is, in fact, the system's capacity to reflect upon itself as a signifying system. Self-reflexivity is, therefore, the very condition of the possibility of signification, of any reference: for any system to refer, it must first be able to self-refer.

We can see, therefore, that the first analogy that Livingston points out between Gödel and Derrida, that they "both depend on a kind of 'self-referential' encoding whereby a system's total logic (the conditions for the possibility of its organizing distinctions) is formalized at a single point" (2012, 121) is closely tied to Livingston's third analogy, the crossing of syntax and semantics, which guarantees the possibility of any intra-systematic self-reference. Livingston's second analogy (about the generalizability of Gödel and Derrida's results) can likewise be seen as following from the third one, since the crossing of syntax and semantics

reveals the condition of possibility for any signification and this ensures its applicability in the case of any system that purports to refer to some reality other than itself.

Livingston's Paradoxico-Criticism

Where do these consequences of the crossing of syntax and semantics leave us? Let us consider first of all how all this makes Livingston capable of identifying a political position. I will not be able to do full justice to his complex and very carefully developed approach to politics, but what has been said so far is perhaps enough to indicate the main line of his argument.

Livingston convincingly argues that the implicit or explicit engagement with formal thought—especially with the paradoxes of formalization like that presented by the undecidable proposition—has led in the 20th century to the development of a distinct orientation of political thought: an orientation which he terms “paradoxico-critical” and which he traces in the work of Wittgenstein, Lacan, Deleuze, Derrida, and Agamben. As all meaningful modern philosophical enquiries must be, according to Livingston, this orientation is also fully aware of the paradoxes of formal thought. It is characterized furthermore by what could be termed an attitude of “radical immanence,” an attitude that is perhaps best summed up in Derrida’s already quoted phrase, “there is nothing outside of the text.” This latter principle is in fact what distinguishes paradoxico-criticism from all other philosophical approaches. Unlike other schools of thought, paradoxico-criticism considers the inevitable paradoxes of formalization not simply as signs of the incompleteness of a particular system or text that may warrant access to an outside, to the “reality.” These inherent contradictions are rather looked at as ineliminable and constitutive elements of the text which—rather than legitimate exceeding the system in the name of some greater power, the reality—reveal any appeal to an extra-textual power to be a delusion; a delusion, moreover, which is only made possible by the inherent paradoxes of the text.

Once we accept these principles, we indeed have a powerful critical tool in our hands. As Livingston puts it, this approach “appears to demonstrate a new possibility for philosophy itself: to revitalize its critical categories on a fundamental ground that owes nothing to the historicism and culturalism prevalent today” (2012, 178). The power of paradoxico-criticism, in other words, lies in its capacity to demonstrate that all coherent arguments must contain inherent points of contradiction, which arise from the essential self-reflexivity (the excess of the syntactic) that—

as we have seen—inevitably pertains to any signifying system. What is more, paradoxico-criticism can demonstrate this on purely formal grounds, without recourse to any “historicism or culturalism,” that is to say, without any ideological motivation or agenda. The paradoxes that paradoxico-criticism traces do not occur in any signifying system because of historical processes, ideological prejudices, or political biases; they occur just because this is an inevitable consequence of the formal organization of any text.

Moreover, paradoxico-criticism will in this way also have the ability to diagnose and criticize those powers that arise in all texts to counter the inevitable paradoxes of self-reflexivity. For, as Livingston points out, all discourses develop a certain imaginary compensation for the inherent contradictions of language’s essential self-reflexivity (2012, 182). These imaginary compensations can indeed be seen as structurally necessary, since they almost automatically arise as a consequence of the threat of inconsistency that the ineluctable paradoxes pose. This structural necessity, Livingston proceeds to argue, tends to issue in certain “superlative figures of power” that appear in various forms and disguises throughout history. While the shape of these superlative figures is different in different contexts, their structural constitution remains the same: they always arise to preserve consistency at all costs and to prohibit inconsistency and paradox. They thus typically manifest themselves in gestures of mandating what is necessary (to maintain consistency) and of prohibiting what is (purportedly) impossible (because it threatens with paradox). By drawing attention to the inevitable and constitutive presence of paradox, paradoxico-criticism successfully diagnoses and criticizes these imaginary constructions and thus removes the force of the superlative figures of power they engender. As Livingston himself puts it, summarizing the political potential of paradoxico-criticism,

[t]his identification of structural paradox has the critical effect of locating the structural contradictions inherent to reflexive linguistic reason as such, and hence of diagnosing the “weak points” of ineffectivity in any existing sovereign regime. These are the points at which any such regime can be resisted, or transformed. (2012, 182)

The Relevance of Literature

Livingston’s description of paradoxico-criticism serves two main purposes: 1. he characterizes a tendency of 20th-century philosophical thought, and 2. he outlines and advocates a critical-philosophical approach. In both these attempts, his book is eminently successful. Firstly, he convincingly points

out the structural similarities in the thought of Wittgenstein, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, and Agamben, explaining how each of these philosophers deploys the paradoxico-critical strategy of locating inherent contradictions in the texts they analyse and destabilizing thereby the imaginary compensations, those “superlative powers” that the texts project to counteract the paradoxes. Secondly, he goes beyond merely *describing* the strategies of the paradoxico-critics. By identifying the salient features of paradoxico-criticism and synthesizing these in a coherent pattern he also provides a powerful critical tool, which can be used in the analysis of potentially any text. Besides the description of a major trend in philosophical thought, therefore, Livingston also outlines a critical, political, philosophical project.

Livingston’s powerful attempt to outline the paradoxico-critical approach, however, can apparently only be achieved by leaving an important issue unaddressed. His insights can only be gained at the cost of bracketing the question of the status of the paradoxico-critical text itself. If it is indeed a structural necessity that any text will constitute itself on the basis of inevitable contradictions, and that it will—out of the same necessity—counteract these paradoxes by means of the reliance on some imaginary superlative power (the ideal), then will these structural necessities not affect the paradoxico-critical text, as well? Can the paradoxico-critical text that discerns the inevitable paradoxes and thus diagnoses, resists, and transforms the imaginary forces that strive to suppress them alone escape these otherwise universal structural necessities? Can it alone present a consistent argument without recourse to some imaginary compensation, and free itself thus from the dimension of the ideal? It would be naïve to believe that it can, and Livingston cannot be accused of such naivety. Elsewhere in his book, he demonstrates—for example, in his discussion of the Saussurean approach to language—how the critical stance of an external position is undermined by the reflection that the critical language is actually the same as the language criticized (Livingston 2012, 117). However, when he puts forward his own critical project in the form of paradoxico-criticism, he still overlooks this difficulty—and he does so for a good reason. The reason is that once one acknowledges the ultimate similarity of the critical text and the text criticized, one risks a complete levelling of distinctions between different qualities of discourse. If all texts (critical and criticized alike) are indeed constituted by those inherent contradictions that they suppress by relying on some imaginary powers, then how can one text criticize another for doing just this? How can we distinguish a naïve or mystified text from a critically more aware one? And if there can really be such a difference in the degree of critical

awareness, then from what position can we perceive this difference? And who is this “we” that can perceive it? Posing such questions would obviously lead us to complete paralysis when it comes to critical or political action, and Livingston is thus wise to bracket these questions when he comes to formulating his paradoxico-critical project.

However, these difficulties are still worth examining because they draw attention to a possible direction in which Livingston’s approach may be extended. Indeed, I want to argue that such an extension is, in fact, necessary. For we must observe that the difficulties I have outlined are in fact inevitable difficulties: they emerge in all efforts that try to describe the functioning of potentially all texts. Questions similar to the ones that I have raised above frequently emerge, for example, in Derrida’s thought. One especially revealing statement of the issue is to be found in his reading of Lévi-Strauss in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” which is particularly useful for us here because, apart from perspicuously outlining the problem, Derrida also suggests a solution to it that might guide us in how the necessary extension of Livingston’s project can be carried out.

Derrida runs up against this problem when analysing the decentring moves in Lévi-Strauss’s structural study of myths. He observes that Lévi-Strauss’s realization that myth is a fundamentally decentred structure leads him in his book, *The Raw and the Cooked* to adopting a different approach to the study of his subject. In particular, what Lévi-Strauss realizes is that the external, “objective” position of a scientific observer is insufficient when we try to make sense of mythic thinking. To comprehend the myth we must shape our discourse according to the structures of mythic thought or else we will be unable to follow its fundamentally decentred movement. As Derrida sums it up, the “structural discourse on myths—*mythological* discourse—must itself be *mythomorphic*. It must have the form of that of which it speaks” (1978, 362). The structural-philosophical *description* of the myth must, in other words, become essentially the same as its “object” of study.

As Derrida points out, however, this directly leads us to a problem:

If the mythological [that is, the structural discourse on the myth] is mythomorphic, are all discourses on myths equivalent? Shall we have to abandon any epistemological requirement which permits us to distinguish between several qualities of discourse on the myth? A classic but inevitable question. (1978, 363)

This is recognizably the same problem—though approached from a different angle—as that related to the status of the paradoxico-critical text,

the problem that inevitably arises when one realizes that the critical/descriptive text and the text criticized or described are essentially the same. And it is this “classic but inevitable question” that reveals how Livingston’s approach may be supplemented with another one. Derrida is our best guide here, since he points to the possible solution to the problem raised by Lévi-Strauss’s move—a solution we can also adopt *mutatis mutandis* when tackling the problem emerging in Livingston’s argument. He hints at this possible solution in the immediate continuation of the passage above when he comments on the “classic but inevitable question” in the following way:

It cannot be answered . . . for as long as the problem of the relations between the philosopheme or the theorem, on the one hand, and the mytheme or the mythopoem, on the other, has not been posed explicitly, which is no small problem. (1978, 363)

What this comment seems to suggest is that the problem in Lévi-Strauss’s discourse on myths arises from the anthropologist’s conflation of two distinct modes of textual operation: the philosophical, descriptive, constative, on the one hand, and the mythical, poetic, performative, on the other. These two, Derrida implies, cannot be simply brought together. Lévi-Strauss tries to join them by adapting his descriptive, philosophical approach to the structure of the myth, but he does so without taking into account the radical dissimilarity between the myth and his structural, scientific approach. To bring these two together is a legitimate and indeed necessary step, but it can only be successfully taken, Derrida insists, if the question of their relation is raised explicitly: the philosopheme, the foundational structural principle of the descriptive, constative discourse, and the mytheme, the atomic structure of creativity, must be thought of as distinct and at the same time as fundamentally and inseparably hinged to each other. Only by thoroughly examining and understanding this hinge can we avoid the problems incurred by Lévi-Strauss’s move of adapting his philosophical discourse to his mythic subject matter.

While this Derridean suggestion is here connected to Lévi-Strauss’s project of understanding decentred mythic thought, I think it can be seen as generally applying to all situations where the problems we encountered in both Lévi-Strauss and Livingston’s arguments arise. The paralysis brought about by the realization that the critical/descriptive text functions on the very principle that it purportedly criticizes in the target text can only be breached by posing the question of creativity. The descriptive/critical project must, therefore, be supplemented with another one, one that focuses on the performative, poetic aspect of discourse. In the case of Livingston’s argument, moreover, this solution to the inherent

problems of paradoxico-criticism (or of any critical-descriptive approach) is particularly apt, since we could argue that with his characterization of the functioning of Gödel's undecidable proposition Livingston comes probably as close as one can ever get to what Derrida describes in the quotation above as the "philosopheme."² As he convincingly demonstrates, Gödel's undecidable proposition provides the most fundamental pattern of all the "contradictions at the limits and the undecidables which constitute the actual basis for any subsequent production of (what appears to be) univocal meaning" (Livingston 2012, 127). Gödel's undecidable proposition is thus a particularly succinct statement of the condition of the possibility of any meaning, representation, signification, reference. In his description of the functioning of Gödel's proposition, therefore, Livingston comes very close to what Derrida identifies as the ultimate aim of his philosophical project: to find the "strictest possible determination of the figures of play, of oscillation, of undecidability" (1988, 145). He comes very close, in other words, to adumbrating the philosopheme. Livingston's treatment of Gödel is thus perhaps the best starting point for formulating what I have called above a necessary supplementary approach: the creative approach, which consists in the search for the mytheme, for the strictest possible determination of the fundamental structure of creativity.

How I think this search for the mytheme can actually be carried out I will be unable to explain in this article. However, one thing is clear: this is a point where literature will become vital again for philosophy. Not in the sense as it has sometimes been invoked in 20th-century thought, as a radically unformalizable outside to formal, mathematical thought,³ but in the sense in which, for example, Paul de Man and Derrida treat it when they talk about literary texts, as "the most rigorous and, consequently, the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and modifies himself" (de Man 1973, 33). Rather than treat it as vague, inexact, indeterminate, therefore, we must read literature as the most exact, rigorous and accurate expression of the constitutive undecidability of

² Elsewhere Derrida uses this term in a different sense. He usually means by "philosopheme" certain fundamental building blocks in philosophical texts, which are themselves deconstructible and thus fail to account for the functioning of the given text in its entirety (see, for example, Derrida 1988, 153). In "Structure, Sign and Play," however, he seems to mean by this term the general possibility of forming any theorems, the fundamental structure that makes the formulation of any meaningful argument possible.

³ This invocation of literature and the corresponding contrast between the "scientific" and the "literary" or between formal structures and the extra-formal, "poetic" resistance to them are justly criticized by Livingston (2012, 191-92).

signification; and once we do so, we may be able to trace in literature the strictest possible determination of the foundations of creativity: the mytheme.

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CHAPTER TWO

ANXIETIES OF DISAPPEARANCE: ANALOGUE IDENTITY AND CHEMICAL ROMANCE IN CRAIG CLEVINGER'S MINIMALIST FICTION

LÁSZLÓ SÁRI B.

My cigar is not a symbol.
It is only a cigar.
—Sigmund Freud
motto to Craig Clevenger's
The Contortionist's Handbook

You cannot separate paranoia
from knowledge.
—Craig Clevenger,
Dermaphoria

In an estimation of his friend and fellow writer's work on his website, William Christopher Baer talks about how the most distinctive feature of Craig Clevenger's fiction is his "almost pathologic sensitivity" to people disappearing (Baer 2009). And indeed, both of Clevenger's novels to date plot traumatic stories of loss, following them to their extreme destinations, be it the radical impossibility and/or unnarratability of romance (as in *The Contortionist's Handbook* [2002] or the disintegration of one's own self and the decisive instability of narrative itself posited thereupon—the case of *Dermaphoria* [2005]). Clevenger, who is perhaps the most paradigmatic case of contemporary minimalist fiction, is preoccupied with how the very construction of identity for his lower-middle-class, white, heterosexual, male narrators denies them the possibility of being an individual, yet, at the same time, his texts seem to insist on the necessity to be one. Hence,

the motif of disappearance in his text, as in many a minimalist piece,¹ is an index of an anxiety of identity construction turned into an existential(ist) dilemma. In what follows, I will trace how *The Contortionist's Handbook* and *Dermaphoria* stage dilemmas related to this problem of identity construction in relation to two, distinctly different historical eras, and from two diametrically opposing angles. I will argue that Clevenger's approach is not only minimalist through and through, but that it relies on existentialist, and oftentimes essentialist, presumptions that he utilizes as his critique of identity construction in an institutional framework and alongside preconceived categories. What is more, his narratives strive for an implicit, shared, communal sense and understanding of the loss and alienation enacted by the plots.

In my argument, I will rely on a definition of minimalism elaborated by Mark McGurl, who sees minimalist fiction as a mode of writing rooted in the practice of creative writing. In contrast to other, formally oriented approaches to the short story of the 1980s (Hallett 1999, 1-42), to an outright critical evaluation of the resurgence of "dirty realism" in the 1990s (Rebein 2009, 22-81), or to sporadic attempts to individually and thematically engage with minimalist authors (Sartain 2009; Mandel 2011), McGurl's systemic understanding of the field of contemporary fiction (2009) enables him to establish links between the institutional background, the aesthetics and the politics of fiction—all of which is vital, in my view, when trying to make sense of *and* critically evaluate a given text or author. Thus, McGurl's insights into how minimalism, or, in his parlance, "lower-middle-class modernism"—understood in contrast to "technomodernism"/postmodern fiction and "high cultural pluralism"/texts in the ethnic canon (2009, 68)—follows the creative writing maxim of "show don't tell" (301), thereby romanticizing "work" and "beautifying shame" (294) felt over one's class belonging and insecurity (281), and creating what he calls the "non-politics of minimalism," "an ironic kind of universality" (316) present throughout minimalist pieces of fiction from the early seventies to date, will enable me to reposition contemporary minimalism in the critical landscape and amidst debates about what comes after postmodernism.

¹ The most well-known example of this motif, and with similar overtones as in Clevenger's fiction, is Bret Easton Ellis's notorious catchphrase: DISAPPEAR HERE. For a discussion of this impossible ethical imperative, see Sári 2015, 487.

Analogue Identity

The tendencies of minimalist fiction as described above based on McGurl's account culminate in *The Contortionist's Handbook* in what the narrator claims with regard to his ancestry:

Sometimes a plane will go down and FAA investigators can't identify any remains. A fuselage explosion at 35,000 feet or 800,000 pounds of flesh and metal hitting the water at four hundred miles an hour makes it hard to check prints or dental work. And sometimes the passenger manifests don't check out. Names dead-end when they look for next of kin. Illicit lovers on secret vacations, drug couriers, battered wives, and federal witnesses died midair wondering why their oxygen mask doesn't inflate, and nobody knows it because each one is a walking, breathing John Doe. That's my family. (Clevenger 2002, 45)

Significantly, this silent camaraderie is posited as a unity in death, and in remaining unidentified, and, as I will argue, it points in the direction of an identity without the attending consciousness of having one; the white, lower middle-class, heterosexual, male narrator paradoxically defines himself in league with other, atomized individuals, consciously denying any belonging to any race, class or sexual orientation. These factors only interfere in negative ways with whom the narrator successively claims to be: when choosing a name to go with racial markers, his red hair and blue eyes (Clevenger 2002, 11), or when he is "swimming out of [his] depth" (119) by dating Natalie, a middle-class girl obsessive to mate below her class (121).

Questions of identity are no stranger to Clevenger's first novel, *The Contortionist's Handbook*, as it relates the story of an all too successful con-artist, whose obsessive-compulsive cycles of shapeshifting are induced by how his own constructions prove to be tenuous under real or perceived threats: on the one hand, by ideological state apparatuses like school, psychiatric wards, and law enforcement agencies, and, on the other, by similarly operating criminal, business-like organizations making use of his skills as a talented forger, or by his own paranoid reflexes ensuing from all these. This pressure on John Dolan Vincent/Daniel Fletcher/Christopher Thorne/Eric Bishop/etc. results in a series of flights comparable to a contortionist getting in and out of boxes (Clevenger 2002, 40) or, as the narrative frame would suggest, straitjackets of identity. The psychological effects of variations on white, lower-middle class, heterosexual, male identity are paradoxically described by the narrator as cyclical, and not altogether different from a female period:

I enjoy a certain feeling of new freedom after each change, each time I crawl out that small airless box and breathe again. I have a clean name and a clean start. Then the rabbit-reflex tension returns *on day twenty-two, like I could set my watch by it*. I wonder if someone's on to me, a subtle paranoia that the coke habit only encourages, and it's worse with each passing day. I squint, glance over my shoulder when someone asks the time. Look for vans, delivery services—flowers, parcels, plumbing or electrical repair—stop at a pay phone and call the 800-number painted on the side. If I get a dead connection, I'm going to run. Disappear. That's what I tell myself. Then I start seeing blue and the cycle starts all over again. (Clevenger 2002, 165; emphasis added)

This compulsion to evade the consequences of his actions is not only related to John Dolan Vincent's passionate doting on women but to successfully avoiding distinct attention from institutional frameworks, legal or otherwise. His flight from bureaucratic as well as from romantic engagements is dependent upon his acute perception of the phenomenological level of social reality around him: in that, he is aided by his eidetic memory (Clevenger 2002, 27), his meticulous insistence on subtle details (40), and, most importantly, his *denial* of the importance, or indeed, the existence of symbolic content. The novel's motto, Freud's famous claim about his cigar only being "a cigar" and not "a symbol," is voiced by Johnny several times to indicate that social reality is based on the relationships between and the proportions of its material components. As he explains, the combination of observing the phenomenological levels of existence and the avoidance of any symbolic content compiled throughout one's personal history results in an acute sense of visual reproduction—a key to the "analogue" construction of identity in the novel's fictitious 1980s, before state and business administrations went digital, leaving practically no room for manual forgery:

Most people look at an object and see the object, force their hand to copy what their eye sees. But that object is getting filtered through a brain with years of associations to and memories of that object, so they fail. Ask someone to draw a tree and a lifetime of trees in their head says *That's not good enough*. That's why children use symbols. A stick topped with a blast of swirls. Brown crayon, green crayon. Burnt Sienna and Forest Green. Maybe a dozen Fire Engine Red dots, though they have never seen an apple tree, much less had one growing in their front yard. (Clevenger 2002, 27)

Accordingly, Clevenger's narrator elevates "show, don't tell", the minimalist maxim of representation (McGurl 2009, 23) onto an ontological