Personal identity and personal history have been defining preoccupations—one might even say obsessions—of the modern age. Questions much like those asked by Wilhelm Raabe and Christa Wolf drive both fictional and nonfictional accounts, from confessional literature and Enlightenment autobiography, to the Bildungsroman and artist’s self-portrait, to the memoirs crowding the shelves (or claiming the gigabytes) of today’s bookstores. This book does not presume to explain this fascination or offer an exhaustive account of its exploration in writing, whether fictive or autobiographical. Instead, it investigates a peculiarity signaled by the similarity between Raabe’s and Wolf’s questions and the similar forms their answers take. The narrators’ questions reveal a common struggle to understand their present identities in relation to their pasts, to make sense of the events and experiences that have led them to where they stand. The novels that answer these questions share a common form, in which a character narrator relates a story about another character’s life. The shared questions and narrative forms suggest that these two works—separated from each other by nearly a century and straddling the line between the fictional and the factual—share a two-faceted conception of identity. First, identity relies on narrative. This narrative emerges from individuals’ history and experiences, and from their

How do people sometimes come to be in places where, when they stop to think, they wonder how they got there?
—Wilhelm Raabe, Stuffcake: A Tale of Murder and the High Seas

How did we become what we are today?
—Christa Wolf, A Model Childhood
Introduction

attempts to understand and explain who they are in the present by telling a story about the past. Second, identity is relational. The story one tells about the past doesn’t have to be about oneself, at least not centrally. In fact, telling a story about someone else’s past may be an extremely effective way to define who one is and has been—and who one is not.¹

In other words, this book argues that the similarities between Raabe’s and Wolf’s novels are not peculiar at all; instead, they reflect fundamental aspects of the way many people have understood themselves for the last two hundred years. In Germany, the French Revolution and its aftermath crystallized the sense, already nascent in Enlightenment conceptions of subjectivity, of the relationship between the individual and a history unfolding its distinct eras through time. Within this new conception of history, the individual often understood himself as occupying a moment of historical flux and changing over time. This discovery of the “historicity of personal identity” informed a variety of the socially critical novel [Zeitroman] that combined the socially critical aspects of the genre with the focus on individual development characteristic of novels within the Bildungsroman tradition.² Twentieth-century modernity, and then again postmodernity, have offered competing models of understanding identity and its relationship to history: in both philosophical and narrative accounts, disjunction has often displaced development. Yet I argue that narratives in which one person tells a story about another’s past represent a recurring effort to understand the self in terms of its relationship to its contemporaries and to its own past. In associating this narrative form with these challenges of modern identity, this book answers Ansgar Nünning’s call to explore “the rich and messy domain of the history of narrative forms and the ways they are related to cultural history and the history of mentalities.”³ Modern lives and experiences are not continuous; they are punctuated by the myriad social, political, economic, and personal upheavals that separate what was from what is. The texts this book examines portray modern identity as being shaped by the need to negotiate these shifts and

¹. The relationship between identity, self-narrative, and narrative about others has been discussed in two waves of autobiography studies. In the 1980s feminist scholars claimed a relational aspect to female identity based on the prominent role that narrative about others played in life-writing by women. See Mary G. Mason, “Other Voice”; Stanton, “Autogynography”; Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves.” More recently, Nancy K. Miller and Paul John Eakin have made the case for relational identity and autobiography across gender lines. See Eakin, Lives Become Stories, chapter 2; Miller, But Enough About Me; Miller, “Representing Others.”

². Göttche, Zeit im Roman, 9–26, quotation on 30. Göttche’s comprehensive history of the Zeitroman explains its genesis in terms of this new sense of time and history.

narrative as a common means for this negotiation. My book explains how
telling a story about someone else can function in this way.

I do not claim that all texts in which a character narrator relates a story
about another protagonist are concerned with the relationship of past and
present identity. Nor do I mean to erase the line between fiction and nonfic-
tion. In German-language literature alone, fictional and nonfictional vari-
tions of this form have been used over several centuries to address numerous
issues: from Jean Paul's Siebenkäs (1797) to E. T. A. Hoffmann's The Life and
Opinions of the Tomcat Murr (1822) [Lebensansichten des Katers Murr] and
Heine's Ideas: The Book of Le Grand (1827) [Ideen. Das Buch Le Grand], to
Adalbert Stifter's Brigitta (1844) and Theodor Storm's The Dykemaster (1888)
[Der Schimmelreiter], to Hermann Hesse's Der Steppenwolf (1927), to Thomas
Bernhard's Frost (1963) and Irmtraud Morgner's The Life and Adventures of
the Trobadora Beatrice as Chronicated by Her Minstrel Laura (1974) [Leben
und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz nach Zeugnissen ihrer Spielfrau], to
Monika Maron's Pavel's Letters (1999) [Pawels Briefe] and Uwe Timm's The
Friend and the Stranger (2005) [Der Freund und der Fremde]. The striking
differences between the textually playful Book of Le Grand, the classic frame
novella The Dykemaster, and the memoir-like The Friend and the Stranger
illustrate the difficulty, even the folly, of generalizing about all works with
this narrative constellation. But the texts in the subset I examine, which I
call dynamic observer narratives, resemble each other closely, both formally
and thematically. While most of the texts I discuss are fictional, examples can
be found in both spheres. All operate within a realist mode, where narrator
and protagonist are clearly distinguishable figures with distinct historical
and social identities. Further, the narrator tells a story of past events dur-
ing which both protagonist and narrator were present and, in many cases,
participants. Yet for all the narrator's focus on the protagonist, he alone links
the two temporal realms. While the narrator appears in both the narrated
past and the narrating present, the protagonist is absent when (or where) the
narrator tells his story, and the narrator's story encompasses an attempt to
come to terms with his relationship with this now-absent protagonist. It is
these kinds of texts that illustrate and explore an enduring tradition of using
a story about someone else to attempt to come to terms with the past and
its relationship to one's own present identity. In the wake of a historical or

4. I use the terms “realist” and “realistic” in a general sense, rather than a literary his-
torical one. This usage follows Peter Rabinowitz's conception of the term in "Truth in Fiction"
(131–33), where the degree of realism derives from the degree to which the fictional world re-
sembles a historical one, or how many fictional elements (such as invented characters) readers
must accept to enter the narrative world.
personal watershed, their narrators reinterpret the events of their protagonists’ lives in an effort to reckon with their own past identities and their present selves.

In the German tradition, the period since 1945 has produced a multitude of such narratives addressing the National Socialist past: Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*, the entire genre of *Väterliteratur* [father literature], Hans Peter Richter’s young adult novel *Damals war es Friedrich*, and films such as Helga Sanders-Brahm’s *Germany, Pale Mother* [*Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*].¹ Indeed, in German culture, individual and societal efforts to reckon with the past are associated primarily with the post–World War II phenomenon of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [coming to terms with the past]. Yet the need to address the relationship between past and present existed long before National Socialism. Speaking of the years following the French Revolution, Dirk Göttsche maintains that the “realistic hybrid of the individual and society novels” served a “reckoning [Bewältigung] with the failed revolution and with middle-class self-assertion in the emerging Restoration period.”² Uncertain attitudes toward past events and an uncertain identity in the present produce attempts to make sense of both. Nor is this need restricted to German-speaking cultures. Although the analyses and claims of this book focus on German texts and history, analogous developments and narratives appear in other Western cultures and narratives, a point to which I return in the conclusion. The narrative constellation this study examines has been enmeshed in processing the relationship between present identity and the past by way of narratives about others since the turn of the nineteenth century—both in using a story about someone else to work through the relationship between past and present and in pondering that usage with a self-reflexive eye.

### Reckoning with the Past in the Dynamic Observer Narrative

In the dynamic observer narratives I examine, the process of reckoning with the relationship between past and present identity consists of four essential components. First, it consists primarily of telling a story that reinterprets past events and reassesses the behavior or character of the individuals who participated in them. This moment of reinterpretation is a key component of all efforts to come to terms with one’s past, whether they occur in fictional or

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¹. In this film, the daughter of the protagonist speaks in the first person in the voice-over, approximating the role of a narrator. She also appears in the diegetic realm of the film where, as a small child, she witnesses her mother’s actions and suffering.

nonfictional writing, in the negotiation of personal relationships, or in the symbolic gestures or reparations of the public sphere. After all, the need to come to terms with the past arises only when that past presents a difficulty to one’s current view of or position in the world, a difficulty that requires one to try to make sense of or explain how one got from there to here. In cases of nostalgia, a world once despised may be transformed into a paradise, and a self once deemed “unlucky” suddenly mourned as having had everything a heart could desire. In cases of a critical judgment of the past, one may need to acknowledge the imperfections, even evil, of a society, people, and self that were once loved. And, of course, an engagement with the past often involves aspects of both dynamics. In the narratives under examination here, such reinterpretation is particularly crucial. For in these texts, as in many fictional and nonfictional narratives, such reinterpretation is the only method available for processing and coming to terms with past events. The protagonists are absent or inaccessible. Reunion, reconciliation, or restitution is impossible. Reinterpretation provides the only opportunity for achieving personal closure or for extending a gesture of goodwill, regret, or understanding toward others.

Second, this kind of reinterpretation occurs most readily in the wake of what I term a critical break. Such breaks are precipitated by periods of radical political or social change or by personal upheaval, and they invite reassessment of past events because of the changed vantage point from which they allow one to view those occurrences. As Werner Wertgen argues in his generalized theory of coming to terms with the past, “the possible historical interpretations also depend on the narrative possibilities at one’s disposal,” and in many cases, a critical break caused by a shift of great historical or personal consequence generates new narrative possibilities. A military defeat or personal loss may be experienced as a tragedy when it occurs, for instance, but later happenings may cause it to appear fortuitous, as an event that cleared the way for positive developments. This propensity of historical discontinuities to bring about critical breaks helps to explain why the production of narratives like those discussed here surged in the nineteenth century; although the entire modern period is associated with social, political, and economic change, such shifts began to punctuate the social landscape with increasing frequency as the repercussions of the French Revolution spread throughout Europe and the industrial revolution began to gather speed. As borders and states were redefined, traditional economic structures and interest groups eroded, new relationships between religious and civic institutions legislated, colonies established, and gender roles destabilized, individuals

were forced to adjust their understanding of the world repeatedly—a process that continues today.

Finally, each shift in worldview, each reinterpretation of the past, requires the individual to revise not only his stories of past events but also his vision of the self that participated in or coexisted with those events. In other words, the values of a given worldview are inescapably linked to individual identity; a new understanding of the world entails a new understanding of the self. Moreover, the way one addresses past events and past identity carries consequences for one's identity in the present. Revising the story of how one arrived at one's present standpoint changes the way one evaluates and values that position, but it also stakes out this position anew. Declaring (or implying) one's relationship to the events and people of the past and present constructs a version of one's identity. Of course, this revised account of one's relationship to others also casts those others in new roles and redefines the relationships among all players. In all narratives that bear on the identities and relationships of the past and the present, then, stories are not merely constative descriptions of fact, to use J. L. Austin's terminology, but performative acts. In addition to depicting a reinterpretation of the past, the critical break that occasions it, and its impact on identity, all of the texts this project discusses share a fourth characteristic. While their narrators demonstrate varying degrees of consciousness about narrative's consequences for identity and relationships, all of the texts exhibit awareness of this power that narratives possess. The texts engage with specific historical events and individual identities, but they also address the general problem of the relationship between narrative and the identities and interpersonal relationships it represents and constitutes, or between poetics and ethics. Whether obliquely or explicitly, they contemplate what telling a story about someone else does, how it affects the identities of narrating and narrated subjects and constitutes or reconstitutes the relationship between them. In presenting narrative as praxis, these texts pose the question of its responsibility and open the act of narration to ethical examination.

Reckoning with the Past in German Vergangenheitsbewältigung

Those familiar with postwar German literature and culture will recognize these elements and concerns, because the salient features of these narratives accord closely with many fictional and nonfictional narratives of coming to

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8. Austin, How to Do Things.
terms with the past in the post–World War II era (a process I designate with the historically specific term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). In his 1947 *The Question of German Guilt* [Die Schuldfrage], Karl Jaspers poses questions very similar to those asked by Raabe and Wolf: “We want to know where we stand. We seek to answer the question, what has led to our situation, then to see what we are and should be—what is really German—and finally to ask what we can still want.” The essential features of the process are similar, too. Reinterpretation, the critical break that spurs it, and its relationship to the identities of past and present feature prominently in philosophical, psychological, and social scientific accounts of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In their influential *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (1967) [Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens], Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich define the process as a “sequence of steps in self-knowledge,” and more recent studies, including those belonging to the international body of work on transitional justice, see reinterpretation as a key aim of the process. A “break in continuity” or “critical juncture” has been called the condition of possibility for *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and the Mitscherlichs assert that the tendency to repeat the past is interrupted only “when historical events bring about a change in the level of consciousness.” In post-1989 accounts, this social and political sea change and a generational shift are seen as making a new approach to the National Socialist past possible. Finally, writing about the German disillusionment following World War II, Jaspers maintains that “the very fact that honest consciousness and good-will were our initial guides is bound to deepen our later disillusionment and disappointment in ourselves. It leads us to question even our best faith.” And, one might say, our best selves. In attributing the German postwar failure to address the past to the continuing but unacknowledged entanglement of postwar identity with past

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identity, both Theodor Adorno and the Mitscherlichs underscore the inextricable relationship between the story of identity and the story of the past; in claiming that a confrontation with the past would help correct the Federal Republic of Germany’s social and political malaise, they ascribe great performative power to the process.  

Finally, Wertgen goes so far as to say that “the identity of individuals, of the perpetrators as well as of the victims, is thus the actual object of Vergangenheitsbewältigung.”

These postwar explanations of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, while historically specific, can help illuminate the phenomenon of coming to terms with the past more broadly. Many postwar narrative accounts, which often articulate the issues explicitly, do the same. Christa Wolf’s A Model Childhood [Kindheitsmuster], with its narrator’s extensive and pointedly agonizing self-reflection, is a canonical case. Her narrator writes of the process of reinterpretation, of “the complete turnabout of your feelings. . . . It must have taken years of the greatest effort to accomplish this turnabout . . . free, unforced empathy for the ‘others’” [vollständige Umkehr deiner Gefühle . . . , die hervorzubringen eine schwere jahrelange Angstrengung gewesen sein muß . . . : Gefühle, die sich jetzt frei und ungezwungen auf der Seite der einstmals “anderen” bewegen]. As she reports about how her protagonist’s teacher prompts the girl’s long-delayed renunciation of National Socialism, she illustrates that individuals need available alternative stories of the past before they can relinquish their old beliefs. Most blatantly, the novel’s narrative configuration dramatizes the tension that structures all of the texts I examine. The narrator writes about her childhood self as if about someone else, exposing the conflict between the narrator’s past and present identities that lies at the heart of all these texts. Finally, Wolf’s narrator is acutely aware

16. In their central thesis, the Mitscherlichs state this efficacy in the negative, attributing postwar Germany’s social and political “sterility” to its failure to address the National Socialist past. Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, Inability to Mourn, 26–27. Adorno maintains that if Germany is to have a healthy, democratic future, its citizens must process their continuing connections to the past and its authoritarian ideologies and strengthen their sense of self; only when they have done so will they be able to conceive of themselves as subjects of the political process. See Adorno, “Coming to Terms.”

17. Wertgen, Vergangenheitsbewältigung, 163. With its talk of “perpetrators” and “victims,” this statement is indicative of the way the particular experience of postwar Germany colors Wertgen’s attempt to generalize the concept of Vergangenheitsbewältigung such that it can be applied to any kind of past event.

18. This book is offered as a canonical example even beyond the bounds of German-focused scholarship. Eakin, for instance, uses it in Lives Become Stories (93–98) to show how relational autobiography may negotiate the relationship between the discontinuous identities of past and present.

19. Wolf, Model Childhood, 315; Wolf, Kindheitsmuster, 399.

that in telling her story, she can manipulate events and her characters’ identities to alleviate her own self-doubt and assuage her conscience; she fears the temptation to “exploit [the] helplessness” of the vulnerable figure Nelly and dislikes the idea that the people who fill her pages are “at [her] mercy” [[ihr] ausgeliefert]. The book returns again and again to the idea that the power of narration brings ethical challenges. Both the illustrative “as if” of this novel’s narrative situation and its explicitness in discussing the process of coming to terms with the past make it an excellent illustrative example of the dynamics at work in the novels I discuss; they also ground my decision to omit it from the case studies, in favor of examining works that help show the pervasiveness of its approach.

Modern Identity as a Reckoning with the Past

Wolf’s and Jaspers’s questions clearly emanate from and are embedded within the specificities of the German postwar situation, and their responses to the questions are no less particular. Yet I contend that these postwar questions are related to questions that have driven similarly structured texts since the early nineteenth century, and that these texts have sought to answer those questions in similar ways. As another of Wilhelm Raabe’s nineteenth-century narrators asks, “So, how is it then, really? Wasn’t it different before, around you and inside you? How have you come to all this, and do you really belong here, and is everything that you’re doing here and that you have to do serious, or is it a joke?” [Ja, wie ist denn das eigentlich? War das sonst nicht anders um dich her und in dir? Wie kommst du zu allem diesem, und gehörst du wirklich hierher, und ist das nun Ernst oder Spaß, was du jetzt hier treibst oder treiben mußt?]. The routes to the narrators’ present locations are marked by their historical moments, but the procedure for tracing these routes is shared: the narrators tell a story about someone else’s life to confront the trajectory of their own.

Chapter 1 presents more extended arguments about why coming to terms with the past has been a recurring process of modern identity. Here, I summarize the most important points. First, the need to come to terms with the past occurs when changing circumstances lead to a change in the individual’s value system and sense of self. This need to reckon with the past is explained by the idea that one’s values, identity, and sense of self are dependent on one’s

21. Wolf, Model Childhood, 48, 200; Wolf, Kindheitsmuster, 65, 256.
surroundings; that these surroundings change with history; and that identity changes as history does. Moderns have thus been concerned with “the historicity of personal identity” and with the troubling sense that they are not one with themselves over time. \( ^{23} \) “So great is the power of the conditions that surround us,” laments the narrator of a novel from 1805, that “the person who had become a few years older had difficulty recognizing himself in the person of a few years ago.”\(^ {24} \) While one trajectory of modern thinking has come to accept, or even celebrate, such disunity, it continues to disturb others. The narrators of these novels belong to this second group, and turn to narrative to try to reckon with it.

Second, modern identity depends heavily on the individual’s relationships with others. These others populate the individual’s historical surroundings, so that identity and a sense of self develop in their midst. But identity also depends on these relationships because one’s sense of self is bound up with one’s sense of morality, and for modern individuals, moral status turns largely on how one stands with respect to others. Charles Taylor maintains that the ideal of universal benevolence has been a pillar of Western modern identity and morality since the mid-nineteenth century. Combined with beliefs in the “significance of ordinary life” and the “free, self-determining subject,” this ideal of universal benevolence has led to imperatives to reduce suffering for all and to establish universal justice and freedom. Taylor acknowledges that huge changes have taken place during this time. But he insists that underly ing the surface changes, these ideals have remained constant. \(^ {25} \) An impulse to show benevolence toward the victims of past crimes, to do justice to them or to their memory, drives many efforts to come to terms with the past, from German reparation payments to wartime slave laborers to the narrative and symbolic reparations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in countries from South Africa to El Salvador to Canada. In the texts about coming to terms with the past that I read, the narrators try to reckon with their changing identities by telling stories in which they show benevolence toward their protagonists.

Telling the story of how narratives construct a self that remains connected through time and that stands in a positive relationship to others is a potentially important task. That is not the story of this book, however. This book tells a story about narrators who desire such stories of self, but whose efforts to tell them fall short. The books’ structure foregrounds their narrators’ impulse to respond to the discontinuities of modern existence with stories: unsettled

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by a challenge to self-understanding, they reach to narrative to restore their equilibrium. It also foretells the impossibility of the enterprise. The divide that separates the narrator and his protagonist, the narrator’s self-doubt, and the self-reflexivity of narrator and/or text all indicate a modern awareness of division, uncertainty, and self-questioning that calls the enterprise of telling a positive, unified story of self into question. As the narrators tell coherent, realistic narratives about their protagonists, their own stories appear piece-meal, in fragments around the edges of the central tale. Each of these novels is marked by the tension between stable identity grounded in coherent narrative, on the one hand, and the disruptions and self-reflexivity that undercut such stories of self, on the other.26

Book Overview

I first want to acknowledge three other studies that have investigated the same narrative situation. Each shares some concerns and claims with my approach, and each interprets the form with respect to changing historical contexts. Rachel Freudenburg traces changing conceptions of friendship in the twentieth century and provides psychoanalytic readings of the friendships depicted in four postwar German novels.27 Freudenburg’s work portrays the narrators of these novels as seeking a unified identity, much as I do. In her readings, all of the novels reveal the “coherent” identity achieved through friendship to be false; it is fictional, self-deceptive, and predicated on the end of the relationship. Employing psychoanalytical concepts such as narcissism, sadomasochism, and the mirror stage, she analyzes the psychological functions of narration in the novels and contextualizes them with respect to changing norms of friendship and of male gender identity in the twentieth century. Keith Ashley claims that the narrative form illustrates the changing epistemological ground of intersubjective relations since the eighteenth century.28 His study also works from a body of German-language texts, but it spans a longer chronological period. In the course of his investigation, his attention to epistemological frameworks gradually cedes ground to a consideration of the social and historical circumstances that impinge on the narrator’s ability to know

26. In this skepticism and resistance to closure, they differ from the “liberal narratives” that Ruti Teitel describes in “Transitional Justice” as underpinning processes of transitional judgment. On another instance of artistic resistance to the predominantly political liberal narrative, see also Rothberg, “Progress, Progression, Procession.”

27. Freudenburg, “Fictions of Friendship.”

28. Ashley, “Intersubjectivity in Narration.”
the other figure, and to the ethical implications of various theories of knowledge. He reads the narrator of Jean Paul’s *Siebenkäs* as a narrating intelligence; the narrator of Franz Grillparzer’s *The Poor Fiddler* [*Der arme Spielmann*] as a representative of instrumental reason; and the narrator of Christa Wolf’s *Quest for Christa T.* [*Nachdenken über Christa T.*] as a narrating subjectivity influenced and bound by the society in which she lives. In other words, he reads this final narrator as a representation of a person, rather than as a narrative function. Largely as a result of these shifting methods, Ashley asserts that ethically inferior nineteenth-century approaches to intersubjectivity are overcome in the approaches of the postwar twentieth century. As I discuss in the following section and in chapter 1, I, too, consider notions of ethical “progress” and trace the evolution of ethical principles in the novels. As much as possible, however, I apply the same methods to all of the readings and evaluate the novels’ ethical frameworks within their own historical context.

Finally, Kenneth Bruffee’s *Elegiac Romances* offers claims most similar to my own. This study, which focuses on English-language works but also includes a reading of Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*, reads the form as a manifestation of the twentieth-century attempt to come to terms with loss and change and to overcome nineteenth-century ideals. Bruffee argues that in the genre of “elegiac romance,” “the [narrator] expresses an unavoidable fact of modern life—the experience of catastrophic loss and rapid cultural change, and the need to come to terms with loss and change in order to survive.”

While his characterization of the form coincides closely with my own, it is not identical. Bruffee construes the elegiac romance as a specifically modernist form in which its narrators seek to overcome nineteenth-century attitudes and thought, whereas I draw attention to its realist impulses and see it as covering similar terrain in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Perhaps as a result of his focus on modernism, Bruffee’s analyses focus on internal epistemological and psychological processes, even though he cites cultural change as a driving force of the narrator’s storytelling; in his interpretations, the relationship with the “hero” figure becomes symbolic, so that the hero appears as little more than a projection screen for the narrator.

Two features distinguish my account from these three. First, where the others emphasize historical discontinuity, my study draws out the commonalities that inform even very disparate texts from the late eighteenth through the early twenty-first centuries. Second, where the other analyses tend to focus on “internal” aspects of self, such as epistemology and psychoanalysis, my analyses treat the protagonist as distinct from the narrator and target “external” aspects, such as social, historical, and linguistic context. This

approach corresponds to a concept of identity in which subjectivity and one’s internal sense of self are bound up with others’ view of who one is, with external markers of social identity. In particular, I analyze the texts’ use of historically and socially marked language and the narrators’ orchestration of voice within their stories. The tensions between the narrators’ languages and those of their protagonists often illuminate the historical conflicts being negotiated in the texts. The narrators’ treatment of these voices holds key importance because it bears on their effort to reckon with the past by doing justice to the protagonist. The analyses focus on the social, historical, and ethical dimensions of the form and reflect on how it has evolved as successive generations of authors have used it to represent the process of coming to terms with the past. They suggest that, over time, the narrators’ effort to do justice to the protagonist increasingly entails letting that protagonist’s “voice” be heard in the text.

The idea that the individual should be able to speak for himself has been central to Western society since the Enlightenment. Implied in the principle of self-determination and enshrined in the right to free speech of all modern democratic constitutions, this ideal proclaims that humans have the right not only to decide how they live but also to articulate who they are and what their lives mean. When combined with the ideals of benevolence and universal justice, this right implies a duty to secure the freedom of speech and self-determination for others. Taylor claims that these ideals have remained constant since the late nineteenth century, but that the moral demands they generate have escalated as new groups have won these rights and as standards of benevolence have become more stringent. He does not claim a teleological progression toward universal justice and the elimination of human suffering; instead, he argues that the historical record of the West shows a development largely according to these principles. The history of Western social movements over the last two centuries, for instance, has been a history of campaigns to extend the rights of freedom and self-determination to ever new groups of people: abolitionism, female suffrage, the normalization of national self-determination, the civil rights movement, and the current trend toward legalization of same-sex marriage all operate with these ideals and standards.

31. See Lanser, Fictions of Authority, on the development of a narratological concept of voice that attends to social identity and ideology.
32. Taylor, Sources of the Self, 397.
33. Ibid., 394–96.
This book argues that, in the novels I read, these expanding obligations manifest themselves in the narrators’ treatment of voice. While in the earlier novels the narrator tries to do justice to the protagonist by representing him positively, increasingly the aim for justice entails letting the protagonist speak for herself. Taylor believes that “notions of the good are interwoven with modes of narrative,” and his book traces the historical development of overarching narrative modes. My book historicizes the form in which a character narrator tells a story about another protagonist and argues that, within that form, changing strategies of marshaling and managing voice correspond to the evolving moral ideals of universal benevolence and freedom.

I make my argument in three parts. The first, theoretical section links the problem of coming to terms with the past with modern identity more broadly and with the narrative form. As suggested by the sources I use in this section (philosophers, narrative theorists, scholars of life-writing, and theorists of coming to terms with the past), my claims here derive from studies of literature and of the “real world,” and many of them pertain to both fictional and nonfictional writing. Chapter 1 shows that theories of coming to terms with the past share important assumptions and features with many contemporary theories of modern identity. Both see identity as dependent on its historical context. Both view it as narrative and relational. Finally, both assume that it is inseparable from one’s ethical stature. I begin by showing how Taylor’s concept of identity resembles the assumptions that theories of Vergangenheitsbewältigung make about the historicity of identity, its inherent ethical dimension, and its reliance on narrative. I then discuss Paul Ricoeur’s treatment of narrative, which explains how stories can help people navigate historical and personal change by integrating their experience into a coherent whole. Finally, I summarize Adriana Cavarero’s view of narratives as acts that possess ethical status, not only as articulations of particular ethical frameworks but also in their own right. Such approaches, which emphasize how narrative can recognize and do justice to another person, resemble theories of Vergangenheitsbewältigung that emphasize the key role narrative plays in the (often impossible) attempt to compensate victims of past crimes. I also highlight the resonances between these theories and the fictional texts I examine. At the same time, I suggest that the texts cast doubt on these assumptions, anticipating and echoing antinarrativist approaches to identity such as those of Galen Strawson and Judith Butler. As the texts portray a reckoning with past and present, they dramatize a negotiation between a faith in and mistrust of narrative—a tension that might also be seen as characteristic of the modern era.

34. Ibid., 396.
Chapter 2 defines the dynamic observer narrative narratologically and asserts that its prominent structural features focus the reader’s attention on crucial issues in the process of reckoning with past and present identity. In realistic texts, character narration draws attention to the narrator’s historical identity and encourages readers to evaluate his or her reliability. The central position of the protagonist’s story encourages readers to assess the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist, both its historical and its ethical dimensions. Finally, the dramatization of and reflection on the narrative process invite ethical inquiry about narrative itself and raise questions about narrative’s efficacy for reckoning with past and present identity. As do the theoretical treatments discussed in chapter 1, the narrative form presents individual identity, interpersonal relationships, and ethical stature as intertwined. In the process of linking structural features to the process of coming to terms with the past, I argue that in realist texts, narrator reliability has a text-internal historical dimension deriving from text-internal tensions. In such texts, narrator unreliability may be used precisely to draw attention to these historical tensions. The tensions between past and present, narrator and protagonist, and narrative movement and metanarrative commentary signal the dynamic observer narrative’s status as a hybrid form whose combination of textual modes is uniquely suited to representing the effort to come to terms with the past.

Parts II and III contain the textual analyses from which the claims of the introduction and first two chapters are derived. These chapters follow the narrators’ efforts to come to terms with the past by telling “good” stories about their protagonists. In the perennial modern attempt to reckon with past and present identity by telling another person’s story, a “good” story is one that provides acceptable identities for both the self (narrator) and the other person (protagonist). To analyze how the narrators attempt to tell such a “good” story—and how successful they are in their attempts—I conduct three mutually supporting kinds of investigation: (1) I elucidate the historical forces and positions in the book and consider what “acceptable” identities for narrator and protagonist are in this context; (2) I examine the narrative strategies, especially the manipulation of voice, that the narrator uses to construct, negotiate, maintain, or assert these identities; and (3) I assess how fruitful these strategies are, and how the text signals their success or failure. Together, these investigations yield “descriptions which take into account both thematic and formal features of texts and the ways in which the epistemological, ethical, and social problems are articulated in the form of narrative representations.”

While most of the texts I discuss are fictional, not all are; chapter 6 examines three autobiographically based narratives that span the transitional space between fiction and nonfiction, demonstrating the relevance of the dynamic observer narrative and its concerns in both spheres. My primary aim, however, is to investigate how fictional texts have used the form to stage the historical, ethical, and narrative conflicts at the heart of modern identity.

Part II comprises two chapters explicating nineteenth-century texts. Chapter 3 treats the emergence of the narrative form by discussing two texts with relatively reliable narrators. In Friedrich Ludwig Textor’s *The Life, Adventures, and Heroic Death of Paul Roderich the Democrat*, hereafter referred to as *Paul Roderich* (1794) [*Leben, Abenteuer und Heldentod Paul Roderichs, des Democraten*], the narrator tells the story of a friend whose enthusiasm for freedom led him to support the French Revolution into its violent, anarchic phase. As he does, he both valorizes his own past belief in democratic ideals and clearly establishes an antirevolutionary identity in the present. In this early example of the narrative form, no discord undercut this self-positioning with respect to historical events. In Theodor Storm’s *A Double*, hereafter *Doppelgänger* (1886) [*Ein Doppelgänger*], both historical and narrative tensions begin to appear. As the narrator graciously rehabilitates a convict’s character, he both absolves himself of guilt for his past condescension toward the man and solidifies his middle-class self-understanding. Self-positioning is achieved through benevolent narration. I contend that the text suggests the narrator’s continuing condescension toward the protagonist, however, and I end the chapter by exploring how Storm’s novella both exposes and discourages judgment of this condescension. Chapter 4 discusses a very different narrative strategy for suspending reader judgment. In Wilhelm Raabe’s novel *Stuffcake: A Tale of Murder and the High Seas*, hereafter *Stuffcake* (1890) [*Stopfkuchen: Eine See- und Mordgeschichte*], no single, coherent story of the past dominates. In fact, the novel is grounded in the narrator’s realization that his story of the past must compete with alternative accounts, and that the voice that dominates the tale holds great power over identities, interpersonal relationships, and social structures. Against the backdrop of colonialism, the novel dramatizes the conflict between different stories of the past; the chapter argues that the undecidability these conflicting stories generate is a common characteristic of the narrative form and the process of reckoning with the past.

36. Translations from Textor are my own.
37. Translations from Storm are my own.
The three chapters of Part III investigate texts from the fifty-year period following World War II. Chapter 5 focuses on Günter Grass’s *Cat and Mouse* (1961) [*Katz und Maus*]. The analysis shows how the narrator’s reckoning with the past falters as he lapses into the comfortable rhythms of long-familiar litany, rather than offering a confession in the new, untainted language sought by post–World War II German authors. The prominent place that litany holds in both Grass’s fiction and his nonfiction prose up through his 2006 autobiography, *Peeling the Onion* [*Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*], suggests an enduring autobiographical awareness of the comforts and dangers that such language holds. In a sense, this chapter tells the classic story of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and of its (misplaced?) faith in the power of narrative to heal the rifts of the past. In its focus on the narrator’s voice alone, it also interrupts my story of a historically increasing obligation to allow others to speak with their own voices. It serves, then, as an important reminder that this trend is neither necessary nor universal. Chapter 6 examines a heretofore unexamined collection of books about mothers: Peter Handke’s *A Sorrow beyond Dreams*, hereafter *Sorrow* (1972) [*Wunschloses Unglück*], Verena Stefan’s *It Was a Rich Life: Report on My Mother’s Dying*, hereafter *Rich Life* (1993) [*Es ist reich gewesen: Bericht vom Sterben meiner Mutter*], and Hanns Josef Ortheil’s *Hedge* (1983) [*Hecke*]. Competing ethical demands dog the narrators of these mother books. Wishing both to recognize mothers who were victims of patriarchy, poverty, and provincialism and to reject the narrow and tainted beliefs those mothers espoused, the narrators seek a mode of narration that both gives the mothers voice and distances themselves from that maternal vocabulary. In their empathetic treatment of their mothers’ positions during the National Socialist era, the narratives trouble common characterizations of generational writing in the era of *Väterliteratur*, and in their highlighting of historical voice they give explicit attention to an element long present in narratives of this form. Finally, chapter 7 examines a high-profile text of this century, Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001). This novel is often celebrated for its ethical narration, because the German narrator appears to allow the Jewish protagonist to speak for himself and, in so doing, to redefine his identity. Yet as the narrator blends his voice into his protagonist’s,

41. Translations refer to Handke, *Sorrow beyond Dreams*, trans. Ralph Manheim, unless otherwise noted. Translations of Stefan and Ortheil are my own.
42. Translations of *Austerlitz* refer to Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell, unless otherwise noted.
he disappears into that figure. This blending and disappearance render the ethical triumph questionable; indeed, I argue that the text presents the protagonist’s Jewish story as repressing the narrator’s German one. My reading thus both interrogates the adequacy or viability of the strict divisions often made between “narratable” and “unnarratable” identity and experience in the Holocaust and aligns itself with the more skeptical body of readings of “second-wave” Sebald criticism.

Untangling the books’ discursive levels and webs of interlocking voices is complicated. Tracing their historical, social, and cultural resonances from a chronological and geographical remove is difficult. Linking changes in narrative form to changing historical and social circumstances is more so. But the claims that these efforts yield offer a point of departure for continued argument and insight about the narrative forms associated with modern identity. I enter, then, the “rich and messy domain” where history and narrative form intersect.