Introduction

“Who am I?” For users of Unix operating systems, `whoami` is a command that gives the name that the user is working under. For psychologists and psychiatrists, it is the question that many patients ask themselves, trying to pin down the main ‘ingredients’ of their personality. In 2009, Richard David Precht published *Wer bin ich – und wenn ja, wie viele? (Who am I – and If so, How Many?),* subtitled “a philosophical journey”. Unlike many other self-help books Precht’s deals with the important questions in life: What is truth? Where do we come from? What is it that I am morally obliged to do, and why? As such, it is a short introduction to philosophy, and the question of who one is also belongs to this area. “Who am I?”, then, seems to be one of the key questions of humanity.

In philosophy, sociology, and psychology, it asks for the definition of an identity. According to the OED, ‘identity’ denotes

- a. The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition of being a single individual; the fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality.
- b. Who or what a person or thing is; a distinct impression of a single person or thing presented to or perceived by others; a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person or thing from others. (OED, s.v. ‘identity’)
Identity, then, is seen as something that is largely immutable (“sameness […] at all times or in all circumstances”) and as unique (“that distinguishes a person […] from others”). The idea is that someone – or something, or even a group of someones – has features that sets him/her/them apart from everyone else, and that remain stable even if circumstances change. But just who “am” I, or who “are” we, and how do we find out?

The perception of oneself differs from the way others see us, and the self-concept of an individual must be considered as different from the way s/he is seen from the outside. Many aspects come into play: an individual’s dreams and aspirations, his/her abilities and disabilities – real or perceived – , his/her interaction with others, his/her physical constitution, to name but a few. Sociologists have suggested that identity is created on two different levels, on an individual or personal and a social level. Essentially this describes the difference between referring to oneself as ‘I’ as opposed to making statements about ‘us’, meaning ‘I and others like me’ and creating a group identity that is seen as distinct from the identity of ‘them’.

With respect to literature and literary analysis, questions of identity matter very much: Whenever we look for characteristics of this or that fictitious character we are interested in the way his/her identity is formed and formulated, part of which is apparent in the group or groups the character belongs to. Whenever we analyse the behaviour of a narrator we try to pin down not only his/her identity as an intermediary between the reader and what happens in the story, but also investigate the relationship between narrator and fictitious characters. There is more to that, though. Many texts deal with questions of group identity; Romeo and Juliet are separated by group boundaries that are formed by kinship, for example, and novels like Sir Walter Scott’s Ivanhoe or Waverley depict conflicts between groups that are delimited by belonging to a specific ‘race’ or political persuasion. The four essays in this volume reflect various aspects of identity and its (literary) construction.

The first two papers focus on the formation of characters, on patterns of identity, in nineteenth-century literature. Ever since the publication of Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, readers have been faced with characters that were (and are) seen to be modelled on ‘real life’. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, George Gordon Lord Byron became infamous not only for his scandalous love-life but also for his poems which, in their male protagonists, largely reflected the image he created of himself. Readers were fascinated, and the ‘Byronic hero’ became a literary staple. Vanessa Mangione follows the variations of this very special kind of anti-hero through some of the best-known nineteenth-century novels written by female authors. Drawing on Kristeva’s terminology of the symbolic and the semiotic she explains why the Byronic hero was so interesting and yet so challenging to the authors and their readers. At the same time she traces a closely related and
very modern discussion: that on the rights and duties especially of women, but
also of men.

The nineteenth century does not only witness the first novelists that can be
considered as feminists, it also sees the rise of the British Empire. Sabina Fazli
looks at another very modern feature of nineteenth-century literature: Authors like
Arthur Conan Doyle, Willkie Collins and Anthony Trollope use Indian diamonds
to represent facets of nationality and a very specific concept of 'civilisation'. Fazli
points out that diamonds have always been the subject of myths and legends, and
these are taken over into sensationalist novels and the budding crime literature.
They serve to characterise women as frail vessels that must be protected – because
they are very good at losing the very valuable stones –, but at the same time they
introduce an element of the Orient to England, and one that is directly connected
to criminality as they “poison” minds (183) and make otherwise rational men
commit acts of murder and treachery.

The following two papers are concerned with the creation of identity in na-
tional and transnational contexts. The early twentieth century saw the disintegra-
tion of the Empire. Discontent had long simmered in India but also closer to
home, in Ireland. Throughout the nineteenth century there had been attempts to
create a greater autonomy for Ireland, and in 1893 the Second Home Rule Bill was
passed in the House of Commons though vetoed in the House of Lords. It was
only in 1914 that the Home Rule Bill was passed by both Houses, but with the
outbreak of the First World War the implementation was deferred. From 1921,
Ireland was a divided country, comprising the Republic of Ireland and Northern
Ireland. This also sparked a debate about the constitutional status of Northern
Ireland and provoked what became known as ‘the Troubles’, a series of conflicts
between (mainly Catholic) nationalists that were interested in a closer relationship
with the Republic and (mainly Protestant) unionists intent on remaining a part of
Great Britain. ‘The Troubles’ found their way into literature, too. Melanie
Swiatloch shows how contemporary Irish novelists negotiate the difficulties of
positioning their characters within the framework of religion and politics, moving
between past, present and a vision of the future. Questions of how to relate to the
‘Other’ are raised and answered differently in the texts Swiatloch discusses; yet in
all novels, some kind of national identity is created and altered through the lives of
the protagonists.

The final paper in this collection is also concerned with questions of national
identity, but Sonja Lehmann does not restrict herself to one geographic region.
Instead she focuses on the work of a novelist whose very biography is trans-
national: Michael Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka in 1943 to parents of Tamil-
Dutch origin; his family moved to England in 1954, and in 1962 Ondaatje emi-
grated to Canada. He holds both the Sri Lankan and the Canadian nationalities.
Many of his texts focus on the experience of migration and the resulting mental
and physical homelessness – another aspect of identity.
‘Them’ and ‘Us’ are important categories, not only in theories of nationhood but also with respect to the social positioning of individuals. The papers collected in this volume illustrate how very relevant this dichotomy has been for authors and readers from 1800 onwards. Each of the papers was accepted as a master’s thesis between 2009 and 2010 and was chosen for inclusion both for the authors’ competence in using theories and for their unusual topics. As such, they are valuable additions to literary criticism; at the same time they show the level of competence students can attain at Göttingen university.

Bibliography

