Stefanie Schäfer

'Just the Two of Us'

Self-Narration and Recognition in the Contemporary American Novel

Ansgar Nünning, Vera Nünning, Norbert Finzsch (Hg.)

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Jena, December 2010 Stefanie Schäfer

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE SELF EXAMINED IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

The unexamined life is not worth living.
— Socrates

The unexamined life may not be worth living.
but the life too closely examined may not be lived at all.
— Mark Twain

With a slight variation by replacing "life" with "self," the present volume takes its cue from Mark Twain's ironic remark about the relationship between living and reflecting, or telling about it. The 'examination' Socrates calls for takes a double meaning that represents the core of my argument: The self can be both subject and object of scrutiny, it[1] can be the examiner as well as the examined. In turn, Twain's dismissal of too intense an examination addresses the paralysis that comes with thinking too much about how to be good, or talking too much about it. The relationship between self and Other, teller and audience, inherent in the notion of 'the self examined' is addressed by narrator Cal in Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* when he tells readers that in his story, it is "[j]ust the two of us" (Eugenides 2003: 319). Cal pinpoints an age-old query of human ontology and epistemology: Who am I to myself, and who am I to the others around me? And, more importantly, how do I tell (about) myself? This study aims to provide an answer to this negotiation between self and Other for a distinct historical and cultural setting: By looking at strategies of self-narration in recent novels from the United States, I discern how identity and the self are narrativized in American literature at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The concepts at the basis of this undertaking — self, narrative, and ethics — are interrelated and illuminate each other in recent contributions to identity theory. The following introduction addresses subjectivity and narration under special consideration of the third, overarching question of ethics. I will trace theories of self and subjectivity in the late postmodernist period and beyond in critical theory and literary works and then elaborate how selves are represented and (re)created in writing and reading narratives, most dominantly in the generic framework of autobiography. As a part of American cultural practice, the latter offers a foil for fictional texts, which generate and uphold the illusion of an autobiographic voice and telling scenario. In doing so, they restate the ethical question of positioning oneself to the teller and the told underlying self-narration. My method of analysis assesses these implications of self-narration and bears witness to this scenario of encountering an Other.

[1] I attribute the term "self" with the pronoun "it" to bear witness of its ungendered quality.

1. There's life in the old dog yet: the self in contemporary culture (and theory)

MySpace, Facebook, Second Life: All of these internet-based interactive platforms invite us to join the social networks and thereby invent ourselves anew within the limits of virtual reality. Doubtlessly, in the day and age of web 2.0, billions of users are familiar with the notion of self-description by means of a toolkit of (technological) properties. The staging of identity in virtual space is a creative undertaking, an unfinished project available for improvement and revision at all times. More importantly, it is designated to make oneself visible and connected to others in a global virtual community. However, what is a daily practice for millions of users represents a bone of contention in academic discussions over definitions of selfhood in cultural and literary theory. At the heart of the problem lies the concept of the subject itself: "Much of the difficulty in understanding the self is that, if it is granted meaning at all, its meaning will of necessity be entirely experiential, entirely subjective" (Olshen 2001: 799).

Olshen's statement points to the same problem Twain alludes to: The self cannot be framed once and for all, because the effort of making it understandable and examining its entirety, warts and all, deprives it of its individual essence. Since Socrates' plea for virtuous self-reflection carved a yardstick for being in the world, models of subjectivity have developed up to its early modern institutionalization in the Western academic canon as Cartesian source of self-knowledge and, literally, as protagonist in the Romantic and Revolutionary periods. In the wake of two world wars and the ensuing collapse of the enlightened *I*, postmodernist[2] epistemological skepticism inquired about the conditions of our (self-)knowledge and came to conclude that they are man-made and based on language.[3]

Theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes thus proclaimed, respectively, the death of the subject and the death of the author. Given postmodernism's "particular decentering mission" (Hutcheon 2002: 175), its theories postulate "a radical critique or an outright rejection of the notion of subjectivity (be it collective or indi-

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[2] Instead of elaborating on post-modernism's various tenets and strands, and, admittedly, for want of a concise definition, I propose to understand it not as ideology or aesthetic, but as 'problematic or socio-linguistic situation in which distinct answers to distinct questions are sought' (cf. Zima 1997: 20, my translation, cf. also Zima 2003). Steven Connor (1989: 10) makes a similar argument: "Instead of asking, what is postmodernism?, we should ask, where, how and why does the discourse of postmodernism flourish?" The following argument takes off from the minimal consensus of postmodernism's strategy of decentering and undercutting normative representation and of its deconstruction of the subject. For an overview, cf. also Hutcheon (2002: 1-28), who stresses that mapping the postmodern is a political undertaking in itself (cf. ibid.: 1).

[3] Postmodernist writing provokes, according to Hutcheon (2002: 18), "an investigation of how we make meaning in culture, how we 'de-doxify' the systems of meaning (and representation) by which we know our culture and ourselves."

vidual)" (Zima 2003: 26), which was often understood to be white and male. Consequently, this subject is either "replaced by [parodic] pseudo-subjects […] or female anti-subjects" (ibid.: 27), or it is "fractured" (Hall 2004: 118), or "decentered in that the concept of the subject as agent, as centre and origin of action, is undermined" (Olshen 2001: 799).[4] Jean-Luc Nancy's ensuing inquiry "Who comes after the subject?" comments on this casualty and initiates the quest for a substitution of the deceased (Nancy 1991).

Before proceeding to more recent developments in subject theory that indicate a reconstruction of the subject in a postmodernist stance, a brief detour will explain my own view of the deconstruction or 'death' of the subject in critical theory. If I haven't commented on my use of the term 'self' so far, it is to indicate that we share an understanding of it in spite of its deconstruction: Readers bring an understanding of subjectivity as world knowledge to the text they work with. Therefore, it is not my intention to terminally define the self in Western contemporary culture, nor can I make claims about its resurrection in post-postmodernist times.[5] Rather, I focus on the fact that, given that readers have an experience of self, they are likely to attribute this to the self they encounter in their reading. As a consequence, the terms 'self' and 'subject' here synonymously indicate the embodied consciousness which authors both actions and thoughts. 'The self' designates a discursive agent and ethical being established in and responding to a social framework that is culturally and historically determined.[6]

But now we have to return to the patient we left etherized on the table of deconstructionist theory: As early as the 1980s, concerns about the "politically compromised identity of the postmodern and its lack of a theory of agency" (Hutcheon 2002: 174) were articulated by feminist and postcolonial critics, who saw their agenda hurtfully mutilated. Suggestions at reconceiving postmodernity include, for instance, Steven Connor's call to "forge new and more inclusive forms of ethical collectivity" (1989: 244). Various disciplines have contributed since to a reformulation of subjectivity that incorporates postmodern language-criticism but affirms the notion of the self as embodied agent, "not only something we are but an object we actively construct and live by" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 19). Many approaches share an interest in the proce-

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4 For an analysis of the transition between the modernist and postmodernist periods and their treatment of subjectivity, see Zima (2001). He shows that, whereas writers of the second half of the nineteenth century established the doubt in the subject's unity at the center of their works, post WWII-writings dismisses the problematic or confines it to the margins of other postmodern themes (cf. ibid.: 1). Straub (1991) provides a critical assessment the debate over identity and non-identity under the impression of postmodernist thought as well as commenting on the terminology of 'identity.'

5 I have examined this theme in greater detail in Kucharzewski, Schowalter and Schäfer (2010).

6 This understanding of subjectivity does not ignore the normative power of subjectivation processes that enable a self to conceive of itself as agent in the first place. I chose this definition to highlight the ongoing process of negotiating selfhood.

dural self who constantly emulates itself in interaction with its cultural surroundings and in response to his Others.[7]

While many scholars link narrative to identity, it is important to note that there are two different understandings for this relationship (cf. Ritivoi 2008: 231): The first one conceives of narrative as an ordering structure imposed upon the chaos of experience, the second one sees narrative as expression of an already narratively ordered experience. Narrative psychologist Jerome Bruner adheres to the first position, whereas philosopher Paul Ricoeur assigns an ontological value to narrative (cf. Vandevelde 2008: 141). In order to sketch out a framework of analysis for reading fictional self-narration, both tenets from narrative psychology and phenomenology are instrumental. Since the focus of my own research lies in the narrative strategies employed in putting forth one's story, I suggest to bypass this contingency by narrowing this question down to the cultural specifics of self-narration. It is crucial here that, in keeping with the understanding of identity as process, concepts of a narrative identity have been devised.

The first among these relevant in my own model percolated in narrative psychology as a response to the aforementioned deconstruction of the self, a move which threatened the entire discipline. Paul John Eakin and Jerome Bruner have recast identity as constantly in the making:

> Im Gegensatz zu anderen Zeiten versorgt die gegenwärtige westliche Kultur ihre Angehörigen nicht mit einer kohärenten und stabilen Definition des Selbst. Stattdessen betrachtet sie das Selbst als eine Fertigkeit, welche im alltäglichen sozialen Leben erworben werden muss. Die Bildung des Selbst braucht Zeit, sie ist ein Entwicklungsprozess. (Polkinghorne 1998: 33)

Eakin, who conceives of narrative as "an integral part of a primary mode of identity experience" (1999: 137), stresses the necessity of stories in identity formation: "Despite the postmodern appetite for all things post, after, and beyond, […] I see no signs of anyone anywhere unendowed with a narratively constituted identity" (ibid.: 139).

Narrative identity is also used by philosopher Paul Ricoeur, whose theory seminally relates subjectivity, narrative and ethics in a hermeneutics of self.[8] For Ricoeur, narrative represents not merely a rendering of a non-narrative structure, but an "onto-

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[7] As a case in point, Charles Taylor's seminal work *Sources of the Self* (1989) explores the connection between the self and morality and depicts the self as established in "webs of interlocution": "I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding" (Taylor 1989: 36). Taylor's interlocutive model is anchored in the Western tradition of subjectivity and draws from speech act theory to propose a "more agential self than that configured and bequeathed by the whole post-structuralist tradition" (Parker 2004: 138).

[8] Shoemaker (2008: n. p.) describes the relationship between narrative, self, and ethics in Ricoeur's theory: "[N]arratives show that from the standpoint of ethics there is a kind of primacy of the other-than-self over the self. Ethically considered, the narrative unity of a life is made up of the moments of its responsiveness or failure to respond to others."