Ethics and the Dynamic Observer Narrator

Byram, Katra A.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Byram, Katra A.
Ethics and the Dynamic Observer Narrator: Reckoning with Past and Present in German Literature.

The Ohio State University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/38651.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/38651
The authors of this chapter’s epigraphs belong to two distinct groups. Charles Taylor and Adriana Cavarero are emphatic proponents of a narrativist approach to identity, pegging both selfhood and the good to the ability to tell stories about oneself and others. In contrast, Judith Butler represents an antinarrativist approach that views narrative as repressive, deceptive, and inhibitive of change. In this chapter I argue that the narratives I discuss combine elements of these two approaches. While they depart from narrativist assumptions, much as many accounts of the process of coming to terms with the past do, their structure and dramatization of the narrative act reveal antinarrativist skepticism about narrative’s adequacy for providing either an ontological account of or an ethical approach to identity. In this way, they are
examples of what Claudia Breger calls “narrative performances.” Breger contends that while narrative and (antinarrative) performance have often been polemically theorized in opposition to each other, aesthetic productions often combine elements of each. As narrative performances, the narratives I discuss both combine narrative and performative approaches to modern identity and its challenges and call attention to the narrative mediation of identity.¹

My argument in this chapter is not merely that these narrative performances combine two unlike views. Rather, the texts lead me to draw out three assumptions about modern identity that underlie both approaches: that identity is historically contingent; that it must account for the individual's “becoming” over time, for change; and that the relationship to other people is part of that becoming. These shared assumptions explain the similarity between the philosophical statements in this chapter’s epigraphs and the fictional narratives’ central questions. Both narrativist and antinarrativist accounts also see the narratives that intervene in this process as having ontological and ethical status. One views narrative as descriptively and ethically valuable, while the other decries it as insufficient, but both are concerned with its functioning. The narratives are not literary arguments for one set of theories over the other. When I say that they depart from narrativist assumptions but reveal doubts about narratives’ ontological and ethical adequacy, I am not arguing that they arrive happily at a superior antinarrativist position. Rather, they share important impulses with both views of narrative, so that in them, an unresolved tension persists between a desire for and belief in narrative, on the one hand, and doubts about its value, on the other.

Identity as Historical, Ethical, and Narrative

I begin my exploration of the relationship between the two approaches by explicating the shared assumptions that underlie theories of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, the novels I discuss, and Charles Taylor’s account of modern identity in Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity. The core belief of these assumptions is the idea that identity is impinged upon from without. It is historical, relational, and influenced by the linguistic environment in which it develops. The title of the first novel I discuss foregrounds these external factors as it identifies its protagonist and narrator: Life, Adventures, and Heroic

¹. Breger, Narrative Performance, 9–10. Breger contends that narrative performance is the dominant aesthetic mode of contemporary literature, film, and theater, but she also stipulates that art has produced combinations of performance and narrative for centuries (10–12, 23).
Death of Paul Roderich the Democrat: A History from the Present-Day War Written by His Aristocratic Cousin. As it signals the social positions of both cousins, the title foreshadows the linked differences of station and opinion that drive the two figures’ reactions to the French Revolution. It shows that the narrator defines both his cousin and himself with respect to the groups to which they belong. This conception of individual identity as strongly dependent on group identity belongs to Taylor’s central convictions: “One is a self only among other selves,” he writes. “A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it” (35). The self always answers the question “who are you?” with reference to her position within her human community.

Because individuals understand themselves with respect to the historical groups to which they belong, individual identity depends on one’s relationships with others. And within such a relational understanding of identity, stories about others can be integral to the story of the self. In the dynamic observer narratives I read, the narrators achieve whatever self-understanding they do by narrating or reflecting on their relationships with their protagonists. Such novels have long recognized and played through a dynamic that has recently gained attention in studies of nonfictional life-writing, as well. Paul John Eakin and Nancy K. Miller seek to expand the definition of self-narrative beyond Philippe Lejeune’s canonical definition of autobiography as the “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.” Self-narrative, they contend, is often centrally concerned with the existence, lives, and personalities of the people one has known.

In the texts I examine, these narratives often lend particular weight to the narrator’s conversations with her protagonist. The narrator of Sebald’s novel, for instance, recounts very little beyond his conversations with Jacques Austerlitz. Language and linguistic interactions constitute key sites of the exchange between and reciprocal definition of the individual and the people who surround her. Language and conversation play a similarly central role in Taylor’s account of identity. In fact, he maintains that it is impossible to arrive at a sense of self that does not develop in conversation with others: “I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors. . . . A self exists only within what I call ‘webs of interlocution’” (36). One might say that people can only really understand themselves and what they believe by understanding the conversations they have had with others. Moreover, the language in which these conversations take place is of crucial importance, because it bears within it what

---


3. For additional discussion, see Taylor, Sources of the Self, 35–40.
Taylor calls a moral framework. For Taylor, being a person means having a moral framework that allows one to make judgments about right and wrong, or at least better and worse. Knowing who one is means knowing what this framework is: “my identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon . . . within which I am capable of taking a stand” (27).

This knowledge resides in the languages one speaks, in their designations of what is given, what is possible, and what we are as human beings. Expressing the belief in the constitutive nature of language that has become common in recent decades (including in performative approaches to identity), Taylor thus asserts that “to study persons is to study beings who only exist in, or are partly constituted by, a certain language” (34–35).

The narrators of the books I read seek to solidify their identities by establishing a new understanding of the languages and relationships within which they have developed. Ortheil’s narrator understands his own antipathy toward the past and achieves a new approach to it only after tracing his family’s linguistic history; he first revisits his enchantment and disenchantment with his mother’s language and then traces the development of that language through her experiences of National Socialism, World War II, and the post-war period. My analyses assess the narrators’ historical and ethical positions by focusing on their linguistic relationships and exchanges with their protagonists. I show, for instance, how the narrator and protagonist of Textor’s Paul Roderich share the vocabulary of Enlightenment thinking, while the narrator rejects the emotional excesses that the protagonist attaches to these terms.

In chapter 6 the children of National Socialist mothers present themselves both as heirs to and as resisters of their mothers’ conservative, provincial language. As the novels’ and memoirs’ narrators revisit and reinterpret conversations with key figures from their pasts, they find themselves confronting and negotiating linguistic differences, and these differences force them both to reevaluate their past identities and moral stances and to reflect on or adjust their present selves and moral principles.

---

4. The intimate link between identity and morality is Taylor’s central theoretical assertion, and the opening claim of his book: “Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes” (3). He contends that humans necessarily operate within moral frameworks or horizons, and that these frameworks are “constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood” (27).

5. Taylor emphasizes the linguistic framework within which the self takes shape, but he refuses the poststructuralist move in which the subject dissolves into language and anonymous discourse, insisting on the integrity, coherence, and responsibility of the self. See Taylor, Sources of the Self, 35, n. 8.
The simultaneous presence of a moral reorientation and a reconsideration of one's identity is not coincidental. Reckoning with the past entails reevaluations of both. In the wake of National Socialism and the Holocaust, for instance, Jaspers’s questions about what it means to be German are predicated on the assumption that this national identity entails a particular moral quandary: “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.” Knowing what is really German means acknowledging Germans’ postwar moral position and facing the question of what their moral and ethical responsibilities are. This conflation of morality and identity also informs more contemporary accounts of coming to terms with the past: “A human lives in an historical structure that cannot be suspended and that contains all the elements shaping his identity and interactions (or capability for interaction)—and with them, also his moral quality and his responsibility.” Finally, it is implicit in the notion of “the grace of belated birth” [Gnade der späten Geburt], the idea that Germans too young to have fought in the war or committed its crimes enjoy an inherent moral advantage over members of the war generation. The narrators of the fictional texts share this sense of entwined identity and morality, too. The question that the narrator asks at the beginning of Raabe’s Stuffcake does not necessarily include moral overtones: “How do people sometimes come to be in places where, when they stop to think, they wonder how they got there?” (157) [Wie kommen Menschen dahin, wo sie sich, sich besinnend, zu eigener Verwunderung dann und wann finden? (7)]. But as the novel progresses, readers come to see that the narrator’s disorientation is moral, as well. As the protagonist attacks him for his boyhood cruelty and his present, shallow dedication to conventional mores, both the narrator’s sense of self and his sense of what is good are shaken. This kind of disorientation is precisely what provokes the effort to come to terms with the past. The moral crisis is also a crisis of self; the narrator no longer stands where he thought he stood.

Both in efforts to come to terms with the past and in Taylor’s account, however, this moral crisis is cause for hope rather than despair. Reckoning with the past occurs when people understand themselves to have improved as individuals or as a society; Germans must reckon with National Socialism because they now condemn its actions and moral framework. Taylor’s view of the way humans understand themselves through time assumes a similar sense of movement in a positive direction. He stipulates that the communities and

the webs of interlocution to which people belong can change; the language that initially formed their sense of self may yield to, or be confronted with, other languages and the moral frameworks and identities they communicate (34–38). People understand themselves as being in motion, so that where they are today is not where they will be tomorrow. This sense of movement invests narrative with a crucial importance for self-understanding: the account of how people have moved in the past and intend to move in the future is an “unfolding story” (47). In a statement that resonates with the questions of Jaspers, Raabe, and Wolf, Taylor claims that “in order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going” (47). The stories that capture this idea of self do so not only by recounting events but also by explaining the links between them and giving them meaning. In other words, stories about our lives give us a sense of who we are by giving our lives sense. Consciously or not, we use them to relate our history to underlying moral frameworks. And because we need to understand ourselves as being oriented toward what is good, stories of change tend to be stories of movement toward that good, in which inferior moral frameworks are discarded for new, superior ones (46–52, 64–65).

This view of identity as relying on a coherent narrative that characterizes the self as on the path to good is problematic for at least two reasons. While Taylor contends that a belief in moral progress and improvement has suffused morality and identity since the nineteenth century (393–94), nostalgia and the vision of modernity as moral decline have been powerful currents of thought, as well. In addition, as I discuss in the next two sections, antinarrativists object to the idea that stories can or should create a sense of continuous identity and maintain that a desire to cast the self in these terms—and especially as “on track” toward good—tends to yield self-deception, rather than self-knowledge.8 Whatever the problems with this view may be, however, such a story of self and of good clearly motivates the process of coming to terms with a difficult past and informs common understandings of it. Wertgen writes, for instance, that “people need a (positive) qualitative-diachronic identity to be able to act. They need it to construct a self-conception that guarantees the individual’s consistency as well as his social competence.”9 As the title of her book summary indicates, Ruti Teitel conceives of “transitional justice as liberal narrative,” a narrative of progress toward knowledge and social unity.10 And, I argue, the desire to construct such a story of self drives the narrators of all the dynamic observer narratives—

9. Wertgen, Vergangenheitsbewältigung, 175.
whether or not their stories are convincing in the end. Even the texts that show the inadequacy or ethical failings of such narratives use the figure of the narrator to acknowledge the desire for this kind of self-story. Such desire prompts the narrator of *Cat and Mouse* to cast himself as an innocent bystander in the past who works for social good in the present, and, I argue, leads the narrator of *Austerlitz* to identify with Jewish trauma. The narrators’ desire for a narrative of moral progress belongs to the novels’ diagnosis of society and the individuals who people it. The novels register the same persistent desire that Taylor’s historically based philosophy does.

A desire for moral progress does not necessarily produce it, however, nor are narratives of progress always convincing. The dynamic observer narratives are frequently skeptical about the “good” of this mode of self-understanding, and they question both the efficacy and the ethical ramifications of such a narrative enterprise. Taylor, too, is careful to point out that, although individuals believe they have exchanged a bad moral framework for a good one (or, at least, a lesser good for a better one), this transaction is never neat. Inevitably, the new good fails to displace the old good entirely. Remnants of old frameworks and old moral languages remain, or are consciously preserved (64–66). This persistence of past values animates one line of critique of the postwar German term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. While I translated it in the introduction as “coming to terms with the past,” “overcoming the past” is a more literal rendering. The primary critique of the term insists on the impossibility of ever overcoming the destruction wrought by National Socialism. In Adorno’s analysis, the inability to overcome the past is also rooted in the failure to escape the mental, social, and political structures that caused the disaster in the first place. Not coincidentally, he writes of the “reprocessing” [*Aufarbeitung*] of the past, rather than of its overcoming. In the narrative texts, this continuing entanglement manifests itself in the persistence of old moral languages, along with the implicit assumptions and ways of understanding that they support. The narrator of *Cat and Mouse* continues to use a ritualistic language reminiscent of National Socialism, even as he tries to atone for his youthful culpability during the war years; this circular language allows him to avoid an image of himself as a perpetrator, though his postwar social work and his story testify to his unspoken guilt. As Taylor writes, a shift in morality is “not necessarily a once-for-all affair. The older condemned

11. See, for instance, Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, *Inability to Mourn*, 14: “It is obvious that the murder of millions of people cannot be ‘mastered’. . . . Rather, by ‘mastering’ we mean a sequence of steps in self-knowledge. Freud called these ‘remembering, repeating, working through.’”

Chapter One

goods remain; they resist; some seem ineradicable from the human heart. So that the struggle and tension continues” (65). In fact, as the readings in chapters 3–7 show, this struggle and tension drive the narrators’ need to tell their protagonists’ stories. Morals and frameworks that have been completely abandoned hardly need to be discussed.

The assumptions about identity and morality that occupy the core of theories of Vergangenheitsbewältigung and the texts I analyze also underpin Taylor’s narrativist account of identity. For this reason, Taylor’s thought is an important resource in explaining how the political, social, and personal shifts in the dynamic observer narratives both destabilize the narrators’ sense of self and animate their need to reckon with the past. The new moral horizons and languages associated with these shifts force the narrators to confront their past and present identities in new terms. The “webs of interlocution” that bind them to the protagonists take on new meaning, so that these linguistic and narrative encounters unsettle their self-understanding (36). Some of these crises arise when the narrator suddenly “sees” for the first time a language and perspective that challenges his own. Such is the case in Storm’s and Raabe’s nineteenth-century texts. In Doppelgänger the middle-class narrator comes to see his earlier self as unfeeling when he confronts the privation, helplessness, and desire that drove the protagonist’s tragedy. The crises of self suffered by the post–World War II narrators, on the other hand, tend to occur because a historical shift remains incomplete; the confrontation with the protagonist symptomizes an incomplete break with a society, language, or morality tainted by National Socialism. In listening to Austerlitz’s story of Jewish suffering and loss of identity, Sebald’s narrator is returned to the historical site of atrocity and reminded of his ineradicable ties to its perpetrators.

Narrative as the Ground of Coherent Identity?

The dynamic observer narratives, theories of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, and Taylor all see narrative as offering a mechanism for coping with breaks in self-understanding. Antinarrativist accounts, too, acknowledge that narrative often functions in this way; they simply deny that it is adequate or appropriate to the task. While Taylor asserts that life stories help individuals make sense of critical breaks in identity and morality, he does not explain how narrative helps people withstand such disorientation and reinterpret their lives or why it can serve this function. Paul Ricoeur’s account of identity, especially in Oneself as Another, does. Although his metaphysical reasoning is far from my own methods, his explanation of how narratives construct a continuous
sense of identity through time and across breaks and discontinuities strongly resembles the picture of narrative and identity that emerges from the texts I read. Other aspects of these same texts threaten to fracture that picture, however, conjuring antinarrativist doubts about narrative’s value as a producer of coherent individual identities. Galen Strawson’s rejection of narrative as a ground of identity denies that a continuous sense of identity is desirable and pleads, instead, for a view of identity that accepts unreconciled breaks. In the terms of my project, Ricoeur explains why narrative is productive for coming to terms with past and present, and Strawson why it should be cast off.

Ricoeur contends that narratives provide such a continuous understanding of self by mediating between two different facets of identity: idem-identity, or identity as sameness, and ipse-identity, or identity as a sense of selfhood. According to Ricoeur, these two different conceptions of identity come into conflict precisely when one considers the problem of the self’s permanence in time. He names two possible anchors for this permanence: character and the ability to keep one’s word. A belief in character makes it possible to answer the question “who are you?” with a description of one’s lasting characteristics, or to describe “what” one is (119–22). It allows the narrator of Hedge to characterize himself as an architect and music lover, uninterested in women, and detached from the relationships and gossip of his home village (7, 14, 16). Such self-descriptions resemble the responses that Taylor’s self offers to the same question, containing information not only about one’s disposition but also about one’s position within both the human community and a particular moral horizon. In fact, Ricoeur’s definition of character resonates with Taylor’s insistence on the self as defined through the web of interlocutions and moral framework of one’s given historical community; Ricoeur casts it “as a finite, unchosen perspective through which we accede to values and to the use of our powers” (119).

Ricoeur writes that in character, the sense of sameness (idem-identity) and the sense of selfhood (ipse-identity) can coalesce; the sense of what one is may be very closely allied to one’s sense of selfhood. In contrast, the ability to keep one’s word relies entirely on the idea of selfhood, on the existence of a self who can accept responsibility. Crucially, that ability persists even when the self’s characteristics change dramatically, when the self is no longer “the same.” In

---

13. Ricoeur introduces this key distinction in Oneself as Another (2–3), then returns to a substantial discussion of it in his section on narrative and selfhood over time (115–25)—a sign of the crucial importance of narrative in his conception of self.

14. Parenthetical citations referencing plot points or examples (but not direct quotations) refer to the English translation, when available, or to the German original for texts with no published translation.
such moments, *ipse*-identity and the ability to keep one’s word constitute the only guarantors of identity (118–24, 147–50). In *Doppelgänger*, for instance, the central conundrum is how to connect two seemingly opposite characters in one man: the gentle father a daughter remembers and the violent husband who killed his wife. Initially, they are connected only by the idea of selfhood and by the responsibilities that persist beyond the break of the mother’s death: his responsibility for his daughter, and his ineradicable record as a legally convicted criminal. Both the sense of self and that of enduring responsibility can create a need to come to terms with the past. The continuous sense of self propels the effort to link different “characters,” and the sense of responsibility that attaches to it drives the frequent effort to repair or atone for past deficiencies or crimes.

Moments of character change often lead to a reckoning with past and present identity because they jolt one’s “finite, unchosen perspective” and, with it, one’s language, moral framework, and story of self. For Ricoeur, the purpose of narrative is precisely to bridge these moments of disruption when *ipse*-identity alone guarantees permanence and to fold them into a cohesive story and character. A story constructs this *idem*-identity through a dialectical movement that transforms moments of disruption and departure into necessary moments of development. It produces a character that “draws his or her singularity from the unity of a life considered a temporal totality,” even as that unity is shaken by “the disruptive effect of the unforeseeable events that punctuate it (encounters, accidents, etc.)” (147). In looking back to tell the story of a life, people make its accidents into necessary developments in the character the story as a whole produces. Contingency becomes part of the character of the life, so that “chance is transmuted into fate” (147). By imaginatively recreating his protagonist’s experience, *Doppelgänger*’s narrator’s story bridges the two parts of the man’s life and identity. The narrator of Handke’s *Sorrow* sees the era in which his mother’s economic and familial independence and National Socialism coincided both as exceptional in her life and as central to her character (15). In equating character with narrative, Ricoeur makes a general understanding of narrative productive for an understanding of identity. If narrative in general subsumes and repairs moments of disruption, the story of a life produces the “discordant concordance” of an individual’s character (148).

---

15. I discuss the significance of this statement for Handke’s handling of National Socialism in chapter 6.

The process of coming to terms with the past does not generate a seamless coherence between past and present; it links past and present because its reinterpretation of the past has ramifications for the identities of the present. Similarly, Ricoeur’s vision of character is not that it remains constant over time. In the end, character seems to be stable, and the characteristics that persist contribute to the self’s permanence in time. But many other characteristics change. Character evolves. The impetus for change may come from within; the self does something new, and continues doing it, until what was new has become part of the stable, reliable aspect of character. The impetus for change may also come from without; the self encounters, and then internalizes, “otherness.” (Or, as I will argue in the next section, it may “disidentify” with the difference it encounters.) A life story provides an account of the internally and externally driven changes that have produced a seemingly stable character: “character has a history which it has contracted. . . . What sedimentation has contracted, narration can redeploy” (122). Nearly all of the texts I discuss show their narrators explaining their protagonists by relating the accidents of their lives. Unjust privilege and arbitrary exercise of power bring Paul Roderich to hate traditional social structures and make him a democrat (Paul Roderich); discrimination, poverty, and helplessness make John Glückstadt violent (Doppelgänger); Heinrich Schaumann’s childhood defense of a persecuted girl makes him a self-satisfied land baron (Stuffcake); an early arrest by National Socialists makes Katharina fearful (Hedge); and the inclusion on a Jewish children’s transport from Prague to England determines Jacques Austerlitz’s life trajectory and character (Austerlitz). All the stories create clearly defined characters who are memorable for their strong character traits. But in each story, these identifying traits are the product of far-reaching change. In the stories the narrators tell about the protagonists, change contributes to the “discordant concordance” of the narrative and the character, and “chance is transmuted into fate.”

All of my examples of how narratives subsume change into lasting character come from their stories of the protagonists’ lives, because all of the narrators fail to provide a stable account of themselves. Instead, their “stories” must be gleaned from the (relatively) brief and isolated passages of their explicit self-reference and from the texts’ linguistic, formal, and structural cues. Theirs are what Ricoeur might call “unsettling cases of narrativity” (149); advocates of performance might say that they are cases where narrative breaks down in the face of an experience incommensurable with narrative’s capacity to make meaning of it. The end of Sorrow dramatically depicts this movement

17. Ricoeur discusses character in Oneself (118–23).
that leads both into and away from narrative. Returning to his hometown for his mother’s burial, the narrator struggles to gain his footing in the face of the contrast between life and civilization, on the one hand, and death and a threatening nature, on the other (64–66). The coffin in the ground and the surrounding forest menacing him, he suddenly sees human life as “an episodic jumble of shapes” (66) [ein episodisches Getümmel von Gestalten (98)]. At that moment, he resolves to write his mother’s story, the coherent account that the reader has just finished. But the text the reader encounters from this point forward no longer tells a coherent story. It dissolves into “unsettling” snippets about the narrator, where the lack of any narrative connection is highlighted by the blank lines that separate each snippet from the next. The same moment that produced the linear, coherent biography of the mother prompts narrative degeneration when the narrator himself is the subject. He cannot—or will not—construct a coherent narrative of himself.

This failure of or resistance to narrative recalls the antinarrativist mistrust of coherent life narratives. While Ricoeur values narrative for its capability to subsume difference, this unifying function serves as the point of attack for approaches like those of Galen Strawson and Judith Butler. Both Strawson and Butler challenge the body of thinking on “narrative identity” that has developed over the past decades and reject the normative demands for coherence and sameness over time that they see in such thinking. Strawson’s challenge merits closer discussion here, because it shares its point of departure with the fictional narratives I discuss: his argument, like the narrators’ stories, departs from a sense of disjunction between the self of the present and the self of the past. Strawson maintains that many people experience no sense of relationship between their present selves and the selves associated with their physical bodies at other points in time. He dubs such people Episodics and asserts that they do not understand themselves through narrative. In contrast, Diachronics see themselves as connected to the selves of their pasts and futures and often use narrative to explain and understand the relationship between these selves. Strawson deplores the dominance of the narrative approach to identity not only because it describes identity incorrectly, by extending a Diachronic’s view of identity to all people, but also because it valorizes this narrative understanding of self. According to Strawson, many adherents of narrative identity insist that identity should be

---

18. The pieces I discuss here are Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” and Butler, “Account of Oneself.”

19. In addition to Taylor and Ricoeur, see, for example, MacIntyre, After Virtue; Bruner, “Life as Narrative”; Bruner, Acts of Meaning; Schechtman, Constitution of Selves; Cavarero, Relating Narratives.
narrative, that “a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to
true or full personhood.” Strawson begins by arguing for a neutral view of
the ethics of narrative and nonnarrative selves, but in the course of his arti-
cle, the nonnarrative self emerges as the ethically preferable option: he shares
Sartre’s judgment that “narrativity is essentially a matter of bad faith, of rad-
ical . . . inauthenticity,” so that “it is in the sphere of ethics more of an affliction
or a bad habit than a prerequisite of a good life.” In a similar vein, Butler
opposes “the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call
the truth of the person.” In this view, Handke’s narrator does not fail to con-
struct a stable story; he resists the temptation to do so.

As I have shown, the texts I examine exhibit a tension between these two
views. On the one hand, they exhibit a distinct narrativist and “Diachronic”
slant. Disoriented by a clash or gap between past and present identity, the nar-
rators tell stories to recover a coherent sense of self, as Ricoeur might predict.
In these moments, which “expos[e] selfhood by taking away the support of
sameness,” the oscillation between sameness and selfhood swings toward the
pole where the only indicator of a self or identity is the sense of selfhood itself
(149). Character, beset by change, is no longer a reliable source of identity at
all. In Stuffcake Eduard writes because he suddenly finds himself regarded—
and begins to regard himself—as a narrow-minded, conformist, cruel philis-
tine, rather than a bold and successful adventurer. He, like the other narrators,
tries to “repair” or negotiate discontinuity by providing a coherent account of
the protagonist’s life. These efforts yield the largely cohesive, linear stories that
earn the texts the label of “realist,” or, at the least, the reputation of working
with realist traditions. The narrators’ own life stories remain disjointed, how-
ever—even though it was this sense of disjointed identity that had prompted
their tales.

Narrative, Identity, and the (Ethical) Relationship to Others

The narrators’ fractured self-presentation points, perhaps, to narrative’s
inability to capture the essence of an identity, the experience of a life. But
there are other possible explanations. Their splintered self-portrayals may also
be a product of their unwillingness to reckon with the relationships between
their past and present selves; they may resist linking the episodes of their lives

21. Ibid., 435, 50.
to evade the guilt or shame that all of them feel in some measure as they face their pasts. In either case, the contrast between their stories about their protagonists and the form of their self-representations raises questions about the ethics of telling life stories; the asymmetry leads to questions about the role narrative plays in the relationship between self and others.

Up to now, I have reconstructed the narrativist and antinarrativist positions on the relationship between narrative and identity by focusing on their treatment of the relationship between narrative and the self. In the books I investigate, however, narrative also plays a key role in mediating the intertwined identities of the narrating self and his protagonist. These protagonists play important roles, not only as conversation partners in the narrators’ stories but also as the stars of their own life histories, which the narrators tell to try to come to terms with the past. As the narrators relate these tales, they display a fascination—and struggle—with the other person's story. This fraught relationship to another person's story again resonates with both theories of coming to terms with the past and contemporary theories of identity; in all three arenas, stories about other people carry a heavy ethical load. While Taylor insists on the historical and social origins of the subject and Ricoeur derives the self through its relationship with others, an understanding of the self remains the central goal in both accounts. In the last section of this chapter, I attend to theories that place the relationship between self and other at the heart of their investigation of narrative, identity, and ethics. Here as in the previous sections, the similarities between theoretical explorations of these relationships and fictional representations of them suggest that the forces driving the fiction also operate in the extraliterary world.

**Narrative as the Ground of Ethical Relationships: Adriana Cavarero**

Because a reinterpretation of past events stands at the heart of a reckoning with the past, the narratives that reconstruct those events often take on significant ethical importance. These narratives can yield a variety of effects. Looking forward, participants may alter their beliefs and their actions because they understand the past and themselves in a new way. In Taylor's terms, they may change course to aim toward a newly perceived good (and away from a newly perceived evil or folly). In the postwar German context, accounts like those of Adorno or the Mitscherlichs emphasize this benefit of reckoning with the past; they advocate for Germans to come to a new understanding of their responsibility for and entanglement in totalitarian and fascist National Socialism, so that they can achieve a healthier psychological state and a strongly
Looking back, participants may try to make amends for acts now perceived as evil or inadequate, or to make reparations to others now perceived as victims of such actions. Cases of actual reparations, such as German payments for the slave labor extracted in its concentration camps, garner great attention. But, in many cases, the narrative reinterpretations themselves and the symbolic acts they produce (such as memorials or apologies) bear significance because they are the only means available for trying to do justice to the past and its victims, or to atone for it: those who perished in the German camps can receive no reparation. Narratives and symbolic acts based on reinterpretations of the past, especially apology, recognize the experience and point of view of those who have suffered. Although some contest the value of such symbolic measures, others hold them to be essential elements of any reckoning with the past. A story in the present may extend belated recognition to those who had previously been denied it. In the contexts of crimes of genocide or religious persecution, for instance, the apology that emerges from the reinterpretation of another’s story serves “the victim’s need for acknowledgement,” of his humanity and of his suffering. Similarly, the narrator of Doppelgänger offers John Glückstadt a posthumous acknowledgment of his human status; he is no longer only a convict, a wife batterer, or a ghostly voice on the moors, but a human with a history, loyalties, and passions. The narrators of both Handke’s and Stefan’s texts write their mothers’ stories to acknowledge the vital, human hopes and suffering that passed unnoticed and unappreciated during their oppressed lives.

This potential for narrative to grant human recognition also stands at the center of Adriana Cavarero’s account of the positive ethical value of narrative. Cavarero envisions the narration of a life story as the fundamental ethical act in the relationship between individuals. In her understanding, people fulfill their ethical responsibility to others by recognizing them, and they recognize them by acknowledging and telling their unique life stories. Caverero’s take on the relationship between narrative and identity is somewhat different than in other accounts because, rather than seeing narrative as constructing identity or giving it meaning, she sees narrative as registering the specific events of a physical life (42, 35–36). Moreover, rather than being a means of individual self-understanding, narrative here is the fundamental element in relationships

23. Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, Inability to Mourn; Adorno, “Coming to Terms.”
between people. For Cavarero, a human’s identity depends on being recognized as human; people are human because others see them that way (20–22). Further, selfhood resides in the sense that the self is narratable, and that one’s life has a singular story defined by the singular details of one’s physical and social existence (33–34, 38–40). Recognition, therefore—not the identification as a biological human, but the recognition of one’s humanity—occurs through the recognition that one is “a narratable self with a unique story” (34). Despite the importance she places on the life story for the individual’s sense of self, Cavarero insists that no one can tell a complete story of her own life. This necessary incompleteness begins in the simple facts of human existence: no one can tell the story of her own birth or childhood (38–39). Yet people still desire a complete life story, one that generates a “unity” of their identity. So they look to others to provide the information they cannot; the stories that other people tell fill the gaps in their own (37–41). The stories told by others complete the self’s own story and “unity.” Cavarero is careful to note that this unity is constructed; all narrative relies on selection, and the character of the “unified” life is determined by the selection of events included in its story. Yet she insists that the events and circumstances of the story, and the desire for the story, exist beyond the narrative itself (42). Providing sympathetic narration for another fulfills a fundamental human desire. It recognizes the individual’s humanity and gives her a story of self, so that “there is an ethic of the gift in the pleasure of the narrator” (3–4). In Stefan’s book about her mother, the dedication is not merely formulaic but an acknowledgement of the mother’s desperate desire for the story Stefan gives her: “for my mother / who wrote for her life” [für meine Mutter / die um ihr Leben geschrieben hat].

Narrative and the Ethics of Disidentification

Many recent discussions of reckoning with the past and of narrative ethics have emphasized, however, that such narratives are only gifts when they refrain from colonizing the other person’s story with one’s own needs, desires, or self-understanding. Cavarero, for instance, maintains that to be a true gift (or to enact real recognition), a story must affirm the singularity of the self it narrates, its character as “this and not another.” It cannot confuse or conflate the selves of narrator and protagonist. Cavarero calls this principle an “altruistic ethics of relation. . . . No matter how much you are similar and consonant, says this ethic, your story is never my story. . . . I do not dissolve both into a common identity, nor do I digest your tale in order to construct the meaning of mine” (92). Nancy K. Miller contends that autobiography
and memoir are valuable precisely because they can promote “an ethics of disidentification.” In disidentification, authors and readers may come to see what they share with a figure in the story, but they also realize their fundamental difference from that figure. Similarity prompts human recognition, but difference prohibits identification. Dorothy Hale sees a similar trend in reflections about the ethical status of novels. She contends that, from Martha Nussbaum and Gayatri Spivak to J. Hillis Miller and Butler, scholars have recently posited an “ethical value of the readerly self.” This ethical value resides in the reader’s decision to acknowledge the alterity encountered in the novel and to submit to that alterity for the duration of the reading experience. Reading novels encourages people to recognize, in Cavarero’s sense, people who are very different from themselves.

Important differences mark the thinking of these scholars. In Nussbaum and Butler, for instance, the purpose for recognizing alterity is very different. Nussbaum wants readers to recognize different people’s experience so that they can empathize with otherwise incomprehensible others, becoming better citizens in the process. Butler, on the other hand, writes that recognizing alterity must sometimes mean acknowledging the impossibility of ever understanding another’s experience, or translating it into one’s own terms. In Nussbaum, it seems, recognizing difference is to reduce the distance between different people; in Butler, it is to remind them that they do really stand apart. Still, they share with Miller and Cavarero the imperative of acknowledging another person’s position: that the other is a person; that the other has a particular experience, story, and identity; and that that other position is truly different from one’s own. This kind of recognition of others, so prevalent in theories of recent decades, seems to me to relate closely to the ideals of universal concern and universal justice that Taylor observes developing in modern conceptions of morality and identity (394–96). Ultimately, the goal, or responsibility, is to affirm the equal value of other individuals, with their very different life stories. Having recognized that equal but different value, one is to be moved to support others’ rights and improve their quality of life (as

26. Miller, But Enough about Me, 120. Similar notions of empathic but self-reflexive relations to others appear in several other fields, as well. Kaja Silverman’s Threshold of the Visual World provides a psychoanalytical model of “heteropathic identification” (2, 23–24); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet considers the problems and opportunities of “identification as” and “identification with” in the context of feminism and queer studies (59–63); and, in the field of trauma and Holocaust studies, Dominic LaCapra’s Writing History, Writing Trauma advocates an empathy that recognizes the other’s alterity (40).

27. Hale, “Fiction as Restriction,” 188–89.


Taylor holds, 393–96); or to advocate for social justice (as Nussbaum hopes readers will after reading Dickens's *Hard Times*); or to grant them freedom of self-determination (as Butler's plea not to redefine others in one's own terms seeks to do).

This tension between empathy and the recognition of absolute difference pervades attempts to reckon with the past, too. It exists, for instance, within the memorial culture focused on the Holocaust. One approach to memorializing Holocaust victims is to engage audiences in learning about the victims' world and experience and, in so doing, to encourage empathy with the victims. This is the approach taken by the U.S. Holocaust Museum, where visitors receive an identification card that encourages them to follow the experience of one individual as they move through the historically organized permanent exhibit. It is also the approach taken in many films; Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*, for instance, repeatedly encourages viewers to look with its protagonist's eyes (as in the many scenes framed by windows) or hear with his ears (as when a bomb hits his apartment building and momentarily deafens him). The other approach is to emphasize the complete unintelligibility or untranslatability of the victims' experience. The epitome of this approach appears in the concept of the *Muselmann*, the walking dead whose experience is inaccessible because it occurs outside the framework of normal human existence. Many (even most) self-reflexive and critical accounts assert or reveal such an unbridgeable divide at one point or another, however. In Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the survivor father's Polish-inflected English continually marks his experience and identity as foreign to his New York–born son and chronicler. In chapter 7 I highlight the tension between empathy for victims and a recognition of their difference in *Austerlitz*.

Despite the contrast between these approaches—and the vitriol that sometimes accompanies their responses to each other—both are predicated on the recognition of another person's experience and identity. In both cases the audience is asked to confront, recognize, and affirm the validity of a foreign experience, and to acknowledge a story of the past that is different from its own. In the end, the goal of a reckoning with the past is often to achieve consensus on a shared story of the past by recognizing and incorporating different, “foreign” positions. Yet even those who advocate constructing such shared narratives insist that, sometimes, the perspectives, frameworks, and languages of the parties may differ so fundamentally that they cannot be

integrated; in such cases, the shared story must emerge from a “bridging discourse” that draws from common concerns without violating the principles of either position. The search for a balance between difference and empathy also animates the “memory contests” in which post-1990 German-language writers acknowledge their families’ experiences of the National Socialist past, even as they pursue buried, conflicting accounts. The authors and narrators of these recent texts seem to seek a language and story that can encompass and maintain a critical distance from both understandings of the past.

Disidentification might be seen as the precondition for a narrative reckoning with the past; empathy opens the door to interpretation within a new, “foreign” moral framework, while the recognition of difference assures that the reinterpretation remains anchored in one’s own identity and historical experience. That same kind of disidentification prompts the narrative reckoning undertaken by the narrators discussed in this book. Ricoeur writes that either internal or external events may initiate character change; the self may innovate, changing what it does, or it may confront “otherness” and then internalize it (121–22). All the narrators I examine experience external challenges to their notions of self, challenges brought by the protagonist’s “otherness.” But while Ricoeur says that character changes when the self identifies with the other person, I contend that many of these narrators’ self-understanding changes because they disidentify with their protagonists. The narrators recognize the protagonists’ similarity as humans with stories of their own, but as they reinterpret those stories, they realize the difference that separates them from their narrative subjects. The narrator of Stuffcake learns to see his protagonist not as a comic figure but as a man with a history lived from the inside. Recognizing this other perspective causes him to question his previous interpretive framework, and to see himself, at least momentarily, in a new and uncomfortable way: as a narrow-minded man of convention and veiled violence, rather than as an adventurous colonial hero. The relationships in Stefan’s mother book move in the opposite direction. Since her youth, the daughter has defined herself against her mother and her mother’s brand of womanhood, but after her mother’s death, she writes her mother’s story to feel her way into her experience. The book ends with a reaffirmation of the two women’s difference, however; relating her process of writing, the daughter reports that when she tried to adopt her mother’s perspective and words, she became physically ill (152–53). To write the book successfully, she had

34. See Fuchs, “Generational Memory Contests.” For similar descriptions of post-1990 literature, see also Eigler, Gedächtnis und Geschichte, 24–33, 61–62; Holdenried, “Zum Aktuellen Familienroman.”
to disidentify: to describe her mother’s beliefs and language, hopes and suffering, but to do so from her own, external (and still critical) perspective. For the narrators in these books, reckoning with the past and with their own past and present identities begins with an experience of disidentification, and continues as they try to tell new stories about the past that acknowledge or incorporate the stories the protagonists might have told about themselves. In fact, the later narrators increasingly tell their stories so as to allow the protagonists to tell their own stories, in their own voices. Rather than trying to adopt their protagonists’ perspectives, the narrators reproduce the protagonists’ own, “foreign” language.

The Dangers of Narrative

From an antinarrativist perspective, however, this effort to identify and give voice to the other person’s language bears significant ethical dangers. I have suggested that dynamic observer narrators’ disjointed self-narration may reveal narrative’s insufficiency for capturing identity over time, much as Strawson objects to the (false) coherence that narrative imposes. Narrative, he suggests, is an ethically inferior mode of understanding oneself. For similar reasons, Butler insists that, while we cannot live entirely without narrative, it is an ethically suspect approach to others. Cavarero sees the narration of another person’s story as a gift. Butler sees it as a cage. While Butler shares Cavarero’s conviction that an ethical approach to others requires acknowledging them as subjects or selves, in “Giving an Account of Oneself,” she resists the idea that stories can provide such acknowledgment. Narrative may be a tool for making oneself “recognizable and understandable,” but a story can never give a full account of the self (26). First, like Taylor, Butler sees self-understanding as reliant on a framework of language and norms that we do not choose, but which predate us and to which we have to accede, so that a narrative is always “disoriented by what is not mine, or what is not mine alone” (26). A narrator does not reproduce her protagonist’s language, but the language within which the protagonist has been forced to define herself. I discuss this problem of narration in chapter 6, where the conventions of language and narrative trouble Handke’s and Stefan’s narrators’ efforts to recognize their mothers’ individual identities. More problematic for Butler is the necessary lack of self-knowledge and the resulting incompleteness of narrative that Cavarero also asserts. Instead of turning to others for one’s story, as

---

35. Here, Butler’s suggestion that the true account of myself would be “mine and mine alone” indicates a commitment to the uniqueness of the self that is similar to Cavarero’s.
Cavarero’s self does, Butler’s self reflects that the self-knowledge impossible for the self is also impossible for others (27–28). The ethical stance is to recognize others’ selfhood despite their imperfect self-knowledge; it “consists in asking the question, ‘Who are you?’ and continuing to ask the question without any expectation of a full or final answer” (28). One should not try to provide a complete and coherent story about “who” someone else is. Above all, Butler’s ethical self does not demand that others provide definitive accounts of who they are. Definitive accounts are closed, and closure precludes desire, and desire is the essence of what it means to be human and alive (28–30). Butler distrusts narrative precisely because of its tendency to coherence, precisely for its ability to mediate “permanence over time,” as it does in Ricoeur, or to provide a sense of “unity” for the life as a whole, as it does in Cavarero.

In reading the dynamic observer narratives, one might posit that the narrators insist on generating coherent stories for others while evading clear stories of self. As I discussed earlier, their fragmentary, inconclusive self-accounts contrast sharply with the chronological, cohesive stories they often tell about their protagonists. In telling these stories, they both “answer” and interrupt their initial implicit or explicit questions about how they came to be where they are. In this reading, the narrators grant themselves the indeterminacy brought about by a critical break, while erasing the traces of such open possibility from their protagonists’ stories. Butler distrusts narrative largely because she suspects that even if people allow themselves to be inconsistent and changeable, they tend to want other people’s stories to be coherent and stable. It is, in fact, in the context of talking about someone else that she writes, “It may be that we prefer the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call the truth of the person, a truth which, to a certain degree, and for reasons we have already suggested, is indicated more radically as an interruption” (35). Stories are dangerous because they tempt people into denying others their moments of interruptive truth, and for Butler, these moments are indispensable to individual freedom and development: “the encounters I undergo . . . are those by which I am invariably transformed; recognition becomes the process by which I become other than what I was and, therefore, also, the process by which I cease to be able to return to what I was” (24). The encounters between the narrators and their protagonists are asymmetric. Read through Butler’s lens, one could interpret the narratives as moments of living change for the narrators, and of foreclosing definition for the protagonists.

Fundamentally, the disagreement between narrativist and antinarrativist positions is not whether narrative plays a role in identity. The question

36. In response to Strawson’s polemical article, Eakin’s “Response to Galen Strawson”
is what kind of role it plays, or should play. Both the antinarrativist positions and the fictional works cast doubt on the narrativist faith expressed by thinkers like Taylor and Cavarero and by theorists of reckoning with the past. The books question the adequacy of stories as a foundation for identity or a truly generous gift to others. But they do not jettison narrative, either. In fact, many of them turn precisely on their narrators’ or protagonists’ problematic lack of a satisfactory story of self.

argues forcefully that humans cannot live entirely outside of narrative. See also Battersby, “Narrativity, Self, and Self-Representation”; Phelan, “Who’s Here?”