HEIKE HARTUNG (ED.)

EMBODIED NARRATION

ILLNESS, DEATH AND DYING IN MODERN CULTURE

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Do liminal embodied experiences such as illness, death and dying affect literary form? In recent years, the concept of embodiment has been theorized from various perspectives. Gender studies have been concerned with the cultural implications of embodiment, arguing to move away from viewing the body as a prediscursive phenomenon to regarding it as an acculturated body. Age studies have extended this view to the embodied experience of ageing, while drawing attention to the ways in which the ageing body, through its materiality and plasticity, restricts the possibilities of (de)constructing subjectivity. These current debates on embodiment find a strong counterpart in literary representation. The contributions to this anthology investigate how and to what extent physical borderline experiences affect literary form.

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Introduction
The Concept of Embodiment in Modern Culture

Heike Hartung

In response to the perceived neglect of the body as a category of cultural analysis, the concept of embodiment has been theorized in recent years in an attempt to move beyond the Cartesian dualism and to overcome the nature/culture split. Feminist theory and gender studies have been concerned with the cultural implications of embodiment, arguing for a move from viewing the body as a “nongendered, prediscursive phenomenon that plays a central role in perception, cognition, action and nature to a way of living or inhabiting the world through one’s acculturated body” (Weiss and Haber xiii–xiv). Since the 1980s, this relationship has been very much at the centre of interest, with a special focus on theorizing the body. Many disciplines have been interested in this theorizing, branching into the history of the body, but also focusing on philosophical, sociological and, above all, gendered and feminist engagement with the cultural implications of “embodiment”. The term “embodiment” is not simply a rephrasing of “body”, but rather a term that indicates the cultural framework in which the physical is always situated. Thus “embodiment” indicates a movement beyond the nature/culture binary.

Moving away from the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, contemporary psychologists and neuroscientists offer empirical evidence that “the body thinks”, arguing that what they refer to as “embodied cognition” may be non-conscious rather than conscious, but can nevertheless influence conscious action as well as initiating thought (Cuddy-Keane 680). The neuroscientific discipline more closely concerned with narrative, the “Philosophy of Mind”, has introduced the term “embodied narrative” to refer to another aspect of the connection between body and mind: The narrative self, introduced by David Dennett as an abstraction of the conscious
mind, is described by this term, first, as an embodied consciousness, self or agent, whose experiences are available for narration, and, second, as a narrative which plays a role in the agent’s psychological life. According to Richard Menary, “this embodied narrative view makes more sense of ourselves as complex biological, historical and social beings whose experiences and actions are ready for narration” (64).

With its focus on a person’s being “aged by culture” (Gullette), age studies has extended this view to the embodied experience of ageing, while drawing attention to the ways in which the ageing body in both its materiality and plasticity restricts the possibilities of (de-)constructing subjectivity. Therefore, the Foucaultian notion of “biopower”, with its treatment of the body as a projection screen for the playing out of power and knowledge structures, has been extended into more flexible conceptions of embodiment focusing on “biosociality” (Rabinow) or “the somatic self” (Rose). As a consequence, the new emphasis on the materiality of both body and mind in contemporary “neurocultures” has to be taken into account critically in relation to shifting notions of biopolitics.

In order to briefly explore the concept of “embodied narration” in this introduction, I will draw on theoretical concepts that can be made useful to age and disability studies. The interdisciplinary construct of embodiment should enable the analysis of literary representations of liminal embodied experiences such as ageing, illness and dying. My starting assumption is that these liminal experiences affect literary representation in significant ways: they problematize and shift the limits of narration itself. Or, in other words: liminal experience challenges narrative form as well as what we perceive as readers as narrative. Implicitly, therefore, this volume wants to open up the question of what can be defined as narrative.

The modern view of life and the body has been defined by Michel Foucault as “biopower”. In the essay “Right of Death and Power over Life” (1976), Foucault describes a transformation from the classical juridical form of power—or, in other words: the law of sovereignty, which extends its power over the life and death of its subjects—to a new, modern form of power that is “exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population” (137). This shift leads to the paradox, as he observes, that modern wars, which have become more devastating than ever, are no longer waged in the name of the sovereign. Instead, power is exercised at the level of life: “It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so
many wars, causing so many men to be killed” (137). In his essay, Foucault points to a transition from a premodern life or embodied existence, which was regulated by the hierarchical forms of sovereign power, but also exposed to arbitrary and haphazard forms of death (through contagion, plague, or the death penalty), to a modern individualized life, which is turning into an ever more controllable form of biological existence. The extension of power, he argues, has shifted from the sovereign’s right to take life—the “right of death”—to an extensive (technological, medical) control and power over life. This has affected the meaning of death, which has turned from a public spectacle into a private affair: “One might say that the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death. [...] Now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its domination; death is power’s limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most ‘private.’” (138) The shifts in the forms of embodiment hinted at in Foucault’s term “biopower”, and which he distinguishes as two basic forms that concern the disciplining of the individual human body and the regulation of the “species body” (139), have extensive cultural repercussion that affect the experience of ageing, but also those of illness and dying.

Foucault’s brief remarks on biopower have been extended in recent years from various perspectives. Paul Rabinow has incorporated the concept into his anthropological critique of modernity. In his Studies in the Anthropology of Reason (1996), Rabinow argues that the category of life itself is subjected to modernization. Therefore, he focused his ethnographic research in the 1990s on the expansion of biotechnology, and more specifically, on examining the sequencing of DNA. He argues that after the Second World War questions concerning life and death, health and illness, the pathological and the normal were turned, in Western societies, into concerns of the nation state, which led to the institutionalization of national welfare. This concern has been reformulated, since the 1990s, into an economic, scientific and political interest in ‘life’. The commercial and technological interest in life has, in its turn, changed the relationship between science, economy and the state. Rabinow’s studies of DNA sequencing, in which he pursues the question how this global research project has affected our social and ethical practices, describe a shift from an early twentieth-century “sociobiology” to a more recent “biosociality” (99). Sociobiology refers to modernist eugenic projects, which
encompassed liberal philanthropic attempts to moralize and discipline the poor and the so-called ‘deranged’. But they also led to the institution of racial hygiene, and to the elimination of whole social and ethnic groups in the Holocaust. Rabinow describes these modernist projects as social constructions using biological metaphors, in which the construction of a new society was at issue. The new genetics, he argues, is no longer concerned with biological metaphors of a modern society, but is transforming itself into a network of identity concepts, from which a new form of autoproduction emerges, which Rabinow terms “biosociality”:

“In the future, the new genetics will cease to be a biological metaphor for modern society and will become instead a circulation network of identity terms and restriction loci, around which and through which a truly new type of autoproduction will emerge, which I call ‘biosociality.’ If sociobiology is culture constructed on the basis of a metaphor of nature, then in biosociality, nature will be modeled on culture understood as practice. Nature will be known and remade through technique and will finally become artificial, just as culture becomes natural. Were such a project to be brought to fruition, it would stand as the basis for overcoming the nature/culture split.” (99)

The shift from sociobiology to biosociality as a form of embodiment is interesting for cultural analysis because of the notion of the social Rabinow employs. He refers to Raymond Williams’s use of the social (and of society) in *Keywords*, as concerning the “whole way of life of a people (hence open to empirical analysis and planned change)” (Rabinow 102). In this broad sense of the social as the common life practices of a people, the relationship of the social to embodiment becomes visible. What is at stake in these and other recent reformulations of Foucault’s notion of “biopower” are new concepts of modern subjectivity which affect the relationship between nature and culture, the biological and the social as well as cultural. This is also apparent in Nikolas Rose’s concept of the “somatic self”, with which he describes how the meaning of human life has changed the notion of humanism emerging in the nineteenth century by changes in biology, biomedicine and biotechnology that have occured since the twentieth century:

“Selfhood has become increasingly somatic—ethical practices increasingly take the body as the key site for work on the self. From official discourses of health pro-
motion through narratives of the experience of disease and suffering in the mass media, to popular discourses on dieting and exercise, we see an increasing stress on personal reconstruction through acting on the body in the name of fitness that is simultaneously corporeal and psychological. [...] I have termed this ‘somatic individuality’ (Novas and Rose, 2000). The new genomic and molecular vocabularies of ourselves—like earlier biomedical languages of intelligence, or depression, or ‘hormones’—are being incorporated within these relations of the somatic self to itself.” (18).

Thus the concept of the body is being extended to include both the corporeal and the psychological, but also political, social and cultural dimensions. This inclusive concept of embodiment, on which both Rabinow’s term “biosociality” and Rose’s term “somatic individuality” draw, has recently been related to “the shifting boundaries between life and death” by Rosi Braidotti (“Dying” 201). She argues that current notions of biopower concern not only “the government of the living” but also “practices of dying” (“Dying” 201). Braidotti’s reformulation of the concept of biopower is part of her notion of the posthuman. She incorporates the liminal concept of death into these biopolitical reformulations of subjectivity, for which art becomes a crucial reference point:

“By transposing us beyond the confines of bound identities, art becomes necessarily inhuman in the sense of non-human in that it connects to the animal, the vegetable, earthy and planetary forces that surround us. Art is also, moreover, cosmic in its resonance and hence posthuman by structure, as it carries us to the limits of what our embodied selves can do or endure. In so far as art stretches the boundaries of representation to the utmost, it reaches the limit of life itself and thus confronts the horizon of death. To this effect, art is linked to death as the experience of limits.” (The Posthuman 93)

These contemporary concepts involve a move towards a more inclusive concept of embodiment which encompasses the physical and the psychological. Foucault’s notion of biopower has also traveled further: from a shift between premodern and modern notions of life and death to different approaches to the political, social and cultural repercussions of concepts of human—as well as posthuman—subjectivity. These current debates on embodiment have a strong counterpart in literary representation. Therefore, this volume aims to investigate how liminal embodied
experiences such as illness, death and dying affect literary form. Proceeding from the assumption that these experiences problematize and shift the limits of narration itself, contributions explore exemplary works of art from the period of literary modernism onwards to include also contemporary culture. With its focus on experimentalism, the fragmentary and a reduced aesthetics, modern and postmodern literature seems particularly appropriate for studying liminal experience. Furthermore, modernist experimentalism has been seen in a dialogic exchange with similarly experimental tendencies in medical psychology and physiology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Together, these approaches have shaped modern concepts of embodiment, thus providing a bridge to our contemporary critical engagement with the acculturated body and embodied mind.

The contributions in this volume look at embodiment from different perspectives, focusing on the interrelations between illness, death and dying. The first chapter, my essay “Embodied Narrations of the End of Life: A Thanatological Biopolitics of Modern Culture” provides a brief overview of approaches to death and dying from the disciplinary perspectives of sociology, cultural studies, history and philosophy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Describing the material turn in the modern attitude towards death, the essay goes on to sketch a preliminary phenomenology of embodied death and dying in a cumulative reading of exemplary texts by Henry James, Samuel Beckett, Christopher Isherwood and Julian Barnes. The essay thus turns from James’s ghost stories, in which the ghost materializes as an absent presence and the ghostly presence of the dead determines their remembrance, to Beckett’s aesthetic concern with the interrelationship of births and deaths, beginnings and endings, which are prominent as a cultural matrix in his early work. Isherwood focuses on homosexual embodiment turning to embodied consciousness and physical materiality, while Barnes promotes different forms of “death writing” in an ironic inversion of life writing. The second chapter, Rüdiger Kunow’s “About Suffering They Were Never Wrong, The Old Masters: Human Pain and the Crucible of Representation”, focuses on suffering as an “emphatic now” in human embodiment. Looking at the body in pain and its representation in art leads him to a consideration of the negotiations of the border that pain expression entails. He traces the artistic representation of pain with an emphasis on how, where, and why the balance of power between the body in pain and the body in representation shifts,
and in what direction it does. Focusing on Seth Kaufman’s novel The King of Pain (2012), he argues that the text illustrates how the human body is “being ruthlessly commodified” and subjected to commercialization. He thus delineates the outlines of an ethics of representation and comes to the conclusion that pain in representation is “both a necessary practice and one that must remain incomplete, unfinished”.

In the third chapter, Margaret Morganroth Gullette poses the question of “How We Imagine Living with Dying”. In the first part of her essay, Gullette investigates how “living with dying” is represented in British and American nonfictional writing. She points out that there is a new kind of “eagerness to learn the particulars of dying” in the American cultural context that has moved beyond religion. In the second part of the chapter, Gullette turns to Marilynne Robinson’s novel Gilead (2004) to explore what this text implies about what general readers want to learn about living with dying. In focusing on the protagonist John Ames’s enhanced form of living with dying in his gentle life review, the novel provides an example of the good death. Sarah J. Ablett, in the fourth chapter on “Disgust in Samuel Beckett’s Molloy”, argues that Beckett in this novel “navigates in the liminal spaces of body and mind”. Her focus is on the tragical rather than the comical aspects of an aesthetics of disgust in Molloy (1955). Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, Ablett employs Beckett’s novel as an exemplary text to explore the embodiment of the “dualistic struggles of life and death, body and mind, nature and culture, as well as attraction and repulsion”. She concludes that the narrative voice in Molloy functions both on a physical and cognitive level to draw the reader’s attention to the difficult areas of embodiment, such as ageing, illness and dying.

Chapter five, Ellen Matlok-Ziemann’s “‘Blue with Age’: Dis- and Dys-appearance of the Body in Eudora Welty’s ‘A Worn Path’”, focuses on the specificities of the ageing body and, in particular, on representations of older women in literature. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir and Drew Leder’s phenomenological investigations, Matlok-Ziemann reads Eudora Welty’s short story as an example for overcoming the binary of decline stories and progress narratives of successful ageing. Rather, Welty’s “A Worn Path” is analysed as a text which makes its ageing female protagonist paradoxically visible in her lived embodied experience, in spite of the contradictory tensions in the text which entail her body’s disappearance. Mirjam Grewe-Salfeld in chapter six, “Growing
Bodies: Narrating Death and Sexuality in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction”, turns to the question of how the representation of death and dying is related to sexuality in the genre of Young Adult novels. With reference to four texts of this genre—Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* (2002), Gayle Forman’s *If I Stay* (2009), Jenny Downham’s *Before I Die* (2007) and John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012)—she argues that the embodied experience of dying in these young protagonists becomes a “process and site of growth”. As she points out in her conclusion, the aspects of embodied growth in these novels become “enmeshed with mortality and pain” and sexuality in its closeness to death “becomes dually inscribed as dangerous and desired”.

Chapter seven, Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl’s “When Mother is Dying: Miljenko Jergovic’s *Kin*”, argues that in the Bosnian-Croatian writer’s novel, which is an autobiographical family saga of a thousand and one pages, the main motif is death. Gramshammer-Hohl shows that this motif brings together the dying of the author’s mother with the dying of his family, “the dying of a city (Sarajevo), a country (Yugoslavia), and of what once meant home to the narrator”. In an attempt to orientalize his subject, the narrator employs multiple digressions and arabesque interpolated stories to “delay his mother’s death as long as possible, as if telling it would make it definite and irrevocable”. Furthermore, the essay illustrates in a close reading that the “proliferation” of the narrative mimetically “embodies” what it depicts: the narration, which tries to circumvent the imminence of the mother’s and the motherland’s death, becomes itself “metastatic”, spreading ever further away from its center, the multiple deaths. Ariane Schröder, in chapter eight, begins her essay “Storytelling in the Age of AIDS: Narrative Possibilities and the Exigencies of Loss in Dale Peck’s *Martin and John. A Novel*” by pointing out that the representation of AIDS as a literary subject entails encountering specific biomedical, political, ethical and aesthetic discourses. With reference to the specific experimental text she focuses on it is her aim to illustrate how Peck is “able to liberate his narrative [...] from the discursive limits of AIDS” and the stereotypical tropes associated with the disease. She first gives an overview of the development of the genre of AIDS literature, which turned from an early focus on activist texts to more complex renderings in the mid-eighties. As she shows, the focus of the genre is on “the act of bearing witness’ to both individual suffering and the potential demise of a whole [gay] subculture of American life”. In her reading of Peck’s novel
she points out that the author evades the frequent focus in AIDS narratives on “irreversible decline” and destabilizes the “commonly assumed link between homosexuality and death in the age of AIDS”. In her conclusion she argues that *Martin and John* is a novel that represents “an elaborate elegy on loss, grief and the potential for self-healing”.

In chapter nine, Vira Sachenko’s “Realism and the Soul: the Philosophy of Virginia Woolf’s Illness”, the focus is on Virginia Woolf’s approach to her own mental illness and its consequences for her writing. This topic is explored with reference to George Lukács’s writing on realism, drawing connections between the materialism of both Lukács and Woolf. In order to illuminate the relationship between Woolf’s writing style and her treatment of illness, Sachenko provides readings of Woolf’s essays “Modern Fiction” (1921) and “On Being Ill” (1926). She argues that Woolf’s concern with materialism, realism and the body was shaped by her reading of Russian literature. Furthermore, she proposes that Woolf draws on the concept of the soul as an unknown quantity to which body and mind are related in illness. She concludes that illness, for Woolf, was “the experience that revealed her embodied difference from all other beings”. Anita Wohlmann, in Chapter ten, “The Illness is You: Figurative Language in David Foster Wallace’s Short Story ‘The Planet Trillaphon’”, examines the uses of figurative speech in describing and explaining illness in narrative. In her close reading of Wallace’s postmodernist text, which is an imaginative investigation of depression personified as “the Bad Thing”, Wohlmann explores the move “from comparison (as in simile and metaphor) to equation or identification (as in synecdoche) by focusing on the relational nature of the two things that are brought together”. Rather than regarding metaphor and narrative as two unrelated theoretical endeavours, Wohlmann brings metaphor theory and narrative theory together in her reading in order to explore how narrative criteria can inform metaphor analysis, thus developing a rich critical vocabulary. Drawing on the critique of metaphor in the field of Health Humanities, in which metaphors have enjoyed an ambivalent reputation, she argues that figurative speech can be put to different uses in illness writing—courting both the danger of appropriation and colonization but also opening up the potential of identification. In her conclusion she points out that Wallace’s unnervingly open-ended story illustrates the “ambivalences involved when similarity and difference turn into identification and sameness”.

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Introduction
In chapter eleven, Monika Class focuses on “Illness and the Assault on the Lived Body in Hilary Mantel’s Giving Up the Ghost (2003)" in her reading of the British writer’s memoir of chronic illness. With reference to phenomenological approaches she defines the concept of embodiment as referring to the “lived body as experienced subjectively” and as connoting “embodied consciousness which is psychological, physiological and social in kind”. In her reading of the illness memoir, Class points out how Mantel constructs embodiment as a means of emancipation, while the writer encounters in her depiction of her endometriosis and the difficult way to diagnosis epistemic, testimonial and hermeneutic injustice. In fighting against the self alienation that chronic illness entails, Mantel’s language crosses the boundaries of politeness in order to fend off the invasiveness of medical examination. Thus Mantel employs literary narrative to evoke an embodiment that “advocates the epistemic and social recognition of the experience of illness”. Taken together, the chapters in this volume delineate a phenomenological inventory of the embodied narration of illness, death and dying in modern culture.

Works Cited


