Ethics and the Dynamic Observer Narrator

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For many people, parents are the first and most important interlocutors in the “web of interlocutions” that, as Taylor argues, initiate individuals into the “language[s] of moral and spiritual discernment” grounding their identity. It should come as no surprise, then, that the attempt to define one’s own moral language and identity often entails reckoning with the moral languages of one’s parents. David Parker suggests that Taylor’s concept of identity is particularly useful for understanding the dynamics of intergenerational auto/biography, in which narrators seek to understand themselves by telling the story of a parent or other influential family figure. In this chapter, I explore texts along the continuum between fictional dynamic observer narrative and intergenerational auto/biography to explore the operation and boundaries of each, and to highlight again the rhetorical function of the ideal narrative audience. Traditional autobiography often thematizes personal development, and narration about a younger, more naïve self is a common feature of the genre. Narration by a staged younger self with a different interpretive framework represents a step away from such traditional life-writing. Essentially, such narration takes a step along the continuum of fictionaliza-

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1. Taylor, Sources of the Self, 36, 35.
tion. Whereas authorial, narrative, and ideal narrative audiences coincide in traditional autobiography, an author who stages narration by a younger incarnation of herself communicates indirectly with readers about that former self: she employs an unreliable character narrator. This narrator and her ideal narrative audience know less (or think differently) than the implied author does. To at least some degree, the aim of the book thus fictionalized is to reflect on, question, or expose the interpretive framework that the fictionalized narrator and her ideal narrative audience share. The fictionalized texts discussed in this chapter operate in this way.

Parker maintains that classic modern examples of intergenerational auto/biographies, such as Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (1907), often document the narrator’s attempt to establish autonomy from the parent, but that since about 1980, this drive has often been complicated by a desire for relationality. Rather than simply declaring themselves free of their parents, the narrators of such works “discover significant sources of self in parents and grandparents” and attempt to unearth and preserve the (often overlooked) values these figures represent. This wave of auto/biographies tends to illuminate forebears who would otherwise remain obscure; Parker takes as his illustrative example Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), which reckons with her mother’s experience as a working-class woman and with its legacy for Steedman’s own self-understanding. For such writers, the moral frameworks of the past are no longer simply encumbrances to be jettisoned. Tension arises as they seek to salvage some building blocks for the moral framework of the present.

Within autobiography studies, the move to broaden the definition of autobiography to include what Paul John Eakin calls “relational autobiography” also takes women’s life-writing and feminist autobiography studies, which emphasize the relationality of women’s life-writing, as its point of departure. In fact, this feminist intervention in autobiography studies took place during the same era that Parker pinpoints as the turning point in intergenerational autobiography. Given this wave of concern, it would hardly seem surprising for contemporaneous German-language life-writing about mothers to show a similar pattern. In the postwar German context, however, such an approach is surprising, since it has been generally assumed that there can be no desire to recognize a “source of the self” in National Socialism. Reading relational German-language “mother books” that broadly span this era thus suggests

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the need for a new understanding of the landscape of postwar German cultural memory and literary history. In addition, reading these books within the context of the tradition of dynamic observer narrative calls for a reevaluation of second-wave feminism’s quest for relationality and the recovery of lost and oppressed female voices. As they excavated and liberated these voices, feminists took the crucial step of making this work explicit and of bringing the operation of moral languages to consciousness. Still, the dynamic observer narrative tradition shows that the effort to do justice to others by making their voices heard was not entirely new. The women in the relational autobiographies of the 1980s are the descendants of John and Hanna Glückstadt and Valentine Schaumann. New narrative strategies, such as extensive metanarration and prominent discourse markers, bring this effort to the forefront of attention and make it explicit. But those “lost” voices had long been sought in dynamic observer narratives.

Life-Writing in Postwar Germany

While I have already discussed the dynamic observer narrative at length, my argument about the significance of mother books in postwar German-language life-writing requires some contextualization. In the 1970s and early 1980s, intergenerational writing in German-speaking Europe was associated with the “New Subjectivity,” a movement in which writers emphasized interiority and self-reflection in often autobiographical explorations. This movement is usually understood as a resigned retreat from the political and social protest movements that rocked Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and from the politically engaged literature that accompanied them. In these protest movements, young adults of the first postwar generation had begun to confront their parents’ generation for its complicity with National Socialism. The confrontations occurred both in the public sphere, with challenges to those who retained positions of public influence despite their past National Socialist associations, and in the private sphere, with parents as the primary targets. Indeed, the protesters insisted that these two spheres were linked—that the social and authority structures that produced National Socialism in the political realm were the same as those that warped families and individuals in the home. The “New Subjectivity,” too, while it has the reputation of apolitical resignation, conducts its self-examinations with the understanding that personal identity and experience cannot be divorced from political and social issues. Two currents of writing within New Subjectivity reckoned with parents’ influence on their children’s character, self-understanding, and moral
language. Feminist self-exploration and redefinition required a confrontation with mothers’ conceptions of female identity, as in Gabriele Wohmann’s *An Outing with My Mother* (1976) [*Ausflug mit der Mutter*] and Katja Behrens’s *The Thirteenth Fairy* (1983) [*Die dreizehnte Fee*]. Continuing the central concern of the 68er movement, the genre known as *Väterliteratur* [father literature] investigated fathers’ culpability for both the crimes of National Socialism and the painful deformation of the postwar German family.

These mother accounts and father books share many points of contact. Both present themselves as largely autobiographical and deal with parents of the war generation, including their experiences during National Socialism. Both attempt to deal with the moral and linguistic legacies that the authors have inherited from their parents. Both feature children who narrate about their parents’ lives to try to cement what Taylor calls an “epistemic gain,” or what I term a critical break: “a move to a new way of looking at things, a new understanding of the good.” The feminist daughters, like the children of former Nazis, declare their opposition to their parents’ moral languages and struggle to loosen the hold those languages still exert on them. And yet, these two strands of personal and social introspection remained quite separate—or, at least, literary criticism has considered them separately and has read them through very different theoretical frameworks: feminist theory on the one hand, and discourses of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* on the other.

In this regard, the texts (or the scholarship) reproduce the dynamics of the activist movements of the 1960s, where feminist activism remained mostly distinct from antifascist, antiauthoritarian activism, or, at least, where feminists received very little support from the “politically oriented” movement. Similarly, feminist accounts of women’s narratives have been read as treating a special phenomenon, while the generalized story of generational writing in this era has been told as a story of sons and daughters who write about their fathers and their fathers’ ties to National Socialism to separate themselves absolutely from their parents. Compared to English-language generational

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6. Susanne Maurer argues in “Gespaltenes Gedächtnis?” that historiography about the period reproduces this division, too. The famous incident in which a tomato was thrown at the male student leaders unwilling to discuss discrimination against women, for instance, is frequently invoked as a founding moment of the feminist movement, but almost never as an important indicator of student movement politics.


8. Two influential accounts have been Michael Schneider’s “Fathers and Sons, Retrospectively,” and, in the United States, Ernestine Schlant’s *Language of Silence*, 80–98. Mathias Brandstätter’s recent, more differentiated (but as yet little recognized) *Folgeschäden* uses a corpus approach to establish the “simultaneity of different *Väterliteraturen*.”
auto/biography, which saw a shift toward an affirmation of relativity in the 1980s, the German-language generational writing appears to follow a postwar Sonderweg [special path]. Or so the story has gone.

This chapter challenges this characterization. The seeming disparity between the English-language and German-language writing results from slippage between discussions of “fathers” and discussions of “parents.” It arises because the story of the fathers has eclipsed the story of the mothers to become the story of the parents’ generation as a whole. Even Matthias Brandstädter’s important, corpus-based effort to reconstruct the differences within father literature elides the gender differences that affect the texts’ view of history, the ethical value of narrative identity that they assume, and the way others read these accounts of history and identity. By reading mother narratives against the backdrop of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, I provide an alternative picture of postwar generational writing and its efforts to articulate a new moral language and orientation. For all their similarities with “canonical” Väterliteratur, these mother books cannot simply be subsumed into existing paradigms under a new, gender-neutral rubric. The mothers are not like the cold and culpable fathers of paradigmatic Väterliteratur, and they also differ from each other. Moreover, the narrators’ efforts at self-positioning are complicated by a range of emotional, psychological, and ethical factors that make a simple distancing not only impossible but also undesirable. Their narratives are openly relational.

In this chapter I track the movement of language between mother and child in three mother books to complicate and enrich the story of generational self-positioning that has been constructed on the basis of Väterliteratur. Rather than reading the narrators’ critique of their parents’ language as a complete rejection lacking in self-reflexivity, as the father books have often been read, I argue that the mother books show the narrators’ struggle to

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9. The historiographical theory of the German Sonderweg posits National Socialism as the product of Germany’s insufficient development of liberal values in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

10. Such generalizations elide other differences, as well. The story of the “war generation” told here is actually the story of National Socialist sympathizers, or at least of passive witnesses. For a critique of such generation-based generalizations, see Weigel, “Generation.”

11. While he refers nearly exclusively to fathers and often mentions “father-son conflicts,” his corpus includes a number of books about mothers, a fact that he never mentions. For a list of the corpus, see Brandstädter, Folgeschäden, 104–14.

12. For a similar reading of postwar books by women, see Schaumann, Memory Matters, 145–54.

reckon with the persistent language of the past that they find in themselves. As in Grass’s texts, narrative strategies highlight language as an often ambivalent cultural, social, and historical force that can undermine the critical break with the past. Here, too, narrative clearly possesses—or is hoped to possess—a performative force. Unlike in Grass, however, the question of if and how another person’s story ought to be told moves to the center in these texts. Grass’s narrative strategies draw attention to the consequences that telling someone else’s story has for self-identity. These books openly question what that story does for or to the other person. Mahlke remains a blank slate. These mothers do not.

Isolated studies have taken a political approach to representations of war-generations mothers. Erin McGlothlin examines the mothers who appear in Väterliteratur, and others have discussed Peter Handke’s treatment of the National Socialist era in Sorrow.14 Caroline Schaumann’s book on women’s accounts of the Nazi era considers some texts about mothers, but these were all composed after the reunification of Germany in 1990. No study has investigated the body of texts that constitute a Mütterliteratur [mother literature] counterpart to the Väterliteratur of the 1970s and 1980s. Nor do I have the space to examine them all here, or to account for all the gender dynamics that influence their representations. In this study, I focus on the impact the parent’s gender has on the representations, largely bracketing the writing child’s. My text selection relies on three criteria. First, the books I consider must all be dynamic observer narratives, where the story of the mother takes center stage. Second, National Socialism must figure as an important episode in the story of the mother’s life and moral language. Finally, I focus on texts where a negotiation with the mother’s historical language, or voice, features prominently.15 While Anne Fuchs celebrates the autobiographical writing of this era for its effort to “restore the notion of individual historical agency and responsibility” rather than to foreground “the analysis of the social and linguistic structures that precede individual agency,”16 I argue that the authors’ efforts to excavate the linguistic detritus of the past is part of the project of taking responsibility for it. Three examples of Mütterliteratur from the 1970s to the early 1990s ground this claim and show a continuity of concerns from the

15. Other texts that belong to the larger body of mother literature include Helga Novak’s Die Eisheiligen, Barbara Bronnen’s Die Tochter, Behrens’s Die dreizehnte Fee, Christa Wolf’s Kindheitsmuster [A Model Childhood], Karin Struck’s Die Mutter, Wohmann’s Ausflug mit der Mutter, and Hans Frick’s Die blaue Stunde. Wolf’s is the only one of these to have appeared in translation.
early aftermath of the student movement to the first years after the fall of the Berlin Wall: Handke’s *A Sorrow beyond Dreams* (1972), Stefan’s *It Was a Rich Life: Report on My Mother’s Dying* (1993), and Ortheil’s *Hedge* (1983).

**Whose Words Are They? Handke and Stefan**

I begin with *Rich Life* and *Sorrow*, which represent the nonfictional to “less fictional” end of the spectrum, respectively. Together, they also illuminate the boundaries of the dynamic observer narrator form. Although the maternal biographies they relate are strikingly similar, their different relationships to the dynamic observer form are immediately evident. In *Rich Life* the first five paragraphs present the instability of the mother’s looming death; in *Sorrow* the first instability introduced is that of the son’s conflicted attitudes toward writing about his mother and her death. These contrasting narrative launches accurately signal the difference in form: *Rich Life* is not a dynamic observer narration, but *Sorrow* is. In *Rich Life* both the conflict between mother and daughter and the daughter’s attempt at narrative reckoning lie in the past. The story of that narrative reckoning and of the relationship it yields appears only in the epilogue, the events of which precede the composition of the book the reader has just completed. Stefan’s book is actually a memoir of a dynamic observer narration, in which authorial, narrative, and ideal narrative audiences coincide. In this coincidence, it is conventionally nonfictional. Handke’s dynamic observer narrative troubles the waters of both the internal textual and the authorial-readerly relations. Although his narrator has negotiated the linguistic boundaries between himself and his mother, their relationship remains unstable in the present-tense narrative track, and the past-tense narrative constitutes the narrator’s effort to resolve it. The authorial-readerly relationships are variable. In some places, as in the passage relating the mother’s life during National Socialism, author and narrator, and authorial, narrative, and ideal narrative audiences, appear to merge. In many of the self-reflexive or highly stylized passages, on the other hand, the artistic detachment suggests an implied author with a more sovereign view of the situation than the narrator seems to have. At such moments, as in the book’s conclusion, the implied author offers a distanced, somewhat critical view of the narrator and those like him, the ideal narrative audience for whom he writes.

Although my introduction to these texts highlights their differences, most of the remaining discussion focuses on their similarities. First, they relate parallel biographies. Young women, oppressed by provincial life and
its traditional gender roles (in Austria and Switzerland, respectively), reach adulthood during National Socialism and briefly break out. They marry and move to Germany and the city. After the war, both return to their home-towns, wither under the deadening physical and emotional demands of a traditional domestic routine, and suffer long, painful declines and deaths. As their children tell these stories from Germany, where they have established independent lives, their concern with language leaps from the page. Typographical conventions—all uppercase words in Handke and italics in Stefan—highlight words and phrases throughout the books, generally marking bits of the mothers’ free indirect speech. I argue that these marked phrases register the tension between the desire for both autonomy and relationality vis-à-vis the mother that drives the two accounts. Such phrases appear in many generational accounts of this era, including the Väterliteratur, and they tend to mark language that expresses deeply ingrained patterns of thought and belief, whether individual or social. Often, in fact, it is difficult to tell whether the speech emanates from the main “relational” figure, or that figure’s spouse, or some unnamed person in the social environment. Such usage reflects the contemporaneous, burgeoning focus on language now often referred to as the linguistic turn. In Handke and Stefan, the language that appears in this form is to be understood as formulaic and, often, clichéd.

The phrases have been repeated so many times by so many people that they have become fossilized and representative of those who voice it, rather than communicative; Stefan calls them “preserves” [Konserve (60, 62)]. As in Cat and Mouse, such formulaic language resembles Bakhtin’s authoritative discourse, which “enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass. . . . Authoritative discourse cannot be represented—it is only transmitted . . . [as] a dead quotation.”

In both mother and father books, the society that the children wish to reject is crystallized in these “compact and indivisible” expressions, and the fossilized phrases help the narrators put distance between themselves and their parents, as the fused phrases help Cat and Mouse’s Pilenz parody National Socialist rhetoric. Christoph Meckel, for instance, highlights his
dissociation from his father’s National Socialist ideology when he notes that his father’s house was built in the “ARYAN BUILDING STYLE mandated during the Third Reich” [im Dritten Reich vorgeschriebenen ARISCHEN BAUWEISE] and describes his father’s attitude toward the German occupation of Eastern Europe: “we were NOT MONSTERS and showed understanding” [man war KEIN UNMENSCH und brachte Verständnis auf]. Handke seethes against the way his mother accepts and makes light of her poverty and homebound drudgery, as in her cozy designations of the outdated household tools that make her a slave as she makes do: “the GOOD OLD washboard, the COZY hearth, the often-mended FUNNY cooking pots, the DANGEROUS poker, the STURDY wheelbarrow” (41–42) [die BEHÄBIGE Waschrumpel, der GEMÜTLICHE Feuerherd, der an allen Ecken geflickten LUSTIGEN Kochtöpfe, der GEFAHRLICHE Schürhaken, der KECKE Leiterwagen (64)].

Stefan rejects her mother’s self-blame for her husband’s lack of interest in her and her conclusion that she must simply “wait for it more patiently and humbly” [geduldiger und demütiger darauf warten (51)]. The content of Meckel’s phrases is “political,” Handke’s and Stefan’s “domestic,” but all three narrators mark their parents’ language to separate themselves from the ideology and values that it expresses. Nor are these values unrelated. As Claudia Koonz has shown, the domestic whitewashing of millions of women provided National Socialism’s venom and violence with a veneer of domestic stability.

Analyses that read Handke’s text without the backdrop of Väterliteratur do not capture the full scope of the social function these phrases perform.

Ernestine Schlant and Hinrich Seeba charge that the narrators of the Väterliteratur fail to recognize their continuing entanglement in their parents’ language. In Handke and Stefan, however, the fossilized phrases fulfill a dual role: they signal not only the narrators’ efforts to distance themselves from this language but also their awareness that they cannot escape it. The narrators do not present these phrases in direct quotations. Rather, they weave them into the text as free indirect speech, using typographical conventions to designate it as a foreign object within the narrative stream that surrounds it. In so doing, they present it as embedded within their own narration and stories. The typographical conventions allow them to characterize themselves as individuals who find themselves reliant on this language that they would like to see pass away. Marked phrases that emanate from the narrators highlight this entanglement. Stefan, for instance, uses the italics of the

22. Manheim’s translation amended slightly.
23. Koonz, Mothers in the Fatherland.
fossilized phrase to acknowledge that the language she shares with her generation is just as ritualized as her mother’s. Describing her youthful rebellion against her parents’ norms, she recalls the idolized screen stars and fashions of her teen years and concludes, “Otherwise, everything important is high and hip, flower and also already power. Anything that counts can be said only in English, and only in the loudest-colored pens” [ansonsten ist alles, was wichtig ist, high und hip, flower und auch schon power. Was zählt, läßt sich nur auf englisch sagen und nur in den grellsten Filzstiftfarben (56)]. The “loud” colors of her imagery “highlight” the terms just as the italics do in the text. By occasionally using fossilized phrases to represent their own speech and viewpoint, the narrators show themselves to be self-critical and aware of their own attachment to the traditions and conventions propagated through language.

It is likely that these phrases fulfill such a dual function in some of the more self-reflexive father books, as well. But they have a second, fundamentally different function in these two mother texts, because the mothers possess a fundamentally different relationship to language. The narrators of Väterliteratur can take the domineering fathers’ voices for granted; breaking free of them demands a vociferous rejection and declaration of autonomy. The mothers in Handke and Stefan, on the other hand, do not speak for themselves. They aren’t heard in tape-recorded monologues, as in Peter Henisch’s Negatives of My Father [Die kleine Figur meines Vaters]. They don’t speak through journal entries, as in Meckel’s father account. Instead, they are nearly speechless—except when their voices echo in these dead phrases.

The narrators of these fictionalized autobiographies approach their mothers’ voices like much feminist life-writing of the 1970s and 1980s did, trying to reclaim the silenced voices of the oppressed. Yet, they have access to their mothers’ voices only through fossilized clichés, a circumstance that heightens their awareness of the social and cultural conditions inflecting her voice. Moreover, their need to reconstruct the mothers’ silenced voices encourages them to reflect on the relationship between those lost voices and their own. They reflect on the writer’s difficulty in resurrecting such a voice, and the child’s difficulty with the mother’s alternating speechlessness and clichéd utterances. As Katharina Aulls writes, “A trend becomes visible to respect the

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25. In their speechlessness, they seem to resemble the storyless mothers in Hartwig, “Geschichtslosigkeit der Mütter.” Yet the narrators’ efforts to find a voice and a story belie an understanding of mothers that equates a life in the domestic sphere with an unstoried one, as she does.

Chapter Six

‘mother’s’ voice and to trace the maternal discourse in the texts.” 27 These narrators cannot be glib about representing their mothers’ voices. Perhaps it is the mothers’ very silence that encourages the “linguistic sensibility” that the fathers’ thundering seems to repel. 28

Both texts emphasize this silence, returning to it again and again. As an adult woman and mother, the mother in Handke’s text is isolated by her lack of speech. She lacks a language that would allow her to talk with her husband, so their communication is limited to “gestures, involuntary mimicry, and embarrassed sexual intercourse” (27) [unwillkürliche Mimik, Gestik und verlegenen Geschlechtsverkehr (43)] and, later, mute physical abuse (37). Her society—provincial, respectably poor, and patriarchal—does not allow her to speak about herself, except in confession; women can be silent, or, if they go a little crazy, they can scream (33–34). In the end, in her profound depression, she can no longer speak at all (54). Accordingly, instances of her direct speech are few. A rare example allows readers to “hear” her report on her inability to talk to others: “I talk to myself, because I can’t say anything to other people anymore” (59) [Ich rede mit mir selber, weil ich sonst keinem Menschen mehr etwas sagen kann (88)]. Stefan’s mother struggles to speak, 29 and when she does, no one wants to hear what she has to say; her husband, for instance, doesn’t want to listen to her feelings of uselessness, of unfulfilled exhaustion, of frustrated longing (50). To be able to speak of her life, she writes voluminous journals, and, as she grows older, she is dogged by the urgent need to bring “order” to her scribblings, jottings, and sketches. But this attempt fails, so that her journals become a symbol of the inadequacy and futility of her life as a whole: “Order plagues her, a derisive grimace. You’ve failed, you’ve made nothing of your life, too weak, too weak, only cooked and forever scribbled your notebooks full of boring nonsense” [Ordnung plagt sie, eine höhnische Fratze. Du hast es nicht geschafft, du hast nichts aus deinem Leben gemacht, zu schwach, zu schwach, nur gekocht und ewig deine Hefte vollgekritzelt mit langweiligem Zeug (31)]. Consumed by the labor of maintaining a house, a family, bodies that need food and clothes, she has been unable to construct a coherent, sustained narrative of her life. The value she attributes to this elusive narrative, its potential to grant her life meaning, resonates with narrativist approaches that see narrative as the ground of individual identity and ethical status. 30

Stefan’s narrator explicitly links her mother’s struggles with language and

27. Aulls, Verbunden und gebunden, 238.
29. For examples, see 46, 145–46.
30. See the discussion in chapter 1.
narrative to contemporary feminist theory. Remembering her first feminist gatherings, she recalls that transformation began “because each woman could hear her own voice. . . . Each had the experience that her voice counted, that her words were worth something, that others were listening” [weil jede ihre eigene Stimme hören konnte. . . . Jede konnte erfahren, daß ihre Stimmezählte, daß ihr Wort etwas galt, daß andere zuhörten (60)]. She represents the effort to forge an adult relationship with her mother as an effort to find a common language. Unable to talk about babies and diapers, the childless daughter and her mother enter uncharted and uncertain, but open, interpersonal and linguistic territory: “The undiscussed space between them remains discussable. What has gone unarticulated is entirely unprocessed; it can be shaped. It can succeed or fail” [Der unbesprochene Raum zwischen ihnen bleibt besprechbar. Das Ungesagte ist vollkommen roh; es ist formbar. Es kann gelingen mißlingen (60, 62)]. Later, mother and daughter linger over the daughter’s emerging translation of Adrienne Rich’s *The Dream of a Common Language*. Even at the end of her mother’s life, when their relationship has become deep and tender, Stefan’s narrator anticipates her mother’s death as the moment when “broken women’s language” [gebrochene Frauensprache (74)] will become unnecessary. These characterizations echo second-wave feminist theory, in which Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva advocated the search for a subversive female language that would oppose the patriarchal hierarchies encoded in existing language and open up a realm of feminine expression and meaning-making.31 Against the intellectual backdrop of feminism, the mother’s sense of failure about her writing itself takes on meaning. Her disjointed, fragmented writing does not satisfy the normative demand for a coherent, linear life-narrative that developed in the context of the male-dominated genre of post-Enlightenment autobiography.32 She lacks the framework for accepting, let alone celebrating, the “messy,” kaleidoscopic *écriture féminine* that her self-narrative might be seen to represent. Handke’s account is less explicit in making these links, and the son learns something of his mother through discussions of literature (by males), rather than through a hard-won, shared language. But he clearly presents his mother’s speechlessness as a product of her identity as a poor woman in provincial Austrian society.33

31. Three of the founding texts of this line of thinking were published in the mid-1970s: Cixous’s *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), and Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974).

32. For an overview of feminist critiques of autobiography as a genre, and of the opposition that has often been posited between life-writing by men and life-writing by women, see Eakin, *Lives Become Stories*, 46–53.

33. See also Schindler, “Nationalsozialismus als Bruch”; Sevin, “Frauenschicksal und Schreibprozeß.”
In this feminist context, the fossilized phrases play a different role than they do in the father books. First, the narrators have to use them, repugnant as they are, because to eschew them would be to condemn their mothers to silence yet again. The mothers are almost completely subsumed by the social codes concretized in the phrases; they have no other resource for understanding or expressing their experience. Handke reports, for instance, that when his mother returned to provincial Austria from Berlin, “she took to the native dialect again, though of course only in fun: she was a woman who had been ABROAD” (32) [Sie nahm wieder den heimischen Dialekt an, wenn auch nur spielerisch: eine Frau mit AUSLANDSERFAHRUNG (50)]. In the word “ABROAD,” Handke signals his mother’s satirical citation of the collective voice suspicious of her foreign experience—but she uses the word, nonetheless, and it is doubtful that this usage is only “in fun.” The phrases’ double voicing highlights the mothers’ dependence on and the children’s inflection of historically and ideologically colored language.

Moreover, the mother’s experience with her journals in Stefan’s book shows that any attempts to construct an account of self outside that language must fail to be heard. The fossilized phrases show that the children, too, rely on it to make the mothers’ stories accessible and relevant. Butler’s antinarrativist mistrust of life stories derives partly from this necessary reliance: “The ‘I’ who begins to tell its story can only tell it according to recognizable norms of life narration . . . to the extent that it agrees, from the start, to narrative itself through these norms, it agrees to circuit its narration through an externality, and so to disorient itself in the telling.” This tension between individual and group has been seen as inherent to the historical project of representing the lives of “ordinary” women, of simultaneously doing justice to individual experience and making the individual story illustrative of a category of historical experience. Handke’s narrator clearly feels this tension and voices a mistrust akin to Butler’s. He does not want to make his mother

34. In “Freedom and Remembrance,” Cecile Zorach sees the tension between ritualized public language and a private idiom as uniting Handke’s reflections on his writing with the mother’s biography. She reads the mother’s final isolation as a result of her entirely abandoning the world of ritualized language that had defined her earlier life. I do not believe she ever escapes that language.
35. On polyvocality, ideology, and language, see Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 80–81; Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, 282.
37. Booth and Burton, “Critical Feminist Biography.” On the tension between the exceptional and the representative in women’s biography, see also Miller, “Representing Others,” 16.
38. On this tension in Handke’s text and its relationship to “classical” narrative style and biographical practice, see Rey, “Provokation durch den Tod,” 298; Perry, “Kritik der Biographie.”
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)]. At the same time, he relies on

the already available formulations, the linguistic deposit of man's social experience . . . for only with the help of a ready-made public language was it possible to single out from all the irrelevant facts of this life the few that cried out to be made public. (29)

Such extensive metanarrative commentary goes beyond the suggestions in Doppelgänger and Stuffcake that the silent oppressed (John, Hanna, and Valentine) should perhaps be able to tell their own stories. It questions how and if linguistic narrative can rescue the mothers as unique individuals from the mute invisibility that doomed them. Handke's and Stefan's narrators use the fossilized phrases to mark their own representational difficulties, and to highlight their mothers' helpless reliance on the social expectations that crushed them.

These phrases also help the narrators protect themselves from the unremitting suffering and speechlessness that threaten to engulf them if they identify too closely with their mothers. In these texts, the mothers' inability to tell their life stories contributes to their vulnerability. Handke's narrator avails himself of the formulae that construct "the orderliness of the usual

39. I have altered the parenthetical portion of the translation to fit the syntax of the sentence.

40. Ursula Love seems to suggest that the generalization serves to awaken interest for the mother's story. Love, “Identifizierung und negative Kreativität,” 134. Christoph Parry maintains that she appears more as a representative of her generation than as an individual. Parry, “Vorzügen einer Fiktionalisierung,” 90.

41. Similarly, Matthias Konzett contends in “Postideological Aesthetics” that Handke rejects the Frankfurt School's claim that the need to tell the story of one's own life amounts to nothing but Kitsch (46–47). Or, as one of Stefan's brothers believes, that the mother's desire to tell them her stories is "just a personal cult" (66) [doch nur Personenkult].

42. Cf. Hartwig, "Geschichtlosigkeit der Mütter," 48. Hartwig explains mothers' vulnerability as the result of a subjectivity that relies entirely on a dedication to giving unconditional love, rather than on stories.
biographical pattern” [die Ordentlichkeit eines üblichen Lebenslaufschemas] to escape the “horror” [Schreckensseligkeit] he feels when he identifies with his mother’s feelings and speechlessness (31; 48).\(^4\) In her epilogue, which contains the story of the story found in the frame of dynamic observer narratives, Stefan’s narrator recounts in hindsight her struggle to work with the mother’s desperate journals. She reports that she became physically ill trying to tell her mother’s story from her mother’s perspective. The breakthrough comes when she speaks with her mother in a dream. “I don’t want my diaries to be published,” says the mother. “I don’t want that either, I answered, I’m eating your texts so that I can reproduce them in my own way” [Ich will nicht, daß meine Tagebücher veröffentlicht werden. Das will ich auch nicht, antwortete ich, ich esse deine Texte, um sie in meiner Form wiedergeben zu können (153)]. The chapter titles, each of which is an anagram of one of the mother’s last statements, “It was a rich life” [es ist reich gewesen], are products of that process. Felicity Rash grants these anagrams positive force, claiming that they demonstrate the creativity of language and that, with their roots in the mother’s words, they make Stefan’s book the mother’s book of her life.\(^\text{44}\) But in reading them this way, Rash does not account for the desperate need for distance that prompted the narrator to begin this process of digestion and creation in the first place; after all, her life goal has been to escape “the tyranny of female weakness” [die Tyrannei weiblicher Schwäche (55)]. The calcified phrases that stud Stefan’s prose are the indigestible remnants of this process. They are traces of the poisonous, debilitating maternal language that she must escape. In Stefan and Handke, the phrases serve a need for distance and autonomy that derives as much from the mother’s suffering as from her belonging to a detested moral world.

At the same time, this suffering justifies—even demands—their attempts at reclamation. In these texts, “the project of finding an adequate language in which to articulate what makes the forbear worthy of attention is often closely related to the project of rearticulating the moral language(s) of this first interlocutor as a constitutive language(s) of self.”\(^\text{45}\) In other words, these narrators tell their mothers’ stories to salvage what is salvageable. Handke’s effort is particularly visible in the last several pages of his account. Here, where he recounts the aftermath of his mother’s death, the narrative disintegrates into disjointed paragraphs and sentences; empty lines are all that link one brief statement to the next. Some of these reflect on the narrator’s distraught and disoriented state. The others are anecdotes that capture, however

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\(^4\) Manheim’s translation slightly altered.

\(^\text{44}\) Rash, “Stefan Twenty Years On.”

\(^\text{45}\) Parker, “Narratives of Autonomy,” 151.
ambivalently, the mother’s positive qualities: “The painful memory of her daily motions, especially in the kitchen. . . . When she was angry, she didn’t beat the children; at the most, she would wipe their noses violently. . . . She was kindly” (68–69) [Die schmerzliche Erinnerung an sie bei den täglichen Handgriffen, vor allem in der Küche. . . . Im Zorn schlug sie die Kinder nicht, sondern schneuzte ihnen höchstens heftig die Nase. . . . Sie war menschenfreundlich (102, 104)]. The work of salvage is difficult. The memories are painful not only because she is gone, but because they remind the narrator of her enslavement to her domestic duties and of the warmth those duties never quite extinguished. At the same time, the lack of connections between the narrator’s self-reflections and his memories of his mother indicate his ongoing inability, or unwillingness, to place himself in relationship to this self-sacrificing woman—a stance that echoes his ambivalence toward writing in the book’s opening paragraphs.⁴⁶ This resistance contrasts sharply with the warm relationship that Stefan’s narrator has achieved with her mother by the time she arrives at a narrative form, and Handke’s conspicuous stylization in these pages, which differs markedly from the rest of the book, suggests an authorial distance toward the narrator that Stefan’s implied author never assumes. Here, perhaps, Handke the author subtly criticizes his narrator’s ideal audience—members of his own generation, his readers—who, as Michael Schneider charges of the postwar generation, refuse to implicate themselves in their parents’ lives and who reciprocate the emotional unavailability they indict in their parents.⁴⁷

Such authorial distance is missing when the narrator discusses the mother’s experience of National Socialism. This lack of distance is remarkable, because while most postwar intergenerational autobiography has been seen as an attempt to condemn this era, the narrators of Sorrow and Rich Life try to reclaim something from it. In trying to remain faithful to his mother’s experience and voice, Handke’s narrator describes her life and the political backdrop of these years in largely neutral or positive terms. He often reproduces National Socialist rhetoric, perhaps assuming that it damned itself,⁴⁸ or perhaps merely reconstructing his mother’s world; the page that reports Austria’s annexation and Hitler’s subsequent election presents without comment

⁴⁶. The narrator’s reluctance to represent himself as an actor in his mother’s life manifests itself in other ways, too. Here and elsewhere, he writes of “children,” rather than using a personal pronoun that would attach the narrating instance to the child who shared her experience (21, 31).

⁴⁷. Schneider, “Fathers and Sons, Retrospectively.”

⁴⁸. Schlant’s Language of Silence diagnoses and sharply criticizes this approach in the Väterliteratur (92).
what seem to be excerpts from National Socialist propaganda, along with a paragraph of entirely detached reporting (13). At other times, his critical perspective manifests itself. One brief paragraph employs fossilized phrases that signal his ironic stance, then shifts to his own postwar assessment of National Socialist political aesthetics:

Demonstrations, torchlight parades, mass meetings. Buildings decorated with the new national emblem SALUTED; forests and mountain peaks DECKED THEMSELVES OUT; the historic events were represented to the rural population as a drama of nature. (14)

Kundgebungen mit Fackelzügen und Feierstunden; die mit neuen Hoheitszeichen versehenen Gebäude bekamen STIRNSEITEN und GRÜSSTEN; die Wälder und die Berggipfel SCHMÜCKTEN SICH; der ländlichen Bevölkerung wurden die geschichtlichen Ereignisse als Naturschauspiel vorgestellt. (23)

In the end, however, he discounts the importance of the politics of National Socialism for his mother’s story. Four pages detailing its political and social manifestations end with a long paragraph explaining his mother’s lack of interest in politics and her failure to see the events taking place around her within a political framework: they were “something entirely different from politics—a masquerade, a newsreel festival, a secular church fair” (13–14) [alles andere—eine Maskerade, eine UFA-Wochenschau . . . , ein weltlicher Kirchtag (24)]. In saying that “politics” has nothing to do with “reality” for his mother, he exculpates her and patronizes her at the same time; she is incapable of understanding independently what is behind the empty words and symbols she has learned in school. The empty lines that follow this paragraph emphasize that the discussion of the mother’s relationship to National Socialist politics is over.

Then, abruptly, the next sentence describes the National Socialist era as a release from the isolation, need, and narrow horizons that deformed the rest of his mother’s life: “That period helped my mother to come out of her shell and become independent” (15) [Diese Zeit half meiner Mutter, aus sich herauszugehen und selbständig zu werden (25)]. Stephen Schindler calls this depiction a “scandal” for its misrepresentation of the realities of misogynist National Socialism,49 but it also shifts the significance of the era away from the political: the paragraph goes on to trace this independence in

the mother's personal relationships. She loses her fear of men and of physical contact, enjoys a feeling of familial belonging when she writes to her brother at the front, and surrenders to her first and only love. Political and social developments may provide the backdrop, but the real relevance of these years lies in their impact on her self-understanding and the personal relationships it facilitates. So does Handke present it, and so have scholars read it.\(^{50}\) Such accounts and interpretations betray the blind spot that prevents mother literature from being read with father literature: the political emancipation that triggered the postwar generation's reevaluation of its fathers seems not to have affected its view of its mothers as private, rather than political, actors.\(^{51}\) Handke's affirming summary sentence, and the shift it enacts between the political and the private realms, signals exactly this discrepancy. National Socialism is passed over as little more than the background condition for individual identity and personal relationships.

Stefan's text holds the mother accountable for her reactions to National Socialism more than Handke's does. The narrator notes the domestic responsibilities that prevented the mother from reflecting on “what is happening around her” [was rings um sie passiert (21)], but also reveals that she knew better. Her sister told her something of what was happening, and she feebly attempted to avoid the Nazi salute and declared herself, as a Swiss, independent of Hitler. Moreover, in the aftermath of the war, having been subjected to slave labor herself, she recognizes that she had deceived herself about the plight of the Jews, “because she hadn’t looked closely enough, because she hadn’t wanted to see anything” [weil sie nicht genau hingeschaut hat, weil sie nichts sehen wollte (27)]. Rather than turning the story of the war into a story of the mother's personal development and suffering, this account begins and ends its brief narration of the National Socialist years by highlighting what the mother failed to see.


\(^{51}\) With the exception of Schindler's account, even those that focus on Handke's representation of National Socialism are colored by these gendered assumptions. Even Barry, who holds the mother responsible for her National Socialist enthusiasm, reads Handke as criticizing “a corrupt patriarchal discourse of the ‘fathers,’” without explaining why Handke uses the mother's story for this critique. See Barry, “Nazi Signs,” 303. Similarly, when Parry claims that Handke's later fiction fulfills the promise of the text's closing sentence to write more clearly later, he implicitly makes the relationship to the father the “real” story at stake. He reads this later fiction as constituting emotional, if not factual, Väterliteratur; the “more specific” treatment is not of Handke's mother's life but of the expected generational conflict. In conclusion, Parry claims “that Handke's processing of the fascist past and the representation of his relationship to his fathers is an incomplete project, of which Wunschloses Unglück is an integral part.” Parry, “Vorzüge einer Fiktionalisierung,” 99 (my emphasis).
Still, the primary legacy of the war is not guilt at this failure, but a fossilized phrase that the daughter adopts from the mother—the only one she makes her own. Later in her account, the daughter returns to her mother’s internment in a cinema basement with hundreds of German women and children at the end of the war, where rape by Russian soldiers was a constant threat. The mother fended them off with a furiously spoken Swiss-German phrase: “you damned pig!” [du verflüemerete Soucheib, du! (66)]. The phrase appears in the italics of the calcified expression: the words have been repeated so many times so as to become legend. Decades later, her feminist daughter twice repeats these words when she feels threatened in her globe-trotting, independent life: “you damned pig!” (66). Five times in the space of a paragraph the daughter repeats this magical phrase, which protects her as it had protected her mother. The one scrap that Stefan can salvage from her mother’s language to use in her own life comes from the war (or, at least, its immediate aftermath). In Stefan the era that is the grounds for rejection in the Mütterliteratur opens a space of possibility. It is a threatened space, certainly: hunger, displacement, and the threat of rape make the war years dark and frightening. But the war also frees the mother from her husband and gives authority. In this one case, she can tell her own story, and others hear and acknowledge it:

When she told that story, no one dared interrupt her.
No one said:
   Nonsense!
   You’re imagining it!
   You don’t understand!

Bei der Geschichte hat niemand gewagt, sie zu unterbrechen.
Niemand hat gesagt:
   Unsinn!
   Das bildest du dir ein!
   Das verstehst du nicht! (21)

In Stefan the war is the only time when female words matter. What is more, the words that Stefan borrows from the war allow her and her mother to position themselves outside of the logic of perpetration and suffering: they are female words that resist male violence, and “neutral” Swiss-German words that resist the acts of war committed by the Germans and their enemies. Stefan’s adoption of her mother’s phrase is not a “solution” that Mütterliteratur offers to the problem of dealing with the National Socialist past. But it shows that understanding how the children of National Socialism have attempted to
extricate themselves from the web of political, social, and gender identity that defined their parents—and how they remain bound to it—requires reading *Mütterliteratur* alongside *Väterliteratur*.

Both Handke’s and Stefan’s narrators present National Socialism and the war as crucial experiences in their mothers’ lives. For both women, this era is filled with self-defining moments in the literal sense: their children see them as having taken control of their own lives and identities during this time. Both children accept—even implicitly celebrate—this self-definition; the mothers’ response to National Socialism itself is secondary. This dynamic stands in complete opposition to the indictment of the fathers in the dominant paradigm of *Väterliteratur*. The fathers are seen as responsible for the language and the destruction it causes. Their presumed guilt compels their children to declare complete autonomy from them.\(^{52}\) In contrast, the mothers are seen as victims of the moral language they speak. Their suffering drives the children to seek distance, for they want to neither contribute to it nor share it. At the same time, the children feel a need to acknowledge and understand this suffering, and, at least in Stefan’s case, to reconnect her own life to her mother’s.\(^{53}\) National Socialism and the war do not provide the central thread in Handke’s and Stefan’s narratives, as they do in the narratives of *Väterliteratur*. Yet neither are they marginal. And the treatment of this period highlights the children’s opposing assessments of their parents. The era is the source of the fathers’ guilt, but in these mothers’ stories, it acquires a positive aura because of the relief from suffering it brings.\(^{54}\) The postwar generation works against its parents’ corrupted moral language in both the father and the mother accounts, only in very different ways: in the father accounts by rejecting the dominant, violent voices that speak it, and in these two mother accounts by giving voice to those whom it silenced. Restoring gendered difference is a crucial part of telling a complete story of postwar generational relations.\(^{55}\)

**A Worthy, Wordy Forbear: Ortheil**

In contrast to many other mother books, Ortheil’s *Hedge* has been read almost solely within the context of *Väterliteratur*. Ortheil invites such a read-

\(^{52}\) Brandstädter calls this the “amputation paradigm.” *Folgeschäden*, 124–30.

\(^{53}\) Brandstädter’s “(re)construction and integration paradigm.” Ibid., 131–36.

\(^{54}\) Parry highlights the way Maria Handke’s suffering leads Handke to absolve her of historical responsibility. Parry, “Vorzügen einer Fiktionalisierung,” 90–92.

\(^{55}\) There is more work to be done here. The effects of the gendered dynamics of mother-son and mother-daughter relationships on mother representations remain to be examined.
ing because, like the authors of the Väterliteratur, he zeroes in on the political and historical aspects of his mother’s existence, portraying her not only as affected by them but also as a political actor. In addition, as all of the secondary literature notes, the dynamics of the narrator’s relationship to his mother mirror those of the relationships between children and fathers in the Väterliteratur. The narrator tells the story of his mother’s life in order to distance himself from her and from the language and mode of narration that she and her generation use to forget and obfuscate the National Socialist past. However, the linguistic and narrative self-reflection that permeate Hedge prompt Schlant and Helmut Schmitz to see Ortheil as having moved past the simple, judgmental stance of “classic” Väterliteratur. In terms that implicitly affirm the goal of using narrative to temporarily assume a foreign point of view, they applaud Ortheil’s quest to understand his mother’s “experiential viewpoint” “on [her own] terms,” and see his work as making “an exemplary contribution to a true Vergangenheitsbewältigung.”

Hedge is a paradigmatic dynamic observer narrative and, despite its autobiographical basis, overtly fictionalized. In the texts of this chapter, then, fictionality is associated with dynamicism and life-writing with resolved memoir, although this association is not necessary. Authors willing to present themselves in the process of a writing that has not resolved instability (or cannot resolve it) can produce dynamic nonfiction. Hedge’s opening para-texts mark its fictionality from the start: like many novellas, it declares itself a “narrative” [Erzählung], and it is dedicated to Mia, a figure who does not exist in the narrative world. Unlike the narrators of Sorrow and Rich Life, the narrator has negotiated a satisfactory relationship neither with his mother nor with her language; this process takes place only as he investigates and writes her story. That story, too, differs dramatically from those of the mothers in Handke and Stefan. As the daughter of a successful businessman, Katharina goes away to a boarding school and returns to her village full of self-confidence and curiosity about the wider world. She becomes church librarian, holding a recognized position in her community. When she refuses to cooperate with National Socialist control of the library, she is arrested and then loses her position. Years of increasing dissatisfaction with her life and desperation about the political situation follow, yet she becomes fascinated with the first young man of her acquaintance to join the SA. After a courtship

56. See the discussion of a literary “new ethics” in chapter 1.
58. Examples might be Joan Didion’s Year of Magical Thinking (2005) and Blue Nights (2011), particularly the latter.
consisting largely of mutual attempts to change each other’s political attitudes, she agrees to marry him when he shields her brother’s induction to the priesthood from SA interference. Her family accepts this match readily, since it leads her to abandon her plan to study at the university, which they see as unfitting for a young woman. She moves with him to Berlin, where, for a short time, she revels in the freedom and variety the city offers. Soon, however, the war begins, and her primary experience of the city changes from excitement to fear. This fear is borne out when the terror of a bombing raid results in the stillbirth of her first son, and when she becomes pregnant again, her husband consents to her return to their village. A second son is born there, but this son is lost, too, a victim of the final moments of the war. The narrator, the third son, is born some years later and remains the couple’s only child.

The narrator knows little of this story at the beginning, and his drive for an autonomous understanding of history, his mother, and himself provide the impetus for his investigation into her life. Like the narrators of the Väter-literatur, he must battle against his parent’s dominant, mesmerizing voice to construct this account. Katharina has read a great deal, and she has a fluent, literate storytelling style that reassures her listeners: “her listeners feel secure, no matter how terrible the things she is reporting” [man fühlt sich geborgen, mag sie von noch so entsetzlichen Dingen berichten (24)]. Her stories appear inevitable and natural, and they never vary: “She will use the same words, mention the same details, keep the same evaluations. A story has an inviolate place in her memory” [Sie wird dieselben Worte benutzen, dieselben Details erwähnen, dieselben Wertungen beibehalten. Eine Geschichte hat in ihrer Erinnerung einen unumstößlichen Platz (24, 20)]. She participates in the same ritualized provincial language as the mothers of Handke and Stefan, and as the other people in her village: prejudice, stereotype, and an unwillingness to think or to empathize predetermine their stories (126–29). Yet Katharina is not erased or silenced by this language. On the contrary, she is an inexhaustible speaker and dominates her “conversations” (20). Moreover, she uses her stories to forget and erase the past, much like the fathers do; the narrator maintains that she “forgets by telling stories; but it is only by telling stories that she controls her forgetting” [vergißt, indem sie erzählt; aber nur indem sie erzählt, beherrscht sie ihr Vergessen (23)]. At the end of her stories, nothing of substance remains. They are comfortable, spellbinding performances that permit the kind of repression the postwar generation loathes.

Within this scheme, it is predictable that the narrator writes to counteract her repression of the past. He resists the position of “naïve listener” whose passive listening slowly immerses him in “the dreamy wave of forgetting”
[einfältiger Zuhörer; die träumerische Woge des Vergessens (51)]. While his mother is on vacation, he interviews her friends and relatives and reads her old letters to reconstruct the story of what befell her during National Socialism. Here, too, the structure of the narrative largely reproduces the tropes of *Väterliteratur*. Her directly quoted letters appear to let her speak for herself. The narrator reports having been enthralled by his mother’s stories and language as a child and having achieved self-confidence by emulating her: “since language belonged to me, so did the world” [indem mir die Sprache gehörte, gehörte mir die Welt (24–26)]. The magic of his mother’s language gives her an aura and a power much like that Meckel’s father had for his young son, and it lasts from the moment she initiates him into the magical world of letters until the moment when a critical outside voice suddenly voids the power of his own “magic spells” [Zaubersprüche] and he realizes the emptiness of the ritualized incantations he has been mimicking (18, 26).

Following this disillusionment, the narrator goes through the same phases of relationship to his mother that marks the 68ers’ relationship with their parents. First, as Michael Schneider had diagnosed, he becomes complicit in the silence about the National Socialist era because he wants to dissociate himself from it entirely. He refuses to hear any stories about the past, no matter how innocuous or beautifying they may be. He refuses to see himself as the son, grandson, or descendant of the barbarians who had committed the unspeakable crimes, and he insists that his postwar birthdate grants him the “grace of belated birth” [Gnade der späten Geburt]: “the war—that was the time before I was born, a different time with no relationship and no connection to my experience” [der Krieg—das war die Zeit vor meiner Geburt, eine andere Zeit, die zu dem, was ich erlebte, in keinem Verhältnis und keiner Beziehung stand (37)]. Eventually, he makes the ultimate effort for autonomy, completely severing his relationship with his parents for a number of years. When he reestablishes ties and begins to pursue the story of his mother’s past, he struggles to avoid repeating her fossilized stories; a page of his mother’s direct speech about her arrest concludes with an ellipsis and the remark, “That’s the way my mother tells it, and here I stop, so as not to repeat her stories” [ja, so erzählt meine Mutter, und ich breche hier ab, um ihre Geschichten nicht zu wiederholen (21–22)]. At the end of the book,

59. Mauelshagen suggests in *Schatten des Vaters* that the letters, journals, and recordings of the *Väterliteratur* constitute a gesture toward dialogue, allowing the father to “answer” to the child’s account of his life (122). While they do allow the father to present his views—and, as Schlant contends, often go uncommented—the textual frames in which they appear clearly delegitimize his viewpoint.

having solved the riddles of his mother’s past, he guards his interpretive independence by leaving her home before she returns from vacation. Ortheil’s narrative seems to be a father book about a mother, where the son declares absolute autonomy from her self-protective view of the past and the powerful moral language that supports it.

In attempting to achieve autonomy from her voice, however, Ortheil’s narrator establishes himself unquestionably as her son. Some father books depict men slowly yielding to the seductive language of National Socialism, but Ortheil’s Katharina consistently strains against its pull, just as her son’s narrative resists an abhorrent moral language. At first, she is somewhat troubled by her inability to incorporate herself into the jubilant masses. After hearing a triumphant newsreel pronouncement of the people’s unity under Hitler, she tells her sister “that she wasn’t a part of it, that she hadn’t had the right words to belong to it, and, what was worst, that she couldn’t even explain why” [daß sie nicht dazugehörte, daß ihr die richtigen Worte gefehlt hatten, um dabei zusein, und daß sie, was vielleicht das Schlimmste war, . . . nicht einmal erklären konnte, warum das so war (83)]. This reflection follows her terrifying arrest and interrogation for refusing to turn over library borrower lists to the SA. As church librarian, she is a recalcitrant guardian of long-term cultural memory who refuses the new regime’s attempts to replace it with an instrumentalized collective memory of German identity and nation. Predictably, she is promptly fired. Yet she continues to defend this culture and language under siege. When the list of banned books is published and the new librarian has removed them from the shelves for destruction, she claims that she needs to retrieve some belongings from the library, steals the books, and conceals them in her parents’ attic. Each time she moves, she takes the books with her, a traveling repository of a language that she refuses to let the Nazis touch. Finally, she, like her traditional father, finds their language incomprehensible (60–61, 74, 214–15). She refuses to adjust her language to theirs, or, as her insistence on a public celebration of her newly ordained brother’s first mass shows, to allow her moral orientation to shift in accordance with their values.

Her resistance to “the watchmen of words and laws” [die Wort- und Gesetzeshüter (245)] eventually assumes more drastic forms. After suffering a stillbirth in Berlin, she returns to her family’s rural home, where she eventually gives birth to a healthy son. As he grows and learns to speak, her family realizes that she is initiating him into an idiosyncratic linguistic world

61. Jan and Aleida Assmann discuss cultural, collective, and communicative memory in a number of publications. For a brief account, see Assmann and Frevert, Geschichtsvergessenheit, 35–52.
separate from the one in which the rest of them live. Ortheil discusses not only the function of this language but also its texture and feel. She invents it to insulate her son from the violence that has irreversibly contaminated German, because “the language that everyone used had become irretrievably ugly, like a spirit of death, and the grumbles of the dying crouched behind each sound” [die Sprache, derer sich alle bedienten, sei für immer häßlich geworden, lemurenähnlich, und hinter jedem Laut hocke das Sterbegemecker der Toten (259)]. Morphologically, the language she speaks with him resembles German enriched by a collection of “wild sounds”; it is “strange and seductive,” an “incessant singsong” full of “reassuring adages and magical formulas” [wilde Lauten; sonderbar und verführerisch; unaufhörlicher Singsang; beruhigenden Sprüchen und zauberische Formeln (259)]. In the cocoon of this language, mother and son share an intimacy and interdependence that far exceeds the already tight bonds between mother and young child. To protect her son, Katharina summons her resolve, her creativity, and the energy generated by fear to invent a new language. In this act, she could not be farther from the villagers, who spout predictably prejudiced stories; from Handke’s and Stefan’s mothers, who are imprisoned in traditional clichés; or even from her own postwar self, who relies on rehearsed, rote stories to hold the past at bay. Rejecting all of the moral languages that form the web of social life and social identity, she determines to provide her son with an entirely new and independent frame of moral reference.

In the end, however, the language she has invented for her son cannot protect him. As the Americans take control of the area around the farm where the family is staying, he is killed by shrapnel as she holds him in her arms. This devastating death brings about her final and most radical break with the world around her. After a scream “as from the eternal judgment” [wie aus der Ewigkeit des Gerichts (292)]—from outside the realm of human language and morality—she retreats into a silence and an isolation that no one can penetrate. She does not choose this state, but it is hard not to see in it a final act of separation from the brutality of life in the world that surrounds her. As the narrator presents it, the story of Katharina’s life under National Socialism is a story of her steady dissociation from its language and community.

This pursuit of linguistic and moral autonomy proves fruitless, however. Her son is killed, and the books that she has so assiduously shielded from being burned by the Nazis presumably burn, after all, when her village is burned.

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62. See also Schlant, Language of Silence, 111. She had brought them to Berlin after her marriage, and presumably brought them back to the village with the rest of their household goods as chaos in Berlin grew (225, 265–67). But, in the end, the village burned, too (282).
bombed. Still, tragedy is not language’s weakness in the face of violence. Her tragedy is that, in her efforts to create an independent system of meaning, she repeats the abhorrent structural features of National Socialist language. Her suffering had begun with National Socialism’s efforts to eradicate all competing moral languages and to provide the only framework for thought and decisions; when she invents a new language for her son, it is to shield him from violence by isolating him from all outside influences—including from his soldier father and her family (258). She pulls him from radio broadcasts and newspaper recitations and disappears with him for days into the woods, and the child becomes resistant to other words and other speakers, particularly his father (259–60). Eventually, her control over his language erodes, but in the emotionally intense final days of the war, she tries to draw him into this hermetic world again. Her linguistic efforts in this phase operate on the same principle of annihilation that was simultaneously destroying European Jewry; she insists that “certain words had to be entirely exterminated and winnowed out in time, before the victors’ arrival” [bestimmte Worte müßten rechtzeitig vor dem Eintreffen der Sieger gänzlich vernichtet und aussortiert werden (287)].\(^6^3\) Just as doggedly as the Nazis, she attempts to silence dissenting voices from within and without. Her attempt to protect her son amounts to an attempt to seal him hermetically from the world.

After the war, she is fearful and uncertain, increasingly so as two miscarriages make her fear that she will never have another healthy child. Her uncertainty disappears when the narrator is born. She determines again to protect her child from violence, suffering, and pain, but this time, protecting him means shielding him from the past, rather than the present. This determination produces the obfuscating language and avoidance that so frustrates the narrator. Again, her desire to protect her son misleads her into adopting a morally compromised language. This postwar language—which the mother shares with those who want to deny the past out of guilt—resembles National Socialist language even more clearly than her invented language had. As Schlant notes, the narrator uses the same expressions to characterize his mother’s storytelling as she had used decades before to describe Hitler’s speeches.\(^6^4\) Moreover, his assertion that nothing of substance remains at the end of her stories echoes her observation that she can remember nothing of Hitler’s speeches when they are over, “at most the final words” [höchstens die letzten Worte (215)].

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\(^6^3\) See also Schlant, *Language of Silence.*

\(^6^4\) Schlant notes the dual use of “singsong.” *Language of Silence,* 109–10. The narrator also uses the verb “(ver)streuen” [to scatter] to describe how both his mother and Hitler disseminate their messages to “das Volk” (24, 216).
The mother’s insistence on autonomy throughout the war yields to an acceptance of the dominant moral language when it appears most suited to protecting her son. Eventually, the underlying poverty of this language and the intense and all-consuming relationship it weaves drive the narrator to wrest his independence from her, for only with such independence can he begin to recover from the effects her wartime trauma have had on him. These effects are profound.\textsuperscript{65} He is apathetic, an insomniac, and incapable of having an intimate relationship with another woman—indeed, he rarely succeeds in maintaining human connections to anyone. Like she, he inhabits an unhappy isolation, insisting far too vehemently, “Oh, I like to be alone” [oh, ich bin gerne allein (8)]. Finally, he resents his lifelong efforts to assuage his mother’s pain by being well, successful, and happy.\textsuperscript{66} As in the \textit{Väterliteratur}, the narrator appears emotionally stunted by the repercussions of the parent’s past experience; he must escape her influence and work out a language of his own for understanding the past.

Because of its many similarities with \textit{Väterliteratur}, \textit{Hedge} has been interpreted solely within this frame of reference, but Schlant and Schmitz read it as a positive development in this tradition, emphasizing the narrator’s attempt to understand his mother even as he struggles to distance himself from her and to grapple with how her experience has affected him.\textsuperscript{67} Indeed, his account reveals that he reaffirms his relationship with her even as he makes himself independent of it. He gleans much of her story by talking with the people who are closest to her, reestablishing his own ties to them in the process. Staying in her house while she is away, he buys and plants dozens of beech trees to please her, a planting that suggests his own continuing and future rootedness there. Similarly, his construction of his own cabin on the land symbolizes his need to escape his mother’s order, but also his desire to retain his attachment to the place that is, however ambivalently, still home. As he reads her letters to her husband and her brother, he finds himself questioning whether they understood her as he does—and concludes that only he has grasped what she was trying to communicate. Despite their material similarity to the documents investigated by the narrators of the \textit{Väterliteratur}, then,

\textsuperscript{65} See Schlant, \textit{Language of Silence}, 106; Schmitz, \textit{On Their Own Terms}, 41–44.

\textsuperscript{66} In \textit{On Their Own Terms}, Helmut Schmitz asserts that this “overburdening” of the child within “incestuous” parent-child relationships is a common symptom of the intergenerational transmission of war trauma in the postwar period (41). Thus, he, like Schneider, generalizes about the “psychopathology of postwar families” (41–44), but his twenty-first-century focus on German suffering and trauma lead him to conclusions very different than Schneider’s.

\textsuperscript{67} Schlant, \textit{Language of Silence}, 100; Schmitz, \textit{On Their Own Terms}, 36–43, 49; Schmitz, “Family, Heritage,” 74–75.
the letters play a very different role here. The narrator does not use them to
indict his mother as she was and is, but to gain access and connect to a voice
that has been lost.

The end of the text suggests that the narrator hopes to revive this voice in
the present, as well. Although the story ends as he leaves her house to avoid
seeing her, it also clearly expresses his desire to begin a new phase in their
relationship. He asserts that he loves her and that he sees her as his “only
understanding listener” [einzige verständnisvolle Zuhörerin (314)]. Finally,
although he does not stay to talk to her, he begins a symbolic dialogue by
shifting into direct address, and articulates the hope that this dialogue will
continue, interrupting her desperate attempts to evade the past and helping heal its wounds (314–16). “I would so like to stay,” he laments, “I hope we see each other soon” [Ich bleibe so gern; Ich hoffe, wir sehen uns bald wieder (315–16)]. In contrast to much of the Väterliteratur, he ends by seeking a new relationship with his mother, rather than a final break. Forging this relationship will be difficult, but it does not seem impossible—not least, because his mother is still alive, as many of the fathers of Väterliteratur are not. This real possibility for future conversation distinguishes the function of the direct address in this novel from that in many father books. There, the address to the deceased father testifies to his continuing influence on the child, and to the twin impulses to bring him back to life and to assert the self as a subject speaking against him.68 In neither of these cases is the address a communicative gesture, but in Ortheil’s novel the address is an invitation for a response, for the mother’s answer to the narrator’s reconstructed history. Instead of telling her story to finally silence her voice, the narrator tells it to be able to begin a conversation with her. Schmitz, Schlan, and Aurenche all valorize this approach to the mother’s story and read Ortheil’s mother book as an anomalous—and superior—father book as a result.

But such an understanding of the narrator, and of Ortheil’s work, overlooks a crucial difference between Hedge and the contemporary father books. His book is different, not only because the narrator approaches his mother’s story differently, but also because his mother is different. Schmitz implicitly equates her with the fathers; although he begins by talking about Ortheil’s father and mother narratives, by the end the mother has disappeared:

68. On lyric apostrophe as rhetorical invocation, see Johnson, “Apostrophe”; Kacandes, Talk Fiction, ch. 4. On apostrophe as self-dramatizing gesture, see Culler, Pursuit of Signs, 135–54. Although Mauelshagen maintains that the narrators of some father books do seek to continue their emotional relationships with their fathers, she still reads instances of direct address as symptoms of the father’s continuing influence on the narrator, rather than of intimacy. Mauelshagen, Schatten des Vaters, 120–22.
“The . . . incompatibility of the father’s view of himself as victim and the son’s focus on Auschwitz leaves the son literally displaced from genealogical and historical time.”

Similarly, Schlant’s emphasis on the resemblance between the mother’s language and Hitler’s seems to posit Katharina’s historical position as structurally equivalent to that of the despised fathers. But it is not. She never collaborated with the Nazis. On the contrary, from the Nazi ascension to power to the war’s end, she committed small acts of defiance: from defending the library and protecting its books, to attempting to dissuade her future husband from his pro-regime stance, to avoiding the obligatory Nazi salute, to organizing the public spectacle of her brother’s first mass, to refusing optimism about the war and communicating her fears to her husband and family. Her son has to wrestle with her influence and with the way that National Socialism marked her. But he does not have to try to understand reasons for complicity, as the narrators of the father narratives do, or to come to terms with an awful culpability. Katharina has no guilt to hide. In this text the obfuscating language of the postwar period conceals only fear and suffering.

The narrator of this book approaches his mother’s story differently because his mother’s life demands a different story. She is not a guilty, recalcitrant tyrant. She is a woman of failed resistance and deep suffering whose efforts to protect her beloved children have unintended effects. These differences encourage the son’s empathetic approach. He knows that she desires nothing but good for him, just as she desired only to protect his brother, and this knowledge softens his reaction to the havoc her desire wreaks. Similarly, his awareness that he suffers because her own suffering has been so great makes the inflicted pain easier to forgive. Finally, her attempts at resistance make her a worthy forbear. Her effort to establish autonomy stands as a precedent for his efforts to break with her language and find his own—his very determination to distance himself from her shows him to be the inheritor of her moral independence. This text shows clearly that “the project of ‘finding an adequate language’ is often closely related to the project of rearticulating the moral language(s) of these first interlocutors as constitutive language(s) of the self.”

Katharina’s moral language is not adequate. But it offers a point of departure for the narrator’s own moral language and orientation. This narrator does not make himself his mother’s heir only because he is willing and able. She offers him a linguistic and moral force that is worthy of inheritance.


70. Parker, “Narratives of Autonomy,” 142.
Conclusion

Stefan and Handke find less to inherit from their mothers, but they, too, work to understand their mothers’ experience and to reckon with its influence on themselves. Within postwar German literary and cultural history, these family histories about the women of the war generation thus erode the paradigm of a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that demands absolute moral autonomy from the parents’ generation. Indeed, acknowledging the contemporary existence of this competing paradigm in the 1970s and 1980s might have differentiated the response to the *Väterliteratur* over the years. These different histories derive both from the mothers’ differing experience and from the gendered frameworks of interpretation that the narrators use to understand it. In the best cases, the mothers embody a resistance to violence. Even when they appear as passive or complicit, however, their stories are not shaped by the normative narrative of German culpability that structures the second generation’s narrative of the fathers. Instead, this behavior is interpreted within the “larger” story of their suffering as women and as mothers. Comparing these mother books to the dominant understanding of their father-book counterparts thus also highlights the gender-inflected nature of collective memory and of intergenerational autobiography. The collective memory of guilt and responsibility seems not to determine the narrative of mothers as it does the narrative of fathers. The children are free to plumb the painful depths of their mothers’ experiences as the narrators of the *Väterliteratur* perhaps were not—whether the mothers tolerated National Socialism, were themselves its victims, or occupied an ambiguous, ambivalent middle ground. Unencumbered by the dictates of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the narrators here attribute widely divergent meanings to National Socialism. But in none of the narratives does that meaning relate to guilt. Instead, National Socialism is read with respect to its impact on the mother’s suffering, either as an exacerbation of it, as a welcome temporary respite from it, or some combination of the two. In this focus, in fact, these narratives also trouble other common distinctions between postwar intergenerational narratives: between those of perpetrators

71. Again, Brandstädter’s *Folgeschäden* is more differentiated. While earlier accounts sometimes include differentiated readings, their overall assessment of the genre often remains monolithic. See, for instance, Schneider, “Fathers and Sons, Retrospectively,” 42.

72. In her development of the concept of postmemory, Marianne Hirsch emphasizes the role that gender plays in shaping subsequent generations’ reconstructions of the past. In “Generation of Postmemory,” she cautions that the danger of postmemory lies in its reliance on the “preformed screen images” that can distort the view of the past and its actors (120). Conceptions of gender contribute substantially to these images. From the perspective of autobiography studies, see Miller, “Representing Others,” 17.
and of victims, and between those of the second and third generations. In addressing this suffering, the narrators explore autonomy and relationality just as intergenerational autobiographies of many kinds do. German generational writing as a whole did not follow a Sonderweg in the postwar period.

I do not claim to define a Mütterliteratur with clearly identifiable boundaries and characteristics; it, like Väterliteratur, appears in many guises. But even as their narratives seek to enact a critical break with the discredited moral language of the past, the narrators in this group of mother books are acutely aware of the influence that language still has on their identities and moral orientation, and they acknowledge the continuing relation with their mothers that this persistent language signals. In Doppelgänger the narrator is astonished to find that his native dialect remains buried within him, but he does not recognize that the beliefs of his childhood persist with it; the narrators of these books know only too well that the two endure together. Second, as their extensive metanarrative reflections and strategies of double voicing show, all of these narrators tell their stories to recognize their mothers’ individual experience and humanity and to make their mothers’ submerged, historically inflected voices audible. In this effort, they explicitly undertake the project that implicitly motivates Storm’s and Raabe’s narrators, and that will dictate Sebald’s. These mother books, then, are paradigmatic examples of the ambivalence of reckoning with the past and of the assumptions about the ethical potential of telling another person’s story that characterize many dynamic observer narratives on both sides of the fiction/nonfiction divide. Their stylized, self-reflective approach to these concerns marks them as products of the linguistic turn, second-wave feminism, and the New Subjectivity. Their concern about the nexus of narrative, identity, ethics, and a reckoning with the past clearly belongs within the tradition of the dynamic observer narrative, however, and their positions along the continuums between life-writing and fiction and between memoir and dynamic narrative help bring the form more sharply into focus.

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73. Sigried Weigel challenges generation-based distinctions in “Generation.” In theorizing postmemory as a condition that may affect the descendants of both perpetrators and victims, Hirsch bridges the divide between these groups. “Generation of Postmemory,” 105–7, 15. In addition, my reading of the mother books suggests that the “new paradigm” of generational literature that has been characterized as emerging in third-generation narratives around the turn of the millennium is not so new. See Byram, “Challenging” (under review). On this new paradigm, see Fuchs, “Generational Memory Contests”; Holdenried, “Zum Aktuellen Familienroman”; Eigler, Gedächtnis und Geschichte.