Ethics and the Dynamic Observer Narrator
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Both theoretical accounts of the process of coming to terms with the past and the dynamic observer narratives I discuss work from a conception of identity as historical and relational. In this view, identity emerges from the relationship between different frameworks of morality, language, and experience: between one’s changing frameworks over time, on the one hand, and the relationship between one’s own frameworks and other people’s, on the other. Negotiating identity, in other words, entails negotiating between these differing frameworks. So, too, does coming to terms with the past. In fact, to come to terms with the past is to reckon with the clashes between shifting frameworks, and with their implications for the individual’s self-understanding in past and present. In many accounts, this reckoning takes place through narrative, as participants of the process construct a new story about the past that reconciles the stories told within various frameworks. This view of the process invites a rhetorical approach to narrative, in which narrative is understood to be “not just story but also action, the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose.” In a reckoning with the past, the purpose of narrative is to align, or at least mitigate or explain the differences between, different understandings of past events.

In this chapter, I argue that the dynamic observer form has often been used to explore the problem of coming to terms with the past because its structure highlights conflicting frameworks of meaning and the interactions between them. This function makes it an important narrative form, despite its seemingly hybrid structure. I claim that the three major formal features of the dynamic observer narrative—its character narration, focus on a separate protagonist’s story, and metanarrative passages—highlight the narrators’ efforts to use stories to reconcile the antagonistic interpretive frameworks belonging to their protagonists and to their own past and present. In most cases, the narratives resist resolving all the tensions, thus questioning the possibility of reconciling those frameworks—or casting a questionable light on the story or narrator that would claim to do so. In other words, dynamic observer narratives are defined by the correspondence between their structural tensions and the conflicts that drive their stories.

These interlocking tensions operate on two levels. First, each text offers historical or social commentary by distinguishing between the frameworks present during the period of German history that it treats and commenting on the relationships and conflicts between these frameworks. Second, all reflect on narrative’s role as a mediator between frameworks by associating these frameworks with the narrative’s structural features and figures—with characters, narrators, and authors. Both the realistic historical representations and the narrative reflections encourage readers to recognize something about the world and the interpretive frameworks and stories that give it meaning. At the same time, they invite readers to judge the relative value of the interpretive frameworks and to consider the ethical implications of telling stories. Finally, the analytical chapters will show that the body of dynamic observer narratives as a whole reveals a connection between these two levels: different frameworks of interpretation contain different valuations of narrative and different criteria for assessing narratives’ ethical status. But here I am getting ahead of myself. I turn now to a narratological definition of the dynamic observer narrative and to my explication of the relationship between its structure and the problem of coming to terms with the past.

Narratological Definition of Dynamic Observer Narrative

From New Critics to structuralists, narrative theorists of all stripes have recognized the case of the character narrator telling another’s story as a distinct variety of character narrative. My term of dynamic observer narrator derives

2. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s New Critical matrix of narrative situations in Understanding Fiction (589) includes a scenario described as “minor character tells
from the rhetorical tradition, where James Phelan has characterized observer narration as “narration by a character narrator who is not a protagonist.” I have adopted this terminology because much of it is more intuitive than structuralist terminology, and because my interpretive approach aims to bring historical and cultural interpretation of narrative form into dialogue with the rhetorical tradition, particularly Phelan’s work on character narration. But I have adapted the terminology because the description that Phelan offers of the observer narrator shortchanges the critical role that dynamic observer narrators play. It suggests that the narrator who is not the “hero” of his story plays only a subordinate role in the story’s events, and that the observer narrator functions merely to inflect the story about the protagonist. In contrast, the narrators I examine are key to the concerns that the texts address. Indeed, one could argue that they are protagonists in their own right. The word “dynamic” in my term signals this active function.

Dynamic observer narrators’ centrality emerges clearly in the structures of the texts where they appear, and in the roles they play in the texts’ narrative progression—the reciprocal development of the textual construction of the narrative, on the one hand, and of readers’ experience, interpretation, and judgment of it, on the other. First, the narrators alone connect the various narrative tracks. Not only do they give readers a glimpse of the worlds and identities they occupy as they narrate, but they also figure in the stories they tell. They inhabit both the narrative present, which usually appears as a frame story, and the story they tell about the past. When multiple narrative layers are present, as in Stuffcake or Austerlitz, the narrator appears in each (although, as I discuss in chapter 7, the scenario in Austerlitz differs somewhat from the other texts). Even in cases where the narrator repeats a story the protagonist has told him, his connection to the story extends beyond

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3. Phelan, Living to Tell, 198.
4. Ibid., 99.
5. Phelan, Experiencing Fiction, 3.
the acts of listening and narration. In fact, all of the narrators are associated with the central instability of the narratives about the past: the protagonists’ problematic relationships to themselves, other characters, or their social environments. Thus, although the narrative track dealing with the protagonist is always in the past tense, preceding the time of narration, there are no “historians” among the narrators here, like those of Adalbert Stifter’s *Brigitta* or Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*; none relates a story whose events and players he knows solely through hearsay, or unearths a story in old letters or manuscripts. The narrators have connections to both worlds. The supposed protagonists, on the other hand, are absent from the narrative present.

Although the narrator is merely associated with the instability that drives the protagonist’s story in the narrative track about the past, the progression of the present-tense track centers on the narrator and on an instability in her present character or situation.\(^6\) This instability can emerge at any point, although most of the texts I read begin by exposing it. Invariably linked to the instability in the past-tense narrative, it prompts readers to expect some development or resolution: in other words, some dynamism. Either the narrator and his situation will change, or readers’ understanding or judgment of him will. Nor does this expectation disappoint. All of the narrators punctuate their past-tense stories with periodic returns to the present, so that the instabilities of both narrative tracks develop in interlocking, reciprocal progressions. The central event of the present-tense progression, the narrator’s telling of her story, affects readers’ understanding and judgment of both protagonist’s and narrator’s actions in the past, while the events of the past provide context for understanding and judging the narration of the present. All of the texts I read end with the conclusion of the present-tense progression, whether this conclusion be the resolution of the present instability or the signal that it cannot be resolved; the present-tense progression could conclude before the text’s conclusion, however. Wolf’s *Model Childhood* is exemplary in the way its progression highlights the narrating figure’s centrality to the novel as a whole. While the child, Nelly, is the star of the embedded past-tense story, the adult narrator’s feelings about Nelly are the book’s central conflict. The novel begins with the narrator’s unwillingness to associate her present self with her past self (Nelly), and ends only when the narrator overcomes her distaste for Nelly’s beliefs and actions and acknowledges the child’s presence “in me.”\(^7\) It is this resolution that allows the reader to interpret and judge the book as a whole.

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6. On the role of instabilities in narrative progressions, see ibid., 15–16.
In fact, Wolf’s (autobiographically inspired) novel provides a paradigmatic example of the narrative reckoning with the past that takes place in dynamic observer narratives of all varieties. Whereas Wolf is explicit about that reckoning and about the primary importance of the frame’s narrative progression, however, the relative weight of the two progressions is much less clear-cut in the texts that I examine. The protagonists’ stories dominate their page count. Most of their narrators contend that their object is to tell those protagonists’ stories. The narrator of *Cat and Mouse*, for instance, avers that “this is not the place to tell my story. . . . Here I am speaking only of you [protagonist]” (529) [es soll ja nicht meine Geschichte . . . abgespult werden—vielmehr darf hier nur von Dir [protagonist] die Rede sein (4:106)]. In some cases, generations of readers have accepted these claims. And yet, the works’ progressions point toward the narrators’ centrality: the progressions begin and end with these characters, and also intersect there. The present progression depicts the narrative act that aims to resolve the past instability. The narrators alone register the tension between the narrative tracks of past and present.

The narrator’s structural position in these texts creates two fundamental tensions. First, it generates uncertainty regarding the relative importance of protagonist and narrator. Although the narrator claims primacy for the protagonist’s role—and the protagonist dominates the reported action—the narrator’s status as the sole connection between and his role in the progression of the two narrative tracks belie this claim. This tension accounts for the qualifiers and confusions contained in many theoretical descriptions of the “I-witness” narrative situation: Norman Friedman’s designation of cases in which the narrator threatens to overshadow the protagonist as technically deficient; Wayne Booth’s distinction between “observers” and the “narrative agents” who “produce some measurable effect on the course of events”; Franz Stanzel’s characterization of it as an “intermediary form” in which the narrator is a “relatively uninvolved witness to the outskirts of the action”; Mieke Bal’s definition of the witness narrator as one who is “probably not important from the point of view of action”; and Phelan’s list of the widely varying degrees to which observer narrators may participate in the story’s action.\(^8\) The tension between the present and the past is just as fundamental. The past-tense story contains all the action, while the present-tense track consists almost entirely of the narrator’s reflections and his account of his writing.

\(^8\) See Friedman, *Form and Meaning*, 160; Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 153–54; Stanzel, *Narrative Situations*, 62; Bal, *Narratology*, 28; Phelan, *Living to Tell*, 198 (my emphases). Stanzel specifically refutes the notion that such intermediary forms are inferior (62); indeed, his entire project argues for the equal value and potential of the entire spectrum of narrative situations.
But it is far from clear that the former is more important to the text's overall progression.

The group of texts I examine is defined by the correspondence between these structural tensions and the conflicts in the stories the narrator tells. The embedded, past-tense story shows a conflict between the protagonist and the narrator's youthful self. As the narrator recollects and relates the events of the embedded narrative, however, he struggles not only with the protagonist—who, after all, is no longer present—but also with himself. From the vantage point of the narrating present, the dominant tension is between the narrator's youthful and present selves. His narration as an adult betrays unease with the shape of his youthful relationship to the protagonist. As a result, the narrator must confront his own youthful character. In the end, this confrontation between the narrator's past and present selves shapes his narration of his troubled relationship to the protagonist. The problems may have begun with the relationship between narrator and protagonist, but the narrator's problematic relationship to himself over time drives the progression of the present-tense narrative: “How was it? Where do you come from? Where do I come from?” [Wie ist es gewesen? Wo kommst du her? Wo komme ich her? (Rich Life 42)].

This correspondence between the tensions of form and content also manifests itself in tensions between narrative modes. Phelan identifies three major narrative modes: narrativity, lyricality, and portraiture. “If narrativity can be reduced to somebody telling that something happened,” Phelan asserts, “and lyricality can be reduced to somebody telling that something is, portraiture can be reduced to somebody telling that someone is.” In other words, narrative is concerned with events and change, often in the past; lyricality with states of being, usually in the present; and portraiture with identities. “How was it? Where do you come from? Where do I come from?” Stefan asks, posing lyrical questions about the states of the past. Wolf and Raabe ask questions about the states and identities of the present: “How do people sometimes come to be in places where, when they stop to think, they wonder how they got there?”; “How did we become what we are today?” As the concern with movement in all three quotations suggests, however, the dominant mode of dynamic observer narratives is narrativity. Fundamentally, these narratives investigate how states and identities change over time and explore how people use narrative to comprehend, instigate, or influence that change.

Dynamic observer narratives are a hybrid form, then, a type of synthetic metanarrative that combines lyricality, portraiture, and narrativity in order

to reflect on the relationships between them. The narrative mode predominates both in the past-tense narrative track and in the progression established between the two tracks, but both tracks still incorporate significant components from the other two modes. The present-tense progressions always include passages that evoke the narrator’s thoughts, emotions, or state of being during the time of narration. Much of the present-tense narration in *Hedge*, for instance, conjures the obsessive fever with which the narrator pursues his mother’s wartime story, and his allusions to the isolated, often sterile life he has led since his emotional estrangement from her serve to illuminate his desperate situation. Such focus on the narrator’s present state establishes a lyric mode, where “the text focuses on revealing the dimensions of the character narrator’s current situation” and “revelations about ‘what happened’ are made not for their own sake but in the service of explaining ‘what is.’”

Portraiture plays an important role in the past-tense narrative tracks, where the narrators often construct rich and detailed explanations of their protagonists. In *Austerlitz*, for instance, the narrator devotes extended discourse to characterizing Austerlitz by describing his appearance, habits, and intellectual pursuits. Individual dynamic observer narratives use lyricality and portraiture to represent and elucidate the historically specific states and identities that they seek to capture; they provide a portrait of the married woman in rural Austria in the 1960s or recreate the experience of a once self-confident colonialist who begins to doubt himself. Still, they are more interested in the evolution of these states than in their static existence. As a class, too, dynamic observer narratives are invested primarily in change. They incorporate lyricality and portraiture because they are interested in the way that narrative drives and affects changes in state and identity—or how people try to use it to effect such change. Dynamic observer narratives make tangible and visible the function of narrative as Ricoeur understands it: mediation between change and constancy.

**Form Follows Function:**

**Dynamic Observer Narrative and Reckoning with the Past**

The dynamic observer narrative’s structure reproduces the historical tensions the text addresses: that between narrator and protagonist in the past, and that between the narrator past and present. In the remainder of the chapter, I explain how the three major formal features of dynamic observer narra-

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tives—character narration, narration by one character about another, and metanarration—encourage readers to attend to the issues at stake in a reckoning with the past. David Herman writes that in postclassical narratologies, the focus has been on the “interplay between the way stories are designed and the processing strategies promoted by their design.” This focus unites very disparate approaches to narrative theory—from cognitivist to feminist to postcolonial to rhetorical—and it underlies my own efforts to understanding the dynamic observer narrative. At root, my approach is rhetorical, analyzing the “recursive relationships among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response” that shape the texts’ effects and meanings. In this chapter I argue that, because these texts are narrated by a character, and because the narrator presents himself as telling a story about someone else, readers process the story and judge its figures differently than they would if an extradiegetic narrator told the protagonist’s story or if a character narrator told his own. Yet while rhetorical theorists do sometimes account for the historically specific frameworks of interpretation and understanding that shape texts and readers’ responses to them, these frameworks of interpretation do not (generally) stand at the heart of their analytical enterprise. They are at the heart of mine—not only because I think they are crucial, although I do, but also because I argue that contending with these frameworks is the core concern of dynamic observer narratives themselves. These stories are about interpretive frameworks and about the role narrative plays in mediating them.

My discussions of the three defining features of the form draw out the convergence of rhetorical and historical concerns. I contend that the character narrator encourages readers to wonder about who that narrator is and whether she can be trusted, but specify that in realistic texts, where the fictional world closely resembles a historical one, the answer to that question always possesses a historical component. Further, when that answer changes over time, as it does in these texts, character narration emphasizes the historicity of identity. Similarly, I maintain that any character narrator’s story about another character draws attention to the relationship between the two figures and, insofar as it affects both figures, raises the question of narrative’s ethical dimension. But, again, when narrator and protagonist represent differing interpretive frameworks, as they do in these texts, the narrative configuration also points to ideological, social, or other historical tensions and to the role narrative plays in negotiating them. Finally, the metanarration, the

13. My use of this term is general, rather than literary historical. See the introduction, n. 4.
dramatization of and reflection on the story the narrator tells, draws attention
to the ethics of narrative. At the same time, it also necessarily reveals, or at
least provides clues to, the interpretive framework(s) within which narrative
itself is understood. That is, even in making the most universal of claims—
or perhaps especially then—metanarrative reveals the historical specificity
of the frameworks that color narrators’, authors’, and readers’ understanding
of what narratives can and should do. Taken together, these three features
encourage reader attention to two key elements of the process of coming to
terms with the past: the historical identities and interpretive frameworks that
it attempts to address, and the crucial function attributed to narrative in that
process. Because the structural features and historical issues converge in this
way, defining the formal features of dynamic observer narration is not merely
a theoretical exercise in sharpening narratological terminology. In contexts
such as postwar Germany, disentangling the relationship between “protago-
nists” (or actors) and “observers” (or bystanders), or understanding when and
why people trust others’ accounts of the past, are projects with far-reaching
cultural and ethical consequences.

**Character Narration, Historical Identity, and Voice**

I begin by explaining the character narrator’s function in highlighting both
historically specific interpretive frameworks and voices and the interpretive
tensions that these frameworks generate. Simply put, character narrators draw
attention to themselves and their foibles of perception, understanding, and
judgment. Narrative theorists of all schools concur on this point.”14 As soon as
readers perceive such a figure, as soon as they realize that its views will affect
their understanding of the story, they begin to try to deduce who it is and
what its views are. They want to know the degree to which those views can
be trusted and in what ways those views may skew the narrator’s, and read-
ers’, understanding. In other words, they begin to assess the narrator’s reli-
ability. By presenting a narrator as unreliable—or putting his reliability into

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14. The structuralist Bal writes that the narrator’s use of the first-person pronoun makes
the figure “perceptible,” and that the focalizing narrator reveals something about himself with
every seemingly “objective” picture he paints. *Narratology*, 48. Similarly, the cognitivist Ansgar
Nüning maintains that a narrator’s judgments allow readers to draw conclusions about his
horizon of understanding and of belief, and the rhetoricist Booth asserts that as soon as an “I”
appears, “we [as readers] are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of the experi-
ence will come between us and the event.” Nüning, “Unreliable Narration zur Einführung,”
question—the text invites readers to pay attention to the narrating figure, even making it the element of primary interest in the text.\(^\text{15}\)

My goal in the next pages is to establish the historical component of narrator reliability, and to explain why narrator unreliability should be seen not only as a symptom of history but also as a means of illuminating it. Since different standards are usually applied in assessing nonfictional reliability, the discussion in this section is relevant primarily to fictional texts—although, as I discuss in chapter 6, fictionalized life-writing often employs tactics used by authors of fiction. Cognitive theorists like Ansgar Nünning have read unreliability in the symptom mode. Unreliability, they argue, cannot be judged based on text-internal factors. Instead, it emerges as a product of the reader’s processing strategies: a reader deems a narrator unreliable to naturalize the discrepancies or irritations between textual features and the reader’s frameworks of (textual and/or extratextual) understanding and expectations.\(^\text{16}\) In other words, Nünning claims that readers perceive narrators as unreliable when their narration violates readers’ sense of what is normal, either in the world or in a text. Reliability has a historical dimension because readers’ sense of what is normal varies across time and place, as do literary conventions and the reader expectations they encourage. Vera Nünning uses the reception history of *The Vicar of Wakefield* to demonstrate this historical dimension, arguing that the novel’s first readers perceived its narrator as reliable because they shared his values, while today’s readers see him as unreliable because their values and assumptions no longer align with his Victorian views.\(^\text{17}\) As I discuss in chapter 4, reception of Raabe’s *Stuffcake* shows a similar pattern. Bruno Zerweck shows that the phenomenon of the unreliable narrator has a literary historical dimension, too; the unreliable narrator as understood today did not emerge until the end of the eighteenth century, and it has been far more prominent in some literary movements than others.\(^\text{18}\) In the cognitive model, unreliable narration is the product of an interpretive gap between narrator and reader, and this gap may itself be the symptom of history, of the distinct interpretive frameworks associated with specific times and places.

The perception of unreliability may be symptomatic of the historical gap between text and reader, but I believe that unreliability can also reside in the

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16. Ansgar Nünning, “Unreliable Narration zur Einführung,” 26. In *Structuralist Poetics*, Jonathan Culler develops the idea of reading as naturalization, or understanding a text within a framework that “is already, in some sense, natural and legible” (138).
17. Vera Nünning, "Unreliable Narration."
18. Zerweck, "Historicizing Unreliable Narration."
historical gaps that exist *within* the text, and serve to clarify those gaps. To examine the functioning of these text-internal relationships, I turn to rhetorical accounts. In Booth's original conception of reliability, a narrator is reliable when the facts he reports and the values he espouses correspond to those of the implied author, the author's "created 'second self'" whose "norms and choices" determine the form and meaning of the text as a whole.\(^{19}\) In further refining the concept, Phelan adds another axis of reliability to those of Booth's reporting and evaluating; he maintains that narrators' reliability also depends on what they know and how they interpret or "read" events.\(^ {20}\) Reporting, evaluating, and interpreting all take place within an interpretive framework, however. Character narrators' reliability is historically inflected, then, when the gaps between narrators' and implied authors' interpretive frameworks consist (at least partly) of the gaps between the values and assumptions associated with particular social and historical positions. In fact, character narrators can be used to highlight these social and historical gaps. In realist and in socially critical writing that concerns itself with social and historical conditions and positions, gauging the reliability of a narrator's reporting, interpretation, and evaluation requires considering the social and historical position he inhabits with respect to the other frameworks contained within the text.\(^{21}\)

An unreliable narrator may be cast precisely to characterize that historical position. Mikhail Bakhtin emphasizes the historical self-disclosure that takes place as narrators tell their stories. Because Bakhtin sees characters as linguistic manifestations of particular ideological and historical perspectives, he contends that the narrator indexes his social position with each sentence he utters or writes. In fact, Bakhtin holds that character narrators (or, as he terms them, posited authors or narrators) are useful precisely because they present "specific and limited verbal ideological points of view, belief systems, opposed to the literary expectations and points of view that constitute the background needed to perceive them."\(^ {22}\) Character narrators are

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20. Phelan, *Living to Tell*, 49–51. Viewing unreliability as a product of a gap between narrator and implied author does not preclude attention to the readers who interpret these features. Rhetorical readers may try to understand how readers' interpretive frameworks inflect their understanding of textual features, but they never abandon their focus on the textual features themselves. See ibid., 48–49; Hansen, "Reconsidering the Unreliable Narrator," 234–36. Nünning's list of textual features that signal unreliable narration itself suggests a textual foundation in "Unreliable Narration zur Einführung" (27–32).

21. Zerweck contends in "Historicizing Unreliable Narration" that narrator unreliability is almost universally a phenomenon of realist writing because it depends on a comparison with the "real" network of assumptions, values, and conditions that the text aims to reproduce (159–60).

always unreliable to a degree, and this unreliability has a historical dimension within the text. It is no stretch, I think, to associate the contrast Bakhtin draws between this “specific and limited verbal ideological” perspective and the “literary expectations and points of view” that make it visible, on the one hand, with the contrast between the narrator and the implied author, or the text’s “core of norms and choices,” that determines narrator reliability in rhetorical approaches. For Bakhtin, the very point of a character narrator is to be unreliable—unreliable in the sense that readers see him as limited by a particular social and historical perspective. Or, as Phelan puts it, the figure of the character narrator allows the implied author to communicate indirectly with readers—specifically, as Bakhtin would have it, about the narrator’s historical viewpoint. The reader is invited to puzzle out the language, beliefs, and interpretive capacities that restrict the story the narrator tells.

Viewing the representation of this restrictive historical framework as a central goal of the text suggests the need for revising another rhetorical account of reliability: Peter Rabinowitz’s typology of audiences. Specifically, a historical approach requires resurrecting Rabinowitz’s concept of the ideal narrative audience. Rabinowitz originally claimed that readers of fictional texts may function as members of four different audiences: (1) the actual audience of flesh-and-blood readers; (2) the authorial audience, the audience envisioned by the implied author; (3) the narrative audience, which reads and judges as if it were an inhabitant of the storyworld; and (4) the ideal narrative audience, which inhabits the storyworld and interprets the narrator as he wishes to be understood. When the narrative and ideal narrative audiences converge, the narrator appears reliable; unreliability ensues as they move apart. Later, he and others dropped the ideal narrative audience, locating the interpretive gap between narrative and authorial audiences. I agree that disregarding the ideal narrative audience is defensible if its interpretive framework is an idiosyncratic one, characterized, for instance, by gullibility. In that case, readers’ interpretations and judgments do rely on the interpretive frameworks of the narrative and authorial audiences. But if, as in many realist texts, the ideal narrative audience is ideal not only because it believes but because it believes something in particular—if the ideal narrative audience represents a historically particular interpretive framework—and if the authorial audience is meant to reflect on the relationship between this interpretive framework and that of the narrative audience, then appreciating the

26. Ibid., 133–35.
identity and beliefs of the ideal narrative audience is crucial to understanding the work. One cannot judge the reliability of the narrator in *Doppelgänger*, for instance, or the implied author’s presentation of him, without appreciating the ideal narrative audience’s belief in Enlightenment ideals. Likewise, *Austerlitz*’s ideal narrative audience has a historically distinct set of beliefs about the Holocaust and about appropriate ways of representing it.

Revealing the ideal narrative audience’s views as deluded can be a central tactic of trenchant social critique. Rabinowitz claims that the distance between authorial and narrative audiences is usually one of fact; the authorial audience knows that *Austerlitz* and his narrator are fictional characters, while the narrative audience believes that they exist. In contrast, he maintains that “the distance between the narrative audience and the ideal narrative audience tends to lie along an axis of ethics or interpretation.” To expose an ideal narrative audience is not merely to reveal that it believes what is false; it is to reveal it as having false beliefs. This kind of exposure may be especially rhetorically effective—and maximally uncomfortable—when the ideal narrative audience shares its interpretive framework with flesh-and-blood readers, a dynamic I explore in chapters 6 and 7.

Of course, that discomfort pertains only if flesh-and-blood readers succeed in stepping into the authorial audience. Here, I want to acknowledge the difficulties involved in taking this historical step, and in assessing reliability on text-internal grounds. Distinguishing between the interpretive frameworks of a fictive (but realistic) sociohistorical world, and judging them from within that context (rather than one’s own), is tricky. On the one hand, large removes of time and place make assuming foreign frameworks or evaluating them on their own terms difficult; from the vantage point of a historically distant reader, the text’s interpretive frameworks may be hard to recognize and to disentangle, or even to distinguish from one another. On the other, being party to one of the frameworks involved may blind readers to the commentary being offered. Additionally, as Phelan maintains, character narration relies on the “art of indirection,” and indirect communication is prone to ambiguity and failure. Still, a good-faith attempt to read historically may protect readers from the kind of readings that cognitivists decry, in which judgments of a narrator’s reliability are based only on an unacknowledged “subjectively tinged

27. Considering the historical aspects of the text shows that one does not have to appeal to the unusual case of second-person narration to revive the category of ideal narrative audience, as Phelan does in *Narrative as Rhetoric* (142–45).
29. Ibid., 130–31.
value-judgment or projection governed by the normative presuppositions and moral conviction of the critic.”

And, difficult as it is, it is the only way readers can try to reconstruct the message intended by the author, whether the implied one or the historical figure.

In addition to these historical factors, dynamic observer narratives complicate judgments about reliability because of the amalgamation of estranging and bonding reliability they tend to generate. Most of the narrators are highly ambivalent figures. These characters tell their stories to affect relationships and identities, and, often, the reciprocal progressions of the two narrative tracks bring readers to suspect their motives and to judge them for their unreliability—their lapses in judgment, perception, and reporting. Yet most of the narrators’ stories are also motivated by their desire to do justice to the protagonist in the present, as they had not in the past. This desire encourages a readerly experience of bonding unreliability because of the narrators’ “progression toward the norm” and the “optimistic comparison” readers make between their former and current selves. Finally, the lyrical facet of the narratives also supports a bonding dynamic, what might be called lyric bonding. Phelan maintains that lyric narrators invite a sympathetic effort at understanding, as readers try to assess “the underlying value structure of the lyric narrative,” and to move “toward deeper understanding of and participation in what is revealed.”

In all of the texts from Doppelgänger forward, doubt about the narrators’ motives interrupts and restricts this participation. Still, to the degree that dynamic observer narratives are about the present, they are about the implied author’s attempt to illuminate the narrator’s historically specific state, and the narrator’s to make it understood. In my examination of Doppelgänger, I link lyricality to bonding unreliability and to a special status for unreliability along the axis of perception and understanding.

I have treated narrator reliability and its historicity at such length because unreliability emerges from the conflicts between differing interpretive frameworks, just as a reckoning with the past does. In fact, in reading dynamic observer narratives, the reader who tries to read historically struggles with the same set of conflicting interpretive frameworks as does the narrator. The reader compares and judges these conflicting frameworks to assess the

32. For an introduction to the concepts of bonding and estranging unreliability, see Phelan, “Bonding and Estranging.”
33. Ibid., 231–32.
34. Phelan, Living to Tell, 158. See also Phelan, “Rhetorical Literary Ethics,” 635. Phelan’s discussion of the types of unreliability and the “ethics of reading” in Living to Tell assume that, in general, the reader’s assessment of the narrator entails judgment (49–60). Nünning, too, emphasizes in “Unreliable Narration zur Einführung” that readers judge unreliable narrators (19).
narrator’s reliability and the text’s meaning, while the narrator confronts the differences between her present framework and those of the protagonist and her past self as part of her effort to come to terms with her changing identity. Both narrator and readers of Austerlitz, for instance, grapple with the contrasts and coincidences between wartime and postwar German and Jewish frameworks of understanding. Dynamic observer narrators wrestle with the gap between the interpretive framework that guides their present perception, values, and reporting, and that which shaped their assumptions, beliefs, and actions in the past. In effect, this gap reveals their own past unreliability when they confront the inadequacy of their previous understanding of the protagonist’s story.

Telling Another Person’s Story and Narrative Ethics

Character narration focuses attention on the character narrator’s historical identity, and potentially unreliable character narration on the conflicts between historically specific interpretive frameworks. In all of the texts I discuss, these contrasting frameworks raise the question of what it is good to be and to believe in a particular place and time. To be clear, I claim neither that all texts with character narrators are concerned with historical identity and the conflicts between interpretive frameworks, nor that character narration is the only technique for concretizing such historical struggle in a narrative text. Rather, I maintain that character narration provides a technical strategy for illuminating and reflecting on the negotiations between interpretive frameworks over time. In this section I analyze the effects of the second defining structural feature of these texts: their narrator’s focus on another character’s story. I argue that this focus supports an exploration of the ethical import of stories that serve a reckoning with the past, and of narrative in general.

Although my object of investigation here is the narrators’ focus on other characters’ stories, my aim in this section is not to ascertain whether or not the texts are really “about” those other protagonists—in other words, whether or not they are observer narratives. Rather, I want to investigate the impact that the choice to have a character narrator tell a story about a separate protagonist has on the story the text tells. The narrator tells the story as if it is a story about someone else, and this intervention changes both the texture and the import of the protagonist’s story.35 While Stanzel emphasizes the

35. See Booth, Rhetoric of Fiction, 345–46. Booth also maintains, however, that readers always want to know whether the narrator’s version of the story is actually “right” (or, in other words, how reliable the narrator is).
importance of the relationship between the narrating and experiencing selves in the first-person narrative situation, in the case of the authorial novel, he declares that the “structure of meaning” resides primarily in the “references and relationships between the fictional world and the figure of the authorial narrator and from the resulting tensions in values, judgments, and kinds of experience.”

In the intermediary form of the dynamic observer narrative, the character narrators assume strongly authorial stances toward their protagonists’ stories, distancing themselves from those stories and providing frequent evaluative commentary on them. Indeed, they often present themselves as inhabiting different “worlds” from those their narratives represent; most have left their childhood homes in the province to live in the city or abroad. Thus, the structure of meaning in the dynamic observer narrator shifts. While the relationship between experiencing and narrating self remains important, illuminating the individual’s change over time, the narrator’s focus on the protagonist’s life means that the “references and relationships” between narrator and protagonist also play a key role in the text’s overall meaning. The effect of the form is to emphasize that the individual’s relationship to others is as important as that to himself over time.

In Bakhtinian or Taylorian terms, the protagonist provides a “language” and “horizon” against which the dynamic observer narrator comes to realize his own interpretive framework. As they tell stories about their protagonists, the narrator concretizes the goal of the novel as Bakhtin conceives it: “what is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one’s own language as it is perceived in someone else’s language, coming to know one’s own horizon within someone else’s horizon.”

The process Bakhtin sees at the heart of the novel is, fundamentally, the same as the process of reckoning with past and present identity as it appears in the texts I examine. Facing their past selves and their protagonists from across a social, political, or personal divide, the narrators of the frame stories are forced to confront the different historical voices and interpretive frameworks that these figures represent. In narratological terms, the contrasting narrator and protagonist figures draw attention to voice and its functioning in narrative. Genette’s structuralist narratology uses the term voice solely to designate the narrative instance that speaks, but, as I have already argued, a character narrator encourages readers to wonder about the figure who mediates the story: what she believes and understands, and where she comes from. In other words, character narrators encourage readers to think about voice in terms akin to Susan Lanser’s

37. For a succinct summary of Stanzel’s authorial type, see ibid., 23–24.
definition of it, where “narrative voice . . . embodies the social, economic, and literary conditions under which it has been produced.”

The narrator’s relation of the protagonist’s story emphasizes this social dimension of voice. As they present a narrator who tells a story about the protagonist’s life, the texts all raise questions about the relationship between the distinct social and historical voices and identities that the two figures represent. With varying degrees of explicitness, they all use the narrative configuration to highlight who can speak and narrate, and under what conditions. The narrator who tells another protagonist’s story thus allows insight into both the interpretive frameworks being negotiated and changing ideas about the ethical importance of voice—in particular, about whether the individual ought to be able to tell her own story. They inquire into the same relationships of power and voice that Lanser’s groundbreaking study does, only from a different direction. While Lanser concentrates on how narrators use textual strategies to establish their own authority to speak, these texts use a pair of textual voices to question whether narrators might have the obligation to grant that authority to others. While the assumptions about the ethics of voice change from Textor in 1794 to Sebald in 2001, the following chapters show that all of the narrators have an awareness of the relationship between their own voice and their protagonist’s.

While the narrators may learn to see their own voices with respect to others’ voices, however, the books all show that they cannot escape their individual languages and interpretive frameworks. The narrator of Stuffcake, for instance, is forced to recognize himself as having been a conformist bully who ostracized his overweight classmate, but he continues to use the boy’s derogatory nickname. In fact, it is the book’s title. As they tell their protagonists’ stories, the narrators come to recognize the historical and social interpretive frameworks that have shaped them. The implied authors show that those frameworks still constrain them. Readers, too, come to understand the narrator through his engagement with the other person’s story. The text’s meaning resides largely in this revelation about “the speaker’s situation and perspective.” In the individual texts, this revelation leads to readers’ judgments about the narrator, as well as about the historical interpretive frameworks embodied by the various characters. Individual texts call for individual, historically specific judgments. In the body of texts as a whole, the focus on another person’s story highlights the degree to which the narrators understand their identities in relation to others’ identities, by both relating to and

39. Lanser, Fictions of Authority, 5.
40. Ibid., 6–8.
41. Phelan, “Rhetorical Literary Ethics,” 635.
disidentifying with them.\textsuperscript{42} Although a critical break between past and present enables the narrators to reinterpret their past identities, the break itself does not force reinterpretation in any of these texts. The provincial boy becomes an urbane lawyer (\textit{Doppelgänger}), the war ends (\textit{Cat and Mouse}), the feminist revolution occurs (\textit{Rich Life}). Reinterpretation occurs only when the narrators confront their protagonists’ stories and are forced to see them, and themselves, in a new light: when the lawyer meets an ex-convict’s daughter (\textit{Doppelgänger}), the postwar social worker remembers his war-hero “friend” (\textit{Cat and Mouse}), the feminist unearths her mother’s unheard story (\textit{Rich Life}). The narration of a separate protagonist’s story underscores the degree to which the narrators’ self-understanding relies on how they understand their contemporaries, and how those contemporaries understand them. It underscores the interplay of historical identities over time. In their presentation of identity as relational, these fictional (or fictionalized) texts are counterparts to what Irene Kacandes has called “autobiography once removed.”\textsuperscript{43} They are autobiographical texts in which, as Paul John Eakin maintains, “the focus is, paradoxically, on someone else’s story.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textit{Metanarration and Narrative Ethics}

Their focus is not only on someone else’s story, but also, as in the autobiographies Eakin discusses or in Kacandes’s “paramemoir” about her father, on someone else’s \textit{story}.\textsuperscript{45} That is, as my discussion of voice has already suggested, they all have a metanarrative component; the “stories of getting the stories” play important roles, and the “narrator reflects on the process of narration.”\textsuperscript{46} All of the texts depict, dramatize, or discuss the narrator telling his story. Readers see the narrators sitting down to write or hear their thoughts about that writing and about the story it tells. While metanarrative can take many forms and fulfill a wide variety of functions,\textsuperscript{47} the metanarrative in the texts

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{42} On disidentification, see chapter 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Kacandes, “When Facts Are Scarce.” Kacandes’s book \textit{Daddy’s War} discusses, and is itself an example of, the related genre that she terms “paramemoir.”
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Eakin, \textit{Lives Become Stories}, 56.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} In \textit{Lives Become Stories} Eakin maintains that “the story of the story plays a determining role” in the corpus of relational autobiographies he examines (58). In \textit{Daddy’s War} Kacandes defines paramemoir as an account that encompasses “analytical components” and “the stories of getting the stories” as well as the personal narratives of traditional memoir (51).
  \item \textsuperscript{46} Kacandes, \textit{Daddy’s War}, 51; Ansgar Nünning, “On Metanarration,” 19.
  \item \textsuperscript{47} For a discussion of the types and functions of metanarrative, see Ansgar Nünning, “On Metanarration”; Monika Fludernik, “Metanarrative and Metafictional Commentary.”
\end{itemize}
I examine often raises questions about the ethical implications of the stories the narrators tell, and about the ethics of narration more generally. As it draws attention to the narrative present and the ethical import of the story told there, it also emphasizes the texts’ lyric dimension. By presenting a narrator who claims to tell a story about someone else, the texts highlight the narrativity that is central to their enterprise, but by having the narrator reflect on that story, they shift their narrative balance back toward a synthetic form that emphasizes the relationships between the three narrative modes.

The metanarrative elements highlight the ethical dimension of narrative in two ways. First, the dramatization of the narrator and his writing presents the story he tells as an act in the relationship between himself and the protagonist. By emphasizing the rhetorical nature of the narration—its status as an act committed “for some purpose”—the texts encourage inquiry into the ethical ramifications of the narrator’s storytelling. Readers are invited to think about what the story does, and why the narrator tells it. They are invited to assess how the story affects the two figures and their relational identities. Readers may ask, for instance, why the narrating sons of *Sorrow* and *Hedge* tell their mothers’ stories, and how these stories affect the mothers and sons and their relationships to each other. At times, the narrators explicitly state their intention to manipulate identities and relationships through their stories. The first sentence of *Stuffcake*, for instance, stipulates the self-image the narrator hopes to convince his readers to share: “Before I proceed with the setting down of this narrative, I would like it understood that I still consider myself an educated man” (157) [Es liegt mir daran, gleich in den ersten Zeilen dieser Niederschrift zu beweisen oder darzutun, daß ich noch zu den Gebildeten mich zählen darf (7)]. In *Hedge* the narrator’s commentary reveals the dynamics of his relationship with his mother, and his hope to free himself from her narratively: “Yes, that is how my mother tells stories, and I stop here so as not to repeat them” [Ja, so erzählt meine Mutter, und ich breche hier ab, um ihre Geschichten nicht zu wiederholen (22)]. Studies of nonfiction narration have examined how stories about others intervene in “the web of interpersonal and intertextual relationships in which the story and experience are entwined” and have outlined the ethical implications of stories based on the positive and negative effects they can have for the real people they portray. I contend that the figures in the fictional texts are created to direct attention to such effects, and to their consequences for particular historical relationships.

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49. Shuman, *Other People’s Stories*, 23–24. For a collection of reflections on ethics within biography and autobiography, see Eakin, *Ethics of Life Writing*. 
Thus, my readings attend to the repercussions the stories have on their fictional characters, and my analysis of these repercussions undergirds the historical aspect of my textual interpretations. I elucidate how the narrators use stories to attempt to redefine the specific social and historical identities and interpretive frameworks at stake in the texts, and how readers might judge these attempts. The texts’ metanarrative dimension shows that stories affect identities and relationships, and encourages readers to ponder, and perhaps to judge, their ethical value.

The metanarrative elements also communicate the texts’ assumptions about and commentary on the ethics of narrative in general, and of particular narrative strategies. Some of this communication is direct, as narrators ruminate explicitly about the ethical status of their own stories and, by extension, of the process of narration. Handke’s narrator, for instance, articulates an ethical imperative not to subsume his mother’s experience in the formulations of (male) literary language, not to make her mere fodder for “a chain reaction of phrases and sentences like images in a dream, a literary ritual in which an individual life ceases to be anything more than a pretext” (28) [eine Kettenreaktion von Wendungen und Sätzen wie Bilder im Traum, ein Literatur-Ritual, in dem ein individuelles Leben nur noch als Anlaß funktioniert (44)]. Other narrators, however, apprehend the power of narration only vaguely, or fail to appreciate how decisively their narrative choices define the relationships and identities they claim only to represent. Narrators like that in Doppelgänger simply do not see the full effects of their stories. They remain unaware for the same reason that they are necessarily unreliable: their interpretive framework remains historically limited, and this limitation remains largely invisible to them. Confronting the protagonists’ differing languages makes them aware of some of the assumptions their frameworks propagate, but they can never recognize their full reach. Of course, no one can. But these narrators are staged within texts that expose these implications. The narrator of Doppelgänger explicitly acknowledges stories’ power to tame the past, but the staging of his narration exposes the social inequalities that power can serve. Even when the narrators and their ideal audiences remain unaware, the implied author and narrative and authorial audiences reflect on the relationship between narrative, identity, and ethics; the combination of metanarrative staging and commentary communicate indirectly what the narrator cannot, or will not, see.

50. Manheim’s translation altered.
A Speculative Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the structure of dynamic observer narration focuses attention on the conflicts between interpretive frameworks and on the ethical import of the narratives that negotiate these conflicts. It highlights key elements of the process of coming to terms with the past. Before I explore how the texts display these narrative negotiations, I want to speculate about one last interpretive effect of the dynamic observer narrative: the way it encourages conjecture about the authorial act and what I call the historical author. I believe that dynamic observer narratives encourage readers’ tendency to equate narrator and author—that is, to blur the distinction between fact and fiction. Paul Dawson has recently argued that actual readers perceive fictional narratives as a kind of public statement made by their actual authors; not only do these readers view actual authors as responsible for the narratives, then, but they also tend to conflate narrator and actual author unless the text clearly signals their difference. Not only do many dynamic observer narratives fail to signal this difference clearly, but they actively highlight the narrator’s and author’s similarity. From Storm to Sebald, many of the authors employ narrators who share striking characteristics with the historical author, playing with what Philippe Lejeune has termed the autobiographical pact: the coincidence of the author, implied author, and narrator. With varying degrees of playfulness, the texts thus invite speculation about the historical author. Such a stance is familiar from “autobiographical” character narratives, from Karl Philipp Moritz’s *Anton Reiser* (1786) to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963). In making the narrator someone who insists he is telling a story about someone else, however, the historical author makes the narrator conspicuously like himself in a functional way, as well. As these texts’ metanarrative components question what telling a story about someone else does, both to the protagonist and for the narrator, they may gesture toward what fiction writing does for its author. In reading, I have often wondered whether they invite their readers to judge that historical figure—or, in a lyric mode, to try to understand his perspective and situation.

51. Dawson, “Real Authors,” 111. Dawson proposes omniscient narrative as a form that often permits such conflation. He cites Lanser, *Narrative Act* as arguing for readers’ tendency to equate narrator and actual author, but the passage he cites actually refers to the “extrafictional voice or ‘implied author’” (151). Lanser does stipulate, however, that this “textually encoded, historically authoritative voice [is] kin to but not identical with the biographical person who wrote the text” (152).
Bringing the historical author into the analysis harbors a number of potential dangers, of course. It can yield facile equations. In an area where very few textual clues exist, it may rely too much on the inappropriate imposition of readers’ interpretive frameworks, on text-external factors, or on insupportable generalizations. It can devolve into remote psychological analysis of the historical figures. And yet, in the chapters that follow, I find that I have to ask questions about the historical author again and again. In the complex of overlapping and conflicting interpretive frameworks that these texts set up, these figures seem important. If the texts aim to question the value or ethics of telling a story about another person’s past, to interrogate what that storytelling does for and to the teller and the protagonist, and to critique the relationship between particular pasts and presents—then their goal is to question authorial activity. And not, as I shall argue in several cases, without grounds. Unreliable narration has been said to give the impression of “unintentional self-recrimination.” Many of these texts may harbor an element of authorial self-recrimination, whether intentional or not.

In raising the possibility of authorial self-recrimination or pleas for understanding, I once again return to the nexus of lyric, portraiture, and narrative. In a sense, my argument in this chapter has been that the dynamic observer form allows authors and readers to explore the nature of narrative reckoning with the past because it occupies the space between these three categories. This hybrid is more than an in-between phenomenon, a spot on a continuum between three ideal types. It corresponds to a central aspect of modern experience. The three modes intersect where the events of the past exert a hold on the present, even as the narrator uses a story to distance himself from them (narrative). They intersect where who the narrator is can only be explained in relation to whom she has known and has been (portraiture). They intersect where the interpretive frameworks of narrator, characters, and text can be understood only in relation to each other (lyric). They intersect where the confrontation of these value structures may leave questions of judgment unanswered, or where the very desirability or possibility of judgment may be challenged. They intersect where narrative represents the hope of self-mastery and self-understanding, but where that hope often remains futile. In other words, they intersect in a place that inhabitants of the modern world know very well.


54. See also Phelan’s reading of Frost’s “Home Burial,” where the distance between the interpretive frameworks becomes more important than the content of the frameworks themselves. Experiencing Fiction, 211.