

Martin Klepper, *The Discovery of Point of View: Observation and Narration in the American Novel 1790–1910*. American Studies: A Monograph Series, Volume 197. Heidelberg: Winter, 2011, 419 pp., € 54.00.

In Edgar Allan Poe's satirical story "How to Write a Blackwood Article/A Predicament" the narrator, Signora Psyche Zenobia, suffers a horrible fate. While looking at the city of Edinburgh from the steeple of a Gothic cathedral she is trapped by the hands of a gigantic clock and recounts how, slowly and mercilessly, the minute-hand of the clock begins to cut into her neck. Eventually her head will be severed from her body but before that happens she describes how she painfully loses her eyes: "My eyes, from the cruel pressure of the machine, were absolutely starting from their sockets. While I was thinking how I should possibly manage without them, one actually tumbled out of my head, and, rolling down the steep side of the steeple, lodged in the rain gutter which ran along the eaves of the main building. The loss of the eye was not so much as the insolent air of independence and contempt with which it regarded me after it was out. There it lay in the gutter just under my nose, and the air it gave itself would have been ridiculous had they not been disgusting. Such a winking and blinking were never before seen" (Poe 188).

Although Martin Klepper's study *The Discovery of Point of View* does not mention this story by Poe it would provide fitting material for his research interest: the relations between, and disjunction of, narrative voice and observing eye or experiencing consciousness in the history of American literature which, according to Klepper, turned towards the subjective and personal during the romantic period. In Klepper's introduction Poe's exceptional status at the beginning of the nineteenth century as well as Henry James' literary productions around the fin de siècle serve as the framework for his examination. As a whole, however, the study covers the period of the mid-eighteenth century until the early twentieth century and makes reference not just to American authors but to a wide range of philosophical, scientific, and literary traditions from England, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States. Due to this transnational and transgeneric approach the subtitle "observation and narration in the American novel 1790–1910" seems like an understatement in some parts of the book even though, on the whole, the most extensive analyses are indeed devoted to American novels and cultural developments.

Klepper's study has a dual focus. On the one hand, he approaches the process of observation from a narratological perspective aiming to provide a historical account of the emergence and increasing complexity of point of view in English and American literature from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Klepper traces in many different texts and genres, from sentimental and gothic fiction to romanticism and realism – from Sterne, Fielding and Richardson via Brown, Poe, Hawthorne and Melville to Howells and James – how narrative devices such as free indirect discourse contributed to a second-order of observation, i.e. to fictional texts that increasingly turned to the process of observation and perspective itself. On the other hand, Klepper interweaves this evolutionary story of literary and narrative devices with a history of philosophical concepts, cultural developments, and visual technologies that reflect upon, and demonstrate, the increasing importance of observation as a major force of modernity and modernization. This complementary trajectory proceeds from John Locke's and David Hume's enlightenment philosophies proposing the camera obscura as a metaphor for the (transparent) mind, and observation as a prerequisite for notions of sympathy. It continues to trace the more opaque and subjective notions of observation and selfhood in the romantic era (Ralph Waldo Emerson) and culminates in the pragmatist's concern with the interactional and relational qualities of observation (William James). Furthermore, drawing primarily on Jonathan Crary's work, Klepper makes continuous reference to the history of visual toys and technologies such as the phenakistiscope, diorama or photography and the emergence of a predominantly scopic consumer culture in the "age of Expositions", both of which support the notion that multi-perspectivism and the subjectivity of vision enter the realm of literature because it interacts closely with major social and cultural developments of the nineteenth century.

Despite the daunting scope of this design Martin Klepper's study manages successfully to balance the different threads of literary, cultural, and intellectual history. Following Niklas Luhmann's sociological theory of a "functional differentiation" of society Klepper argues that literature and art constitute an autonomous realm of experimentation in which unique forms of observation and self-observation may emerge. Over the course of the nineteenth century narrative techniques contribute to a process of refinement that creates multiple perspectives in literature and – beginning in the United States with the major American Renaissance authors – eventually triggers the shift to a second-order of observation. As Klepper writes: "Literature creates models of how observers observe in various subsystems of society" (39). Narratologically this process happens in first-person as well as editorializing authorial narratives, yet as Klepper shows its crucial development takes place in instances of "observational doubling": the simultaneous presentation of a narrative voice and the observational or perceptual apparatus of a character in new forms of internal focalization (Genette) or figural narrative situations (Stanzel). Klepper argues that, over the course of the nineteenth century and culminating in the "realist project", the continuous experiments with free indirect discourse, dual voices, empathetic narratives, psychonarration, and other devices eventually "allow the reader to observe a character's observations through the voice of a narrator" (22). To give one example, Klepper discusses the romantic quest for interiority or "latency" as the creation of multiple internal perspectives and regards the use of free indirect discourse in Jane Austen's novels as exemplary: "It can formulate latency as a tension between two points of view in one utterance. As a fusion of different temporal perspectives it is the phenakistiscope of narrative" (183).

The most extensive analyses in the last part of the study are devoted to the novels of Henry James. Klepper shows that they serve as the most intricate examples

of the shift to second-order observation. They also underline the importance of the “realist project” for the significance of observation as such. By allowing the reader “to form his or her own understanding of the fictional reality from the juxtaposition of perspectives” (378) they indicate that the different forms of (self-)observation are seen to be instrumental for the modernization of psychological concepts, notions of individualism, and forms of identity (the “dark side” of this process, Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, is less prominent but mentioned in the first part). Klepper argues that this process begins in the eighteenth century but comes to full (literary) fruition with the realist movement and the continued attempt to bridge “the gap between the immanence of the mind and the indeterminacy of reality” (379).

In the field of American literary history Martin Klepper’s impressive study is the first attempt to produce a comprehensive narratological and cultural history of observation and point of view. It identifies and explains crucial transitional phases and provides compelling readings of canonical texts that support the underlying argument about the shift to second-order observation in the history of American prose fiction. As groundbreaking and innovative as this study undoubtedly is, I believe that two aspects may need further discussion. One obvious difficulty of a study devoted to this time-frame is the choice of texts, particularly since focalization and point of view can be such intricate and complex phenomena to examine. In the transnational framework of his book Klepper argues that “one could study the relations between observation and narration with largely the same results in England, France, Germany or even Russia” (9, 10). Given the anti-exceptionalist bent of the New American Studies this is a perfectly feasible position, yet the specificities of the American process of modernization suggest that there may also be crucial differences between the American and the European situation. In particular, the lack of a refined court culture and the dominance of democratic traditions created different forms of (self-)observation that comparative studies of literary perspective would have to address in the future.

The second issue for further discussion, it seems to me, is Luhmann’s theory of functional differentiation and its relation to the concept of observation. At the height of the postmodernism debate in the early 1980s Jürgen Habermas argued against the increasing separation of science, morality, and art as distinct social subsystems. A related problem seems to be pertinent to Klepper’s study. If literature and art developed increasingly complex forms of (self-)observation during the nineteenth century in the autonomous sphere of their separate “subsystem” what was – and is – the impact of these experiments on other subsystems in an age of their increasing insulation? Klepper’s discovery of point of view suggests a “not always linear and partly discontinuous, but still evolutionary movement” (9), yet at the end of the book one wonders where this evolutionary movement has been leading to – i.e. if and how it has managed to affect non-literary realms of society, and how the less “civilizing”, more traumatic and pathological examples of narrative perspective would complicate the story. Most likely, they would have to include the “winking and blinking” of Psyche Zenobia’s lost eye as an early spoof of self-observation. Yet, as these remarks show, Martin Klepper’s study has laid the groundwork for discussions of this kind and, by combining narratology, literary history, and cultural studies, has forcefully opened up a new field of research in American studies.

## WORKS CITED

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