

MALS 70000: Inventing the Self
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**Theories of Narrative
Psychology:**

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“It is reasonable to hypothesize that in the process of regulating life the networks formed by these nuclei also give rise to composite neural states. The word *feelings* describes the mental aspects of those states.

To grasp what I have in mind, I ask the reader to imagine a state of pleasure (or anguish) and try to itemize its components by making a brief inventory of the varied parts of the body that are changed in the process: endocrine, cardiac, circulatory, respiratory, intestinal, epidermic, muscular. Now consider the feeling you will experience is the integrated perception of all such changes as they occur in the landscape of the body. As an exercise, you can actually try to compose the feeling and assign values of intensity to each component. For each instance that you can imagine, you will obtain a different quality” (Damasio, *Self* 104).

When I am writing well, I often lose all sense of composition; the sentences come as if I hadn't willed them, as if they were manufactured by another being. This is not my day-to-day mode of writing, which includes grinding, painful periods of starts and stops. But the sense that I have been taken over happens several times during the course of a book, usually in the latter stages. I don't write; I am written. (Hustvedt 72).

In Eco's witty words (1994: 117-118) 'life is certainly more like *Ulysses* than like *The Three Musketeers* – yet we are all the more inclined to think of it in terms of *The Three Musketeers* than in terms of *Ulysses*'. (László 126).

Modern life in middle-class America derives from this nineteenth-century legacy. The public and the private realms of adulthood remain divorced, and adults recognize the existence of their several selves. The multiplicity of the self is a result of economic, technological, social, and philosophical changes that have occurred in our world during the past two hundred years. Like many aspects of modern life, multiplicity in the self is an uneven privilege. ON the one hand, modern men and women would appear to have a great many more opportunities, compared with adults living two hundred years ago, for living productive, happy, and full lives. On the other hand, wide-open choices are sometimes frightening, and adults are bound to realize, typically in their thirties if not before, that choices bring with them eventual limitations and inescapable sacrifices. Furthermore, as we seek to become many different things, we appear to be pulled in the opposite direction as well, to become one thing upon which, as William James once put it, “we can stake our salvation.”

Modern life invites us to be many things. Our life stories welcome the debut and development of a wide cast of characters. But ultimately we seek unity as much as diversity. We seek to be one thing, for a single life. As a modern adult, one must find meaning at home, be everything to everybody at every place and time. But an individual can be some important things for important people, at particular times and particular places. Furthermore, he or she can be these things in a way that is unique, self-consistent, coherent, meaningful, purposeful, and gratifying. Creating a personal myth that contains a rich but finite source of characterizations—a suitable case of imagoes—enables an individual to resolve the problem of simultaneously being the many and the one. (McAdams 121)

This book presents a theory of human identity. The theory is built around the idea that each of us comes to know who he or she is by crafting a heroic story of the self. I aim to explore and explain how each of us constructs, consciously and unconsciously, a personal myth. (McAdams 11-12)

For all its power and persuasion, however, the paradigmatic mode is a strangely humbler form of thought than story making. It is not able to make much sense of human desire, goals, and social conduct. Human events are often ambiguous, and resistant to paradigmatic efforts to understand them. By contrast, good poets and novelists are masters of the narrative mode. Their stories are especially effective when, in Bruner's words, they "mean more than they can say." A good story triggers presuppositions. We have all had the experience of comparing with a friend what we "got out" of a good movie, play, or novel, only to learn that the two of us have read or understood the same story in very different ways. This is part of the fun and value of stories, for they give us differing ideas and opinions from around which to have conversations and arguments. Good stories give *birth* to many different meanings, generating "children" of meaning in their own image. (McAdams 29).

Narrative Analysis

Traditionally, narratives are analysed in social sciences in three distinct ways. *Formal-structural analysis* initiated by the Russian formalists focuses on the role that linguistic and discourse structures play in conveying meaning. In psychology this approach prevails in cognitive studies of story production and comprehension. *Content analysis* is directed to the semantic content and tries to quantify it. In psychology, of course, psychological contents are classified and measured. Major limits of both analytic tools are, first, the uncertainty of the external validity of the constructs derived from them, and second, blindness to the context where structures or semantic contents occur. This latter flaw prevents formal-structural analysis and content analysis to reconstruct pragmatic or psychological meaning in texts. However, the third type of narrative analytics, hermeneutic analysis, embraces the social, cultural, and textual context of the narrative and interprets its meaning against this background. In psychology it mostly means interpretation of personal narratives with reference to identity. Validity of interpretation, however, is not amenable to empirical testing. (László 3)

The positivism versus hermeneutics or the sciences versus the humanities controversy is clearly reflected in the above approaches. Whereas content analysis goes bottom-up, attempting to construct meaning from elementary pieces of narrative discourse, hermeneutics adopts a top-down strategy in which the interpretation horizon has absolute primacy. Attempts have been made to reconcile the two approaches with moderate success. For instance, Martindale's empirically aided 'quantitative hermeneutics' (Martindale and West 2002), which uses computer technology to unravel thematic lines in text corpora, has been by and large dismissed by positivists as too soft and by hermeneutic scholars as too reductionist. Nevertheless, as I will argue in chapters 3 and 4, psychology is a discipline where the 'two cultures' of sciences and humanities (Snow 1993) can and should meet. Of course, we do not envision a merging between the two epistemological stances. We rather expect to emerge psychological issues in personality, social and cultural processes, where complexity of the phenomenon both allows and requires concerted application of top-down and bottom-up methodologies. Narrative, but its undoubted structural organization, its material, empirical aspects, and its close relation to broad issues of identity, seems to be the vehicle of these complex psychological processes. Scientific narrative psychology is an attempt to outline these domains and to facilitate the encounter between the scientific and the hermeneutic methodologies. (László 3)

A person whom I perceive mainly through my projections is an imago, or, alternatively, a carrier of *imagos* or *symbols*. All the contents of our unconscious are constantly being projected into our surroundings, and it is only by recognizing certain properties of the objects as projections or imagos that we are able to distinguish them from the real properties of the objects. (Jung, *Dreams* 50).

Imagoes are often built around significant others. Beyond the character types offered by society at large, adults fashion their imagoes on models provided by parents, teachers, siblings, friends, and many other significant people they have known. Ultimately, imagoes are forged from interpersonal relationships. A significant person in one's life may serve as a flesh-and-blood incarnation of what a particular imago represents. One's own mother may serve as a model for the imago of the caregiver. A beloved teacher who helps clear up some academic and personal confusions may prove to be the prototype of the healer.

There exists today a strong movement in clinical psychology and psychotherapy suggesting that we all “internalize” important people in our lives and structure our personalities around these internalizations. According to the “object relations” approach to personality, people for whom we feel strong emotions ultimately become represented in our unconscious minds as personified structures. . . . (McAdams 130)

To interpret the dream-imagos on the subjective-level has therefore the same meaning for modern man as taking away his ancestral figures and fetishes would have for primitive man, and trying to convince him that his “medicine” is a spiritual force which dwells not in the object but in the human psyche. The primitive feels a legitimate resistance against this heretical assumption, and in the same way modern man feels that it is disagreeable, perhaps even somehow dangerous, to dissolve the time-honoured and sacrosanct identity between imago and object. The consequences for our psychology, too, can scarcely be imagined: we would no longer have anybody to rail against, nobody whom we could make responsible, nobody to instruct, improve, and punish! On the contrary, we would have to begin, in all things, with ourselves; we would have to demand of ourselves, and of no one else, all the things which we habitually demand of others. (Jung, *Dreams* 20)