

Alexander Scherr

Narrating Evolution:

Agency, Narrative Thinking, and the Epistemic Value
of Contemporary British and American Novels

Vera Nünning, Ansgar Nünning (Hg.)

RABE

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 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier**

Scherr, Alexander: Narrating Evolution:
Agency, Narrative Thinking, and the Epistemic Value
of Contemporary British and American Novels /
Alexander Scherr.-

Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2017
(RABE ; Band 2)
ISBN 978-3-86821-697-4
Zugl.: Gießen, Univ., FB 05, Diss., 2015

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2017
ISBN 978-3-86821-697-4

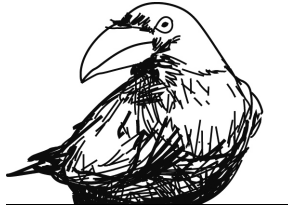
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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Tel.: (0651) 41503, Fax: (0651) 41504
Internet: www.wvttrier.de
E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de
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The Raven

“Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.”

(Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*)



“Raven is our version of what you call Coyote in the Southwest. Raven stirs things up and makes change happen. He catalyzes different interactions to occur. Whether you like it or not, Raven makes the people grow and change.

[...]

Maybe that’s how change starts – with someone getting angry enough to upset the apple cart, to initiate revolt, to cause trouble, like Raven did.”

(indigenous story, quoted from Lewis Mehl-Madrona,
Narrative Medicine: The Use of History and Story in the Healing Process.
Rochester/Vermont: Bear & Company, 2007, pp. 60-61)

Sowohl die traditionelle Narratologie als auch die interdisziplinäre Erzählforschung haben in den letzten Dekaden einen anhaltenden Boom erlebt, der zur Entwicklung zahlreicher neuer Ansätze in einer zunehmend transgenerisch, intermedial und interdisziplinär orientierten Erzähltheorie geführt hat.

Die neue Buchreihe RABE/RAVEN trägt diesen Entwicklungen nicht nur Rechnung, sondern stellt ein Forum dar für Monographien und konzeptorientierte Sammelbände, die

- sich mit Erscheinungsformen des Narrativen in lange als ‚nicht-narrativ‘ eingestuften Gattungen (z.B. Drama und Lyrik) oder in vernachlässigten Phänomenen und Texttypen (z.B. Rituale, Nachrichten, Alltagserzählungen) beschäftigen,
- Formen des Narrativen in anderen Medien (z.B. Cartoons, graphic novels, Film, bildende Kunst, Musik, Hyperfiktion, Erzählen in den neuen Medien) oder multimodales bzw. transmediales Erzählen untersuchen,
- narratologische Kategorien rekonzeptualisieren, neue narrative Formen untersuchen oder die Konzepte, Modelle und Methoden der klassischen und postklassischen Narratologie erweitern,
- Ansätze, Erkenntnisse und Methoden aus der Erzählforschung anderer Disziplinen (z.B. Geschichtswissenschaft, Linguistik, narrativer Medizin, Psychologie, Kognitionswissenschaft, Sozialwissenschaften) einbeziehen,
- Formen des langsamen Wandels (z.B. Altern, Evolution, Klimawandel, der durch digitale Technologien ausgelöste Geisteswandel, Krankheit, Artensterben) und andere Phänomene (z.B. Performances, Rituale, komplexe Systeme) erforschen, die auf nicht-narrativen Logiken basieren, sich einer narratologischen Analyse widersetzen und mit zentralen Kategorien der Narratologie nicht recht zu erfassen sind (z.B. Geschichten ohne Akteure, Ereignisse, Handlungen, Plot).

Darüber hinaus versteht sich die Reihe als ein Forum für innovative Publikationen und alternative Beiträge zur Erzählforschung, die die Grenzen der Narratologie ausleuchten und der Erzählforschung neue Gegenstände, Konzepte, Methoden und Horizonte erschließen. Sie ist auch ein Forum für Bände, die Definitionen des ‚Narrativen‘ im Sinne eines kognitiven Schemas, einer (Repräsentations-)Form oder eines semiotischen Artefakts weiterentwickeln, das Narrative von anderen Modi/Strategien der Sinnerzeugung abgrenzen oder es in seinem Verhältnis zum ‚Fiktionalen‘ bestimmen. In der Reihe erscheinen Bände in deutscher und englischer Sprache. Die Bände werden von den Herausgebern und/oder Mitgliedern des internationalen Beirats begutachtet.

Both traditional narratology and interdisciplinary narrative research have witnessed an ongoing boom during recent decades which has resulted in the development of a host of new approaches in an increasingly transgeneric, intermedial and interdisciplinary narrative theory.

The new book series RABE/RAVEN does not only reflect these developments, but offers a forum for monographs and concept oriented collective volumes which

- deal with forms of narrative in genres traditionally regarded as ‘non-narrative’ (e.g. drama and poetry) or with relatively neglected phenomena and text types (e.g. rituals, the news, narration in everyday contexts),
- explore forms of narrative in other media (e.g. cartoons, graphic novels, film, art, music, hyperfiction, storytelling in new media), and multimodal or transmedial storytelling,
- reconceptualise narratological categories, explore innovative narrative forms, or extend the range of concepts, models and methods of classical and postclassical narratology,
- take into consideration approaches, insights, and methods developed by narrative researchers working in other disciplines (e.g. history, linguistics, narrative medicine, psychology, cognitive science, the social sciences),
- examine forms of slow change (e.g. ageing, evolution, climate change, mind change as a result of the impact of digital technologies, illness, extinction of species) and other phenomena (e.g. performances, rituals, complex systems) that are based on non-narrative logics, and that challenge or defy narratological analysis and its key concepts (e.g. stories without actors, events, actions, and plot).

The series offers a forum for innovative publications and alternative varieties of explorations in narrative which gauge the limits of narratology and which open up new objects, concepts, methods and horizons for research in narrative studies. It is also a forum for volumes which advance definitions of narrative as a cognitive schema, as form or as semiotic artefact, which conceptualise narrative in contradistinction to other modes/strategies of meaning-making, or which probe into the relationship of narrative and fiction. The series publishes books in German and English. All volumes are peer reviewed by the editors and/or members of the international advisory board.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The story of this study, which is a slightly revised and extended version of my PhD dissertation, is a story of evolution: So many different agents have had a share in its coming into being – sometimes knowingly and sometimes completely unaware of their impact – that the final outcome could almost be described as an emergent result. Although we will see in the course of this book that it is often difficult in evolutionary narratives to attribute a central role to individual agents, there are a number of people whose contribution to this work is so great that they shall be acknowledged here.

Among the most central actors partaking in the evolution of this study is my first supervisor, Prof. Dr. Ansgar Nünning, who did not only support my project from its initial (and admittedly murky) stages but who has also given me the fabulous opportunity to work at his chair at Justus Liebig University, Giessen. I owe him gratitude for the possibility of conducting my research in the splendid environment constituted by the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC), the International PhD Programme “Literary and Cultural Studies” (IPP), and the Department of English, and, moreover, for his trust, counsel and patience in times of academic crisis. I have the same deep sense of gratitude for my second supervisor, Prof. Dr. Marion Gymnich, who has supported me since my MA studies at the University of Bonn and of whose classes and office hours I have the fondest of memories. Besides my two supervisors, I am indebted to the other members of my doctoral committee – Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Hallet, Prof. Dr. Andreas Langenohl and Prof. Dr. Kirsten von Hagen – for having committed themselves to making a timely date for the defence possible.

Progress is rarely steady in evolutionary contexts. In the case of this study, however, the members of my IPP colloquium have contributed greatly to the constant development of my research. I gladly acknowledge the help and friendship I have received from Sebastian Brand, Rebecca Duncan, Lauren Greyson, Franka Heise, Elizabeth Kovach, Alexander Matschi, Mirko Miliwojević, Kristina Rauschan, Johnny Van Hove and Katharina Zilles. Lauren Greyson, in particular, deserves credit for the fact that a readable manuscript did ultimately emerge out of more or less coherent versions of chapters; I am indebted to her for her careful editing and the extinction of linguistic, grammatical and stylistic mistakes. I would also like to extend my thanks to the GCSC and IPP coordinators and staff, who have supported me in matters both professional and personal. For lack of space, I will only mention the following colleagues and friends as representatives of both institutions: Michael Basseler and Ann Van de Veire (of the GCSC); and Natalya Bekhta, Farzad Boobani, Christine Schwanecke, Robert Vogt and Claudia Weber (as former IPP coordinators and staff).

While writing my dissertation, I was given the chance of working and teaching at the Department of English at Justus Liebig University; I could not be happier about the fact that this rewarding experience is still ongoing. Among the large number of great colleagues I have had throughout the years, I would like to mention the following in-

dividuals, many of whom have become close friends: Ingo Berensmeyer, Nora Berning, Silke Braselmann, Stella Butter, Tobias Gabel, Gero Gutzzeit, Daniel Hartley, Mirjam Horn, Christina Jordan, Tim Kurtzweil, Rose Lawson, Caroline Pirlet, Andrea Rummel, Martin Spies, Nadyne Stritzke, Snežana Vuletić and Jutta Weingarten. I am just as indebted and grateful to friends in Giessen, Bonn and the beautiful geographical area in western Germany known as the Eifel, but I have decided that singling out individual persons would inevitably do injustice to others. The same goes for other colleagues (present and past) at the Department of English, the GCSC and the Language Centre of the University of Bonn.

The metamorphosis of a PhD thesis into a book takes time, effort and counsel. In addition to Prof. Dr. Ansgar Nünning, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Vera Nünning for the generous offer to publish this study in the new RABE/RAVEN series. I feel honoured that my work should be among the first volumes to appear as “Research on Alternative Varieties of Explorations in Narrative”, and I hope that it will live up to the promises raised by the series title. Needless to say, my thanks also go to Dr. Erwin Otto of Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier (WVT) for his care and helpful assistance in all matters regarding the book publication. Last but not least, the publication of this study was assisted by the Dr.-Herbert-Stolzenberg Foundation, which presented me with an Award for Excellence in Higher Education Teaching and with greatly appreciated financial support.

Since I began revising and editing my manuscript for this book, Anja Drautzburg has taken on a special role in my life. The evolution of our personal relationship is a truly marvellous development. I thank her for her skilful advice and wonderful help with the book manuscript, but I am even more grateful for her love and unrelenting support.

This book is dedicated to two people who have had the greatest share in my personal development and who have always stood by my side: my parents.

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF NARRATING EVOLUTION AND THE EPISTEMIC VALUE OF LITERATURE

In a 1996 interview with “Upon Reflection”, a TV format launched by the University of Washington, the late evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002) was asked why so much of what we think we know about natural history is actually wrong. The answer Gould gave provides an entry point into the central epistemological problem this study seeks to investigate:

Because humans are storytelling creatures and stories only go in certain ways, and many of the ways that we love stories to go – things getting better, things making sense – are really not the way the world works. I think we have imposed upon the world’s messiness, the world’s randomness, the world’s frequent senselessness [...] this hope and dream that things will be progressive, sensible, meaningful, lead to *us* (that is, human beings) [...]. Because we have these hopes – and nature really doesn’t work that way – we tend to get a lot of things wrong.¹

Gould’s statement makes it possible to think the relationship between evolution and human cognition in two ways: On the one hand, human beings – specified as “storytelling creatures” – are the obvious *result* of long periods of evolutionary change. Natural selection, the key evolutionary mechanism that will be illuminated in detail in this study, has endowed us with a ‘storytelling brain’. As various scholars and scientists alike have emphasized, the specific conceptual structure of our brain – our “genetic predisposition to grasp events in time through story form” (Abbott 2008: 230) – may have served us well in a whole range of contexts. Storytelling, from this perspective, possesses what Richard Dawkins (2006 [1989; 1976]: 100) calls “survival value”. A particularly important survival function attributed to narrative is the fact that it constitutes “an especially prodigious capacity for storing and transporting information” (Eibl 2012: 15).² The hypothesis that narrative enhances the understanding, exchange and storing of information ascribes an epistemic, communicative and mnemonic value to storytelling. Additional scenarios in which the use of narrative as a cognitive tool may have contributed to the survival of the human species might easily be imagined.³ In the first sense, then, the human inclination to tell stories is assessed in terms of its useful-

¹ The interview is available online (cf. UWTV 1996; my transcription).

² See also Eibl (2004: 255-260) and Scalise Sugiyama (2008: 255), who defines narrative in a similar manner, as “a system for storing and transmitting adaptively useful information by simulating the human environment.”

³ However, the relative ‘easiness’ of this task can also quickly become a methodological problem regarding the testability of hypotheses. A major question is how to provide evidence for the validity of hypothetical past scenarios that are constructed to render a particular evolutionary function of storytelling plausible. In many cases, empirical evidence about “the origin of stories” (cf. Boyd 2009) does not exist. The problem will be discussed in section II.4.2.

ness from an evolutionary point of view. The functionalist account of the ‘hardwiredness’ of storytelling in human cognition thus has a certain appeal because of its explanatory plausibility, and it was also considered convincing by such prolific writers as the late Doris Lessing (qtd. in Waugh 2005a: 70): “This fantasizing and dreaming must have a use of some kind; otherwise we’d have lost it. From the time that we know anything at all about history we were telling stories to each other.”

But Gould’s take on the storytelling brain is much more critical – and characterized much more by recursion. In the second way of conceptualizing the relationship between evolution and human cognition, the storytelling brain is not only the result of evolution, but also the *means* that we rely on to understand the very process that has produced it. In an interview with *The Believer*, which he gave after his novel *The Echo Maker* (2006) came out, the writer Richard Powers (2007: online) describes this self-referentiality with regard to the evolution of human consciousness: “The brain is the ultimate storytelling machine, and consciousness is the ultimate story. Our neurons tell our selves into being.” However, as Gould’s verdict that “we tend to get a lot of things wrong” indicates, the human brain does not seem particularly well-suited for comprehending evolution.⁴ In a sense, this is unsurprising, as the maxim by which evolution operates within a Darwinian framework is ‘survival’, not ‘knowledge’. H. Porter Abbott (2001: 209-210) has argued as much: “Our brains are designed not, finally, to know but to help us survive. And though real knowledge can often advance the goal of survival, ignorance and misunderstanding have also played key supporting roles, like those questions on the old SAT that you had to get wrong to score higher.” In other words, while knowledge *can* be continuous with survival, it is always subordinated to the imperative to survive and hence ‘instrumental’ (cf. Scalise Sugiyama 2008: 257), but not necessarily objective.

Indeed, the theoretical underpinnings of Darwinism as considered from a philosophical point of view align more neatly with epistemological skepticism. Gillian Beer (2009 [2000]: xxx) has suggested that Darwin himself was aware of these implications of his theory: “Darwin never doubts the world is real. But he does doubt our categories for understanding it and indeed questions, while he shares, the categorising zeal of human beings.” In her classic study on *Darwin’s Plots*, Beer (2009 [2000; 1983]: 69-70) has therefore placed the master evolutionist in a line of thinkers including Goethe, Helmholtz and Freud, who have all displayed a “desolate awareness of maladaptation and of the fragility of the human in an incongruous world.” As a result of this skepticism, any attempt to understand evolution must also take the human storytelling brain

⁴ In this regard, Gould is even in agreement with Richard Dawkins – an evolutionist whose theoretical stance he has criticized in many of his writings (see also section II.4.2). Dawkins, too, writes in the preface of *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986: xi): “It is almost as if the human brain were specifically designed to misunderstand Darwinism, and to find it hard to believe.” See also Walsh (2011: 83-84): “Narrative cognition as an adaptive faculty is of interest precisely because of its incommensurability with the very processes that produced it.”