Introduction

> And who are you? Said he. – Don't puzzle me, said I.
> *Tristram Shandy*, Book VII, Chapter 33, 473

Tristram Shandy's bewildered reaction and his inability to give a straightforward answer to the question as to who he is may be, ironically, the most appropriate way of introducing a series of essays dealing with notions of identity. The self as a concept has always proved highly intricate, if not puzzling. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the Creature, echoing Tristram's perplexity, pondered about his own origins and identity: "'Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?'" the Creature wondered, conceding regretfully "'These questions continually recurred but I was unable to solve them'" (Shelley 104). The Creature's incapacity to provide and articulate a coherent narrative for his own existence crystallizes the vexed nature of the very concept of identity. Certainly, stories relating to how the self is defined and performed have never yielded any ultimate narrative but have constantly been questioned and revised.

One standard story, often circulated within Western culture, presents an overarching movement that sees a gradual shift from communal or collective identity to a more individual and individualistic notion of the self. This tale describes the history of selfhood as a "biography of progress" that leads towards emancipation, autonomy, and authenticity; from the "tribal mentality" of "primitive societies" to the more self-centred and autonomous nature of the modern self (Porter 1). However, scholars have shown this particular tale to be obsolete, suggesting it should be replaced by other stories whose plots complicate and subvert this seemingly progressive and emancipatory development.[1] Advances in

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[1] The collection of essays included in Porter's edited book tries precisely to undermine and supersede the views of selfhood as a biography of (Western) progress and development.

new technologies, to mention only one example, keep changing the parameters in which the self is approached and understood, and within this technological frame the modern "I" is certainly not as autonomous as is usually suggested. No doubt, the question of whether the self is something given and unique or something made and achieved, as well as the related issue of whether the self should be conceived in individual or social terms, have been at the core of the identity debate for centuries (see Culler 110-122). All the essays included in the present volume argue against an essentialist view of the self and demonstrate in various ways how identities – whether they are defined as national, sexual, gendered, cultural, professional, virtual, linguistic or in some other way personal – are the products of multiple constructions and interconnected performances. "Performing" a self is indeed here shown to be an act of constant questioning and staging, a relentless process which one perpetually revises and readjusts.

Performing the Self was the title of the SAUTE conference held at the University of Fribourg in May 2009 and attended by Swiss and international scholars of English literature and linguistics. The present volume contains a selection of the papers presented during this event, offering multifarious perspectives on the debate about selfhood and identity. The diversity of approaches among the contributions, however, should not obscure the degree of similarity and convergence among them. Despite engaging with the topic in contrasting ways, literary and linguistic scholars concern themselves with very similar questions. Both in language and literature, identities are the subject of renewed negotiation and manipulation, of ceaseless confirmation and contestation. Thus this volume has to be read as a cross-disciplinary dialogue about fundamental issues related to identity construction and identity performance. Among the numerous subjects raised here, three in particular have drawn our attention as they offer an ideal platform for interdisciplinary discussion. First, the postmodernist notion of fluidity and multiplicity, already hinted at above, emerges as one central tenet in all the present essays. Unsurprisingly, in an age in which virtual reality, instant communication and rapid travelling regulate the vast majority of our actions and situations, the idea and the experience of a self in perpetual motion, with no fixed centre, is stronger than ever before. Interestingly, the concepts of fluidity and multiplicity can be approached both synchronically and diachronically: one particular identity trait – for example, womanhood – may shift from context to context, while the values associated with it may fluctuate over time. Another issue addressed by several papers is the relationship linking identity with notions of nationality and geography: to which extent is one's identity shaped by the assimilation or denial of national(istic) features? More generally, how is one's personal identity geo-

graphically and culturally located? By which means do individuals construct and define themselves between the local and the global? While these notions of personal and cultural geography are closely connected with concepts of fluidity and multiplicity, they also intersect with ideas of authenticity, performance and staging, which constitute the last major themes of this volume. The idea that the world is a stage on which individuals perform the comedies and tragedies of human life goes back to antiquity. "All the world's a stage," Jaques says to Duke Senior in Shakespeare's *As you Like It*, "And all the men and women merely players: / They have their exits and their entrances; / And one man in his time plays many parts" (II.7.139-142). The negotiation of the fluid boundaries between an authentic and a staged self is a main concern for performance studies which, like postmodernism, emphasize mobility, alteration and dynamism. Indeed, performance studies propose a self that is constantly reconstructed and recreated – the latter term containing within it the idea of recreation both as regeneration as well as play and amusement.

Although the essays contained in this volume have been chosen to represent specific themes, doubtless each article could have been inserted within a different section. We believe that our thematic choice, while ensuring some structural principle, is sufficiently loose to allow for fruitful cross-questioning and intersecting exploration. In this regard, the introductory piece in this volume is symptomatic of the multi-layered dimensions of identity as it simultaneously combines notions of fluidity, nationality, and staging. In "Performing Identities in Byron and Bourdieu," Angela Esterhammer explores the modern performance of identity in Byron's poem *Beppo* (1817), an anecdote recounted by an expatriate English narrator about the customs of Venetian society. Highlighting the continuity between the early nineteenth century and the modern period, her piece shows how Byron's depiction and treatment of characters anticipates certain notions of postmodern sociology, and especially Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*. The performative and improvisatory aspects of identity construction characterizing the three main protagonists' individual experiences are enhanced in the poem by the Carnivalesque setting in which Byron's story takes place, a setting in which the boundaries between true, real, and disguised are explicitly blurred and put on show. At the same time, the highly symbolic status of Venice's cultural history, embracing as it does both Western and Oriental mores, further complicates the characters' perspective on their immediate and foreign environment, as well as on themselves.

In their essay, Adrian Pablé and Marc Haas take this same notion of fluidity as exposed in Byron's poem to heart and claim that the very existence of multiple identities for a single individual – that is, the fact that

identity is in constant flux and is contextually and dynamically con-
structed – calls for a different appraisal of identity-related phenomena
within the field of linguistics. In "Essentialism, Codification and the
Sociolinguistics of Identity," they argue that even the most radical socio-
constructionist linguistic analysis cannot avoid a certain form of essen-
tialism in its approach to identity, which is difficult to reconcile with the
extreme degree of fluidity displayed in everyday communication. Instead
the authors propose that this apparent paradox requires a fundamentally
different approach which literally integrates the complex, online and
sometimes contradictory aspects of identity construction in language,
namely integrationism. Interestingly, by rejecting the more scientifically
grounded generalizations expressed in sociolinguistics, integrationism
claims a less radical – "lay" – position for itself on the continuum which
unites language and literary scholars on these questions regarding the
performance of the self.

Alexa Weik's essay, closer to the literary end of the continuum, ex-
plores the same inner tension that arises from conflicting identities. Her
piece, "From the Great Plains to the Red Apple Country: Identity and
Ecology in Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories*" examines the personal,
linguistic, and ideological conflicts experienced by a woman born on a
reservation in the prairies of South Dakota and subsequently educated
in Quaker mission schools in Indiana. Weik shows how the protago-
nist's geographical journey is accompanied by an equally unsettling per-
sonal journey which forces her continually to question, renegotiate, and
ultimately accept the lessons learned from her conflicted identity. Re-
vealingly, Zitkala-Ša's experience of "double consciousness" translates
into her using the English language in order to narrate her biographical
experience; yet her account also shows that she continually fights to re-
tain key aspects of her Indian identity – a personal struggle, Weik shows,
which ultimately turns into a public and political fight for Native Ameri-
can civil rights and environmental justice.

Touching on the fundamental relation extant between one's language
and the identity one performs, Weik thus emphasizes one of the central
ideas of the scientific approach which characterizes the linguistic inves-
tigation of identity construction. As is already apparent in the seminal
work of their forefathers, variationist studies – which focus on system-
atic patterns of language variation – linked the variability of linguistic
features to a number of predicting external factors (see Labov). Interest-
ingly, the list of factors responsible for such variation has outgrown the
original geographical focus to include typical components that are often
regarded as identity traits: socio-economic background, age cohort, edu-
cational profile, professional occupation, gender, ethnicity, sexuality,
etc., thereby extending the notion of dialect to social categories or

communities. In this linguistic tradition, language is assumed to function as an index of these geographical and social parameters. That is to say that language is considered a mirror in which a speaker's identity is reflected and revealed. This is a direction which has also been explored by literary authors as they create a voice for their characters. In this respect, the presence of non-standard, prototypically insular features in the language of the youth living on Martha's Vineyard – a popular tourist destination off the coast of Massachusetts – in the 1960s, against the general trend towards standard American English, is analyzed by Labov as differentially asserting a local identity against the seasonal onslaught of tourists coming from the continent. This type of scientific investigation is echoed directly in the prose of an author like MacDiarmid who finds stylistic features to index the Scottish identity of his characters, or in Shakespeare's rendering of the "mechanicals'" social identity in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Already in the early stages of sociolinguistic investigation, however, scholars also considered the other side of the causal relationship which was taken to hold between social and regional factors and the presence of certain linguistic traits in the speech of individuals. Thus, in the wake of social constructionist critique, language scholars started to consider how language could be used to *perform* an identity, thereby effectively reversing the causal relationship and claiming that language could be used to construct one's self/oneself. As they focus on the intricate connections that obtain between geographical and national identities and their traces in language – be it *of* an individual or *about* that individual – the contributors in this volume explore the complex and various aspects of this issue.

Céline Guignard's essay, "Recovering and Reshaping a Lost Identity: The Gael's Linguistic and Literary Struggle," forms another bridge between linguistic and literary studies and articulates the complex interconnections between language and national/local identity. Guignard's discussion adds another dimension to the debate about the political and cultural call for a literature produced in indigenous languages. Indeed, addressing this debate from a different perspective, Guignard shows how three twentieth-century Scottish authors – William Sharp, Neil Munro and Fionn Mac Colla – negotiate various ways of writing about Gaelic identity and culture in the English language. Thus, rather than seeing language as a marker of national and cultural distinction, these three authors paradoxically appropriate the very language which threatens to hasten the decline of their own culture. Their literary techniques, some of which Guignard analyzes closely, have a political impetus as they allow these writers to present and share a distinctly local and native spirit within a wider, global, environment.

In "Negotiating identities and *Doing* Swiss," Kellie Gonçalves looks into the subtle ways in which, on the one hand, a new national identity may be constructed ("*doing* Swiss"), and, on the other, how a national identity might be maintained in the heterogeneous environment of an intercultural couple. In a clear parallel with the kind of linguistic positioning discussed by Guignard regarding Scottish writers, Gonçalves shows for instance how language is perceived as an inherent, core component of a person's identity (see Pavlenko and Blackledge). She illustrates how, from a pre-theoretical point of view, the essential relationship which prevails between language and a national as well as cultural identity, is unambiguously assumed: one of Gonçalves' expats exclaims that she feels like she "jumped out of [her] culture!" and doesn't want her "house to be in a foreign language." The article also builds on Buchholtz and Hall's sociolinguistics of identity construction, as it discusses the crucial idea that identity work is "negotiated," i.e. the result of a *joint* performance between the various participants of the talk exchange. In this context, Gonçalves' notion of negotiation is reminiscent of the work carried out in the 1960s by sociologist Erving Goffman in a series of writings that were to have a long lasting impact on research into identity performance. It is this same interactional perspective, where national and cultural identity is regarded as co-constructed, which is taken up in the next paper as well.

Indeed, Amit Chaudhuri's piece, "Ray and Ghatak and Other Film-making Pairs: the Structure of Asian Modernity," puts into question the whole "East" versus "West" dichotomy that has characterized the vast majority of postcolonial studies. Citing the example of Satyajit Ray's reading of the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa – thus replacing the traditionally East-West dialectic by one between two Asian contexts – Chaudhuri maintains that modernity should rather be defined as the "culmination" of "a series of interchanges and tensions" between differing cultural contexts not necessarily existing in polar opposition to one another. For Chaudhuri, modernity and modern identity surface and materialize within a global network of exchanges, influences, transformations and what he calls "recognitions." The modern self is one that results from, and belongs to, a universal platform of individuals who all live in the historical moment of the present.

In "Falstaff in Switzerland, Hamlet in Bavaria: Expatriate Shakespeare and the Question of Cultural Transmission," Michael Dobson tackles similar issues of cultural dissemination and appropriation. His essay explores the reception of Shakespeare in two different national and cultural contexts: the one in Geneva in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, the other in Bavaria during World War II. Drawing on a wide range of different documents, Dobson's piece shows how the plays

of Britain's canonical poet were re-adapted and re-adjusted into the fabric of two distinct modern stages. His essay examines the ways in which the idea of "Britishness" – here incarnated in the figure of Shakespeare – was transmitted and re-interpreted on the Continent. Essentially, Dobson's article investigates the intricate ways in which a historical past is transmitted to, and re-constructed by, a modern present. At the same time, Dobson's analysis engages with the personal implications of theatrical performance, showing how interpreting Shakespeare literally becomes part of the process of identity and gender construction for those who perform his plays.

Dobson's illustration of the fluid connections between national identity and cultural performance on the one hand, and between personal identity and theatrical performance on the other hand, crystallizes the ways in which performance studies have developed over recent decades. Indeed, performance studies were originally related to theatre studies; however, the notion of performativity has since been adopted in many different fields of research, including philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology, literature and linguistics, among others. In his paper, Nikolas Coupland also focuses on what constitutes the definitional traits of an identity, for instance "national," when he writes, like Dobson, about "Britishness." In his criticism, Coupland shows that traditional research carried out in sociolinguistics, following the work done by Labov, relies on the assumption that there exists a correlation between certain fixed social factors – e.g. age, gender, socio-economic background, educational level, ethnicity, etc. – and linguistic features. Coupland argues against the viability of this model on two distinct grounds. First, identity traits or social factors are not necessarily a property that one has but can also be the result of construction processes through language, i.e. of a (linguistic) performance. But if the relationship between language and identity can thus be reversed, the initial sociolinguistic assumption, it is argued, needs to be reconsidered. Interestingly, it is this shift of direction in the relation that holds between social parameters and linguistic markers that is also responsible for introducing a more fluid and multifaceted view of identity, in which performance creates coherence. Second, his paper "Language, Ideology, Media and Social Change" also questions the temporal fluidity of any kind of identity category. Thus, echoing the POW's performances of Shakespeare discussed by Dobson, Coupland shows that while "Britishness" is a World War II concept, its meaning and associated connotations have evolved through time, effectively referring to different social constructs. The same condition of constant flux holds true of the linguistic markers, for instance of "Standard English" features, whose indexing function changes through time. Contrary to Pablé and Haas, the author argues that a more subtle socio-

linguistic approach can be found which factors in this type of inherent fluidity and maintains the scientific validity of this type of research.

Part of Coupland's linguistic investigation into "Language, Ideology, Media and Social Change" rests on an exploration of the popular-culture British television show *Strictly Come Dancing* – a programme featuring celebrities competing in Ballroom and Latin dances, and whose performances are rated by the public and four judges who are "typologically dispersed" and whose "class-related voices" differ from one another. The next article, "'There are many that I can be': The Poetics of Self-Performance in Isak Dinesen's 'The Dreamers'" by Barbara Straumann, represents an attractive literary variation on the theme of staged presentation and orchestrated performance. In line with theories of identity construction and gender performance (Butler), Straumann's essay explores the many transformations of Pellegrina Leoni, a celebrated opera singer who loses her voice in a tragic accident. Leoni's personal resurrection, the author shows, rests on assuming a variety of shifting roles that highly contrast with the "rigid star persona" for which she was initially known. The various masks that Leoni puts on allow her to perpetually construct and deconstruct herself. Significantly, it is precisely when Leoni is being asked "who she is" by one of the other characters in the narrative that she dies – thus offering a postmodern and decidedly more macabre version of Tristram Shandy's response quoted at the beginning of this introduction. The issue of making and unmaking is further complicated in the narrative by the fact that Leoni's continuous rebirths into new selves echo the many personal and artistic resurrections of Isak Dinesen herself, also known as Karen Blixen. The ever elusive relationship between truth and fiction is thus given a new literary platform, with "The Dreamers" functioning as a manifesto for Dinesen's own artistic (self)construction.

Issues of self-making, perpetual transformation and updating, as well as the complex relationship between authenticity and anonymity, are once again pursued in the next and final contribution by Brook Bolander and Miriam Locher. These two scholars investigate how computer mediated communication, in this case the Internet and more specifically the social networking website Facebook, has redefined the sort of identity construction work that speakers engage in. In doing so they show how the recent development of such online social interfaces gives us an exceptional opportunity to observe identity performance as it unfolds through a medium that categorises and re-organises identity-building acts. In "Constructing Identity on Facebook" the authors show that by offering a clean slate, that is, perfect anonymity, online space also requires that a new, possibly fictional, identity be constructed within the materiality of the medium itself. Online network participants

engage in complex performances of their online selves which exploit the various dimensions of the medium (language, image, links). Through a close scrutiny of the data they collected, they reveal the specific linguistic strategies that determine online identity performance.

Clearly, many other aspects relating to identity construction and identity performance could have been raised: this volume touches upon only a few of them. Addressing the question of identity in all its various and contradictory aspects is a Herculean, if not impossible task. The aim of *Performing the Self* is, perhaps more modestly, to bring together two different fields of scholarship and to enable a cross-disciplinary dialogue among all the various papers. The two voices of this introduction, co-authored by a literary scholar and a linguist, reflect such a dialogue. We hope that our exchange will encourage further exploration, leading to further fruitful interdisciplinary discussion on the performance of self-hood and identity.

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