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**FROM SELF TO CHARACTER:  
NARRATION, ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND THEATRICALITY**

A Dissertation in

Philosophy

by

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## *Abstract*

This is a dissertation on the relation between narrative and selfhood. I begin by defining a philosophical tradition out of which the narrative conception of self emerges. This tradition of thinking is characterized by the unity and coherency of the self. I then go on to define the narrative conception of the self. However, I object to the narrative conception of the self on the grounds that it is unable to fix on what the content of our self-narrative should be.

I introduce a concept that has so far been left out of discussions of narrative and selfhood, Stanley Cavell's concept of acknowledgment. I argue that selfhood requires that we acknowledge who we are. One of the ways in which we can acknowledge who we are, as I illustrate through the use of the example of Hal from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, is through theatricalizing ourselves. This involves being beheld by an audience and turning ourselves into a character.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I argue that we can theatricalize ourselves and acknowledge ourselves through writing a literary narrative based on our lives. In a literary narrative we create a character out of ourselves and present ourselves to an audience. Therefore, I argue, the role of narrative plays in selfhood is not to define who we are but to serve as a means of acknowledging ourselves, which is requisite for selfhood.

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## ***Introduction***

This is a dissertation on the role that narrative can play in selfhood. I will argue, contra the narrative conception of self, that the role of a self-narrative is not to constitute who a person is but to acknowledge who he or she is. My intention is to shift the debate on the relationship between narrative and selfhood. In part this requires thinking more deeply about the nature of narrative. In part it involves the introduction of a concept that has so far been left out of reflections on narrative and selfhood, namely acknowledgment, into those discussions.

My chief purpose in this introduction is to define my argument by saying what I mean by the self. There are several uses of this term in the literature on the subject; the version of the self that interests me in this dissertation is the self in terms of the sense we have of ourselves. A description by Harry Frankfurt articulates very well what I mean by a self, though for him it elucidates another term—‘person.’ He says that the ‘criteria for being a person’ are ‘designed to capture those attributes which are the subject of our most human concern with ourselves and the source of what we regard as most important and most problematical in our lives.’<sup>1</sup> So I am speaking of the self as representative of who we are in terms of what we have done, what we have felt and thought and what has happened to us.

In light of this, we might be tempted to substitute the term ‘self-image’ in place of the more ambiguous ‘sense of ourselves.’ Yet while the term does seem to describe what I am speaking about in this dissertation I am anxious to avoid it.<sup>2</sup> There is something paradoxical about speaking of a self-*image* when the topic under discussion is narrative and the narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 12.

<sup>2</sup> David Velleman employs this term for instance. See J. David Velleman, *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.



conception of self. The visual and literary term do not sit well together. Another way of putting this understanding of the term ‘self’ is to speak in terms of our identity, which is, as Marya Schechtman notes, a question of how we characterize ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

Velleman argues that this conception of the self is distinct from the sense of self invoked in discussions of what makes someone an autonomous agent, that is, which actions are attributable to an individual and which are not her responsibility.<sup>4</sup> I agree that, strictly speaking, the two notions of the self are different, and I am not seeking to investigate autonomy here. However, there is an obvious and significant overlap between the questions of who I am on the one hand and what actions are attributable to me on the other. My sense of who I am will involve distinguishing between the thoughts, feelings and actions that are attributable to me and those that are not my responsibility. Moreover, my attempts to disown some actions by disclaiming responsibility for them may offer insight into who I am.

In light of Schechtman’s work, we should note another alternative use of the term ‘self.’ This is what we might call, to use Schechtman’s language, the self conceived in terms of ‘reidentification.’<sup>5</sup> Velleman calls this the issue of ‘self-sameness’ and defines it as ‘the relation that connects a person to his past and future selves, as they are called.’<sup>6</sup> Problems surrounding this notion of the self involve what makes me the same person now as I was when I was a child and what will make me the same person in the future as I am now. Key features of my character, as well as my actual physical makeup, have changed and will continue to do so. What is it that

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<sup>3</sup> Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Velleman, *Self to Self*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Velleman, *Self to Self*, 5.

makes me the same person throughout my life? It is not my intention to explore this question here.

However, there is also some overlap between this notion of the self and the one I am interested in. This is because answering the question of who someone is necessarily involves invoking what has happened to them in the past and perhaps what their projects and life goals amount to.

Therefore any reflection on the sense of ourselves seems at least to presuppose that I am the same person throughout my whole life. Yet given the specific concerns in my dissertation I will not be seeking to give an account of reidentification.

Thus I have limited the notion of the self that will be under consideration here. But there is another feature of this dissertation that warrants mention. This is the prominence I will give to works of art and literature, literary theory, and art and literary criticism. The inclusion of these multiple resources will be crucial to my arguments. First, reference to literary theory and criticism is essential to better understanding narrative. Second, literary examples are vital to illustrating these ideas about narrative. Third, the development of two of the philosophical concepts in this dissertation, acknowledgment and theatricality, straddles philosophical and literary discussion. Fourth, literary works can provide the kind of nuanced examples that help in making philosophical arguments. In this dissertation, the work in question will be William Shakespeare's *Henriad*.

This dissertation has eight chapters. In the first chapter I will provide background to the narrative conception of the self. I will examine four accounts of the self, those of Plato, René Descartes, Harry Frankfurt and Christine Korsgaard. In this chapter I will draw out two themes from these approaches to the self, which will also characterize the narrative conception of the self. These

features are narrative and coherency. I will say how these elements are developed in each account under discussion.

In the second chapter I will turn to the narrative conception of the self. This chapter will be largely exegetical. I will present the views of authors who argue in favor of the narrative conception of self. I will also defend the narrative conception against some objections leveled against it, but only in order to better understand this conception of the self. I will define the narrative view as follows. On the narrative view, the self is constructed and is unified and coherent. Though the self is narratively structured, it remains tied to a social context and a language and is subject to luck or fate. The self is diachronic and historical, and is therefore a gathering together of past experiences and a plausible candidate for determining the course of future action in the specific sense that the desire for a coherent self-narrative may take on normative force.

In the third chapter I will present a significant objection to the narrative conception of self. This is that there is no answer to the question of what belongs in a self-narrative and what should be excluded from it. There is no primitive narrative, and more than one narrative might be composed about the same life. This is a problem because if my self constitutes me then there must be a definitive answer as to what belongs in the self and what does not. I will take this objection as demanding reconsideration of the role that narrative plays in selfhood.

In the fourth chapter, I will give an account of what I mean by narrative. One of the weaknesses of the narrative conception of self is that there is no clear definition of what is meant by narrativity. In order that my account not fall prey to the same objection, and to aid discussion in later chapters, I will set down the necessary features of narrative. The five features are events and

existents, the way in which the story is told, beginnings and endings, temporality and thematic unity. I will describe each of these features in detail.

In the fifth chapter, I will explore a central conceptual resource. This is Stanley Cavell's concept of acknowledgment. First, I give an exegesis of this concept as it arises in Cavell's work. I will then go on to argue that we can go beyond Cavell in our understanding of acknowledgment: we can acknowledge ourselves. This notion of self-acknowledgment is an extension of Cavell's understanding of the concept of acknowledgment, though he alludes to it briefly in his work. Then I will argue that self-acknowledgment is required for selfhood. This is the first step in rethinking the role of narrative in selfhood.

In the sixth chapter I will perform two tasks. First, I will justify my discussion of Shakespeare's *Henriad* in the seventh chapter. I will argue that the virtue of literature from a philosophical perspective is to eloquently present us with examples of possible ways of life. This will be the use I make of the *Henriad*. Second, I will introduce a further conceptual resource connected with acknowledgment, namely the concept of theatricality. This concept occurs in the work of both Cavell and the art critic Michael Fried. I will argue that just as we are able to acknowledge ourselves we are able to theatricalize ourselves. This notion of self-theatricalization, and its relation to self-acknowledgment, is the second step in rethinking the role of narrative in selfhood.

In the seventh chapter I will discuss Shakespeare's tetralogy, the *Henriad*. I will argue that Hal is an example of a literary character who lives a theatrical life. There are two elements to his self-theatricalization, soliciting an audience and turning himself into a character. I will argue that Hal at first seeks out theatricality, but becomes progressively more disenchanted with it throughout

the *Henriad*. He seeks to escape the loneliness that arises from a purely theatrical life in the final scene of *Henry V* through his marriage to Katherine of France.

In the eighth and final chapter I will draw together the threads of this argument. I will argue that in order to acknowledge ourselves we need not live theatrically. Rather we can theatricalize ourselves in literary form. This occurs through the writing of literary autobiographies and autobiographical novels. In these genres of writing we emulate Hal: we present ourselves to an audience and turn ourselves into a character. The role of narrative in selfhood is therefore to serve as a means for us to acknowledge ourselves and thereby achieve selfhood.

The purpose of this dissertation is not to offer a theory of the self. In the first two chapters I will consider philosophical theories of the self in the form of the work of Plato, Descartes, Frankfurt and Korsgaard. I will also look at the narrative account of the self, which holds that a person's narrative is constitutive of who he or she is. However, I introduce these topics, first, to give an account of existing philosophical approaches to selfhood, and, second, to give an account of a prominent way in which philosophy understands the relation between narrative and the self.

My project in this dissertation is very different from these approaches. I am concerned with the role that narrative can play in selfhood. I will argue that a crucial element of being a self is that we respond to the claim that our lives make on us by acknowledging what we have done, felt, thought and suffered. I will then go on to argue that narrating our lives is one way of acknowledging them. And by the end of this dissertation, I will have moved beyond this general claim to explore exactly how this occurs. In writing a self-narrative, a person theatricalizes herself by presenting herself to an audience and turning herself into a character.

As for what someone needs to acknowledge in order to be a self, this can be nothing less than the content of her life. However, by this I mean not the various causal interactions that we may have—for instance, the air molecules that strike me as I walk to a lecture—but the material that represents concerns that are essentially human. To suggest that it could be anything other than these peculiarly human concerns is to overlook the origins of acknowledgment in discussions about skepticism in the work of Cavell. To say that I need to acknowledge, for example, causal interactions, would be to say that such interactions are or ought to be significant to who I am. Yet to take things this way seems to be a case of failing to see a human being as a human being.<sup>7</sup> With respect to the acknowledgment of others this would be failing to recognize the irony in, say, the contrast between the immensity of a man’s spirit when he was alive and the smallness of his body after he is dead:

For worms, brave Percy. Fare thee well, great heart!

Ill-weaved ambition, how much art thou shrunk!

When that this body did contain a spirit,

A kingdom for it was too small a bond,

But now two paces of the vilest earth

Is room enough. (*IHV* 5.4.87-92)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For Cavell’s discussion of the idea of seeing a human being as a human being see Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 373-83

<sup>8</sup> All references to plays by Shakespeare in this dissertation will be to the *Riverside* text and will be given in the text in parentheses at the end of the sentence. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Toibin eds., *The Riverside Shakespeare, Vol. 1* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

With respect to self-acknowledgment, it is to turn my life into a thing, an object, or an artifact, whereas it is really a creation and burden. Part of acknowledgment just seems to be knowing what needs to be acknowledged and what does not.

But what in particular do I mean by ‘human concerns?’ So far as discussions of acknowledgment go, answering this question really amounts to saying which elements of our lives make a claim on us as human beings. I would put these into four categories: (1) the relationships we have developed with friends, family and loved ones; (2) actions we have taken that have led to pain and pleasure, whether physical and psychic, both for ourselves and others; (3) events that have befallen us that have led to pain and pleasure—again whether physical or psychic—both for ourselves and others; (4) thoughts, passions, projects and desires that have shaped our lives in recognizable ways, even if they may be private in many cases. And again, the reason that these things rather than others can be said to make a claim on us is that they are characteristically human, the aspects through which we judge a life happy or unhappy, lived well or badly. They are the elements that, if we become oblivious to them, mean that we forget not only who we are but what we are, that is, human beings.

However, the goal of this dissertation is not simply to say that acknowledgment is necessary for selfhood, but to say that self-narrative is a way in which we can acknowledge ourselves. In order to make this claim, I will speak about two further conceptions in the closing chapters of this dissertation. First, I will argue that theatricality is a way we can achieve self-acknowledgment. Second, I will argue that we can theatricalize ourselves not by living our lives but by using them as the material out of which we build a literary character. This dissertation will therefore conclude with close attention to the creation of autobiographies and autobiographical novels, the point being to show the role that these types of writing can play when it comes to selfhood.

## ***Chapter 1 Background to the Narrative Self: Unity and Coherency***

### *1.1 Introduction*

In this chapter I will lay the groundwork for my discussion of the narrative conception of the self by looking at its two central attributes, unity and coherency, and the way they emerge in four philosophical accounts of the self. The first two will be from the history of philosophy—the accounts of Plato and Descartes. The second two will be contemporary—the views of Harry Frankfurt and Christine Korsgaard. The purpose of this discussion is to put my examination of the narrative self in context, such that it will be clear how the narrative self displays continuity with respect to certain dominant historical and contemporary accounts of the self.

Because if, as we will see in the next chapter, unity and coherency are core features of the narrative conception, it would be naïve to imagine that there is no reason behind this. The narrative conception must be responding to certain preconceptions about selfhood that have their basis in history and human nature. In this chapter I want to consider two figures from that history. But since the narrative conception is not the only contemporary account that foregrounds these elements of selfhood, I also intend to consider two conceptions of the self that have developed contemporaneously with the narrative conception and which reflect the same thematic concerns.

Consequently, I take the accounts of the self I have chosen here to be generally representative of a tradition of thinking about the self, one concerned with unity and coherency. The Platonic and Cartesian accounts do much of the work in establishing this tradition. Meanwhile, Frankfurt and Korsgaard represent two of the dominant contemporary voices in thinking about selfhood.



Obviously both Frankfurt and Korsgaard are influenced by Plato and Descartes, but their work is rich and unique and merits standing alongside that of their philosophical forbears.<sup>9</sup>

But a feature of these accounts is that the unity of the self is not given but something that is achieved. And this achievement often comes not without a struggle. This is most obviously the case in Plato, particularly in the *Phaedrus*, wherein one part of the soul is portrayed as a horse fighting against the rule of its driver, but it is also true elsewhere. For example, in Korsgaard's account we find a clear sense of the self being pulled into pieces when confronted with a choice, and needing to seal itself back together by making a decision.

This chapter will be divided into four parts. In each section I will deal with a single author, showing how unity and coherency are characteristic features of their account of the self. By the conclusion of this chapter I will have shown how unity and coherency emerge in key accounts of the self, which will serve as the foundation for seeing how these same characteristics can be found in the narrative conception.

## 1.2 Plato

The contribution Plato makes to thinking about the self is to be found in his writings on the soul. I will therefore begin this section by briefly describing the separation of the soul from the body in Plato's early work, the *Phaedo*. Here we get an initial reference to the soul's being well-ordered, the crux of the coherency of the Platonic soul and the key to its unity. Following this, I will look at the Platonic account of the soul to be found in the later dialogues *Phaedrus* and

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<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Frankfurt's work on selfhood shows the influence of Aristotle, while Korsgaard draws extensively on Aristotle, Plato and Kant in *Self-Constitution*.

*Republic*. It is in this part of my reflection that the significance of unity and coherency to Plato's view of the self will become evident.

The separation of soul from body in the *Phaedo* emerges in the context of a discussion of why the prospect of being executed inspires no resentment in Socrates. The reason Socrates gives for his resoluteness is the separation of the soul from the body and the immortality of the former. He develops an argument for this position in the *Phaedo*. As he puts it towards the end of the dialogue:

It is right to think then, gentlemen, that if the soul is immortal, it requires our care not only for the time we call our life, but for the sake of all time, and that one is in terrible danger if one does not give it that care. If death were an escape from everything, it would be a great boon to the wicked to get rid of the body and their wickedness together with their soul.

Now that the soul appears to be immortal, there is no escape from evil or salvation for it except by becoming as good and wise as possible.<sup>10</sup>

Both the separateness of the soul from the body and the immortality of the soul are discussed in this quotation. Death is not the termination of all life, but only the point at which the soul leaves the body. The immortality of the soul makes caring for it by becoming good and wise all the more necessary.

Goodness and wisdom in the Platonic account are associated with the soul's being well-ordered. Plato has Socrates describe the way in which soul separates from body on death: 'The well-ordered and wise soul follows [its] guide and is not without familiarity with its surroundings, but

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<sup>10</sup> Plato, 'Phaedo,' trans. G.M.A. Grube in *Plato: Complete Works* ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 107c-d.

the soul that is passionately attached to the body, as I said before, hovers around it and the visible world for a long time, struggling and suffering much until it is led away by force and with difficulty by its appointed spirit.<sup>11</sup> This excerpt contrasts the ease of the good soul's departure from the earth and the difficulty with which the bad soul makes its departure. But of more interest given my concerns in this chapter is that goodness and wisdom are connected with a particular arrangement of the soul, even if it is not clear how we should conceive of the 'well-ordered' soul.

For the beginnings of an answer we need to look at another work, the *Phaedrus*. This dialogue contains an exchange of speeches on the topic of love, and a discussion of rhetoric and writing. The reflections on the appropriate ordering of the soul are communicated through the famous metaphor of the chariot and horses. Plato has Socrates use this metaphor to give an account of the nature of the soul. He says, 'Let us liken the soul to the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer. The gods have horses and charioteers that are themselves all good and come from good stock besides, while everyone else has a mixture. To begin with, our driver is in charge of a pair of horses; second, one of his horses is beautiful and good and from stock of the same sort, while the other is the opposite and has the opposite sort of bloodline.'<sup>12</sup> Plato uses the metaphor of a chariot team and its driver to characterize the makeup of the soul. The soul possesses a good element and a bad element, represented by the two types of horses, and a ruling element represented by driver who must control the bad element, which is liable to upset the whole team. To continue with Plato's analogy: 'The heaviness of the bad horse drags its charioteer toward the earth and weighs him down if he has failed to train it well, and this causes

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<sup>11</sup> Plato, 'Phaedo,' 108a-b.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, 'Phaedrus,' trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 246a-b.

the most extreme toil and struggle that the soul will face.’<sup>13</sup> The bad element in the soul, if left unmastered, is responsible for the downfall of the whole.

In light of these excerpts from the *Phaedrus* we get some sense of what a soul’s being well-ordered consists in. The chariot that represents the soul is a unity of distinct parts, horses and charioteer. While one of the horses is ‘a lover of honor with modesty and self-control’ the other is ‘companion to wild boasts and indecency’ and must be subordinated to the rule of the charioteer.<sup>14</sup> For the chariot to fly a straight path requires that the instructions and goading of the charioteer, who is himself less than resolute, bring the unruly horse into line.<sup>15</sup> Unpacking the analogy, for the soul to be well-ordered requires the suppression of the undisciplined, willful element by the appropriate ruling aspect.<sup>16</sup>

But this account of the well-ordered soul is metaphorical and still ambiguous. A clearer account of the well-ordered soul is to be found in the *Republic*. It is here that we find the model of the tripartite soul. The division into parts is made along the following lines. First and second are the reasoning and desiring parts. ‘We’ll call the part of the soul with which [the soul] calculates the rational part and the part with which it lusts, hungers, thirsts and gets excited by other appetites the irrational, appetitive part, companion of certain indulgences and pleasures.’<sup>17</sup> The third part of the soul is the spirited element, which is ‘by nature the helper of the rational part, provided

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<sup>13</sup> Plato, ‘Phaedrus,’ 247b.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, ‘Phaedrus,’ 253d-e.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, ‘Phaedrus,’ 254b. G.R.F. Ferrari notes of the charioteer that his ‘gesture of mastery seems more like a compulsive reaction of aversion.’ G.R.F. Ferrari, ‘The Struggle in the Soul: Plato, *Phaedrus*, 253c7-255a1,’ *Ancient Philosophy* 5 (1985): 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ferrari notes that we should not take the charioteer as straightforwardly a rational element. Both the good and bad horse reason instrumentally in order to get what they want. The charioteer is different in that he reasons about what he ought to want, about the nature of the good. Ferrari, ‘The Struggle in the Soul,’ 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> Plato, ‘Republic,’ trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 439d.

that it hasn't been corrupted by a bad upbringing.'<sup>18</sup> This final part of the soul is the basis of courage. 'It preserves through pains and pleasures the declarations of reason about what is to be feared and what isn't.'<sup>19</sup>

Thus Plato distinguishes the three parts of the soul. And the well-ordered soul is the one in which the rational element is superior. Plato has Socrates say that a person is called wise, 'Because of that small part of himself that rules in him and makes those declarations and has within it the knowledge of what is advantageous for each part and for the whole soul, which is the community of all three parts.'<sup>20</sup> And an answer as to which part of the soul this ruling element is given immediately afterwards: 'Isn't [a person] moderate because of the friendly and harmonious relations between these same parts, namely when the ruler and the ruled believe in common that the rational part should rule and don't engage in civil war against it?'<sup>21</sup> So the rational element is to rule in the 'community' of the soul.

Which is not to say that reason takes over the functioning of the soul's other elements. The rational part should never do the work of the spirited part any more than the spirited should the rational. As Plato has Socrates put it, 'One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other. He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale—high, low and middle.'<sup>22</sup> So the superiority of the rational element does not amount to reason forcing itself into the spheres that are proper to the other parts. Rather, the appetitive and spirited

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<sup>18</sup> Plato, 'Republic,' 441a.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, 'Republic,' 442c.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, 'Republic,' 442c.

<sup>21</sup> Plato, 'Republic,' 442c-d.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, 'Republic,' 443d.

elements relent and allow the rational element to do its work. The well-ordered soul is not simply a matter of the rule of reason, but of each part of the soul doing the work that is proper to it and no more. 'It is the proper functioning of the parts of the soul that makes these parts and the activities they motivate just, and which makes the whole soul and the person just.'<sup>23</sup> At the heart of the tripartite account of the soul is the fact that, as Jonathan Lear notes, the three parts of the soul, which in the beginning seem irrevocably opposed, need not always be at odds with each other.<sup>24</sup>

How then do unity and coherency emerge in Plato's account of the self? The unity of the soul consists in the fact that while the soul is made up of separate parts, each of these parts are in relation to each other. This emerges especially in the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*. Each part of the soul is bound to the other; the question is whether their interactions are harmonious or acrimonious. The appropriate relationship of the parts of the soul has the rational element as master. And it is this sense of harmony and of being well-ordered that constitutes coherence in the Platonic account of the self. As Norbert Blössner puts it, 'Rule by the appropriate element guarantees a balance among interests and creates harmonious unity in city or in soul.'<sup>25</sup> The self is coherent insofar as each part of the soul has its own function. In the good, wise soul reason will function unmolested, but each element will continue to do the work appropriate to it, with no part assuming the role of any other.

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<sup>23</sup> Nicholas D. Smith, 'Plato's Analogy of Soul and State,' in *Essays on Plato's Psychology*, ed. Ellen Wagner (Boston: Lexington Books, 2001), 132.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Lear, 'Inside and Outside the *Republic*,' in *Essays on Plato's Psychology*, ed. Ellen Wagner (Boston: Lexington Books, 2001), 181.

<sup>25</sup> Norbert Blössner, 'The City-Soul Analogy,' trans. G.R.F. Ferrari in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G.R.F. Ferrari (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 353.

### 1.3 Descartes

Having looked at the Platonic account of the self and considered how unity and coherence are central features of it, I will now do the same for the Cartesian self. Descartes expresses his sense of who he is most clearly in the *Meditations* and *Discourse on Method*. I will therefore focus on this text. Towards the end of this section I will briefly refer to the work of Martial Gueroult on Descartes' use of the order of reasons and Deborah Brown on the relation between mind and body in Descartes. This will allow us to better understand unity and coherence in Descartes' conception of the self.

In the Second Meditation, Descartes seeks the fundamental thing that constitutes him. He rejects the Aristotelian conception of the human being, 'a rational animal' as the locus of his identity. Likewise, he dismisses the notion that his body might constitute him as suspect under the method of hyperbolic doubt he applies in his reflections.<sup>26</sup> But the elimination of the body leaves him only with thought as the essence of his existence: 'I am therefore precisely nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason... Yet I am a true thing and am truly existing; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: a thinking thing.'<sup>27</sup> Therefore, in Meditation II, Descartes conceives of himself as a thinking, rather than an extended, thing. As for what a thinking thing is, Descartes describes it as, 'A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses.'<sup>28</sup>

Though he may have a physical life, as the proof of God's existence and the conclusion that this God is good and not a deceiver allows him to determine, Descartes holds that he is in essence a

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<sup>26</sup> René Descartes, 'Meditations,' Meditation II, in René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 64-65.

<sup>27</sup> Descartes, 'Meditations,' Meditation II, 65.

<sup>28</sup> Descartes, 'Meditations,' Meditation II, 66.

non-physical intellect. Descartes emphasizes this in the Third Meditation when he affirms that by virtue of his ability to clearly and distinctly conceive of a body that is not a thinking thing, the mind is separable from the body: ‘Although perhaps...I have a body that is very closely joined to me, nevertheless, because on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am merely a thinking thing and not an extended thing, and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.’<sup>29</sup> The mind is separate from the body because it is possible to clearly and distinctly conceive of each apart from the other. Moreover, Descartes argues that he can be certain concerning his knowledge of his own mind, because there is nothing that can be perceived more distinctly and clearly by him than this. Following his famous discussion of the piece of wax at the end of the Second Meditations, he says, ‘Since I now know that even bodies are not, properly speaking, perceived by the senses or by the faculty of imagination, but by the intellect alone, and that they are not perceived through their being touched or seen, but only through their being understood, I manifestly know that nothing can be perceived more easily and more evidently than my own mind.’<sup>30</sup> Perception of his own mind is not vulnerable to the errors of the senses. So not only does Descartes argue he is his mind, but also that it is his mind that he is able to know best.

However, we cannot entirely exclude the body from reflection on Descartes’ account of the self. Though the self is clearly mental, in much the same way as it was for Plato, on the Cartesian account the relation between mind and body is much more intimate. This is made evident an analogy Descartes employs in the Sixth Meditation. He compares the mind-body relation to a sailor in a ship: ‘By means of these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, nature also

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<sup>29</sup> Descartes, ‘Meditations,’ Meditation VI, 96.

<sup>30</sup> Descartes, ‘Meditations,’ Meditation II, 69.



teaches not merely that I am present to my body in the way a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am most tightly joined and, so to speak, comingled with it, so much so that I and the body constitute one single thing.<sup>31</sup> It is by virtue of this ‘comingling’ of mind with body that the sensations of pain, hunger, and thirst are experienced in the way that they are. If it were not the case that I were mixed in with my body: ‘Then I, who am only a thinking thing, would not sense pain when the body is injured, rather, I would perceive the wound by means of the pure intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight whether anything in his ship is broken.’<sup>32</sup> Again, while I am my mind, which on Descartes’ view we can hold to be distinct from my body on the grounds that I can form a clear and distinct conception of it, my mind and my body are also one single thing, two components tightly joined.

Referring to Martial Gueroult’s work on Descartes helps to clarify this somewhat opaque conception of the relation between mind and body. Gueroult notes that in the Sixth Meditation Descartes argues in favor of the ‘real distinction’ of the body and the soul as well as establishing the ‘substantial union’ of the soul and the body when perceived through the imagination and the senses.<sup>33</sup> An example Gueroult provides makes apparent the way in which these two seemingly contradictory statements can both be true. He argues that, ‘When [my body] is wounded, or when it needs to eat or drink, I do not learn this clearly and distinctly as from the outside by means of the understanding it, but know it confusedly...from the inside, by means of my pain, my thirst, or my hunger. Whatever happens to my body, I do not perceive it merely as an accident that modifies it, but I encounter it at the same time as a modification of *myself*—in this case, *my* body

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<sup>31</sup> Descartes, ‘Meditations,’ Meditation VI, 98.

<sup>32</sup> Descartes, ‘Meditations,’ Meditation VI, 98.

<sup>33</sup> Martial Gueroult, *Descartes’ Philosophy as Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons: II The Soul and the Body*, trans. Roger Ariew and Alan Donagan (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985), 3-4.

and *my* soul are one.’<sup>34</sup> So, for Gueroult, the close connection between soul and body that emerges in Descartes’ account is best understood as a unity produced when my body is modified. This affects the soul and the two are unified in that instance. But note that this is only the case when body and mind are perceived through the dull imagination and senses. When contemplated through the intellect, the mind and body are correctly understood as distinct.

But this leaves us with the question of how to think of the Cartesian self. On the one hand, Descartes’ answer to the question of who he is is always ‘a thinking thing.’ He identifies himself with his mind rather than his body. And in the singular, irreducible nature of the mind we do see unity emerge. ‘The human mind is not...composed of any accidents, but is a pure substance.’<sup>35</sup>

So this is one answer to the question of where the unity of the self emerges in Descartes. As Udo Thiel puts things: ‘Descartes implicitly distinguishes the notion of human being of person which includes corporeality and the notion of the (essential) self, “I” or soul, as something that is not linked to a body.’<sup>36</sup> Unity in the self might then amount to the irreducibility of soul as substance.

However, Thiel’s distinction between self and person is his and is not consistently applied in the literature on Descartes. We have already noted the view of Gueroult, which implies a unity of body and soul. And Deborah J. Brown, in considering the concept of the self in Descartes, explicitly adopts this position. She asks, ‘What should we say about the self in Cartesian philosophy? It is generally identified with a mind, the *res cogitans*, but the Sixth Meditation brings us back to ourselves as conscious of mind and body, at least for the duration of this life.

What happens to the self is not that it comes to see that it “has” a body, as Ryle famously

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<sup>34</sup> Gueroult, *Descartes’ Philosophy*, 105.

<sup>35</sup> Descartes, ‘Meditations,’ Synopsis, 55.

<sup>36</sup> Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 37.

supposed, but that it *is* a body as well as a mind.<sup>37</sup> So we might also apply the term self to the body and the soul together. This runs counter to the prevailing view of the Cartesian self as something ‘insubstantial’ and as ‘pure mind.’<sup>38</sup>

It seems we might understand the Cartesian self as either the mind alone or the association of mind and body. But then the question becomes whether, if the Cartesian self is the mind and body, this can be described as a unity. Brown makes clear that for Descartes, the ‘whole self’ cannot be grasped through direct introspection.<sup>39</sup> In the end, it comes down to the passions, especially love: ‘Love explains why it is that we form various kinds of non-substantial (but no less real for that) unities...and why it is, therefore, that what others think about us matters and contributes to our forming particular conceptions of ourselves as whole persons.’<sup>40</sup> Thus, the passions are responsible for the unity of the self on this interpretation of the Cartesian account. The love of others is essential for our self conception and our existence as a unified self.

As for the coherence of the self on the Cartesian account, this emerges through reason and the employment of the correct method. While at first glance this appears analogous to the Platonic account of the soul, insofar as there, as in the *Meditations*, reason has privileged status, the ordered makeup of the soul is less a matter of harmony on the Cartesian view than of epistemology. Reason alone is capable of distinguishing true opinions from false ones, which is the basis for the project of self-knowledge that unfolds in the meditations. The senses and, we might add, the passions, are at best capable of returning confused impressions, rather than the clear and distinct ideas required for coherence. But when it comes to the self as a unity of soul

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<sup>37</sup> Deborah J. Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 154. Brown is referring to comments by Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of the Mind* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949).

<sup>38</sup> Jerome David Levin, *Theories of the Self* (Washington: Hemisphere Publishing Group, 1992), 13.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 155.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, 159.

and body, we should note that by the time of the Sixth Meditation we have learned that the senses can be trusted because the goodness of God guarantees that they are not deceiving us.

But the so-called order of reasons is also central to coherence in the Cartesian account of the self, the system in which ‘everything is so arranged that no truth can be taken away without the soul collapsing.’<sup>41</sup> The coherence of the soul that reason grants is hostage to applying it correctly.

This order of reasons emerges in the *Meditations* themselves. The clear and distinct conception of the self that Descartes forms can only be reached through the particular arrangement of the argument in the text. The method of hyperbolic doubt must be applied to pre-existing beliefs in order to eliminate potentially erroneous ideas. The certainties of the *cogito* and the existence of God must underpin the account given in the later *Meditations* or else its certainty will remain suspect. Thus, reason is not a matter of clarity and distinctness alone, but a question of the order in which reflections arise.

#### *1.4 Frankfurt*

I have now described two accounts of the self from the history of philosophy in which unity and coherence feature substantially. I now want to turn to two contemporary accounts of the self in order to show that these remain prominent features in modern thinking on this subject. The two under examination will be those of Harry Frankfurt and Christine Korsgaard. I have most to say about Frankfurt. This is not simply due to the complexity of his account, but because I will be dealing with issues he raises later in this dissertation when I critique the narrative conception of self.

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<sup>41</sup> Martial Gueroult, *Descartes' Philosophy as Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons: I The Soul and God*, trans. Roger Ariew and Alan Donagan (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), 5.

Frankfurt's account of the self originates out of a discussion of actions, so I will begin there. He argues that we may be either *active* or *passive* when it comes to our actions. In the realm of human behavior there are acts in which 'the higher faculties of human beings come into play' (the active) and then there are mere bodily happenings, in which such faculties are not involved (the passive).<sup>42</sup> However, we need not restrict this distinction between the active and the passive to bodily actions: 'The contrast between those movements of a person's body that are mere happenings in his history, and those that are his own activities, leads not only away from human life, into the lower realms of creation. It also leads, in virtue of its analogues, in the psychological domain, into the center of our experience of ourselves.'<sup>43</sup> Here, Frankfurt suggests that the distinction between the active and passive can be applied to our experience of who we are. It is this side of the distinction between activity and passivity that will interest me in this chapter.

Frankfurt suggests that Aristotle's distinction between those events whose moving principle is inside a thing and those whose principle lies outside it is at the root of the distinction between the active and the passive. He recasts the task of separating the active and the passive as that of breaking apart the internal and the external. As Joseph Raz notes, Frankfurt uses the active/passive distinction interchangeably with the internal/external distinction.<sup>44</sup> The distinction between internal and external is the one I will employ from now on. It should be understood to be equivalent to the distinction between the active and the passive.

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<sup>42</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 58.

<sup>43</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Raz and David-Hillel Ruben, 'The Active and the Passive,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 71 (1997): 213.

Frankfurt's discussion centers on the passions. 'Among our passions,' he says, 'there are some whose moving principles are within ourselves and others whose moving principles are external to us.'<sup>45</sup> He argues that it is not obvious that a human desire must belong to a person; some desires do not belong to anyone. In this respect, the passions can resemble a bodily action such as one person's jolting another by accident as the car in which they are traveling round a bend. An individual may be passive with respect to a passion they experience, and need not always be active towards it.<sup>46</sup> The action may be external to them.

The distinction between the internal and the external when it comes to our sense of who we are can be recast in another way. Frankfurt notes that, 'We think it correct to attribute to a person, in the strict sense, only some of the events in the history of his body. The others—those with respect to which he is passive—have their moving principles outside him, *and we do not identify him with these events*. Certain events in the history of a person's mind, likewise, have their moving principles outside of him. He is passive with respect to them, and they are likewise not to be attributed to him.'<sup>47</sup> A good example would be someone who has been drugged without his knowing it. Suppose that the drug produces an unabating thirst. Under the influence of the drug, the person will seek to drink all the water he can. But the only reason he does so is because someone has slipped him the drug. The drug is the moving principle outside him that produces an event in the person's mind that is not to be attributed to him. 'A person is no more to be identified with everything that goes on in his mind...than he is to be identified with everything that goes on in his body.'<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 60.

<sup>46</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 61.

<sup>47</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 61, my italics.

<sup>48</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 61.

So what should someone be identified with? Here Frankfurt distinguishes first-order from second-order desires. A first-order desire is simply some desire that an individual wants to satisfy. A second order desire is a desire about that first-order desire. ‘Someone has a desire of the second order either when he wants simply to have a certain desire or when he wants a certain desire to be his will.’<sup>49</sup> Within the category of second-order desires is a sub-group that Frankfurt calls ‘second-order volitions.’<sup>50</sup> A second-order volition is a second-order desire specifically about what I want my will to be. The notion of the will is ‘the notion of an *effective* desire—one that moves (or will or would move) a person all the way to action.’<sup>51</sup> A second order volition is therefore a desire about what will get me to act.

For Frankfurt, the fact that we can form second-order desires about our first order desires allows us to separate the internal from the external. However, we cannot simply infer that our second-order desires tell us who we are. Though seeing that there are second-order desires is a crucial step towards understanding the distinction between the internal and the external, there is more to be said. The obvious problem with Frankfurt’s account as given so far is one he himself acknowledges. It seems that turning to my second-order desires about my first order desires (recall, how F feels about his desire to drink heavily) should tell me who I am. However, second order desires may not resolve anything. As Frankfurt notes:

People are generally far more complicated than my sketchy account of the structure of a person’s will [presented thus far] may suggest. There is as much opportunity for ambivalence, conflict, and self-deception with regard to desires of the second order, for

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<sup>49</sup> Harry Frankfurt, ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,’ in *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy*, ed. John Christman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 67.

<sup>50</sup> Frankfurt, ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,’ 67

<sup>51</sup> Frankfurt, ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,’ 65.

example, as there is with regard to first-order desires. If there is an unresolved conflict among someone's second-order desires, then he is in danger of having no second-order volition; for unless this conflict is resolved, he has no preference concerning which of his first-order desires is to be his will.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, so far Frankfurt's account says nothing about the potential for conflicts among second order desires. This is obviously a problem. If who I am involves not simply first order desires but second order desires, then conflict among the latter will mean that some questions about who I am will go unanswered. And this will not give a satisfactory account of the self.

There is a second, no less significant difficulty for Frankfurt. This is the possibility of an infinite regress. Frankfurt also recognizes this problem. He writes that, 'There is no theoretical limit to the length of the series of desires of higher and higher orders; nothing except common sense and, perhaps, a saving fatigue prevents an individual from obsessively refusing to identify himself with any of his desires until he forms a desire of the next higher order. The tendency to generate such a series of acts of forming desires, which would be a case of humanization run wild, also leads toward the destruction of a person.'<sup>53</sup> Frankfurt seeks to anticipate the objection that there is no obvious reason why I ought to draw the line at second-order desires. There is little to stop me from having third-order desires about my second-order desires. This in turn begs the question of why my second-order desires should speak to who I am. Why not my third-order desires? Or my fourth? Or fifth?

Frankfurt offers a response to these two criticisms. He argues that with respect to the potentially infinite levels of desires:

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<sup>52</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 21.



It is possible...to terminate such a series of acts without cutting it off arbitrarily. When a person identifies himself *decisively* with one of his first-order desires, this commitment ‘resounds’ throughout the potentially endless array of higher orders... The fact that his second-order volition to be moved by this desire is a decisive one means that there is no room for questions concerning the pertinence of volitions of higher orders... The decisiveness of the commitment he has made means that he has decided that no further questions about his second-order volition, at any higher order, remain to be asked.<sup>54</sup>

The answer to the problems above is therefore that the relationship between a first-order desire and the second-order desire about it must be ‘decisive.’ The decisiveness of this identification means that there is no need for me to go on to have additional levels of desire. By the time I am ready to move on to the desires about my second-order desires, the question of who I am has already been answered, rendering any further attitude in the chain (e.g. a third-order desire about my second-order desire) redundant.

Yet it is clear neither what is meant by ‘identifying oneself decisively’ nor what makes the decisive identification so decisive. This could be restated as a question about what it takes to identify myself with one desire rather than another, and what makes doing so matter so much. Frankfurt sees this ambiguity himself. Writing in a late essay in *The Importance of What We Care About* concerning the passage quoted in the last paragraph, he argues that, ‘The trouble with what I wrote in this passage is that the notions I invoked—namely, ‘identification,’ ‘decisive commitment,’ ‘resounding,’—are terribly obscure. Therefore, the passage left it quite unclear just how the maneuver of avoiding an interminable regress by making a decisive

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<sup>54</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 21-22.

commitment can escape being unacceptably arbitrary.’<sup>55</sup> What are we to make of these terms that Frankfurt himself identifies as unclear? Seeing how Frankfurt resolves this question will be the key to understanding his account of the self. The two most important terms are ‘decisive commitment’ and ‘identification.’

First, how does Frankfurt understand this troublesome term ‘decisive,’ in the sense of a ‘decisive commitment?’ The problem, he notes, is to do with how I can ever avoid being ‘irresponsible or arbitrary’ in my thinking, a question that pertains as much to performing, checking and rechecking an arithmetical calculation as it does reflection on which of my desires are important to me.<sup>56</sup> With this example of arithmetic in mind, Frankfurt gives the following account of what constitutes a decisive commitment: ‘A commitment is decisive if and only if it is made without reservation, and making a commitment without reservation means that the person who makes it does so in the belief that no further accurate inquiry would require him to change his mind. It is therefore pointless to pursue the inquiry any further.’<sup>57</sup> Frankfurt calls this the ‘resonance effect’: the decision resonates because it makes any further reflection unnecessary.<sup>58</sup> And, he argues, the process of inquiry that governs checking arithmetical calculations also governs introspective reflection. If there is no ‘disturbing conflict between desires,’ meaning I do not believe that deeper self-reflection in the form of adopting an attitude (a third-order desire) towards my second-order desires will lead me to alter my desires, there is no motivation to go on reflecting. Thus, I have come to a decisive commitment.

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<sup>55</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 167.

<sup>56</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 168.

<sup>57</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 168-69.

<sup>58</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 169.

If a decisive commitment curtails further reflection, it breaks the chain of desires. There is no need to have higher levels of desires about my second-order desires. This goes a long way towards completing Frankfurt's account of the self. All that is left when it comes to the notion of a decisive commitment is to consider why Frankfurt thinks that making decisive commitments in the way he describes composes a self. He explicates the relation of forming decisions in the following manner:

When [a decision] is made without reservation, the commitment it entails is decisive. Then the person no longer holds himself apart from the desire to which he has committed himself. It is no longer unsettled or uncertain whether the object of that desire—that is, what he wants—is what he really wants: the decision determines what the person really wants by making the desire on which he decides fully his own. To this extent the person, in making a decision by which he identifies with a desire, *constitutes himself*.<sup>59</sup>

Making a decision without reservation (i.e., decisively) serves to winnow out the desires that, while they might form elements in my personal history, are not part of who someone is. In making the decision about what he really wants, someone decisively creates himself. He has identified himself with a desire; it 'has become his own in a way in which it was not unequivocally his own before.'<sup>60</sup>

But the process of 'identifying' still remains ambiguous. The question of what distinguishes the internal and the external led to the separation of first from second order desires; the necessity of answering questions about higher level desires led to the concept of a decisive commitment; the concept of a decisive commitment was explained through reference to identification. Therefore,

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<sup>59</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 170.

<sup>60</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 170.

if we are to understand Frankfurt's conception of the self, we need to ask what he means by identification. A question raised by Gary Watson will serve this end.

Watson claims we can recognize two different accounts of identification in Frankfurt's work, (1) 'identification as endorsement' and (2) 'identification as what one cares about.'<sup>61</sup> The contrast can be brought out through reference to his gloss on Frankfurt's conceptions of endorsing and caring. With respect to the former, he says:

What one endorses is a matter of what one stands behind, what one commits oneself to. To take on the project of extinguishing the aversion *is* to repudiate it, and to repudiate the aversion is to withdraw one's endorsement. Higher-order endorsement logically constrains lower-order endorsement.<sup>62</sup>

When it comes to the latter, Watson argues that:

What one cares about is measured by how much one is 'invested' in or bound up with something, by one's sense of loss or diminishment upon not realizing or achieving the object of one's care... One might not endorse everything that means something to one.<sup>63</sup>

Watson's objection to Frankfurt can be restated as the question of whether identification has its basis in endorsing or caring, that is, whether it derives from what I stand wholly behind, or what I merely care about (which is surely a matter of degree).

In responding to Watson, Frankfurt states that his account of identification has its basis in neither endorsement nor caring. He argues that he favors, 'The notion of identification as

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<sup>61</sup> Gary Watson, 'Volitional Necessities,' in *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, ed. Sarah Buss, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 148.

<sup>62</sup> Watson, 'Volitional Necessities,' 148.

<sup>63</sup> Watson, 'Volitional Necessities,' 148.

*acceptance*... Since I may identify with desires of which I do not approve, identification does not entail endorsement. Since I may identify with desires that I consider to be quite trivial, such as a desire to have some ice cream, identifying does not entail caring.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, if we understand identifying with a desire to mean accepting it, we come to see identification as a neutral attitude. I need neither stand behind a desire nor invest myself in it. Identification, the process by which, on Frankfurt's account, someone constitutes himself, is therefore not a positive evaluation of one desire over another; nor does it necessarily pertain to something of monumental importance.

However, when it comes to asking who I am, whether I would ever be motivated to think that I identify with a desire unless I either thought it was important—that is, cared about it—or had a positive or negative view of that desire—endorsed it—may remain questionable. To distinguish identification from endorsement seems problematic for another reason. If we track back to the analogy that Frankfurt draws between the arithmetical calculation and self-reflection, whereby the arithmetical calculation is meant to be an example of a decisive commitment, we surely could not bring to an end our checking of an arithmetical calculation without saying that we endorse the answer we come to in the end, unless we know we are bad mathematicians. And even in that case we would have to endorse it, because for all we know we might be right, and we have nothing else to go on.

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<sup>64</sup> Harry Frankfurt, 'Reply to Gary Watson,' in *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, ed. Sarah Buss (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 161, my italics. In this passage, Frankfurt points us to his essay 'The Faintest Passion,' wherein he says he first 'adumbrated' his view of identification. Yet even here we find, the sentence, 'Identification is constituted neatly by an endorsing higher order desire with which the person is satisfied.' See Harry Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 105. This reference to endorsement serves to make at least Watson's association of identification with endorsement understandable, though since I am less interested in a close reading of Frankfurt and more interested in applying what he says to the narrative conception of self, I will run with the account of identification he gives in his latest discussions of the subject, taking them to have advanced beyond the adumbration stage.

This completes my exegesis of Frankfurt's account of the self. How do unity and coherency emerge as characteristic features of it? The self is unified in that certain desires and passions are eliminated from my sense of who I am by virtue of the distinction between the internal and external. What unifies me is the fact that some of my actions and feelings are my own while others are not. I identify with some of my actions and feelings and not with others, and it is in identifying with them that I constitute myself.

This process of identification (as well as the notion of having higher order desires) also lends coherency of the self. Identification is responsible for the exclusion of certain desires from myself and the incorporation of others. This means that the answer to that question of who I am will be internally consistent: I will have identified myself with one or other conflicting desires. Contrast this with the position of Frankfurt's so-called wanton, someone for whom it is not important which of her conflicting desires win out.<sup>65</sup> She has no second-order desires, only those of the first order.<sup>66</sup> Such a person cannot answer the question of who she is; it is doubtful it would ever have occurred to her to ask it. She is not a self but a haphazard assemblage of wants, amongst which it is impossible to find any internal coherency.

### *1.5 Korsgaard*

Korsgaard's conception of the self is different again from those described above, though it draws heavily on the work of Plato. In this section I will repeat the process I have applied throughout, first describing Korsgaard's view of the self, then saying how unity and coherency emerge in it. Since, while fascinating, Korsgaard's conception of the self does not have the same relevance to my larger project as Frankfurt's, my reflections here will be less extensive.

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<sup>65</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 18.

<sup>66</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 16.

Korsgaard begins from a simple fact. It is characteristic of rational agents that they are required to make choices in their lives. In her words, ‘Human beings are *condemned* to choice and action.’<sup>67</sup> So in any given situation, I need to decide how I should act. But is this decision good-for-me and no one else? And where does this principle to come from? Referring to an example Korsgaard gives will help to answer these questions. She sets out how we respond, as rational creatures, to being confronted by a dangerous object. Initially, we are rent by contradictory inclinations: ‘Self-consciousness divides you into two parts, or three, or any number of parts you like: the main thing is that it separates your perceptions from their automatic normative force. The object may still look threatening, like a *thing to-be-fled*, but you must make a choice about whether you should run.’<sup>68</sup> So in any situation we are required to decide what to do.

And by virtue of being self-conscious, we are not already unified in what we want, but composed out of conflicting inclinations, which Korsgaard characterizes, along Platonic lines, as parts of the soul. She continues: ‘On the one side, there is the threateningness of the object, and we call your perception of that threateningness a desire to run. And on the other side, there is the part of you that will make the decision whether to run, and we call that reason. Now you are divided into parts, and must *pull yourself together* by making a choice.’<sup>69</sup> So we start off divided, with conflicting conceptions of what we ought to do. And it is through deciding that we escape this conflict that divides us. We decide how to act and in so doing make a whole out of ourselves. However, there is still the question of the kind of principle we adopt when it comes to make our choice: ‘In order to make that choice, reason needs a principle—not one imposed on it from

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<sup>67</sup> Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>68</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 213.

<sup>69</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 213. My italics.

outside, for it has no reason to accept such a principle, but one that is its own.<sup>70</sup> So while reason needs a principle it cannot come from just anywhere. Reason needs to be self-legislating.

We search for this principle by deliberating. Deliberation ensures that our movements are caused by us rather than some outside force. It guarantees that we ‘put [our] whole self...behind [our] movements.’<sup>71</sup> The reason for this is that in Korsgaard’s view it is incorrect to think of the principles that reason comes upon as representing the perspective of reason alone. Rather, reason represents the entire self. Korsgaard derives this idea from discussion of the conception of the soul that Plato gives in the *Republic*: ‘A person does not, except indirectly, identify with his reason. Rather, he identifies with his constitution, which assigns to reason his voice. It is because of this, not because of an identification with reason, that we say of the imprudent person that his passion got the better not just of his reason but of *him*.’<sup>72</sup> So the principles that reason gives are not instrumental in a further fracturing of the self, but responsible for its unification. We do not pick an element of the soul—the rational part—and say that this is who we are. Rather, we regard reason as representing our whole self.

Therefore, deliberation is the ‘attempt to reunite [ourselves] behind some set of movements that will count as [our] own.’<sup>73</sup> The result of deliberation is a principle, but, crucially, it is a principle that will serve to govern not just one particular situation but other similar situations to come.

‘Whenever we act we commit ourselves to a law which obliges us in every other relevantly similar circumstance.’<sup>74</sup> That is, the principle we create must not only count now, but further

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<sup>70</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 213.

<sup>71</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 213.

<sup>72</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 141.

<sup>73</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 213.

<sup>74</sup> Ariela Tubert, ‘Korsgaard’s Constitutive Arguments and the Principles of Practical Reason,’ *The Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (2011): 343-62.



down the line, in situations beyond this one. But this means that this principle also has a shared normative force: it is a law that is good not just for ourselves but for other human beings.<sup>75</sup>

Crucially, an action is not the sole outcome of this process. Rather, in deciding we create ourselves. Every time we make a decision we determine who we are. For Korsgaard, the reason we have a serious stake in our actions is because they constitute us in some deep way.<sup>76</sup> In choosing our actions we create our practical identity: ‘It is as the possessor of personal or practical identity that you are the author of your actions and responsible for them. And yet at the same time it is in choosing your actions that you create your identity. What this means is that you constitute yourself *as* the author of your act of choosing them.’<sup>77</sup> We are a unified self, but in deliberating we come apart; our choice pulls us back together again. In acting, we continually remake ourselves.

Therefore, for Korsgaard, who we are is the result of our rational deliberations, which give us principles that count not just at that moment but in the future. Moreover, these principles count not just for me but for other human beings. In deliberating I come apart because I have conflicting inclinations, but reason draws me back together by providing a principle that speaks for my entire self: ‘In the course of this process, of falling apart and pulling yourself back together, you create something new, you constitute something new: yourself.’<sup>78</sup>

It should be obvious how unity is fundamental to Korsgaard’s conception of the self. On her account, selfhood is identical with being unified. There are several parts of the self, several contending inclinations, but in the process of arriving at a decision we unify ourselves. Similarly,

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<sup>75</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 214.

<sup>76</sup> Laura Papish, ‘The Changing Shape of Korsgaard’s Understanding of Constructivism,’ in *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 45 (2011): 459.

<sup>77</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 20.

<sup>78</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 214.

there is no great difficulty in understanding how the self is coherent. As in the Platonic and Cartesian accounts—though notably not as obviously in Frankfurt’s account—reason lends the self coherency, but this is because reason represents our entire selves. Through deliberating I arrive at a principle that is to govern me not only now but in the future, and this means that I am not only unified but also consistent with myself by virtue of being free of contradictions.

Before concluding this reflection on Korsgaard, I want to mention in passing a curious passage towards the end of *Self-Constitution*. Though she does not hold a narrative conception of the self like the authors I will consider in the next chapter, Korsgaard explains the way in which we are each instances of a common humanity in narrative terms. Because of its relevance to my overall project, I quote the passage in full:

Your life fits into the general human story, and is a part of the general human activity of the creation and pursuit of value. It matters to you both that it is a particular part—*your own part*—and that it is a *part of the larger human story*. What you want is not merely to be me-in-particular nor is it just to be a generic human being—what you want is to be a *someone*, a particular instance of humanity. So it’s like this: in being the author of your own actions, you are also a co-author of the human story, our collective, public, story. As a person, who has to make himself into a particular person, you get to write one of the parts in the general human story, to create the role of one of the people you think it would be good to have in that story. And then—at least if you manage to maintain your integrity—you get to play the part.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 212.

In this passage, Korsgaard argues that we are each not only individuals but parts of something greater. She also compares us to the authors of dramatic roles, which we then go on to perform. This very much resembles the language that narrative theorists of self will employ, to be discussed in the next chapter. And the issue of playing a role will be significant when I look at the *Henriad* later in this dissertation.

### *1.6 Conclusion*

In this chapter I have provided background for the reflections to come on the narrative conception of self. I looked at four different accounts of the self and argued that each conception has two prominent features, the concern with unity on the one hand and with coherency on the other. Along with presenting a more general exegesis of the views of these four authors, I focused on the way in which unity and coherency emerge therein.

And we have seen how in these four accounts unity is the product of process and even a struggle, not something automatic. In Plato this is because a well-ordered soul requires the rule of reason, which other components of the soul—whether conceived along the lines of the picture given in the *Phaedrus* or the *Republic*'s tripartite soul—are bound to oppose it. In the case of Descartes, unity in the self is achievable only through the rejection of accepted beliefs, the use of reason and respect for the order of reasons.<sup>80</sup> When it comes to Frankfurt, unity is a matter firstly of adopting a reflective attitude towards first order desires, then making a decisive commitment through which I identify with one desire over another and thereby constitute myself. Finally,

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<sup>80</sup> I acknowledge that there is more to the Cartesian account of the struggle for unity, but even a merely adequate account of it would require lengthy discussion of *The Passions of the Soul*. There is a good discussion of this topic in Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind*, Chapter 8.

when it comes to Korsgaard, the struggle for unity is accounted for in the self being torn apart by conflicting inclinations, a fault which only making a decision can repair.

Of course, these views of the self have other features in common. In particular, all these accounts are heavily individualistic. This is especially true of the Platonic and Cartesian accounts. In the former, selfhood is a matter of an appropriate arrangement of the soul. In the latter, selfhood is a matter of introspection. However, the same is true to a lesser degree of the accounts offered by Frankfurt and Korsgaard. In the former instance, selfhood is a matter of our having certain attitudes towards our passions and desires. In the latter, I bring unity to myself through deliberation. What makes Korsgaard's account the least individualistic of the four mentioned is that deliberation is a matter of giving 'public reasons,' that is, 'reasons whose normative force can extend across the boundaries between people.'<sup>81</sup>

Now that I have given some background about the self and argued that unity and coherency are consistently characteristic of dominant conceptions of selfhood, I can go on to consider the narrative conception of self in the next chapter. There we will see that unity and coherency are also important elements of that view, though as we will also see they are achieved in a way very different from the accounts I have examined here.

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<sup>81</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 191.

## *Chapter 2 The Narrative Self*

### *2.1 Introduction*

In this chapter I will define the narrative conception of the self. On the narrative view, the self is constructed and is unified and coherent. Though the self is narratively structured, it remains tied to a social context and a language and is subject to luck or fate. The self is diachronic and historical, and is therefore a gathering together of past experiences and a plausible candidate for determining the course of future action in the specific sense that the desire for a coherent self-narrative may take on normative force.

I will draw on a series of thinkers who favor the narrative conception in order to build up this account. At the same time I will refer to critiques of the narrative self. This is in part in order to show that the narrative conception is not susceptible to many of the criticisms raised against it. But responding to them will also deepen the narrative view. I will not argue that a narrative self is something all human beings possess, or that everyone should have one. Later in this dissertation I intend to argue against the narrative conception and present my own view of the role of narrative in selfhood. I only give an account of the narrative conception in order to respond to it down the line.

The most basic tenet of such an account is that a self is not possessed from birth, but constructed during the course of an individual's life. To really understand what is involved in the narrative self, we must begin by examining what is meant by this notion of a constructed self.

## 2.2 Construction

The notion that the self is brought into being by a creative process is found in many approaches to the self. For instance, Irving Howe argues that the self is no more than an ‘hypothesis,’ brought into being through a process of social formation. ‘The self is a construct of the mind, a hypothesis of being, socially formed even as it can be turned against the very social formations that have brought it into birth.’<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Sarane Spence Boocock states that the self is a product that results from our interactions with others, interactions shaped in turn by the historical and social circumstances in which they occur.<sup>83</sup> On such views, then, a self is not something that everyone has from the beginning of their lives; it is the result of a productive process.

The narrative conception of self draws on this idea. The self is the result of a creative process. However, there are two main refinements of what has been said above. First, the process is not merely social.<sup>84</sup> The emphasis is on the role of an individual’s introspection. Self-reflection creates the self, rather than social interactions. Second, the self has the form of a narrative. The model is the story we would find in a literary work. These dual perspectives are summarized by Marya Schechtman who, in articulating her version of a narrative conception of self, argues that, ‘a person creates his [or her] identity by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his [or her] life.’<sup>85</sup> The self is created by an author and is structured as a story.

Yet given that on the narrative conception the emphasis is placed not on social interactions but on an individual’s constitution of his or her own self, what is the ontological status of the

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<sup>82</sup> Irving Howe, ‘The Self in Literature,’ in *Constructions of the Self*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 249.

<sup>83</sup> Sarane Spence Boocock, ‘The Social Construction of Childhood in Contemporary Japan,’ in *Constructions of the Self*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 165.

<sup>84</sup> I will go on to discuss influence on the social on the process of narrative construction later in this chapter.

<sup>85</sup> Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 93.

construction? Is the self an ‘hypothesis’? Is the self that results from the process of construction real or unreal?

To answer these questions, I turn to the work of Daniel Dennett. He argues in favor of a narrative conception of self. On his view, the self is constructed, but importantly this construction is a fiction. Does adopting the narrative conception involve a commitment to the fictionality of the self? This could be reason enough to reject the narrative conception immediately. Therefore, I will briefly show how a constructed self is not necessarily a fictional self. To see why this is the case we need to unpack Dennett’s argument.

He starts by reflecting on the idea of a center of gravity. In his view, a center of gravity is an abstract construct, a theorist’s fiction. He says that, ‘A center of gravity is not an atom or a subatomic particle or any other physical item in the world. It has no mass; it has no color; it has no physical properties at all, except for spatio-temporal location...It is a purely abstract object. It is, if you like, a theorist’s fiction.’<sup>86</sup> So, for Dennett, fictionality is identified with abstractness and the lack of physical properties. He next claims that an analogy can be drawn between the characters in literary fictions and centers of gravity. With respect to fictional characters there is no fact of the matter when it comes to certain questions, for instance whether the character Jenny Wren has a mole on her left shoulder. Fictional characters have only the properties with which their creator endows them. Dennett argues that the same holds for centers of gravity, which are purely the product of a scientific theory that endows them with their properties.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Daniel Dennett, ‘The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,’ in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. Frank Kessel, Pamela M. Cole, and Dale L. Johnson (Hilldale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), 103.

<sup>87</sup> Dennett, ‘The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,’ 106.

Tellingly, Dennett claims that selves should be understood on the model of centers of gravity and fictional characters. He argues that, ‘It does seem that we are virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behavior, more or less unified, but sometimes disunified, and we always put the best ‘faces’ on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography.’<sup>88</sup> So in creating my self-narrative, I lend myself unity and coherence. Yet the character at the center of the autobiography, the one around whom the life that is lived coheres, is fictional. ‘If you... want to know what the self *really* is, you are making a category mistake.’<sup>89</sup>

But the subjects of autobiographies are typically taken to be non-fictional. How can Dennett claim that selves are fictions rather than real? We can look back at Dennett’s initial reflection on centers of gravity for an answer. His reason for claiming that a center of gravity is fictional is that it has no physical properties such as color or mass. No matter how well-defined and well-delineated it is by theories of physics, a center of gravity remains an abstractum because it is purely formal.<sup>90</sup> When we turn to look at Dennett’s arguments as to the fictionality of the self, we find a like claim. It is a error, he suggests, to seek a location for the self in the world or in the brain; doing so constitutes a ‘category mistake.’<sup>91</sup> As with centers of narrative gravity, selves do not have physical properties; moreover, they do not even have spatio-temporal locations like centers of gravity. The self is always an abstraction.

Dennett attributes the fictionality of the self to its lack of physical properties. Yet does this really make selves fictions? I think we can allow for the self’s lack of physical properties and still

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<sup>88</sup> Dennett, ‘The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,’ 114.

<sup>89</sup> Dennett, ‘The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,’ 114.

<sup>90</sup> Dennett, ‘The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,’ 106.

<sup>91</sup> Dennett, ‘The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,’ 109.



argue that selves are not fictions. Let us return to Dennett's initial example of the center of gravity. In one sense a center of gravity is a fiction: we cannot identify a center of gravity with a specific part of an object that has physical properties. However, in another sense a center of gravity is extremely real. By virtue of having a center of gravity that lies in a particular place, an object will exhibit certain behavior if, for example, it is struck with enough force to overturn it. If a center of gravity really were a fiction, it would mean that it has no causal consequences (which it does), and that these consequences were not predictable and measurable.<sup>92</sup>

We might say the same of literary characters. In one sense these are very much fictional in Dennett's sense. There is neither a physical thing with the properties of Jenny Wren that Dickens mentions, nor a Jenny Wren with those properties along with others to which Dickens does not refer. However, this does not mean that Jenny is not real in another sense: she is a literary character who has impacted the lives of the many readers who have sympathized with her. What it would take for Jenny Wren to be fictional in this sense is for *Our Mutual Friend* not to have been written. Therefore, while Jenny Wren is fictional, she is also, from another way of looking at things, all too real.

And J. David Velleman has made a similar argument against the fictionality of the self, though he approaches the question on slightly different grounds. He says that the reason that the self is non-fictional is because while my life shapes my story, my story also shapes my life. With regard to Dennett's example of a woman named Sybil, he notes that, 'Sybil's behavior always manifested the personality whose story she was telling at the moment. Her life shaped her story, and her story shaped her life, all because she was designed to maintain correspondence between

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<sup>92</sup> We could make similar arguments about other cases that Dennett would presumably designate as fictional, such as lines of symmetry.

the two.’<sup>93</sup> And Velleman concludes that if ‘a self-narrator works in both directions’ in this way, the result is that ‘the self he invents is not just and idle fiction, a useful abstraction for interpreting his behavior.’<sup>94</sup> While the self may be ‘fictive’ in some sense, this ‘character’ still exists in fact.<sup>95</sup>

We find another similar view of character in the work of Martine de Gaudemar. She argues with respect to what she calls ‘literary personages.’ A personage, or character, ‘inhabits a transitional zone between thought and reality. It seems to be endowed with a force that drives it to incarnate itself. We always notice something active in the personage, which has effects and does not allow indifference: it engenders emotions, even pushes us to act.’<sup>96</sup> De Gaudemar argues that a literary character or personage can cause us to feel certain emotions and to act in certain ways. And even if these feelings and actions are not predictable, a character is still always more than a being in thought alone, that is, a fiction.

We should think about the self along the same lines. It is true that there are no physical properties attributable to the self, insofar as we will never find a part of the body that corresponds with it. However, it is also true that selves impact the lives of those who possess them as well as the lives of other people. I can choose to refuse to do something because I am not that sort of person. Someone can decide not to be my friend because I am too boring or too annoying. Therefore, while in Dennett’s sense the self is fictional, it is also in another sense very real.

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<sup>93</sup> J. David Velleman, ‘The Self as Narrator,’ in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, ed. John Christman and Joel Anderson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 64.

<sup>94</sup> Velleman, ‘The Self as Narrator,’ 64.

<sup>95</sup> Velleman, ‘The Self as Narrator,’ 72.

<sup>96</sup> Martine de Gaudemar, *La voix des personnages* (Paris: Les Editions Du Cerf, 2011), 22, my translation.

I am not sure how Dennett would respond. Doubtless he would maintain that the self remains a fiction in the sense that he intends it. However, when it comes to the self it is the sense in which I speak of fictions and non-fictions that is important. Selves are not inert; we affect them and are affected by them. This makes them real. From the fact that the self is constructed it does not follow that it is fictional. Narrativity and fictionality are not synonymous.

### *2.3 Narrativity*

But if we now grasp the idea of a constructed self, it is still unclear what the narrative conception means by saying that the self has a narrative structure. Perhaps the clearest statement on this topic comes from Alasdair MacIntyre. For MacIntyre, the central achievement of a narrative is to endow unity. ‘Personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the character which the unity of a narrative requires. Without such unity there would not be subjects of whom stories could be told.’<sup>97</sup> A necessary condition for a literary character is unity, and it is this same unity that is recognizable in narrative accounts of selfhood.

At the most fundamental level, a narrative thus provides wholeness to elements of a life which might, at first glance, lack coherence when grouped together. Yet MacIntyre goes further. He argues that the unity to be discovered in a human life takes a particular form. This is the form of a quest. He says that, ‘The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest.’<sup>98</sup> Since this idea of a quest

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<sup>97</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 218.

<sup>98</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

is ambiguous it is necessary to say a little more. MacIntyre is talking about a quest for the good; as a result of possessing an initial, perhaps rudimentary conception of the good, we are able to order the different goods in our lives in order to develop our understanding of the virtues.

Through undertaking such a quest, we come to redefine our conception of its goal. ‘A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge.’<sup>99</sup>

The obvious response to MacIntyre is that while narratives are sometimes quests, and while a quest might even exemplify narrative, being a quest is not a necessary condition for being a narrative. There are two reasons for this. First, we find many more examples of literary narratives than we do examples of quests: the failure to be a quest does not disqualify a piece of discourse from being a narrative. We could take for example the novel *Confederate General from Big Sur* by Richard Brautigan, which, while it is a narrative, has multiple endings and therefore does not result in a goal being attained. Similarly, a work like Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, while a narrative, due to the ambiguity of its ending leaves it an open question whether a goal has been attained, or even, supposing one has been attained, whether it was worth attaining. Finally, Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* is an exemplary instance of a narrative and ends with the attainment of a goal, but since that goal is just the realization of what the narrator should choose as a subject matter for his writing, this conclusion is also a beginning. Applying the structure of a quest that has borne fruit seems naïve when applied to this narrative. We might also add the example of tragedies, wherein the good is not attained, and comedies, wherein the value of the quest is put in question.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

<sup>100</sup> Thanks to Emily Grosholz for this point.

The second and not unrelated reason is that a conception of narrativity that ties the narrative to a quest unduly emphasizes the pedagogical aspect of a narrative. J. David Velleman has in recent years developed a non-pedagogical account of narrative. He argues against the idea that narrative is specifically a form of explanation, as Arthur Danto, among others, has claimed.<sup>101</sup> According to Velleman, narrative gives understanding, but this understanding is of a particular kind. For Velleman, a narrative leads its reader through a series of events, but rather than explaining how they happen, it allows the reader to appreciate their emotional qualities ‘A story...enables its audience to assimilate events, not to familiar patterns of *how things happen*, but rather to familiar patterns of *how things feel*.’<sup>102</sup> It is through the power to ‘initiate and resolve’ an emotional cadence in an audience that a narrative enables a reader to understand.<sup>103</sup> A narrative may well prompt us for think, but for Velleman it is more important that it prompts us to feel.

Two further points are crucial. First, the emotional cadence through which a story leads its reader is familiar to the reader from everyday life. ‘These patterns are not themselves stored in discursive form, as scenarios or stories; they are stored rather in experiential, proprioceptive, and kinesthetic memory—as we might say, in the muscle-memory of the heart.’<sup>104</sup> We do not retain stories so much as the patterns of how they made us feel. Second, the emotion that resolves the emotional cadence subsumes the emotions that came before it, so as to leave a reader with a single stable attitude towards a series of events. As Velleman puts it, ‘Having passed through the emotional ups and downs of the story, as one event succeeded another, the audience comes to rest in a stable attitude about the series of events in its entirety.’<sup>105</sup> The result is that, ‘the

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<sup>101</sup> Danto makes the point in ‘Narrative Sentences,’ in *History and Theory* 2 (1962).

<sup>102</sup> J. David Velleman, ‘Narrative Explanation,’ *The Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 19.

<sup>103</sup> Velleman, ‘Narrative Explanation,’ 18.

<sup>104</sup> Velleman, ‘Narrative Explanation,’ 19.

<sup>105</sup> Velleman, ‘Narrative Explanation,’ 19.

audience may or may not understand how the narrated events came about, but it understands what they mean—what they mean, that is, to the audience itself, in emotional terms.’<sup>106</sup>

Thus, Velleman suggests that the point of narrative is not to lead to explanatory understanding, but for a reader to learn how she feels about a series of events. When compared with MacIntyre’s conception of the narrative self, Velleman’s interpretation suggests that even if a narrative did involve a quest, it would not necessarily result in the kind of grasp of the good that MacIntyre argues is characteristic of narrative. Moreover, on Velleman’s account, a narrative need not result in self-knowledge, construed in terms of an understanding of why someone is the way she is, but may produce no more than a stable attitude towards a series of events that an individual has experienced throughout their life.

Therefore, narrative should not be understood in terms of a quest. Which is not to say that I accept Velleman’s characterization of narrative in terms of an emotional cadence that results in a stable attitude at its culmination. Rather, the requirement for narrative is much more basic. At this stage, I take the notion of narrative discussed in the narrative conception of self to refer to no more a sequence of events (or episodes in terms familiar to us from Aristotle’s *Poetics*) that leads towards a conclusion. This definition seems sufficiently broad to include both MacIntyre and Velleman’s account, without tying itself to one or the other.

What I do want to emphasize is something both MacIntyre and Velleman accept, namely the wholeness of a narrative. A narrative draws together a sequence of events that might appear at first glance to be unrelated. Whether this follows the trajectory of a quest and leads me to understanding, or whether it is an emotional sequence that comes to a resolution in terms of a

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<sup>106</sup> Velleman, ‘Narrative Explanation,’ 19.

stable emotional attitude to a series of experiences is not a question we need to answer in order to understand the narrative conception. What is most important in the narrative conception of self is that a narrative creates a whole out of an assortment of parts, and that this can be done in many ways that are no less narratives by virtue of failing to share in the structure of a quest.<sup>107</sup>

In this subsection I have done no more than come up with a serviceable account of what narrativity consists in according to the narrative conception of self. As I have said, this is a subject to which I will return later in this dissertation, where I will define narrative on my own terms. One of the main criticisms of the narrative conception of self is that writers who propose such a view of the self do not say what they mean by narrative.<sup>108</sup> At this stage I am not concerned to address this issue. Later, by drawing on literary criticism we will reach a better understanding of what narrative amounts to.

#### *2.4 Social Context and Language*

Though I have rejected MacIntyre's interpretation of narrative as a quest, I will draw on his work to develop the next facet of a narrative conception. This is the significance of social context and language in the development of a self-narrative. This is important for one overriding reason. The term narrative, and the comparisons made by those who argue that the self should be understood on narrative terms, imply that the creation of a self-narrative is analogous to the work of an author on a literary masterpiece. The narrative conception of self might therefore be taken to

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<sup>107</sup> I have given some examples of such narratives already. Others might be battle narratives, such as we find in the *Iliad*, courtly romances in which the good is attained then lost, of which Gottfried von Strasbourg's *Tristan* is paradigmatic, or narratives of madness or psychological disturbance, of which Nikolai Gogol's short story *Diary of a Madman* and Georg Büchner's unfinished novella *Lenz* are examples.

<sup>108</sup> This is John Christman's critique in *Politics of Persons*. I will come back to it in a later chapter.

imply that the process of self-construction is one that an individual undertakes on her own, without interacting with others.

This criticism of the narrative is based on a false picture of authorship. A literary author does not always write in complete solitude and without meaningful interaction with others, but draws on social interactions. Moreover, figures such as literary editors critique and refine an author's writings. A famous example is the relationship between Raymond Carver and Gordon Lish, the latter developing the former's drafts into more successful stories. And such literary relationships do not begin with the advent of the literary editor. Stephen Greenblatt has drawn attention to the social nature of Shakespeare's creative process.<sup>109</sup>

So the narrative conception of self is not resistant to the role of the social. But we need to say more about this. My first insight stems from MacIntyre's work. He notes that, as a 'story-telling animal,' a human being must always question himself with respect to the stories of which he is a part.<sup>110</sup> One of MacIntyre's necessary conditions for a narrative conception of selfhood is that an individual's self-narrative is always connected with the narratives of others. 'The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives.'<sup>111</sup> Through interacting with others, particularly by seeking explanations from others for their actions and being willing to provide such explanations in turn, a form of accountability is developed without which narratives as such could not exist.<sup>112</sup>

Charles Taylor expands on MacIntyre's account of the social aspect of self-narration. He argues that we do not develop a self on our own but with other people. 'My discovering my identity

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<sup>109</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>110</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.

<sup>111</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 218.

<sup>112</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 218.



doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalized, with others. That is why the development of inwardly generated identity gives a new and crucial importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.'<sup>113</sup> Though Taylor allows that this dialogue with another may be internalized, nonetheless there is always this intersubjective aspect to self-construction. Yet Taylor's insistence on this dialogue leads to a further aspect of the social nature of the narrative self. The composition of a self-narrative can only occur through language, which is itself a social phenomenon. The linguistic character of the creation of self broadens and deepens the objection to the original suggestion that a self-narrative is authored by an isolated individual. Far from being accidental, the social character of the narrative self results from the dependency of narrative self-construction on language. Taylor argues that, 'We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression.' Even if by 'languages' he means not only words but other means of expression, it is nonetheless clear that verbalization occupies the central place in an explicitly dialogical process of self-construction.<sup>114</sup>

Of course, as well as being a social artifact or tool, there is a private aspect to language. This private aspect can be reflected in what Stanley Cavell calls the 'fear of inexpressiveness'—an individual's worry that his language does not communicate his meaning or sentiments to others because words, through being overused or perhaps too seldom used, fall flat.<sup>115</sup> Conversely, rather than falling flat through lack of resonance, someone's words may carry a superfluity of

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<sup>113</sup> Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 47-48.

<sup>114</sup> Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 32-33.

<sup>115</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 351. See also Anne Stevenson's illuminating discussion of the need to express ourselves. Anne Stevenson, 'Saying What We Mean,' in *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Emily Grosholz (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, especially 164-67).

meanings for their interlocutor. In the context of a discussion of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Martha Nussbaum notes that language 'issues from a personal history.' She argues that, while being 'in principle nonprivate,' meanings are 'often highly idiosyncratic.'<sup>116</sup> Therefore, despite of its public nature, language retains a private aspect by virtue of both its connotations and its inability to connote.

Given this feature of language, I would like to emphasize a word that Taylor uses: negotiation. Part of the dialogue in which an individual becomes involved in the course of developing a self-narrative is negotiation with others over meanings. Therefore, while an individual's self-narrative is to be composed through dialogue with others, this dialogue does not merely establish the overall structure of a narrative. Rather, the dialogue interrogates and resolves meanings that may be in question. Just as significantly, it determines how the values someone holds are situated in the community in which she is are irretrievably enmeshed.

### *2.5 Luck and Fate*

In *The Politics of Persons*, John Christman presents a significant critique of the narrative conception. I will explore this and use it to further develop narrative selfhood. Christman resists the notion that an individual is completely responsible for developing her own self-narrative. Christman argues that individuals are not so much 'authors' of their self-narratives as their 'literary critics.'<sup>117</sup> He dismisses the analogy that Dennett, MacIntyre and others draw between the composition of a self-narrative and the penning of a literary work.

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<sup>116</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, 'The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*,' in *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*, ed. Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 59

<sup>117</sup> John Christman, *The Politics of Persons* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 9.

Christman emphasizes the ways in which an individual is not responsible for creating a self. ‘Selves should be seen as to a large extent formed by factors not under the control of the reflective agents themselves.’<sup>118</sup> There are two main reasons for this. First, we are born into a social context over which we have no say. For instance, we cannot control the identities of our parents or the way in which someone of our ethnicity and socio-economic background will be received by the society into which we are born. Second, as embodied creatures we grow, and as we grow our bodies are subject to often radical change that is beyond our control.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, seeing an individual as the author of himself, as entirely responsible for composing a self-narrative that determines who he is, provides a false picture of the self. Christman claims we are not self-creators in any deep sense. Rather, we ought to think of ourselves as ‘self-managers.’<sup>120</sup>

I want to embrace this critique to achieve greater clarity and specificity when it comes to the narrative conception. I have already anticipated some of Christman’s objections in my earlier discussion of social context and language. I have highlighted as an essential feature of the narrative conception the fact that individuals are located in a social context, which is necessarily something over which they have no control. Moreover, with respect to social context, I have followed MacIntyre and Taylor in emphasizing the cooperative nature of the composition of self-narratives. Certain aspects of the composition of a self-narrative are indeed outside of an individual’s control. While to a degree we choose our friends, interlocutors and role models, they also are chosen for us by virtue of our being born in a particular place and time. Similarly, in many cases our family is crucial in helping us to develop a self-narrative, and we have no influence over our parentage.

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<sup>118</sup> Christman, *The Politics of Persons*, 2009, 10

<sup>119</sup> Christman, *The Politics of Persons*, 10.

<sup>120</sup> Christman, *The Politics of Persons*, 180-81.

My reflection on language also emphasizes the social nature of the process of self-construction. Language is the resource through which we compose the narratives of our lives, and it is fundamentally public and historical. Part of this public nature is the fact that we are born into a language, meaning that we do not choose the language in which we communicate. Even when we note Henry David Thoreau's perspicuous if regrettably gendered analogy of our mother tongue being the language into which we are born and speak, and our father tongue being the language we must relearn in order to write it, language is still received to a strong degree.<sup>121</sup> Few people have an influence in shaping the language they speak, and they shape it not without heeding the accomplishments of their forebears and the habits of their contemporaries. Thus, because language is social, because we do not freely choose our language, or at least its makeup, and because we use language to compose our self-narratives, we must allow that certain aspects of who we are lie beyond our control.

So the trend of my discussion has already pointed to the social nature of the self and the fact that elements of the self lie outside of an individual's control. I am therefore friendly to Christman's critique. Yet since I wish to better understand the narrative conception, I want to address the more fundamental question of whether Christman's critique requires the surrender of the narrative view—and perhaps adopting a view of individuals as self-managers or self-critics. Should we cling to the analogy between self-creation and the art of a writer penning a literary novel?

In search of an answer, I turn to the work of Paul Ricoeur. His approach to the narrative conception embraces the issue at hand, namely whether we can maintain the analogy between

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<sup>121</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 99.

literary composition and self-creation. Ricoeur understands a narrative as a ‘concordant discordance.’ He says:

Following the line of concordance, the character draws his or her singularity from the unity of a life considered a temporal totality which is itself singular and distinguished from all others. Following the line of discordance, this temporal totality is threatened by the disruptive effect of the unforeseeable events that punctuate it (encounters, accidents, etc). Because of the concordant discordant systems, the contingency of the event contributes to the necessity, retroactive so to speak, of the history of a life, to which is equated the identity of the character. Thus chance is transmuted into fate. And the identity of the character emplotted so to speak, can be understood only in terms of this dialectic.<sup>122</sup>

For Ricoeur, the self, as narratively constructed, is in part composed of unforeseeable events. Thus, he already makes room for incorporating into a self-narrative elements that are outside of an individual’s control. Contingencies are incorporated into a narrative in the guise of fate.

Ricoeur assists in developing a response to Christman’s critique by suggesting a plausible alternative to the analogy of the literary author which has dominated our understanding of the narrative conception of self. We cannot straightforwardly take an individual to be the author of his or her self-narrative. Ricoeur argues:

Unlike the abstract identity of the same, this narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime. The subject then appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life, as Proust would have it. As the literary analysis of autobiography confirms, the story of a life continues to be refigured by

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<sup>122</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Katherine Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 147.

all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. Thus refiguration makes this life a cloth woven of stories told.<sup>123</sup>

In this quotation we see an alternative to the view we have encountered so far. Ricoeur no longer speaks simply of authoring the self, but also of reading it. We might say that Ricoeur introduces passivity into the relationship of an individual to the self he constructs.

Yet does this really do away with the initial analogy, whereby self-creation is understood in terms of literary authorship? It appears to do so, because reader and writer are typically taken to be very different roles, as if each stood on a different side of the literary work and never straddled it. However, writers will often insist that they are readers first and writers second, and the process of revising a literary novel for instance will always involve reading and rereading the narrative. Writers are also readers of their own work, the meaning of which may change for them over a lifetime. Therefore, to stipulate that someone is both the reader and writer of herself does not necessarily shift us beyond the original analogy.

Elsewhere Ricoeur characterizes the relationship of an individual to her self-narrative in different way. In the essay 'Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator,' he reiterates the idea that a self-narrative is a 'concordant discordance.' A narrative plot is a synthesis of divergent, dissimilar components.<sup>124</sup> In arguing that a self-narrative is never completed and subject to continual reinterpretations, Ricoeur argues that 'We do not cease to re-interpret the narrative identity that constitutes us in the light of stories handed down to us by our culture. In this sense our self-understanding presents the same traits of traditionality as the understanding of a literary

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<sup>123</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 246.

<sup>124</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator,' trans. J.N. Kraay and A.J. Scholten in *Facts and Values: Philosophical Reflections from Western and Non-Western Perspectives*, ed. M.C. Doeser and J.N. Kraay (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 122-23.

work does. In this way we learn to become the *narrator of our own story* without completely becoming the author of our life.<sup>125</sup> With the movement from referring to a ‘writer’ or ‘reader’ towards the ‘narrator’ of a story we do see a dramatic shift in the understanding of the relation of the individual to the self-narrative. But how is this so? Ricoeur argues that authoring and narrating are not synonymous, and that we are never the authors of our lives, but the narrators of them. But are the author of a narrative and its narrator not identical? This is a difficult question, and one I want to look at briefly. Ricoeur is saying that not everything in a life-narrative is created *ex nihilo*; insofar as the paradigm of literary authorship is based on creation out of nothing it must be rejected. Given Christman’s critique, I agree with Ricoeur about the necessity of rejecting this paradigm, but do not accept that we need to go so far as to replace the idea of self-authorship with the notion of self-narration. My reason is the difficulty of distinguishing the author of the work from its narrator.

There may be good reason to separate the narrator from the author in some instances. It just seems obviously the case that in certain stories the narrator and the author are not the same person. These obvious instances are certain fictional stories involving first person narration. A good example is the novel *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Nabokov was asked about the strength of his ‘sense of the immorality of the relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita,’ in the novel. He responded, ‘No, it is not *my* sense of the immorality of the Humbert Humbert-Lolita relationship that is strong; it is Humbert's sense. *He* cares, I do not.’<sup>126</sup> In saying this, Nabokov disowns the thoughts and feelings of the novel’s

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<sup>125</sup> Ricoeur, ‘Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator,’ 131.

<sup>126</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, ‘The Art of Fiction No. 40,’ interview by Herbert Gold in *The Paris Review*, accessed at <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4310/the-art-of-fiction-no-40-vladimir-nabokov> on 2/14/12.

narrator. What Humbert desires and cares about, Nabokov does not care about. They cannot be identified with one another.

However, if *Lolita* is a literary work in which the narrator is closer to a character in the story, in other instances the narrator seems to be much more closely related to the author. Examples include autobiographies and autobiographical novels. Even if we allow that the narrator is artfully created by the author in order to communicate her intention, it is hard to say in such instances that the narrator is distinct from the author, simply because the use of the first person can only pick out the author, and no one else.<sup>127</sup> In such instances we may be inclined to speak about a ‘narrative voice’ that the author employs, and to say that this is not the same as the voice of the author, but this does not warrant making a strict separation between narrator and author.

While in some instances we can distinguish author from narrator, in others it seems they are the same. And there is a further reason for rejecting Ricoeur’s distinction between the author and the narrator when it comes to self-narratives. Though dispensing with the paradigm of the author composing a literary narrative and replacing it with the paradigm of the narrator does away with the notion that a self-narrative is created out of nothing, I suggest that it takes us too far in the opposite direction. Under the paradigm of a narrator, the creator of a self-narrative is given no control, because what the narrator does is always determined by the author. And surely Ricoeur does not mean to say that we have *no* influence over who we are. Or, if he does, then he is

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<sup>127</sup> Were the suggestion to be made that the ‘I’ in such instances picks out a *persona* rather than a person, we could do no better than quote Lionel Trilling on the paradoxical nature of this view, which he ascribes to T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Andre Gide: ‘For all their intention of impersonality they figure in our minds exactly as persons, as personalities, of a large exemplary kind, asking, each one of them, what his own self is and whether or not he is being true to it, drawing us to the emulation of their self-scrutiny. Their statements about the necessity of transcending or extirpating the personal self we take to be an expression of the fatigues which that self is fated to endure.’ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 7-8.



mistaken, for while I cannot control some of the elements of myself, in many other instances I can and do.

Yet Ricoeur's examples of self-narration may offer a different picture of what is involved in being a narrator than I have given. Ricoeur speaks of 'stories not yet told.'<sup>128</sup> For Ricoeur, stories exist in an inchoate form in the happenings of life. Beginning, middle and end are already in place, waiting to be synthesized through the act of narration. Life contains potential stories, inchoate narratives waiting to be narrated. Two examples Ricoeur provides are the process through which a psychoanalyst develops a coherent narrative out of the bits of lived history presented by a patient, and the way in which a judge tries to understand a suspect by picking through the tangle of complications in which the latter is trapped.<sup>129</sup> These two cases are examples of instances in which the connection between apparently unrelated events requires articulation. The narrative developed by the judge or the psychoanalyst brings out this connection. But the judge and psychoanalyst are not the authors of the events in question.

These events might be 'stories not yet told' in that the events have already happened. However, in order for a story to result more is needed than for a voice to enunciate what nature or circumstance brought to pass. Even in the case of judge and psychoanalyst, whose status as narrators must surely remain open to question, more than articulation occurs. The individual picks and chooses: certain events are unimportant and can be omitted from the narrative. Furthermore, the individual will give form to the account of events. This is more than mere articulation, and more than narration as Ricoeur understands it, for it involves deliberate choices of inclusion and omission, even of changing the order of events to suit the author's purposes. A

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<sup>128</sup> Ricoeur, 'Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator,' 129.

<sup>129</sup> Ricoeur, 'Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator,' 129.

good example is Thoreau's *Walden*, which condenses the more than two years that Thoreau spent at Walden Pond into a single calendar year for the sake of exploiting the literary symbolism of the seasons.

Therefore, the distinction between author and narrator is unhelpful in responding to Christman. However, what I take to be Ricoeur's point, namely that self-narration is never an instance of creation *ex nihilo*, seems fair. We can see this by rethinking how we understand authorship. Since what is in question is whether literary authorship is an example of creation out of nothing, I want to look at an aspect of authorship that clearly requires an author to build upon something outside of her control. This is literary tradition and convention.

In looking at what motivates a poet to write, Northrop Frye diagnoses the stimulus as being contact with the work of other writers. 'The impulse to write can only come from previous contact with literature, and the formal inspiration, the poetic structure that crystallizes around the new event, can only be derived from other poems. Hence, while every new poem is a new and unique creation, it is also a reshaping of familiar conventions of literature; otherwise it would not be recognizable as literature at all.'<sup>130</sup> Frye speaks about poetry, but his comments are true of all literary works. Literary production is possible only as a result of having read literary works, both because it is reading that inspires an author to write, and the adoption of a literary structure can only come given familiarity with literature. Frye rejects the picture of artistic genius we receive from Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* and the image of the poet as the mouthpiece of the gods that Plato paints in the *Ion*.<sup>131</sup> Literature is not produced in isolation from a tradition. It

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<sup>130</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies of Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), 125.

<sup>131</sup> In the *Ion*, Plato has Socrates say, 'In this more than anything, then, I think, the god is showing us, so that we should be in no doubt about it, that these beautiful poems are not human, not even *from* human beings, but are divine and from gods; that poets are nothing but representatives of the gods, possessed by whoever possesses them.' Kant

is created via the acceptance of conventions or perhaps the subversion of them. Without literary influences, new literature would not result.<sup>132</sup>

Obviously this does not involve rejecting of the notion that the author is the most significant element when it comes to the creation of a literary work. We would have no *Metamorphosis* without Kafka. However, it does involve rejecting the idea that what we read in a work of literature is ever purely the author's voice. We hear from the author in a literary work—the 'I' refers to a person rather than a 'persona'—but what we hear is shaped by literary convention and tradition.

But how does this address Christman's critique of narrative selfhood? His objection is that the narrative conception implies that who we are is a matter of authorial fiat; it leaves no room for luck, historical and social factors, and questions pertaining to embodiment, factors that no human author can control. However, as Frye points out, writing is driven and shaped by literary tradition and convention. An author responds to what he has read. But neither literary history nor literary convention are subject to an author's influence. Authorship is defined by elements far beyond an individual's control. It responds to history, luck and fate by engaging with convention and tradition. To be an author therefore requires that we embrace what we can control and the narrative that we produce is never a matter of fiat.

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argues that 'Fine art is possible only as the product of genius,' which he defines as 'the innate mental predisposition (ingenium) through which nature gives the rule to art.' See Plato, *Ion*, trans. Paul Woodruff in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 534e; and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 174-75.

<sup>132</sup> In talking of 'influences' here, I am allowing that a literary tradition can be something fairly amorphous, though nonetheless effectual for that. This is merely in order to acknowledge that while all writers are readers, they are not all readers of the type of literary criticism that would give them an explicit understanding of literary structures. Not all writers of war memoirs or war novels have read Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*; which is not to say that it might not have helped them had they done so.

This argument has much in common with Ricoeur's. It rejects the view that a self-narrative results from an individual composing in isolation from the effects of history, luck and fate. It takes the view that an author is not a being who composes freely and independently. Where it differs from Ricoeur's view is in avoiding the distinction between author and narrator, which is hard to make.

Therefore, I have tried to show that while the narrative conception seems vulnerable to Christman's objections, it can accommodate them when we rethink the analogy that dominates the narrative view of self. Reading the work that has gone before him inspires an author to write, and convention shapes the way in which he writes. A literary author is a figure, who far from having everything under his control, is subject to much that is beyond his influence. It therefore still seems apt to talk of my being the author of myself, rather than my self-manager or literary critic.

### *2.6 Diachronicity*

In criticizing the narrative conception of self, Galen Strawson addresses what he takes to be its central failing, namely its emphasis on the diachronicity of the self. In this section I want to take issue with Strawson's claims. Understanding myself in anything other than diachronic terms is nonsensical. Engaging with this critique will further enrich our understanding of the narrative account.

Strawson argues that on narrative interpretations, someone who does not live diachronically, but rather in the moment, possessing what he calls an 'episodic' existence, could not be said to have a self. This view, he says, is mistaken and prejudicial. We may choose to understand ourselves in

episodic terms. A diachronic, he says, ‘naturally figures [oneself], the self or person one now experiences oneself to be, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future.’<sup>133</sup> In contrast, an episodic ‘does not figure [oneself], the self or person one now experiences oneself to be, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the further future.’<sup>134</sup> For Strawson, possessing a narrative conception of self, under which an individual sees or experiences life as ‘a narrative or story of some sort, or at least a collection of stories,’ implies the acceptance of the diachronic view, so that narrativity implies diachronicity.<sup>135</sup>

I agree with Strawson that narrativity implies diachronicity. However, I do not agree with the conclusions he takes to follow from attaching diachronicity to narrative in this manner. On the basis that an individual need not think of herself in diachronic terms, Strawson concludes that the self is not narratively structured. Moreover, he resists the further notion that episodics cannot be moral. He argues that, ‘Many think that a good human life must be both Narrative and Diachronic. They think that an Episodic person cannot live a fully moral life. An Episodic, they say, cannot properly inhabit the realms of responsibility, duty and obligation—not to mention those of friendship, loyalty, and so on.’<sup>136</sup> For Strawson, narrative theorists unfairly regard an episodic life as a necessarily impoverished one; a narrative existence is the only life that counts as fully lived, and is therefore the norm for human beings.<sup>137</sup>

I disagree with Strawson that a self can be episodic. I cannot see how someone can sincerely regard his life in the way Strawson claims that an episodic does, namely as neither having

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<sup>133</sup> Galen Strawson, ‘Episodic Ethics,’ in *Narrative and Understanding Persons: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 60*, ed. Daniel D. Hutto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 86.

<sup>134</sup> Strawson, ‘Episodic Ethics,’ 86.

<sup>135</sup> Strawson, ‘Episodic Ethics,’ 86.

<sup>136</sup> Strawson, ‘Episodic Ethics,’ 86-87.

<sup>137</sup> Strawson, ‘Episodic Ethics,’ 86-87.

existed in the past nor going to exist in the future. Though someone may give little or no thought to their past or future, it strikes me as implausible to argue that someone does not experience themselves as having existed in the past and not likely to exist down the line. The reason for this is connected with much that I have already discussed, namely the linguistic character of human existence and the fact that the self is irretrievably ensnared in a social context, which includes a history.

We can best embark on this response to Strawson by turning to arguments Christman raises against Strawson. Christman argues that plans and projects of our own are essential to practical reason and inescapable parts of human life and that therefore we cannot abandon diachronicity as a fundamental feature of human life.<sup>138</sup> Though he does not endorse the narrative conception, Christman shows that Strawson's non-narrative, non-diachronic, episodic conception of self fails to account for the way in which we make use of plans and projects.

I concur with Christman's objections to Strawson. And there are further reasons for concluding that the notion of an episodic self is flawed. One reason is the sheer difficulty of imagining what a self detached from its past and its future would look like. This strikes me as an obstacle too great to permit endorsement of the episodic self. Strawson is too quick to claim that he and others live episodic lives, without considering what it actually entails. One of the examples Strawson provides of an episodic self is the novelist Henry James. He draws on James' note that once having written a masterpiece he considers it not as his own work but as the work of another person. 'He has no doubt that he is the same human being as the author of that book, but he doesn't feel he is the same self or person as the author of that book.'<sup>139</sup> Yet the use of language

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<sup>138</sup> Christman, *The Politics of Persons*, 103.

<sup>139</sup> Strawson, 'Episodic Ethics,' 85.

itself is, along with practical reason, one example of a facet of human life that suggests the diachronicity of the self. I have already referred to Martha Nussbaum's discussion of language, in which she focuses on the superfluity of meanings that can become associated with words and phrases. Nussbaum highlights the fact that for any individual, language has a history over the course of which words and phrases evolve through accruing associations. The language I use has evolved throughout a past. Moreover, it seems reasonable to conclude that it will continue to do so. Given this idiosyncratic history to the language we employ, and because language use is a fundamental element of human lives, we must conclude that for an individual to deny that they have a past and that they will have a future is nonsensical.

There is a further reason for rejecting Strawson's views. He seems to favor the idea that the relation of an individual to her past is entirely deliberate, as though she could decide to disown her past and think no more of it.<sup>140</sup> However, this characterization is shown to be false by the phenomenon of involuntary memory, in which we remember by accident, at unexpected times, and in response to odd and often wholly inexplicable prompts. A famous characterization of this kind of relation to the past is to be found in Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*. Proust describes how a madeleine (a cookie) dipped in tea prompts a catalogue of recollections. Merely declaring that 'the person to whom this happened was not me,' does not sever us from our past. There will always be a question of where a series of memories that suddenly dawn have come from and to whom they belong if not me.

Therefore Strawson is mistaken in arguing that there is such a thing as an episodic self. Though someone might choose to focus on the present, past and future are integral to lived experience.

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<sup>140</sup> Strawson seems to take the happy-go-lucky person to exemplify an episodic person. Strawson, 'Episodic Ethics,' 87.

Consequently, the diachronicity of the narrative self is no objection to it. In fact, the centrality of diachronicity to the narrative conception seems an argument in its favor.

### *2.7 Prescriptiveness*

Thus far, I have characterized the narrative conception as a way of thinking about the self in purely descriptive terms. Narrative can give us a sense of ourselves. However, narrativity may also have a normative aspect, insofar as an individual's desire to preserve a coherent self-narrative can incline him towards one action rather than another.

Velleman is one thinker who emphasizes this facet of a narrative account of the self. Certain of our choices are shaped not simply by calculating the immediate goods that can be achieved through performing an action, but by considering where such an action might fit into the narrative that defines us. As Velleman says:

Our decisions about staying in a marriage or degree program or career are often aimed at making our past investments pay off, despite their worsening prospects, as if we were determined to commit the fallacy of sunk costs. Are we being irrational? I think not. We are seeking not just any payoff but a payoff that will bring closure to our past efforts, because the story of efforts rewarded provided the emotional cadence of hopes fulfilled, which has a comprehensible meaning.<sup>141</sup>

Velleman cites this as an instance of 'narrative rationality,' which is a form of instrumental reason wherein our decisions are made based upon a construal of the resolution they will bring to an emotional cadence. Continually abandoning our projects in favor of others would leave a

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<sup>141</sup> J. David Velleman, 'Reply to Catriona Mackenzie,' *Philosophical Explorations* 10 (2007): 286.



person lacking a sense of what their life had been about, that is, ‘how they fit into a story with an emotionally intelligible arc.’<sup>142</sup>

I agree with Velleman that the desire for a satisfying narrative arc can contribute to our reasoning, though it need not always do so. Therefore, narrative selfhood may also have this further, prescriptive aspect that goes along with its primary function as a means of composing ourselves. Thus, while a narrative is, on the narrative conception of self, as Schechtman has it, ‘an organizing principle of our lives,’ it is also a means by which we can resolve which course of action we ought to take. There are certainly other elements that go into our decisions, for example, our concern for others, our moral principles, and legal principles and constraints. Indeed, these may be more significant factors than narrative concerns when it comes to deciding what we ought to do. However, all I have tried to suggest in this section is that a narrative may not simply describe the past, but also weigh into our decision about what to do next.

## 2.8 Narrative Realism

Before closing I want to consider an alternative version of the narrative conception. So far I have been working off the assumption that individuals develop their self-narratives in the manner of an author writing a novel. The process through which an individual constructs a self is introspective and self-reflective. However, an alternative version of the narrative conception does not take this approach. John J. Davenport advocates ‘narrative realist’ when it comes to understanding the self. He argues that selfhood is composed not of a constructed narrative but a lived narrative. He presents ‘a form of *realism* about life-narratives that arise even in

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<sup>142</sup> Velleman, ‘Reply to Catriona Mackenzie,’ 286.

prereflective experience, which contrasts with various constructivist narrative theories.’<sup>143</sup>

Davenport rejects the constructivist element that I have highlighted as a key feature of the narrative conception. He suggests instead that a self is composed of a ‘narrative.’ A narrative is not a thing; specifically it is not an artistic product. Davenport defines it as ‘an ontologically basic mode of personal existence, definitive of the type of being who forms a practical identity in time.’<sup>144</sup> A narrative is distinct from a narrative insofar as whereas the latter is constructed through reflection, the former is produced through being lived.

But then where does the narrative element come in? For Davenport, it emerges as a result of the fact that lived experience itself is narratively structured. ‘Action is one of several types of experiences that form narrative connections as an agent lives her life largely prior to autobiographical reflection and other narration concerning that life.’<sup>145</sup> Davenport argues that the link between events in a human life is not always simply causal but may also be narrative. Importantly, he argues that this is true even in instances in which the significance of this connection is never thematized by the agent or understood by people who interact with her.<sup>146</sup> Again, Davenport’s narrative realist or ‘narrative’ account does not involve the introspective, self-reflective construction that I have argued is characteristic of narrative conceptions of self.

So is this an objection to the account I have given of the narrative conception? I do not think it is. I dispute the notion that the connection between Davenport’s notion of a narrative and a narrative is as close as he thinks. Admittedly, Davenport himself takes this connection to be fairly weak. A narrative is ‘analogous’ to a narrative; it is ‘*like* a told narrative in diachronic

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<sup>143</sup> John J. Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality: From Frankfurt and MacIntyre to Kierkegaard* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 8.

<sup>144</sup> Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality*, 71.

<sup>145</sup> Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality*, 8.

<sup>146</sup> Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality*, 72.

form.’<sup>147</sup> We need not dispute this resemblance, even if we must draw attention to the fact that mere diachronicity seems like a weak condition for claiming a connection between narratives and narravives. There is much more to narratives than diachronicity and many forms of discourse that are not narratives are diachronic. So if this is the only resemblance, we have grounds for questioning the connection.

But we should also note that there is a significant difference between narratives and narravives. Davenport argues that ‘Unlike a narrative, a living narravive is incomplete and still growing, and modally extended into nonactual but possible continuation into the future, which are closed only at the agent’s death.’<sup>148</sup> To my mind this amounts to a very great difference between a narrative and a narravive, perhaps to the extent that we can question whether there is even an analogy to be drawn between them. The use of the term ‘incomplete’ seems ambiguous to me, because it is questionable as to what it means for a narrative to be complete. I take Davenport to mean that what is written down in a narrative does not change by expanding beyond its furthest limits, whereas a narravive does change in this respect.

But this clearly breaks the analogy between narratives and narravives. The reasons stem from an understanding of what narrative consists in, which I will not arrive at until a later chapter, but I will make two brief points here. First, narratives are predominantly retrospective. They do bear on the future, and in particular instances extend into it, but the natural tense of narratives is the past. We can imagine writing a narrative that is anticipatory rather than retrospective, but we would be inclined to call it a project or plan, which is very different from the literary stories that exemplify narratives. Even the best-laid plans are tentative in some way. We ask whether a

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<sup>147</sup> Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality*, 72, my emphasis.

<sup>148</sup> Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality*, 72.

narrative is realistic; we ask if a project is feasible. Second, part of what makes a piece of discourse a narrative is having a beginning, middle and end, and these are not given but selected. Yet it seems impossible to attribute this kind of structure to experience. We might claim that lives begin with birth and end with death, but death is not where self-narratives end. It is true that we could read a narrative structure into an action, the beginning being the impulse that produced it and the end being the goal that is achieved, but we might raise the question of how this occurs on any broader scale than such isolated instances.<sup>149</sup> And in any case, is the goal of an action really its end? This is the kind of question we seem able to answer only retrospectively.

Therefore, I have tried to show that there are reasons for suggesting that the resemblance between narratives and narravives is weak at best to begin with, and that the analogy between them breaks down when the retrospectivity of narratives and the selection of beginnings and endings is taken into account. A narravive is not a narrative, meaning that narrative realism as proposed by Davenport is not a version of the narrative conception of self. As a result, we are justified in maintaining that being a construction is a necessary element of the narrative conception.

## *2.9 Conclusion*

Therefore, in this section I have defined the ventral features of the narrative conception of self. Its central features as follows:

- (i) The narrative self is a construction
- (ii) The construction is narrative in form

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<sup>149</sup> As Christman suggests. See Christman, *The Politics of Persons*, p. 75.

(iii) This narrative is produced in a social context

(iv) A narrative can account for the role of luck and fate

(v) A narrative may be diachronic

(vi) A narrative may be normative as well as descriptive.

I take these to be the key elements of the narrative conception of self. Not all the proponents of the narrative conception include each of these elements in their account, but they all feature substantially in the literature on the narrative conception.

In this chapter I have also distinguished narrative realist accounts from non-realist accounts. For reasons I have given, I take only non-realist accounts to be instances of the narrative conception. Davenport's suggestion that we can draw an analogy between a narrative and the narrative he describes becomes incoherent when we think in even the briefest way about what a narrative involves.

In this chapter we have also seen how the narrative conception of the self retains the commitment to unity and coherency that was a feature of the four views I considered in the first chapter. What guarantees unity and coherency on the narrative conception is the narrative itself, which brings together elements that would otherwise be disconnected and orders the self by endowing it with a narrative structure and trajectory.

At times in this chapter I have also defended the narrative conception of self. When I have done so, I have been motivated by the desire to deepen our understanding of this idea rather than any agreement with its account of the self. As will become apparent in the next chapter, there is a

further reason to disagree with the narrative conception, one that will suggest we should abandon it as an account of the self.

## *Chapter 3 The Content of the Self*

### *3.1 Introduction*

In the previous two chapters I presented several conceptions of the self. In the first I described the accounts of Plato, Descartes, Frankfurt and Korsgaard. I drew out of these accounts a concern with unity and coherency that all four of these conceptions had in common. In the second chapter, I focused on the narrative conception of the self. This chapter was largely exegetical, but I also responded to potential objections, not in order to reject the narrative conception, but to enrich our understanding of it.

I will now turn my attention to another critique of the narrative conception of the self, this time with different purposes in mind. From now on, when I approach the narrative conception with a critical mindset, it will be for the sake of advancing my own arguments in this dissertation. I want to shift our understanding of the relation between narrative and selfhood, and it will require the remainder of this dissertation to achieve this. The critique in this chapter will be the first step in ceasing to think of a self-narrative as the means by which we create ourselves and adopting the view that it is a means by which we acknowledge ourselves.

The critique in this section stems from the work of Harry Frankfurt on the internal and external. As we have seen, this is the question of where the self begins and ends. It was resolved in Frankfurt's case through second-order desires and the concept of identification. As applied to the narrative conception of self, it will be the question of which thoughts, desires and events from my life are parts of my self-narrative. I will describe how reflection on this issue leads us to question the coherence of the narrative conception. I intend to argue that the narrative conception

does not have a good response to it, and that this should prompt us to abandon the narrative conception as it stands.

In this chapter I will take on two tasks. First, I will argue that the distinction between the internal and the external, which arose in Frankfurt's work, can be applied to the narrative conception of self. Second, I will demonstrate that the narrative conception has no compelling way to separate the internal from the external, then claim that this gives us cause to reassess the narrative conception.

### *3.2 The Hierarchical Self versus the Narrative Self*

To begin, I want to distinguish Frankfurt's view from the narrative conception. I am not claiming that the issues Frankfurt raises automatically apply to the narrative conception of self. It will take a separate argument to show that these issues do apply. I will give a brief account of Frankfurt's hierarchical conception of the self and contrast it with the narrative self.

The best way to understand what is meant by hierarchy is to recall what I said about the narrative conception of self. Simply put, my self-narrative is the story of my life. It is therefore linear, though of course it is more than simply a chronology of what has happened to me.<sup>150</sup> In contrast, we might describe Frankfurt's conception of the self as not linear but hierarchical. Whereas on the narrative conception the important thing might be what I thought or desired and when, on Frankfurt's understanding of the self, the question is how I feel about my thoughts and desires, namely, whether I desire to have them. These desires about my desires—my 'second order' desires about my 'first-order' desires—are vital parts of the self. For Frankfurt, selfhood is not

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<sup>150</sup> As Arthur Danto shows in the contrast he develops between an ideal chronicle of events as they happen and a written history. See Arthur Danto, 'Narrative Sentences,' in *History and Theory 2* (1962): 154.



just a matter of a desire I had or of the actions I performed, but whether I desired to have that desire or not.

An example may assist us in making this comparison. Let us take an hypothetical person called F. He is an alcoholic and drinks to excess every night. It seems like his nights of heavy drinking will be an important part of his self. Presumably, were F to compose his self-narrative, his nights of heavy drinking would figure prominently. If his self-narrative tells F who he is, then it will simply be the case that being a heavy drinker is just part of who F is.

Frankfurt's hierarchical approach to the self sees things differently. On his account, it is not enough to say that F's nights of heavy drinking are important elements of his past and that therefore he is a heavy drinker. Instead, he would have us ask how F feels about engaging in his nights of heavy drinking. Since he is an alcoholic, and therefore an addict, he is not completely free and autonomous. On Frankfurt's account this must figure into our understanding of who F is. It might be the case that while F desires to go drinking, actually he would prefer not to desire to drink at all. There is a dissonance between F's desire and what he desires to desire.

This should make it obvious that the narrative conception and Frankfurt's conception are very different. This is reflected in their turning up contrary answers to the question of who F is. But interestingly, at one point, Frankfurt recasts the distinction between the internal and the external in terms of a personal history (that is, a self-narrative):

Of course, every movement of a person's body is an event in his history; in this sense it is his movement, and no one else's. In this same sense, all the events in the history of a person's mind are his too. If this is all that is meant, then it is undeniably true that a passion can no more occur without belonging to someone than a movement of a living human body

can occur without being someone's movement. But this is only a gross literal truth, which masks distinctions that are as valuable in the one case as they are in the other.<sup>151</sup>

We could imagine composing a history of ourselves, a self-narrative that includes every event that has ever befallen us, every action we have ever undertaken, and every emotion we have ever experienced. Yet for Frankfurt this history is not necessarily identical with who we are, because it includes movements and passions that are not to be identified with us.

### *3.2 The Applicability of the Internal and External to the Narrative Self*

Even if the two views have unity and coherency in common, there are profound differences between Frankfurt's account and the narrative conception. So can issues that arise with respect to an hierarchical conception of the self really bear on the narrative conception? The immediate response must be that we cannot expect this. However, I want to argue that the theme of the internal and the external is just as relevant to the narrative conception as it is to an hierarchical view of the self. I will first deal with an objection to the claim that the issues we find in Frankfurt can be applied to the narrative view of the self. I will then present a positive argument in favor of seeing the internal and the external as a significant theme for the narrative conception.

The reason for claiming that the theme of the external and the internal does not apply to the narrative conception of self is the marked difference between this view and Frankfurt's conception. I have described the narrative conception as an horizontal view of the self, whereas Frankfurt articulates a vertical view of the self in which we possess some desires that pertain to

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<sup>151</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, p. 61.

others of a lower order. We might think these two accounts so far opposed that themes arising out of the one could not possibly be informative with respect to the other.

This strikes me as false. Though the internal and external are problems that arise in the context of Frankfurt's attempt to describe the self as he sees it, it is not the case that the questions of the internal and external pertain specifically to an hierarchical conception of the self. Indeed, this is to mistake the order of the problems at hand. For Frankfurt, an hierarchical conception is necessary precisely because of the issue of the internal and the external. Thus, rather than the internal and the external being an issue that arises out of the hierarchical conception of the self, an hierarchical conception of self is necessary in Frankfurt's opinion precisely because it is able to deal with the problem posed by the uncertain status of some of our desires and passions. In fact, as Frankfurt says, the issue of the internal and the external was first discussed by Aristotle, who holds neither a narrative nor an hierarchical view of the self.<sup>152</sup> We might call Aristotle's account of the self an iterative account, one that involves the construction of character by repeated acts.<sup>153</sup>

Of course, we cannot expect the overlap between the problems raised with respect to very different accounts to be exact. But, as I will explain, even if the theme of the internal and external does not arise with respect to the narrative conception of self in quite the same way as it does in Frankfurt's writings, this is because the narrative conception has a broader understanding of what is a candidate for inclusion in the self than Frankfurt does. Moreover, the issue of what lies inside the self could still arise for this account of the self; there is nothing to stop old

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<sup>152</sup> Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>153</sup> Thanks to Emily Grosholz for this terminological suggestion.

philosophical questions reemerging with respect to new subject matter and thereby enriching our understanding.

Yet if there is nothing in principle to prevent us from taking the questions that Frankfurt discusses and applying them to the narrative conception of the self, the distinction between the internal and external cannot be made in the same way when it comes to the narrative conception. The narrative conception has a much broader understanding of what might be involved in the self than Frankfurt. He concentrates on actions, passions and desires, and asks which of them constitute me and which do not. Note, however, that the narrative conception of the self does not limit itself to these three aspects. For instance, in the last chapter I explained, in light of an objection from Christman, how the narrative conception of the self could account for factors outside my control, such as the language I speak and my social background, by rethinking the way in which we understand an author.

Any narrative worthy of the name acknowledges that individuals are not masters or mistresses of their own destiny, that they are not simply agents but also patients who suffer as a result of being subject to circumstances beyond their control, and that these circumstances comprise part of who they are. (This is the great insight of tragedy.) Accidents or quirks of fate befall them despite their best intentions. One example would be Philip Carey from W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, whom it would be impossible to describe without referring to his club foot. Another would be Thomas Glahn from Knut Hamsun's *Pan*, who accidentally kills Eva, whom he loves, by setting off an explosion in tribute to Edvarda. A narrative conception of self therefore implies that we should not take simply desires or even actions to compose the self, but also what is well outside our control, such as features of our bodies and accidents we suffer.

But how does this alter the way we apply the notion of the internal and the external to the narrative conception of self, and does the way in which we apply it alter it beyond recognition? On the contrary, the issues at stake remain unaltered; all that has changed is the way they are articulated. We are still asking what constitutes me, still asking who I am; the only significant shift has been seeing that, on the narrative account of the self, the lines I draw between the internal and the external, what is part of me and what is not part of me, are not going to be restricted to actions, desires or passions with respect to which I may or may not have been the *agent*, but also actions, desires and passions with regards which I may have been the *patient*. We might include among this latter group wide-spread disasters and wide-spread social ills that have affected me. Implicitly, therefore, determining what is a part of me and what is not a part of me will not be resolved by referring to a desire. It would be an instance not merely of willful blindness but foolishness to say, for instance, that the only events that form a part of me are those that I desired to have happen to me. If we ask Frankfurt's question of the narrative account of the self, we must be prepared for the answer to be very different.

### *3.3 The Internal and the External and the Narrative Self*

I have shown that the issue of the internal and external arises with respect to the narrative conception of self. It remains to be seen exactly how the narrative conception makes this separation. How does the narrative conception distinguish between what is part of the self and what is not part of it? Frankfurt dealt with this issue through higher order desires. How will the narrative conception furnish a solution? It cannot be that the narrative conception separates the internal from the external by saying that a desire solves the problem. I said it would be foolishness to claim that the events that make me who I am are only those I wanted to have

happen to me. This leaves room for the idea that who I am is made up by the lies I tell myself, an unsustainable position.

Yet why it is unsustainable? Perhaps who I am is nothing more than the picture I want to present to the world, and there is nothing more to it than that. This seems particularly relevant to the narrative conception. More than one literary autobiography shows what an author wants to present to the world and nothing more. Novels also often contain such characters. If we read Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, in the figure of the Baron de Charlus we find someone who takes himself to be simply who he wants to be. His occasional outbreaks of furious rage seem not even to register with him; they almost seem never to have happened so far as he is concerned. In our own lives we have all come across people who are happy to let aspects of themselves fall out of the picture because they do not want them to figure in their idea of who they are. Is an account of the self in which a desire determines which parts of my life really constitute me, therefore wholly misguided?

I maintain that it is. For reasons that will emerge later in this dissertation I do not want to dismiss the relevance of self-deception to selfhood. However, the idea that we are no more than who we desire ourselves to be seems like a form of myth-making that is at odds with any substantial philosophical notion of selfhood. In second chapter I noted that the narrative view of self held the self to be a construction, but that this did not mean that it was fictional in the sense of being unreal. The idea that who I am is determined by simply who I want to be seems to lead selfhood into the realms of fiction and fantasy.

Thus, it seems right to reject the notion that desires are the basis of the division between the internal and external when it comes to the narrative conception of self. Yet a more

straightforward alternative is staring us in the face. Should the narrative itself not constitute the line between the internal and the external? That is, should what gets included in my self-narrative not be called the internal, what constitutes me, while what lies outside the self is called the external, what is not part of me?

At least on the narrative conception of self, the answer is yes. But though this distinguishes the internal from the external, it does not solve any problems. Though we might say that what constitutes me is what is included in my self-narrative, in just the same way that Frankfurt argues that what constitutes me is a desire, action or passion to which I have made a decisive commitment (one I have identified with), there is still the sizeable question of what warrants the inclusion of a particular feeling or event from my life in my self-narrative in the first place.

Let me clarify. In writing a novel, an author makes choices about what to include in his work. He goes through a process of selection whereby he determines the events that are to be part of the narrative. He also makes use of a certain narrative voice through which he communicates these events, giving them their weight and meaning. In the novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych* by Leo Tolstoy, Ivan lives the happy life of a moderately successful Russian bureaucrat until he falls ill and dies. By the end of the novella, Tolstoy wants to communicate that before he fell ill, Ivan lived a life in which, for all his happiness, he was oblivious to what was going on around him, and that only his impending death made him see life as it really is. One of the events that befalls Ivan during the course of his happy life as a bureaucrat is the death of his young son, an occurrence whose scant importance for Ivan is demonstrated by its occupying no more than a sentence in the text. This communicates Ivan's obliviousness and the nature of his way of life during these years.

A second example is similar. In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert stops at a barbershop in a town called Kasbeam to have a haircut. Humbert narrates the passage as follows:

In Kasbeam a very old barber gave me a very mediocre haircut: he babbled of a baseball-playing son of his, and, at every explodent, spat into my neck, and every now and then wiped his glasses on my sheet-wrap, or interrupted his tremulous scissor work to produce faded newspaper clippings, and so inattentive was I that it came as a shock to realize as he pointed to an easelled photograph among the ancient gray lotions, that the mustached young ball player had been dead for the last thirty years.<sup>154</sup>

This passage reveals not only Humbert's obliviousness, but also his attitude towards that obliviousness. Coming at the end of a very long sentence, the realization that the barber's son is dead is presented as a discovery that came far later than it should. This anticipates the understanding that Humbert develops late—too late—in the novel about just how little he knew about Lolita, whom he claims to love. In having his narrator tell of this incident in the manner that he does, Nabokov communicates not only the idea that single-mindedness results in obliviousness, but that for the single-minded and self-centered, an acknowledgment of one instance of obliviousness need not suffice to inspire self-reflection and the recognition of a flaw in their characters.

These examples illustrate the way in which we find key authorial choices being made in the course of a literary narrative, including both a choice of which events to include in a work and a choice about how to describe them. This may in part be in response to a literary tradition, but this does not mean that an author is locked into the choices he makes. Most literary novels would

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<sup>154</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (London: Penguin, 1995), 213.



exclude acts of defecation and masturbation as insignificant or uninteresting; in James Joyce's *Ulysses* they are the substance of the book.

Now, in a literary narrative, an author's choices about what to include can be explained by at least four factors. Exigencies of *plot* are one example; in order for the plot to unfold, it may be necessary to omit certain events. Exigencies of *character* may also necessitate the inclusion of some events at the expense of others. Exigencies of *theme* or *message* might make the inclusion of some events imperative. Finally, exigencies of *form* or *style* may also determine the content of the literary narrative.

Note, there is no *a priori* here. The question of which of the four exigencies will influence the creation of the literary work—or in what order the author will prioritize such exigencies—is not necessary, but contingent. A Nabokov or a Gustave Flaubert might claim that form and style are the only qualities by which a work should be judged, and determine what belongs in the work on that basis. A Fyodor Dostoevsky may consider character or theme to be most significant, and decide on the work's contents on those grounds.<sup>155</sup> With all respect to different views on what constitutes 'good literature,' no one of style, plot, character, or theme has an exclusive or overriding claim when it comes to the evaluation of a literary work. Similarly, no one of the exigencies given above has an overriding claim when it comes to what an author should include

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<sup>155</sup> My selection of these authors and attributing to them the views that I do may seem arbitrary, and though it is by no means meant to represent the complete view of the authors in question on their art, I do think it gives a general characterization of their goals as writers. Flaubert claimed that form and style were the only significant features of his novels and spent months revising *Madame Bovary* (though he also painstakingly researched *Salammbô*). Nabokov echoed Flaubert in his lectures on literature, though in his lectures on Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, he seems to emphasize the ethical relevance of literature: '*Beauty plus pity*—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art.' My view of Dostoevsky comes from Nabokov's lectures on Russian literature, in which he dismisses the former as a stylist, as well as from a quotation from Ernest Hemmingway's *A Moveable Feast*: 'How can a man write so badly, so unbelievably badly, and make you feel so deeply.' See Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 251; Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 104; Ernest Hemmingway, *A Moveable Feast: The Restored Edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 105.

in a narrative. However, there is always some operative principle—or a combination of them—that determines which events he should included.

Thus, a literary author has some exigency in mind by which he determines what will be included in a literary narrative. There may be more factors than the four I have given, but these four at least seem self-evident. The question now has to be asked, what is the operative principle that determines the contents of my self-narrative? It cannot be the same as the above; while the resemblance between self-narratives and literary narrative is a fundamental commitment of narrative selfhood, I am more than a story. In particular, the commitments to developing a rich and interesting character or a compelling plot seem antithetical to selfhood, at least if my self-narrative tells me who I am. At the very least, there is no reason why they should not lend themselves to delusion in the manner described above. What other candidates might there be?

The first obvious candidate is *truth*. And if my self-narrative is to constitute me, truthfulness must surely be one of its basic commitments. Yet what do we mean by truth here? Truth cannot be understood as completeness, since that would produce a bemusingly detailed self, and as I have already implied, omission of some elements is not a sin in narrating but a necessity.

Likewise, truth cannot be understood as representative accuracy (*verisimilitude*), because the basic tenet of the narrative conception of self is that the self is constructed; there is no self ‘already there’ to be represented. We will reject the notion of truth as correspondence as unhelpful for the same reasons. A final candidate, truth as disclosure or revelation will be similarly problematic. Revelatory of what? Disclosive of whom? On the narrative conception of self, they do not yet exist.

Marya Schechtman offers a possible answer to this problem based on something like representational accuracy in the form of her ‘reality constraint.’<sup>156</sup> According to this limitation, the narrative self-constitution view requires that an identity-constituting self-narrative fundamentally cohere with reality.<sup>157</sup> There are two aspects to this constraint. First, self-narratives must appreciate ‘obvious, observable facts.’<sup>158</sup> Second, self-narratives must be free from ‘grossly unsupportable inferences,’ that is, interpretative errors.<sup>159</sup> Does this reality constraint save the narrative conception from the criticism I have offered?

I do not think it does. The reality constraint leaves the key question unanswered. It states that a self-narrative must be factually accurate and free of sizeable interpretative errors, but does not say which facts must be accurately represented in my self-narrative. And Schechtman seems to acknowledge that this is a problem. She says that:

The depressed person, the suspicious person, the optimistic person, and the angry person might tell quite different narratives of the same events, but they are all comprehensible and in most cases it seems misguided to argue about which is the most accurate. For certain practical purposes (such as within the context of a discrimination suit), it is, of course, necessary to settle in favor of one narrative over another, but the difficulty and legitimacy and discomfort we usually feel in doing so only shows our willingness to grant legitimacy to a variety of perspectives.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> I am aware that Schechtman argues that the narrative conception of self need not involve ‘actually articulating the story of one’s life to oneself or anyone else,’ but that the narrative is simply an implicit way of organizing experience. However, if there is such a thing as an implicit narrative, then its implicitness does not make it immune to the criticism I have raised. See Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 114.

<sup>157</sup> Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 119.

<sup>158</sup> Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 122.

<sup>159</sup> Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 126.

<sup>160</sup> Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 128.

But the point would be that if my self-narrative tells me who I am, then we have more than the occasional practical reason to settle on one narrative rather than another. And at various times in my life most people are intermittently depressed, suspicious, optimistic and angry, meaning they will tell different stories about themselves at different times. And even if the reality constraint excludes factual errors and misinterpretations, it does not say which truths and correct interpretations must be included. Unless, that is, the criteria for accuracy is a truthful representation of myself, which is incoherent, as noted above.

We will have to reject notions that are along the same lines as truth, but slightly weaker, for the same reasons. For instance, we might claim that the deciding factor in determining what is part of my account of myself is faithfulness to who I am. However, the same problems as arose when we attempted to apply truth as the qualifying factor soon emerge. I cannot aim to be ‘faithful to who I am’ in developing my self-narrative, because it is precisely who I am that is in question.

A third possibility gives us more cause to reflect. Might we already have discussed the means for distinguishing between the internal and the external? Does not the narrative conception of self already contain criteria for excluding certain events from a self-narrative and including others? I am speaking of the unity and coherence that emerged as key characteristics of the narrative conception of self. Does the commitment to producing a unified and coherent narrative not itself determine what belongs in the narrative?

This is not the case. A self-narrative can only begin to be made unified and coherent once an author has already committed himself to particular events, desires, thoughts, and feelings. The inclusion of other events becomes necessary once these events have been privileged. For instance, I might elect to tell the story of my life, and decide that what is most important is the

fact that I left the country of my birth at an early age. Thus, I will emphasize the importance of that departure, perhaps through spending a proportionally greater time on it than on other experiences in my life, perhaps by speaking about it in an especially emotional fashion. The other events I dwell upon in telling my life story will reflect this emphasis, so that, for instance, the holidays I took to the place of my birth will figure prominently in my account of myself. Of course, this is not the only way I might go about things. I might decide that what is most important in my life is philosophy. If so, I would devote much time to my early reading of Plato and Aristotle at high school, an event which I would brush over or choose to omit entirely if I took the first approach to my life. Again, nothing about these choices automatically results in a narrative that is incoherent or that lacks unity. Either narrative might be unified or coherent, though they are very different stories that include very different events.

A fourth possible response comes from Davenport. Narratives do not occur in isolation. We correct for exaggerations, omissions and self-deception in narratives by ‘subjecting them to interpersonal discursive tests.’<sup>161</sup> That is, we do not take narratives at face value, but inquire into their correctness by looking at other sources or asking others who might have a different take on things. Does the fact that we need not accept a self-narrative on face value and can seek other sources—and implicitly that this introduces a degree of accountability into the narrative I tell—provide a response to the criticism I have directed against the narrative conception?

Again, I think this response is inadequate. It still does not address the problem of what should be included in my self-narrative. The appeal to another source at best eliminates potential errors and biases in a self-narrative. There is still the question of the grounds on which we are to prefer another, competing source over the original. Is this its truthfulness? If so, this seems to be no

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<sup>161</sup> Davenport, *Narrative, Identity, Autonomy, and Morality*, 85.

better answer than Schechtman's reality constraint. It helps us decide which untruths should be excluded from a self-narrative, but not which should be included. At best, this objection shifts the responsibility of formulating a self-narrative away from its author and towards an interlocutor, but this hardly does away with the problem. The question of what is to be included and excluded still arises even in this instance. A better response might be that the process of composing a narrative is itself intersubjective; I will return to this suggestion momentarily.

A fifth response might be that my critique reflects unreasonable expectations of a self-narrative. A narrative is never fully complete, so the issue of what makes it into my narrative does not arise. More can always be added later. As Anthony Rudd says, 'It is obviously true and important that the narrative that I live is a work-in-progress. Our narratives grow and change as we live. There is no sense in supposing that we could say—well, I've attained narrative unity, completed my story; now what shall I do? The struggle to unify the elements of one's personality, and to incorporate the contingencies that life throws at one into one's narrative, is a continual process.'<sup>162</sup> If our self-narrative can never be completed, as Rudd suggests, is it still a problem if we are unclear which events to include and which to exclude? Perhaps I just never need to separate what belongs in my narrative from what does not, since the process is open-ended and what is left out can always be reintegrated into my narrative down the line.

I do not want to neglect the idea that narratives are endlessly revisable. Indeed, the revisability of self-narratives—the idea that the significance of events may change—seems like a presupposition of the objection I am making to the narrative conception. I am less receptive to the idea that the story of our lives can never be completed in any sense. First, if we are to take

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<sup>162</sup> Anthony Rudd, *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 189.

the idea of a self-narrative seriously, if the way we constitute ourselves is actually to be a narrative, then we would have to admit that an autobiography exemplifies the sort of thing we are talking about. And surely such pieces of writing do come to an end. This is not to say that a completed autobiography can never be rewritten, just that there is a point at which the author can step away from it in some non-arbitrary fashion. Second, relatedly, narratives are not open-ended. Narratives finish at some point, and the selection of an ending influences the structure of the rest of the narrative.<sup>163</sup> It may even influence what makes it into the narrative and what is excluded. Again, if we lose sight of the fact that a self-narrative is a work in progress, regarding it as a continual process, then self-narratives cease to be narratives.

In light of the recognition that narratives do and must have an end-point, even if we allow that they can be rewritten, we can see that the question of what belongs in them and what should be excluded from them remains. At best, we could say that taking self-narratives to be open-ended does not address the problem. At worst, doing so erodes the sense in which self-narratives are narratives at all.

It might be objected that my examples are too extreme: I need not from the outset choose a certain event as most significant, then from that develop a narrative that is unified and coherent. However, whether the choice is made at the beginning of the process, or whether it is made some way further down the line, the point is that a choice has to be made, and such a choice shapes the narrative that is produced, and reshapes what may already have been written. It is a fact about the composition of almost all literary narratives that they can be subjected to revision at a later date (the exception might be narratives that are serialized in the course of their composition, as was the case with some novels by Dostoyevsky and Dickens). There is no reason to think that self-

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<sup>163</sup> I will discuss this at greater length in the following section.

narratives are not equally susceptible to being rethought further down the line, and it seems felicitous to mention that it is in prompting such revisions of our self-narratives that others play a role in developing them.

But is this a problem? Perhaps what I have identified as a difficulty is no more than a statement of fact, an inescapable element of the composition of self-narratives. Why is the idea that unity and coherence depend on my selecting an event or events (I am even tempted to speak of a *theme* at this point) from my life as possessing overriding significance even problematic? It just is impossible to narrate without recognizing the necessity of prioritizing. And if prioritizing simply is a part of composing a self-narrative, then surely we ought to cease to conceive of it as a problem, and start to think that it is actually a positive element of narrative.

I think this may well be true. Certainly, in the chapters that follow, I will be concerned to talk about what self-narratives *can* accomplish, rather than the ways in which they will always fall short of our hopes. However, at present the issue is that what prompts certain events, feelings, desires and thoughts to be included in my self-narrative may be at least arbitrary and at worst lend itself to self-deception. And coherence and unity seem no more likely than truth or verisimilitude to allow us to escape this result. In short, a self-narrative, which was meant to answer the question who we are, to be define our sense of ourselves, seems unable to do so in a non-arbitrary way.

I have yet to consider a strong objection to my approach to thinking about what determines the events, thoughts and feelings that will be included in my self-narrative. So far, I have consistently suggested that the motivation for including one thing and excluding another must come from the individual whose self-narrative is under construction. However, in the previous



chapter, I argued that an important component of the narrative conception of self is its dialogical and social character. I also claimed that the picture of an author as an artist sitting alone in a room writing a great novel is a false one, and that there is much interpersonal engagement when it comes to literary production. If we really are the ‘authors’ of our self-narrative, then the process of developing it will also be interpersonal. Therefore, we could make the following claim: might not the answer to the question of what to include in my self-narrative come from another person, or a group of people? Why does it have to come from me? Alternatively, why do we have to think about this process as being undertaken either by me or by others? Why not a mix?

We can return to a situation I have already mentioned. If I were to attempt to form my self-narrative, I could emphasize the fact that when I was young I moved overseas. Alternatively, I could emphasize the role of philosophy in my life. As we saw, these contrasting emphases would lead me to include different events, produce different narratives, and therefore constitute different selves. The problem was that there was no obvious way to determine which of these two narratives was right, for there seemed to be no grounds for calling either of them correct. It seemed completely arbitrary where I placed the emphasis in my account of myself.

What happens if we introduce another person or a group of people into this scenario? Might the appropriate contents of my self-narrative not be those I consider most important, but the events those who surround me consider most important? Were I to ask my friends, family, or significant other, they might shed light on what is most important to me. This seems to allow me to escape arbitrariness and self-deception. At minimum, my self-narrative no longer seems likely to fall prey to problems as it did when I determined the contents of my self-narrative on my own.

This strikes me as an important objection because it shows that the role of others in helping me to develop my self-narrative cannot be overlooked. Note how different this would make the narrative conception of self from Frankfurt's hierarchical account, which centers on the role one individual plays in constituting himself. Yet we still have to ask whether incorporating others into the development of my self-narrative addresses the problem of what its contents should be.

In at least one way it does. The extreme case in which I am lying to myself about my own experiences and unable to prioritize them seems to fall by the wayside. The contribution of another point of view will always help me to overcome such problems, provided I am willing to hear a voice that may express unpleasant opinions. Yet in at least three important respects, this contribution of others may not solve the specified difficulties. These three factors counter the power of the influence of others.

(1) I lie to the people around me. I do not always lie about important elements in my life, but sometimes I do. Moreover, sometimes the people to whom I lie are the people whom we might think are best positioned to help me develop my self-narrative, perhaps simply because they love me and are most willing to assist in this way. *In Search of Lost Time* gives a good example of this. Marcel loves Albertine, and Albertine seems to love Marcel, but both are guilty of lying to each another almost constantly and about profound elements of their lives. Just because someone is my friend, a member of my family, or a significant other, does not mean that they are well-placed to help me construct a self-narrative.

(2) Even if someone close to me is not deceived by me, and is in the best possible position to know me, there just are some things they will not know. Even a dear friend or partner is not ever-present. They cannot know everything about me. Additionally, certain information about myself

I keep private. Perhaps I am not clear on the contents of this set of private information. I may not put up as effective a shield between myself and others as I believe. Sometimes I may betray a truth without meaning to. But the fact remains that there is no other person in the world who knows as much about me as I do. It may also be the case that the ones closest to me are those from whom I have most reason to keep secrets. A good example comes from Rebecca West's novel *The Return of the Soldier*. Even the two women who know Chris Baldry best and love him most, his wife Kitty and his cousin Jenny, are ignorant of his love affair with Margaret Grey until she arrives on their front doorstep.

(3) Even if someone did know everything about me, they might not be able to say what they know. This is a problem of expression rather than knowledge. Sometimes the truth is difficult to articulate; sometimes the right moment does not arrive to say the words that need to be said; sometimes articulation is possible and the moment is right, and yet nothing is said because one person fears to tell the other what they need to hear: their knowing would cause them pain.

Alternatively, saying something may demand too much of the person in question. To my mind this problem is no less important than the others. Sometimes it can be harder to say what you know than to learn something that would inspire you to speak out. We get something of this in Henry James' novel *The Golden Bowl*, in which the conversations between Maggie and her father are aching, desperate struggles not because Maggie's knowledge of her father's sacrifices for her are difficult to bear—though they are—but because knowing exactly how much to say is hard.<sup>164</sup>

Therefore, the idea that others could determine the content of my self-narrative, and hence what constitutes me, seems false. Even if we conceive of this process in dialogical terms, as a

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<sup>164</sup> I am thinking of particular in the long conversation in chapter 37 of the novel.

cooperative process involving both myself and others, the problems above can interrupt it at any point. Others might know nothing about my life as a result of my own deceptions or their ignorance. It is questionable whether they can always be relied upon to tell me what they know, even when it is important that they do so.

I do not want to suggest that others cannot have *any* influence on my self-narrative. Several ways in which others may so influence me have already emerged in this dissertation. The composition of a self-narrative is a process that can only occur in dialogue with others. The meanings I apply in the composition of my self-narrative will be social, and will therefore need to be negotiated. I have only argued that a self-narrative produced with others' help is not free of the problems suffered by one produced independently.

Therefore we still lack a means of determining the contents of my self-narrative. It will be necessary to think further about the narrative conception of self. I will suggest in the conclusion to this chapter that we need to rethink it completely. We cannot continue to think profitably about the narrative conception of self without introducing a further concept into the discussion, namely Stanley Cavell's notion of *acknowledgment*.

### *3.4 Conclusion*

The first section of this chapter was devoted to arguing that the distinction between the internal and external that Harry Frankfurt discusses could be applied not simply to an hierarchical conception of the self, but also to the narrative conception of the self. The question then became how the narrative conception of the self might make the distinction that Frankfurt endeavors to make in his work.

In the second section, I argued that the narrative conception of the self could not do this. It was incapable of separating what constituted my self from what did not constitute my self. It seemed as if a self-narrative should have been able to make this distinction on its own, insofar as who I am is whatever is contained in my self-narrative, but given that the question of what is to be included in the self-narrative was an open one, I auditioned a series of promising candidates that might separate what belonged in a self-narrative from what ought to be excluded from it. Each seemed at best arbitrary and at worst likely to invite self-deception. Since who I am cannot be a lie, I was forced to leave the question unanswered. Self-deception is a problem here given that my self-narrative constitutes who I am.

This seems like a fatal problem for the narrative conception of self. If it is unable to separate what belongs in my narrative from what does not belong in it, then it can hardly be a compelling account of the self. If who I am is determined by the story I tell about myself, but it is possible to tell numerous stories about myself on the basis of similar events, so that my life looks one way when certain events, feelings, desires and thoughts are emphasized in my self-narrative, and another way when others are emphasized, then to say that who I am is decided by my self-narrative will either result in multiple selves—thereby dissolving the notion of the ‘sense of myself’ which the narrative self is meant to provide—or even no self at all, if the self we are seeking is supposed to preclude the existence of alternative selves that belong to the same individual. In short, the narrative conception of self fails to deal with the possibility of telling more than one story about the same events, or telling the same story in more than one way, resulting in narratives that have very different meanings.

The idea that self-narratives give us who we are should be renounced; the narrative theory of self cannot do what it sets out to do. However, this does not mean that self-narratives also have to be

given up as components of our sense of who we are. The narrative conception looks on a narrative as a means of organizing our sense of ourselves, developing our lives into a coherent whole. However, as any reader of literature knows, this is not all that narratives accomplish. Narratives have many qualities; they are not simply a means of organizing information. The narrative conception of self leaves these accomplishments of narrative out of the picture. I want to argue that by looking these and other features of narratives we come to see the role that a self-narrative can play in our sense of who we are.

And the key to this argument will be the concept of acknowledgment. When we understand what acknowledgment involves, and appreciate the role it may play in selfhood, we open up possibilities for reconceiving how narratives might contribute to the self in turn. Therefore, in the following chapter I will introduce the work of Stanley Cavell on the concept of acknowledgment. In the longer term, I want to connect this concept to self-narratives, with the ultimate goal of suggesting that rather than giving us who we are, a self-narrative is an instance in which we acknowledge it.

## ***Chapter 4 Narrative***

### *4.1 Introduction*

While I have looked at the narrative conception of self, I have so far failed to say what I mean by narrative. What makes a narrative a narrative? Is a narrative simply a collection of events, settings and characters, or is there something more to it? In this chapter I will describe the five essential features of narrative.

But something further prompts this attempt to state how I conceive of narrative. This is a further criticism by John Christman of the narrative conception of self. For Christman, whereas our sense of what narrative consists in needs to be robust, in the narrative conception of self it is vague. Christman argues that the core features of narrative in narrative accounts of the self can be reduced to two: ‘thematic unity’ and ‘tellability.’ However, if there is nothing more to narrative than this, then, suggests Christman, narrative conceptions of the self lead into a spiral of vagueness. These requirements are too loose to mark out what we mean by narrative.

Christman argues that, ‘If I am correct that “thematic unity” and “tellability” are the most plausible desiderata for narrative, the condition of narrativity will be met whenever a reflecting subject is able to interpret the events, memories, and impressions she experiences and make some sense of these according to socially mediated semantic rules.’<sup>165</sup> Once we reach this point, the notion of narrative soon collapses. We lose any robust sense of narrative.

Christman goes on to argue with respect to the narrative conception of self, ‘What narrativity amounts to then is whatever results from the capacity for self-interpretation mediated by socially embedded rules of meaning. Therefore, what unifies a self is the capacity for self-interpretation

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<sup>165</sup> Christman, *Politics of Persons*, p. 83

by way of socially mediated norms.’<sup>166</sup> Clearly, ‘self-interpretation by way of socially mediated norms’ is far from clear and specific. It fails to differentiate narratives from other forms of communication. If this really is all that narratives amount to for writers who favor a narrative conception of the self, then the idea of such a conception is simply uninformative. The consequences are serious. Christman’s argument not only implies that narrative conceptions of self are empty, but that absent an account of what narrativity amounts to, we can hardly claim that narratives play an important part in selfhood.

Obviously this is a question that also arises with respect to my project. Though I do not want to defend a narrative account of the self along the lines of those I have discussed in the first chapter, I do want to claim that self-narratives can play an important role in selfhood. So it seems imperative that I offer an account of what I mean by narrativity in order to avoid falling prey to Christman’s critique. This account of narrative must involve something more than ‘self-interpretation by way of socially mediated norms.’

If narrative theorists of the self have been less than precise about what they mean by narrative, there is substantial work on what characterizes narrative upon which to draw. This is to be found in literary theory. In its history, reflection on the narrative tradition in literature has come up with much more than the idea that narratives can be reduced to ‘thematic unity’ and ‘tellability.’ Indeed, one of the more substantial achievements of literary theory has arguably been to show just how rich narratives are. When we look at works by literary theorists we see that there are indeed features that mark out narratives that cannot be reduced to ‘thematic unity’ and ‘tellability.’

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<sup>166</sup> Christman, *Politics of Persons*, p. 83.



However, taking discussions of literary narratives as the starting point for this reflection on narrative might seem problematic. Are there not considerable differences between the stories we tell about ourselves and literary narratives? Well, yes and no. Obviously there is a considerable gap between a narrative like *In Search of Lost Time* and the quick account of myself I give to a new friend. Proust's work is extremely long and almost overwhelming in its detail; it is written down, and told in an eloquent style. However, the gap between *In Search of Lost Time* and, say, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* is much less considerable, and the latter is clearly an example of a self-narrative. Moreover, I do not think we can justly rule out the possibility that there are features that all narratives, literary and non-literary, have in common, no matter their length or whether or not they have been committed to paper. None of the features I will go on to describe in this chapter are predicated upon literary virtuosity.

And this seems entirely reasonable. The point of this dissertation is not to defend the narrative conception of self as it stands, but to shift the focus of the role that narrative has to play in selfhood. My aim here, then, is to say that narrative has characteristic features beyond 'thematic unity' and 'tellability,' and that these features prevent narrativity from collapsing into vagueness.

## *4.2 The Features of Narrative*

There are five features of narrative that I want to set out in this section. Once I have done so, it will be clear that when we talk of a narrative, we are speaking of something very particular. A narrative is not a vague form of self-interpretation through socially mediated norms, but has readily apparent elements that generate a unique form of discourse when combined.

### 4.2.1 Existents and Events

The first feature of narrative on which I want to focus can be drawn from the work of Seymour Chapman. According to Chapman, a narrative contains two very basic elements: (1) existents and (2) events.<sup>167</sup> I will define these in turn. Existents are the characters and items of setting that appear in the narrative. Note that it is not the case that characters and items of setting are both necessary for there to be a narrative; but at least one is. We could imagine a narrative that includes only what might typically be described as settings (perhaps the ‘life’ of a rock formation or a forest). Whether or not by virtue of being the focus of the story these elements cease to be settings (that is, the place where some action occurs) and become characters, seems open. It is more difficult to imagine a narrative that contains characters but no setting, simply because characters have to be somewhere, even if this is only inside their own thoughts or dreams.

By events, Chapman means the actions and happenings that arise in the narrative. By actions should be understood something a character performs. An example would be Hans Castorp’s volunteering to fight in the First World War at the end of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. This is distinct from a happening, which occurs without anyone being responsible for it. An example would be Hans Castorp’s bronchial infection that precipitates his decision to remain at the sanatorium in Mann’s novel. Both these elements are necessary for there to be a narrative. It is impossible to conceive of a narrative that concerns only what characters did, without considering things that befell them. It seems more possible to conceive of a narrative that includes only happenings and not actions undertaken by the characters. This might occur in narratives in which there are no characters in the sense of human agents.

However, it is easy to think of examples of texts that emphasize actions over happenings, or vice versa. An example of the former is a novel like Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*,

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<sup>167</sup> Seymour Chapman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1978), 19.

which revolves around the crime that Raskolnikov chooses to commit and its consequences. An example of the latter is Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's *The Makioka Sisters*, which explores the lives of Japanese sisters held hostage to tradition, the illnesses and injuries that befall the main characters, and the sense of a changing Japan brought on by the approach of the Second World War.

The most important class of existents is the characters. The reason for saying that these of all existents are significant is not merely that we cannot conceive of a narrative without them (this is equally true of a setting), but because they provide the direction and energy for a narrative. By direction I mean that stories typically follow the experiences of one or more people. By energy I mean that the interest we take in many narratives, the desire we acquire to keep reading, is in many cases the result of our curiosity about the characters' fates or feelings of affection towards them.

I will have more to say about characters in the final chapter of this dissertation. I only wish to note some basic features of characters and remark upon their essential place in narrative. First, characters are typically human. When they are animals they often possess human characteristics and a very human inner life. The best example would be Kafka's animals, such as the narrator of *Josephine, the Mouse Singer*. Second, characters are unique; they differ from each other.<sup>168</sup> Third, we can be given a large amount of information about a character or a small amount; a character can be the focus of our attention or a mere participant in a larger story; a character can change and be complex or be simple and remain the same. This reflects E.M. Forster's

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<sup>168</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 113.

distinction between ‘round’ and ‘flat’ characters.<sup>169</sup> A stereotype is an obvious case of a flat character. An obvious case of a round character is the hero of a nineteenth century realist novel. However, in contrast to Forster’s approach, we might also want to retain the word ‘character’ strictly for anthropomorphic existents of depth and complexity, using another word, such as ‘kind’ or ‘type’ for the simple anthropomorphic existent of whom we learn little or nothing. I will prefer the latter approach when I discuss character at greater length in the last chapter of this dissertation.

#### 4.2.2 Discourse

Both existents and events form part of what Chapman, drawing on French Structuralist work, calls ‘story’ (*histoire*), which is the content of any narrative. However, this is only one side of narrative. The other he calls ‘discourse’ (*discours*). If story is the content of a narrative, then there is also the way in which that content is communicated.<sup>170</sup> The term discourse picks out this means of communication.

It is easy to see what Chapman intends here. Obviously, the same content might be communicated in several different ways. There is the matter of a choice of narrators, of telling the story in the first, third, or even second person, and the employment of narrative devices such as letters as a way of communicating the content. All these choices bear on the degree to which the narrative is affecting and interesting. As an example of the different approaches that an author might take, we can look at Yukio Mishima’s *The Decay of the Angel*, the fourth and final novel in his *Sea of Fertility* series. Parts of the novel are told in the form of a diary, the first time in the *Sea of Fertility* that this Mishima employs this literary device. The choice of narrative

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<sup>169</sup> E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), 103-118.

<sup>170</sup> Chapman, *Story and Discourse*, 19.

techniques can be telling. Because of the uniqueness of this narrative device in the context of Mishima's novel, and because we can easily imagine the diary sections being told in the third person, *The Decay of the Angel* might justly be criticized on the basis that the easy first-person access to the character's thoughts achieved through this device, when the issue of observation and voyeurism have been recurrent in the series, makes its conclusion less compelling.

On the basis of these first two subsections, we can see that a narrative always contains story, which consists of events and existents, and discourse, which consists of the way in which the content of the narrative is communicated. Before moving on to look at the third feature of narrative, we should take note of a similar but not identical distinction. This is the contrast developed by Russian formalism between *fabula* (usually translated as fable or story) and *sjuzhet* (usually translated as plot or subject). Tzvetan Todorov says of the Russian formalists, 'In any narrative they distinguished the *fable* (the story), that is, the series of events represented as they would have occurred in life, from the *subject* (the plot), the special arrangement given to these events by the author.'<sup>171</sup> This already seems to overlap with the story and discourse distinction, though it is not exactly the same. We can bring out the similarity and difference between these distinctions by referring to another quotation from Todorov. He says, '[Fable] corresponds to the reality evoked, to events similar to those which take place in our lives; [subject] to the book itself, to the narrative, to the literary devices the author employs. In the story there is no inversion in time, actions follow their natural order; in the plot the author can present results before their causes, the end before the beginning.'<sup>172</sup> Again, in this quotation we find a reason to identify the fable and subject distinction with that between story and discourse. What makes me hesitate to call them identical is the emphasis we find in the concept of subject on the order in

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<sup>171</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 26.

<sup>172</sup> Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 45-46.

which the events are given in the narrative, for example whether they are given chronologically or whether they are presented via a flash-back.<sup>173</sup> However, for the sake of convenience, when I use the term discourse later in this chapter in the context of speaking about the key features of narrative, I will subsume under it this notion of the arrangement of events.

#### 4.2.3 Beginnings and Endings

From what has been said, we can conclude that when we talk about narrative in the most general terms we are speaking about a form of discourse governed by authorial choice. One way in which authorial choice manifests itself is the decision upon which events and existents comprise the contents of the narrative; the other is the way these events and existents are communicated. However, a further way in which this authorial choice manifests itself, a way that seems to straddle the distinctions between story and discourse or fable and subject, is the decision upon a beginning and an ending.

It might be argued that the idea that a narrative must have a beginning and ending is not especially insightful. After all, every course of events must start and end somewhere. However, as we have already seen, a narrative is more than just a course of events. An author makes a choice about where a narrative ends and begins. But even then not so much the sheer existence of this choice is important as its exerting an influence on the narrative as a whole.

Frank Kermode has written at length on the importance of endings in literature and in life. He puts the situation with respect to endings in the following way: ‘Men, like poets, rush “into the midst,” *in media res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as giving meanings to lives and

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<sup>173</sup> The same emphasis is to be found in Chapman. See Chapman, *Story and Discourse*, 20.

to persons. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see, have always done so; the end is a figure for their own deaths.<sup>174</sup>

Kermode figures the stipulation of an ending as a way in which people endow their lives with meaning. Their choice of ending reflects their interests.

However, for Kermode the significance of endings goes further than this slightly vague psychological thesis according to which the stipulation of an ending is as one way in which people grapple with the fact that they will eventually die. Specifically, there are two key functions of the decision upon an ending: (i) the refiguring of time; (ii) the production of concord. I will deal with each of these individually.

(i) For Kermode, an ending *humanizes* time. As a model for the way in which the beginnings and endings of stories work, he employs the analogy of a clock's initial 'tick' and concluding 'tock' as rendering meaningful the interval between them. As he says, 'The clock's *tick-tock* I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form; and the interval between *tock* and *tick* represents purely disorganized time of the sort that we need to humanize.'<sup>175</sup> Of course, given the terminology I have employed in previous sections, I do not want to confuse plot and narrative: narratives contain plots. But it is for this reason that narratives can be said to have beginnings and endings. And for Kermode, the end and beginning of a plot act like the tick-tock of a clock, making meaningful time otherwise empty. He makes the shift that occurs when beginning and ending are present more distinct by opposing the notions of *chronos* and *kairos*. He renders this opposition thus: '*Chronos* is "passing time" or "waiting time"—that which, according to Revelation, "shall be no more—and *kairos* is the

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<sup>174</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 7.

<sup>175</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 45.

season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end.<sup>176</sup> The beginnings and endings of stories give meaning to time that is otherwise meaningless. From the beginning, we anticipate an ending. Time in which nothing happens may be vacant but it is not meaningless, because it is time spent anticipating the end of the story, which may even involve guessing how it will end.

(ii) Endowing time with meaning is not the sole function of endings for Kermode. At least, his explanation of the way endings give rise to meaning does not end there. For it is not just that an ending confers meaning, but that the meaning it gives is of a particular kind. The meaning in question is *concord*. As Kermode says, ‘In the midst, we look for a fullness of time, for beginning, middle, and end in concord. For concord or consonance is really the root of the matter, even in a world which thinks it can only be a fiction.’<sup>177</sup> Endings and beginnings provide meaningfulness in the sense of a form of coherence among events that would otherwise be discordant. So the shift is from meaninglessness to meaning, but to a meaning in which it is the coherence among the apparently incoherent that we seek to develop in our stories.

It might be argued in response to this account of concord that it is naïve, or encourages us to participate in willful simplemindedness. Will we not always be inclined to choose the most direct, most obvious relation between the tick and the tock? Kermode anticipates this objection. He insists that, ‘Our ways of filling the interval between the *tick* and *tock* must grow more difficult and more self-critical, as well as more various; the need we continue to feel is a need of concord, and we supply it by increasingly varied concord-fictions. They change as the reality

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<sup>176</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 47.

<sup>177</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 58.



from which we, in the midst, seek a show of satisfaction changes; because times change.<sup>178</sup>

Therefore, the choice of the beginnings and endings of our stories reflect a developing sophistication, one that responds to the increasing complexity of the world we inhabit.

In light of Kermode's arguments, we can see how the decision about an ending is essential to a narrative. Some choice must be made, and this choice will reflect our desire for overall coherence. Peter Brooks argues that, 'The sense of a beginning...must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending. We might say that we are able to read present moments—in literature and, by extension, in life—as endowed with meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot.'<sup>179</sup> We can thus see how the choice of where to begin might be made in light of our decision upon a particular ending.

But there seems little reason to say that endings alone structure our experience. Surely our choice of where to begin a story might sometimes be preeminent. Our selection of a point at which to begin may dictate where it is right for a story to end. The most obvious examples are narratives that set up a quest that a character must complete. And in both cases, the choice of a particular beginning or ending will mean that the middle of a story will take on a certain structure, or involve some events rather than others.

Therefore, one of the central features of narrative is that it has a beginning and ending.<sup>180</sup>

Perhaps we will better appreciate the significance of this, when we consider that, in contrast, a

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<sup>178</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 64.

<sup>179</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 94.

<sup>180</sup> At this point we might ask about unfinished works. An example might be Nikolai Gogol's novel *Dead Souls*. Another might be Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. These works were incomplete at the time of their authors' deaths, therefore they never end. I think we have to say in this case that the authors at least had ends in mind for their works, and when we read them we can see how these endings served to render a particular beginning

mere chronicle will lack an ending that gives coherence to the whole. The most extreme example would be the work compiled by the author of the Ideal Chronicle in Arthur Danto's paper 'Narrative Sentences.' Thought there might be a point at which the Ideal Chronicle would finish (presumably with the destruction of the world, or the chronicler's death), the nature of the chronicler's activity, whereby he writes down exactly what occurs in history at the moment that it happens, without any possibility for revision, would preclude an ending of the kind that Kermode describes, namely one which creates meaning and coherence across beginning, middle and end.<sup>181</sup>

But can we really think about what narratives accomplish purely in terms of meaningfulness and coherence? Do all narratives even aim to be coherent? To my mind we should take coherence and meaningfulness to be goals of all narratives. Narratives always evoke the feeling of building towards something, and this seems enough to justify speaking of them as coherent. This is true even when it comes to very episodic narratives. An example would be Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. This novel, which describes a series of expeditions undertaken by Gulliver, presents his journeys one after the other, interrupted only by his temporary returns home. Moreover, each voyage is complete, with little made connection between them. However, even in this case a reader still wonders about Gulliver's eventual fate, especially whether he will return home or remain among one or other of the civilizations he visits.

We can answer in similar terms when it comes to meaningfulness. All narratives aim to present a whole that matters. The events we are reading about must matter in some way because they have

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point appropriate from the point of view of an overall coherence (in the case of *Dead Souls* Chichikov's journey to acquire the 'souls' of dead serfs from their owners, and in the case of Thucydides' history the events involved in Athenian aggrandizement in the fifth century BC).

<sup>181</sup> For a more thorough explanation of the Ideal Chronicle see Danto, 'Narrative Sentences,' 152.

each been written down. But they have also been grouped together, and something must explain their standing alongside one another. If there are narratives that seem like random assemblage of happenings, then there is still no escaping the fact that they must have been brought together for a reason, even if it is not immediately obvious what it might be.

As to whether narratives can be understood purely in terms of meaningfulness and coherence, we can best answer this by looking at a related question. Do narratives seek to be coherent in the sense of furnishing an explanation? Theorists of narrative have by and large argued that narrative has an explanatory purpose, but there are exceptions, writers who argue that narratives need not pursue meaning in the sense of an answer to a question.<sup>182</sup> In his paper 'Narrative Explanation,' David Velleman argues that rather than being a form of understanding, narrative aims to produce an emotional cadence in the reader. This view of narrative hardly seems conducive to seeing it as a kind of explanation. Rather than explanation, the idea of resolution or emotional closure seems better. So we could say that while narratives always pursue coherence and meaningfulness, their function is not always purely explanatory, because this neglects the emotional quality of narratives. But we should note that even if a narrative pursues not an explanation but closure, the role of beginnings and endings in narrative remains undiminished; they are required so that the emotional cadence achieved by a narrative satisfies a reader.

I do not think we need to answer the question of whether narrative is a form of explanation or whether it aims at a satisfactory emotional cadence. A certain amount of ambivalence seems permissible on this issue. Some narratives aim at explanations, others aim at providing a

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<sup>182</sup> Aside from Kermode's *Sense of an Ending*, works those who take narratives to serve an intellectual purpose include Brooks, *Reading for Plot*; Martin Price, *Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Louis O. Mink, 'Narrative form as Cognitive Instrument,' in *The Writing of History*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), to name a few.

satisfactory emotional cadence. Some narratives do both. Moreover, within the general category of narrative it seems possible to make a more fundamental distinction. The distinction in question is the one introduced by Seymour Chapman between narratives of resolution and revelation.

This distinction arises out of whether a problem is being solved or question answered in a narrative, or whether this is not its purpose. ‘In the traditional narrative of resolution, there is a sense of problem-solving, of things being worked out in some way, of a kind of ratiocinative or emotional teleology.’<sup>183</sup> This can be compared with the narrative of revelation. ‘In the modern plot of revelation...the function of the discourse is not to answer that question nor even pose it. Early on we gather that things will stay pretty much the same. It is not that events are resolved (happily or tragically), but rather that a state of affairs is revealed.’<sup>184</sup> It would be tempting to argue that narratives of resolution provide the kind of satisfactory emotional cadence of which Velleman speaks. Likewise, we might be ready to claim that the narrative of revelation fits with a view of narrative that holds its function to be explanatory. However, this analysis is incorrect. Note that on Chapman’s view, a narrative of resolution may provide either rational or emotional closure; similarly, though the narrative of revelation reveals, this does not mean that a question is answered, but that the world is made less opaque. And we can imagine this being an emotional as well as an intellectual experience. Sometimes we feel pleasure in response to an instance of demystification; we experience shock or surprise when we encounter a plot twist or surprise ending.

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<sup>183</sup> Chapman, *Story and Discourse*, 48.

<sup>184</sup> Chapman, *Story and Discourse*, 48.

We should take from Chapman's distinction between narratives of resolution and revelation the idea that even narratives that seek to explain may involve an emotional cadence. But we should also accept the reverse, namely that narratives that deliver emotional resolution may be explanatory. The latter category may seem like a confusion, but reaching a certain emotional resolution may be explanatory insofar doing so tells us something about ourselves.<sup>185</sup> Therefore, I do not think we need to say that narratives are essentially forms of explanation or emotional cadences. They can be one or the other or both. The more fundamental distinction is between narratives that are concerned with resolution and those concerned with revelation. But most importantly, in order to see that beginnings and endings operate in the manner I have suggested, we do not need to be committed to an account that holds the function of narrative to be explanatory.

#### 4.2.4 Temporality in Narrative

The fourth feature of narrative is the role of time. This should not be confused with the duration of a narrative, understood either in terms of how long the story takes to read or the length of time that elapses in the story.<sup>186</sup> Ricoeur claims that, 'All fictional narratives are 'tales of time' in as much as the structural transformations that affect the situations take time. However, only a few are 'tales about time' in as much as in them it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural transformations.'<sup>187</sup> In this quotation, Ricoeur highlights the importance (perhaps pre-eminent importance) of time to narratives. The first way in which time features in narratives

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<sup>185</sup> For an example of the way in which an emotional experience, particularly one that involves suffering, may deliver self-knowledge, see the discussion of *In Search of Lost Time* in Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), especially 255-56.

<sup>186</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 86.

<sup>187</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 2*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 101.

is that the events of which they are composed occur in time. The second is that some narratives feature time as a theme. The three examples he offers of such narratives are Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.

I have no specific interest in these narratives about time. However, I agree with Ricoeur that narratives are unquestionably 'tales of time' insofar as their plots occur in time and take time to read and to tell. But there is more to say about the way in which time operates in narratives. This is what I will look at in this subsection. To begin, I want to discuss a few lines from Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations* by way of setting out a picture of the way in which time figures in narrative. After this, I will look at another way of thinking about the temporality of narratives, which holds that narratives are essentially retrospective.

The most satisfying and eloquent version of the concluding lines of *Great Expectations*, published in 1861 and narrated by the main character, Pip, describes a meeting between Pip and Estella. Pip says, 'I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw the shadow of no parting from her.'<sup>188</sup> An earlier version of the sentence had the concluding line as, 'I saw the shadow of no parting from her but one.' In a later revision of the same line, published in the novel in 1861, Dickens changed it to 'I saw no shadow of another parting from her.'

There is also a second, completely different, ending of the novel, which, rather than Pip and Estella leaving the ruins together never to be parted, has Pip meeting Estella on the street after

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<sup>188</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1999), 358. This is the final line in the 1861 version of the novel.

she has led an unhappy life. In this ending, Pip is not reunited with Estella, rather they go their separate ways, with Pip's love for Estella a thing of the past, and she having learned to love as a result of her suffering. It is the ending quoted in the first paragraph that I want to dwell upon in this section. I want to employ it as a way of seeing how past, present, and future functions in narrative.

However, before looking at the example of the ending of *Great Expectations*, I want to set out the same information schematically. We can diagram the situation in the following manner:

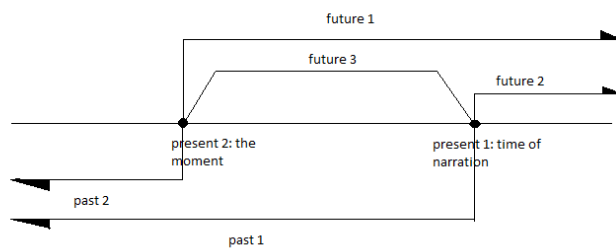


Figure 1. Time in literature

In the diagram we see that past, present, and future are in effect doubled and even trebled in the narrative. We have on the one hand, a present 1, the time at which narration is occurring. Then we have a present 2 in the sense of ‘the moment,’ which is the time of the event that being described. Then we have a past 1 that is prior to the moment of narration. Included within this past is the past 2, which is not only prior to the moment of narration but also to ‘the moment’ of the action being described. Then we have three differentiable forms of the future. First, we have the future 1 after ‘the moment.’ Second, within the span of this overarching future is the future 2

that comes after the time of narration. Third, we have a segment of the future 3 that is after ‘the moment’ but prior to the time of narration. This constitutes an analysis of time in narrative.

Therefore, when it comes to narrative it is not as if there is a Past, Present, and Future that pick out distinct units of time. Rather, past, present and future overlap, and whether we call a particular moment, say, past, or not, depends on whether we look at it with respect to the time of narration or the moment being described. Most importantly, when it comes to the future 3, we have a chunk of time that a reader can anticipate and looked back upon at one and the same time. Overall, our sense of temporality when it comes to narratives involves much more than simply locating one past, one present and one future.

I now want to say how this schema can be applied to the ending of *Great Expectations*. We can see the different forms of past, present, and future in the excerpt. There is the present 1, the time at which Pip is narrating. There is the present 2, ‘the moment’ he describes, wherein Pip takes Estella’s hand and goes with her out of the ruins. When it comes to the past, we can locate past 1 which comes before the present of narration and includes all the events described in the passage. Within this past occurs the past 2, which is in the excerpt the time when Pip first left the forge as a younger man, before he even met Estella and Mrs Havisham. Finally, when it comes to the several forms of future, there is the future 1 that comes after ‘the moment’ and the future 2 that comes after the time of narration. These do not seem to be directly mentioned. Typically, we assume as readers that they will occur. We do find them invoked in the very first version of this concluding passage of the novel, in the reference to ‘no parting from her but one.’ The one parting is the death of Pip or Estella, which, we assume, at the time of narration has still to eventuate. The future 3, which comes between the moment and the time of narration, is apparent in the excerpt. This is the future that has as yet contained no parting from Estella, and in light of



which Pip can speak of this lack of a parting from Estella as shadowy in nature. Significantly, while the metaphor 'the shadow of no parting from her' may express Pip's feelings in the moment, communicating his awareness of an almost threatening commitment, it may also express his feelings at the time of narration, and suggests that the time since they reunited has not been completely happy.

I do not think we would be wrong to claim that it is really this future 3 that is one of the unique possibilities narrative offered. The possibility of being at one and the same time anticipatory and retrospective, as simultaneously influenced by foresight and hindsight appears to be unique to narrative. Whether this effect actually is unique to literary narratives is a further question. The closest we come to it in other art forms may be in the tradition of religious paintings which show different moments from the life of Jesus in the same scene, one large and in the foreground, the others smaller in the background. A similar effect might be said to be achieved in Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors*, in which the anamorphosed skull symbolizing death overlays the lower quarter of the painting. In both these instances there is interplay between different times. However, even in these instances we do not encounter the same overlap between past and future as we find in narrative.

Therefore we see how these distinctions between presents, pasts, and futures arise both schematically and with respect to the passage from *Great Expectations*. Of course, when it comes to the futures 1 and 2 we should note that they do not clearly arise in the passage. However, we can easily see how the future 2 might appear in another. It could occur in the form of a statement in the future tense, expressing an expectation of what 'will' happen down the line. As a consequence, I think we have a clear picture of how temporality figures in narrative.

But it is not as if these times in narrative just are. Narratives serve to make connections between them. In the last section, I spoke of Kermode noting that narrative involves a shift from purely chronological time (*chronos*) to a more meaningful sense of time (*kairos*). Another way of characterizing this distinction is to say that narrative is about showing how different events in time are related. Brooks speaks of narratives as ‘temporal syllogisms’ that are concerned with ‘the connective processes of time.’<sup>189</sup> For Brooks, this means that temporality is an ‘irreducible factor of any narrative statement, in a way that location is not.’<sup>190</sup> What does Brooks mean by this? After all, a story has to be set somewhere. I take him to mean that there is always another location in which a story can occur, but a story cannot escape from temporal succession. Even a simple folktale (he gives the example of ‘All-kinds-of-Fur’ by the Brothers Grimm) must ‘observe the sequence of tenses and the succession of events.’<sup>191</sup>

Obviously, the idea of ‘making connections’ is somewhat vague, and we must ask exactly what type of connections narratives are supposed to make. The typical response, particularly if the assumption that narrative is a form of explanation sits uppermost in our minds, may be that the connections in question are *causal*. Narratives explain how one event leads to another: Ivan Ilych is dead; his death affects (or fails to affect) his friends in a certain way; the narrative shows what precipitated that set of circumstances.

However, this is not the only possible connection. We might speak of a thematic connection: Ivan is dead; his life was made up of numerous events—his marriage, the birth of some children, the death of one of them, the injuring of his side, an epiphany about the necessity of living with death in mind; the narrative links these events together, giving the reason behind speaking about

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<sup>189</sup> Brooks, *Reading for Plot*, 21.

<sup>190</sup> Brooks, *Reading for Plot*, 22.

<sup>191</sup> Brooks, *Reading for Plot*, 22.

them rather than others.<sup>192</sup> We might consider the connections at an emotional level: Ivan is dead; we are not troubled insofar as we see him in the early chapters only as an ambivalent bureaucrat; we are affected when we appreciate his epiphany and experience his death, as it were, along with him.<sup>193</sup> That we see these different ways of making connections is important. As I noted earlier, times are not always presented chronologically in literary narratives. An author can adjust the temporal organization in order to make the connections between events clear. This seems particularly apt in the case of emotions and themes.

So now we have an idea of how past, present, and future figure in the narrative, and have seen moreover that it is not just the presence of different times, but the fact that connections are made among them that is significant. At this point, I want to consider an objection to, or reassessment of, my characterization of temporality in narratives. Brooks speaks of the ‘essentially retrospective’ character of narrative.<sup>194</sup> In one sense it is easy to see what he might mean by this. Typically, a literary narrative is composed in the past tense. This seems natural: how could we narrate events unless they have already happened? Narratives are told in the present tense give rise to an inescapable feeling of contrivance, because someone cannot be narrating at the same time as they act (except in the sense that narrating is acting): they do not have time. I think this is the case even when a master is at work, such as Dickens in the chapter ‘The Same Respected Friend in More Aspects than One’ from *Our Mutual Friend*. But the feeling that a narrative told in the present tense is some form of pretense runs deeper than this. If all this is happening here and now, then I do not know what it will mean in the future; but if I have composed a narrative then I do know what it will mean in the future, or at least that it will mean something, because I

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<sup>192</sup> I will have more to say about theme shortly.

<sup>193</sup> The events to which I refer in these two paragraphs are from Leo Tolstoy’s novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych*.

<sup>194</sup> Brooks, *Reading for Plot*, 301-302.

have chosen to write about it and to include these event rather than others. The narrative told in the present gives the feeling of undermining itself as it goes along.<sup>195</sup>

But narrative's essential retrospectivity goes somewhat further for Brooks. On his view, the 'aim of all narrative' is the 'recovery of the past.'<sup>196</sup> There is an unmistakable allusion to Proust in this statement, and indeed the ideas that Proust expresses in the last volume of *In Search of Lost Time* seem to be at the heart of Brooks' conception of narrative as a form of recovery of the past. Brooks speaks of narrative as being concerned with the 'attempted rescue of meaning from passing time,' and of plot as a 'thread of design' produced by 'our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless.'<sup>197</sup> So if we follow Brooks' view, we move beyond thinking of narrative as retrospective because its natural tense is the past, and towards an understanding according to which narrative is essentially retrospective because the meaning with which it is concerned is the meaning of time that has passed, of what we let slip by, of what we overlooked at the time.

So, insofar as it is retrospective, narrative is a way of recovering meaning. We can of course immediately ask whether it is the only way of doing so. Does narrative retrospectiveness give us something that, say, looking at a collection of old photographs and lingering over the memories they bring to mind cannot achieve? This might be the case. But whatever answer we give in light of this doubt, we still face a more immediate question. Is what Brooks has said sufficient reason to decide that narrative is *essentially* retrospective?

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<sup>195</sup> Obviously this does not mean that when they are told in the past, that narratives need always be a matter of 'x happened, then y happened, then z happened.' The first sentence of *In Search of Lost Time* introduces the sense of events that occurred in the past but were a matter of habit, at the one time defining them by showing the extent to which they were ingrained, while leaving them with a degree of vagueness because as a reader we do not know how many times they occurred. This is particularly obvious in the famous opening passages of the novel.

<sup>196</sup> Brooks, *Reading for Plot*, 311.

<sup>197</sup> Brooks, *Reading for Plot*, 321 and 323.

We should answer in the negative. While helpful in allowing us to see what narratives can let us achieve, namely the meaningfulness brought on by retrospectivity, Brooks' characterization of narrative strikes me as too extreme. We can begin to see why by asking whether there are no narratives of the future, and not in the sense of the imagined futures we find in science fictions such as Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I mean narratives that tell of the uses we project we will make of time to come. We could all imagine writing something based on what we will do tomorrow, with the structure determined by what seem to us the most important steps in working towards some goal. Such a piece of writing would as it were anticipate the meaningfulness of what we do; it might even encourage us not to miss meanings that fail to tessellate with our expectations when we live the day we arrayed for ourselves in advance.

But if this is a form of discourse, would this be a narrative? I do not think it would. We would be more inclined to call it a plan or an itinerary than we would a narrative. Even though it might resemble a narrative in more than one way, its being hypothetical (rather than fictional) disqualifies it. Therefore, this objection to Brooks' suggestion that narratives are essentially retrospective does not amount to anything.

However, we need not conceive of the situation in such extreme terms. We have already seen that the future may play a role in a narrative in the form of the future 2, which foreshadows events that come after the time of narration. Though it is hard to call any examples to mind, we can surely imagine a first-person narrative of past events that ends with reflections on what the narrator expects to happen in the future, with this presumably occurring in the future tense.

However, if this consideration implies that narratives need not always be retrospective, and therefore that narratives are not essentially retrospective, we might still conclude that narratives

have a special relation to the past, and that there is no similar relation that narrative has to the future. Yet this too seems false. I have already pointed out that narrative has a special relation to the future in the form of future (3). Yet this form of the future is also a kind of retrospectiveness, insofar as it involves both looking forward and looking back, as was seen in the excerpt from *Great Expectations*.

However, even if I disagree with the assertion that narratives are essentially retrospective, I agree with Brooks that the relation that narratives have to the past is one of creating meaningfulness. But do narratives—even those that do not end with any projection of how the future will turn out or of the narrator's expectations—have this same kind of relation to the future?

In my view, there are two ways in which narratives relate to the future. The first concerns the way in which we relate to literary narratives once they have ended. The author has decided that no more will be said about the characters in the narrative. However, this does not mean that their lives have ended, or that time has come to an end. Part of the reading experience is to assume that the characters live on. And, most importantly, if the events described in the narrative have any weight to them, we assume that the way in which the characters go on to live will be shaped by what they have experienced in the narrative we have just read. The best sequels not only add to the first narrative, but manage to capture the significance of the original.<sup>198</sup> I would suggest that this is the case even in novels that seek to defeat the reader's interest in the main characters. A good example of how the future operates in this sense in narratives is Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. Even at the end of this novel, which as a whole seems concerned as much with culture as with character, when Hans Castorp fades into the smoke that covers a First World

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<sup>198</sup> I cannot think of any good examples of literary sequels. The example I have in mind in making the above claim is from film, *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II*.

War battlefield, we wonder whether he survives, and if so what his experiences at the sanatorium will mean for him.

The second way in which the narrative is related to the future is connected to the first. When we have finished reading a narrative, it is not simply that we think about the future of the characters involved in the story; we also think about our own future in light of the narrative. The events in a literary narrative may well be fictional, but that does not mean they have no bearing on the world we inhabit. A character is not simply a particular individual but a possible alternative self that presents us with a model for how we might choose to live. So if we read Arthur Schnitzler's *Fräulein Else* we might ask whether we would submit to the humiliating, tyrannous demands of a person who has power over us for the sake of saving someone weak, but whom we love. If we read Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, we ask ourselves whether we too would pursue lust even to the extent of jeopardizing our relationship with a child we love. If we read Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, we ask ourselves the lengths to which we would be able to go in order to feed ourselves, and whether we too would retain a conscience in the face of starvation. In narratives, we see how other people live, and are called upon to consider whether we too might live that way in the future.

But there are other respects in which we think about our own future in light of the narrative. Because the characters in literary narratives are not only agents but patients, we look at literary narratives and ask ourselves whether the fates that have befallen the characters in question might also afflict us. We read Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and ask ourselves whether we might not one day find ourselves falsely accused of some wrong. Or we read Fumiko Enchi's *The Waiting Years* and wonder whether the love we have relied upon could one day turn out to be false, a matter of desire and position rather than real care.

But narratives do not merely make us consider possible futures for ourselves. When we read literary narratives we are frequently reminded of or called upon to reflect on future certainties. Chief among these I would suggest are aging and death. So for instance we read Hamsun's *On Overgrown Paths* or Yasunari Kawabata's *The Master of Go* and realize that we too will grow old one day. Or we read Chekhov's *The Steppe* or Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and are forced to face up to the fact that we will ultimately die.

So we have good reason to think that narratives are not simply retrospective but invoke the future, either in the sense of the future of the characters or in the sense of the way we will choose to live in the future or what we may or will inevitably be called upon to face. I am content to call this a form of creating meaningfulness, only the meaningfulness in question is less something idiosyncratic than a general reminder that we are both agents and patients. In other words, it is concerned less with recovering something individual than exposing us to something general, namely our humanity. As a consequence, it seems apt to say that literature is anticipatory just as much as it is retrospective.

#### 4.2.5 Thematic Unity

I have left thematic unity until last and will discuss it only briefly. There are two ways of thinking about theme in narrative. The first is to see themes as ideas that emerge while or after we read. When we read a narrative, one of our responses is to pick up on the ideas that circulate there and chart, however roughly, their development throughout the text. For example, a reading of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* will involve recognition of themes such as the difficulty of youth, the tyranny of religion, and the insistence of sexual desire. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen suggest that one of the virtues of art—and literature in



particular—might be that it creates these themes for a culture, or lifts them out of everyday vagueness, making them concrete and obvious.<sup>199</sup>

However, when I talk about thematic unity I am speaking of another notion. This is the idea that theme, while part of the *content* of a narrative, may influence its *structure*. Themes do not emerge accidentally after the fact through reading, but are built into the work by the author. They may influence both story and discourse, or which events and existents fill the novel and the way in which these are rendered. This may be the case in a very minor sense. For example, the ordering of the events can be influenced by the author's desire to have the theme emerge most starkly. A good example might be Tolstoy's novel *The Resurrection*. The emergence of the themes of unignorable regret and the self-effacing search for forgiveness are served best by a structure that has the narrative begin *in media res*, with the events that prompted Dmitri Ivanovich's feelings of guilt revealed through a flashback. This structure closes the distance between the moment at which Dmitri's bad conscience awakens and his efforts to attain forgiveness, making the contrast between the oblivion of sin and the peace of redemption more marked.

But thematic unity can also exert a more extreme influence. A running theme lends coherence to what could be taken for a miscellaneous assemblage of events viewed purely from the perspective of plot development. I can offer two examples. The first is parallel narratives. The presence of two stories involving different characters, perhaps set at different times, whether told simultaneously or consecutively, is usually explained by thematic continuity between the two. The second is digressions. Continuity of theme can explain pauses in the story arc that contain

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<sup>199</sup> Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 454-55.

concerned with meditation, explanation or speculation. Good examples would be the ‘Grand Inquisitor’ story in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* or the numerous chapters on the hunting of whales in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*.

#### 4.3. Conclusion

In summary, there are five main features of narrative:

- (1) Story, which is made up of existents and events
- (2) The way the story is told, which includes the use of linguistic devices and the arrangement of events
- (3) A beginning and an end that give significance to what is otherwise just passing time.
- (4) Many senses of past, present and future.
- (5) Themes that influence both which existents and events are included and the way in which the story is told.

I take these to be the central features of narrative. These are the building blocks out of which narratives are composed.

Recall that at the beginning of this chapter I considered Christman’s critique of narrative as it emerges in the context of the narrative conception of self. I set out to show that there is more to narrative than simply tellability and thematic unity, especially when it comes to the decision upon a beginning and ending and the question of temporality in narrative.

There is continuity between a couple of the features of narrative I have identified and those that Christman identifies. I have included thematic unity among my narrative elements, while tellability is implicitly still a part of narrative. In highlighting discourse, the arrangement of events and the employment of literary devices, I have indicated the significance of tellability as a feature of narrative. At the same time I have tried to emphasize that the way in which a narrative is told is crucial, and that there may be more than one way to tell the same set of events.

But I have also suggested that there are three other features that distinguish narrative from other types of discourse. Each of these features alone does not do so (in particular, the presence of events and existents seems characteristic of other forms of communication), but all together they do show how narrative is something unique and far from empty or ambiguous.

I have not been trying to defend the sense of narrative adopted by narrative conceptions of the self against Christman's critique. Existing narrative conceptions of the self may indeed be culpable in the way Christman suggests, namely in failing to present an account of the nature of narrative that escapes emptiness and ambiguity. I have tried to come to a separate understanding of narrative, one that can provide a foundation for thinking about self-narratives in the later chapters of this dissertation.

## ***Chapter 5 Acknowledgment and the Self***

### ***5.1 Introduction***

In previous chapters, I have presented several conceptions of the self. In the first section I look at Plato, Descartes, Korsgaard and Frankfurt. In the second chapter I described the narrative conception of the self, according to which who we are is understood on analogy with a literary narrative. Then in the third chapter I looked at a critique of the narrative conception, one to which I argued the narrative conception had no reply. In the fourth chapter I defined what I mean by narrative.

In this chapter I intend to make another shift. In due course, I mean to argue in favor of a further conception of the self. However, in order to do so, I will need to bring in an additional conceptual resource. This is the concept of acknowledgment articulated by Stanley Cavell. By introducing acknowledgment at this point, I will be able to articulate the relationship between narrative and selfhood in later chapters.

This chapter contains five parts. First, I will introduce the concept of acknowledgment as Cavell presents it. Second, I will turn to the necessity of acknowledging *ourselves* as opposed to other people. Third, I will enrich this discussion by addressing a series of questions arising from Cavell's discussion of acknowledgment and its application to the self. This will lead me to present a model of the way in which Cavell might understand the self. Fourth, I will respond to this model and come up with my own conception of the self, involving the concept of acknowledgment. Fifth, I will compare what I call failures of self-acknowledgment with two apparently similar ideas, the psycho-analytic concept of repression and the existentialist concept of bad faith.

## 5.2 Acknowledgment and Others

Broadly speaking, the concept of acknowledgment as Cavell lays it out in the essay ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ develops out of a discussion of skepticism. Cavell’s discussion revolves around the problem of other minds, namely whether we can know that other minds exist. The problems posed by skepticism are always in the background of Cavell’s discussion of acknowledgment.

However, we can be more specific. We can locate the emergence of the concept of acknowledgment in Cavell’s discussion of expressions of pain and the responses we make to them. Specifically, Cavell concentrates on the phrases (1) “I know I am in pain,” and (2) “I know you are in pain.”<sup>200</sup> We might assert that these phrases are claims about knowledge, specifically that they register my certainty that, in the first case, I am experiencing pain, and, in the second case, that another person (you) is (are) experiencing pain.

Perhaps we could contrive circumstances in which these phrases would perform this function. However, Cavell argues that their function is typically very different. In the case of (1), he argues that the phrase is not a knowledge-claim, or indeed any other kind of claim; it is a form of exhibiting. ‘The reason “I know I am in pain” is not an expression of certainty is that it is an expression of pain—it is the exhibiting of the object about which someone (else) may be certain.’<sup>201</sup> In Cavell’s view, this phrase does not express *knowledge* because it expresses *pain*.

Something similar is true of phrase (2). Cavell argues that ‘The reason “I know you are in pain” is not an expression of certainty is that it is a response to this exhibiting; it is an expression of

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<sup>200</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 238-266.

<sup>201</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 263.

*sympathy*. (“I know what you’re going through”; “I’ve done all I can”; “The serum is being flown in by special plane”).<sup>202</sup> Here, the phrase does not play the role of a knowledge claim because it does something more. The additional function of this phrase is what Cavell calls *acknowledgment*. This transcends mere knowing, though acknowledging someone’s pain implies that we know she is in pain. As Cavell argues, ‘Your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what “(your or his) being in pain” means. Is.’<sup>203</sup> Therefore, acknowledgment is a human response in an instance in which another person makes a claim on me, a claim at least for sympathy, but also perhaps for assistance, recompense, and so on. Acknowledgment speaks to the fact that, as Stephen Mulhall puts it, ‘part of knowing that another is in pain is knowing that another’s pain demands a response from me.’<sup>204</sup>

This does not mean that in all instances acknowledgment constitutes a positive response to another’s claim on me. In fact, as Cavell notes, acknowledgment is closer to a class or category of responses.<sup>205</sup> He states that:

The concept of acknowledgment is evinced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. (It is the sort of concept Heidegger calls an *existentiale*). A “failure to know” might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A “failure to

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<sup>202</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 263.

<sup>203</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 263.

<sup>204</sup> Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 110.

<sup>205</sup> Down the line I will explore this idea further and argue that there are two conceptions of acknowledgment operating in Cavell’s work.

acknowledge” is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness.<sup>206</sup>

Therefore, acknowledgment refers to a category of responses to an instance in which another person makes a claim on me. The exact nature of that response—whether it is positive or negative, a form of recognition or denial—remains open.

This will be crucial for my discussion of the self and narrative. Cavell is saying that in instances in which we respond to a claim on us of the kind ‘I am in pain’ by doing nothing, or looking away, or pretending we did not hear what was said, we are still acknowledging the suffering, and acknowledging that person. Though it is easiest to conceive of acknowledgment in positive terms, say as comforting a person or calling an ambulance when she says she is in pain, as a category of responses acknowledgment is not always positive.

But how is this the case? The key is Cavell’s reference to the ‘presence of something’ and the idea that this is different from the kind of absence of which ignorance is one example. We can see this by comparing two situations. First, someone says to me ‘I am in pain,’ and on hearing her I pretend not to have heard and do nothing. Second, someone says to me ‘I am in pain,’ I really do fail to hear what she said, and as a consequence do nothing. The action that follows the expression of pain is identical in both instances—I do nothing. However, in the first situation my doing nothing is a *response* to the claim the other person is making on me: I know the person is suffering and I do not care, or something else is more important to me than showing sympathy. In the second situation, my doing nothing says nothing about my feelings towards the person, no more than it says something about me, except perhaps that I am hard of hearing.

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<sup>206</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 263-64.

This is not to say that we should lose sight of the important distinction between the failure of acknowledgment and its success. Obviously an instance in which someone says she is in pain and I respond by comforting her seems a clearer instance of ‘acknowledgment’ than responding to someone’s expression of pain by doing nothing. Nonetheless, for Cavell, both are cases of acknowledgment. The confusion is perhaps deepened by a paradoxical quality of saying that acknowledgment has occurred and yet somehow failed to occur. However, when we bear in mind the example from the previous paragraph, we can see how a failure of acknowledgment differs from a case that is not acknowledgment. They differ in that the former involves a response to someone’s pain, whereas the latter involves no response at all.

However, in texts outside of ‘Knowing and Acknowledging,’ Cavell explains that acknowledgment pertains to more than these situations. The best example is Cavell’s reading of *King Lear*. The guiding theme of this long essay is the avoidance of love, the failure to acknowledge it. This avoidance characterizes Lear’s relationships to other characters in the play, especially Cordelia and Gloucester. In discussing Lear’s interactions with the latter in 4.6, Cavell seeks to explain Lear’s declaration, ‘I’ll not love,’ which he makes in response to Gloucester’s attempt to show his affection by kissing his hand. Cavell says of Lear, ‘[He] cannot bear love when he has no reason to be loved, perhaps because of the helplessness, the passiveness which that implies, which some take for impotence. And he wards it off for the reason for which people do ward off being loved, because it presents itself to them as a demand.’<sup>207</sup> Just as another’s expression of pain amounted to a claim on us, his expression of love likewise amounts to such a claim. We are required to acknowledge it. Through his announcement that he will not love Gloucester, Lear commits a failure of acknowledgment. And *King Lear* is a play that engages

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<sup>207</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 289.



with the question of the extent to which we can endure being loved, that is, whether we are ever willing to acknowledge it. This is true not simply of the relationship between Lear and Gloucester, but of the love between other characters. As Cavell says later in his *Lear* essay, ‘We do not care whether the kind of love felt between [Lear and Cordelia] is forbidden according to man’s lights. We care whether love is or is not altogether forbidden to man, whether we may not altogether be incapable of it, of admitting it into our world. We wonder whether we may always go mad between the equal efforts and terrors at once of rejecting and of accepting love.’<sup>208</sup> Thus, in Cavell’s discussion of *King Lear*, we see that the object of acknowledgment is not simply a matter of sensations such as pain, but can involve feelings, of which love is the most obvious example.

Of course, Cavell’s is not the only reading of *King Lear*. First, Margreta de Grazia reads the play not as revolving around Cordelia’s love for her father and his inability to bear being the subject of those feelings, but as interested in property and the role it plays in identity. In particular, the possessions that matter are superfluous things, which, while unnecessary for subsistence, are necessary when it comes to ‘upholding social and personal identity.’<sup>209</sup> This reading is relevant here because it opposes Cavell’s focus on interiority and feeling a concern with exteriority and property. Second, William R. Elton reads *Lear* in religious terms, diagnosing it as an inflected pagan play in which Christian themes are nonetheless evident, and one whose Christian element would have mattered to the audience for whom it was first produced.<sup>210</sup> This reading is relevant because, though Cavell asks whether *Lear* is a Christian play in ‘The Avoidance of Love,’ it is

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<sup>208</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 300.

<sup>209</sup> Margreta de Grazia, ‘The Ideology of Superfluous Things: *King Lear* as Period Piece,’ in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24.

<sup>210</sup> William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 338.

far from his central preoccupation, and he is not concerned with how the audience of Shakespeare's time would have received *King Lear*. Third, Paul Kahn shares Cavell's concern with love in the play, but focuses on its interrelation with law and power. He argues that, 'Man must die to power if he is to love purely. Or he must restrain love if he is to rule effectively. This, in the most abstract and summary form, is the philosophical and moral vision that the play explores.'<sup>211</sup> Kahn picks up on a central theme from Cavell—love—but considers it in terms of an idea that does not feature substantially in Cavell's interpretation, namely the practical demands of kingship.

However, the correctness of Cavell's reading of *King Lear* is not at issue here. What is important is that his discussion of the play shows that acknowledgment pertains to more than just pain. But is acknowledgment always of or in response to another person's sensations or feelings? If we look elsewhere in Cavell's work, we see that this is not the case. I can fail to acknowledge not just that someone, say, loves me, but who she is. This emerges in Cavell's discussion of *Othello*, which concludes *The Claim of Reason*.

One way of understanding *Othello* is to say that the downfall of Othello can be ascribed wholly to Iago.<sup>212</sup> On this reading, the tragedy would not have occurred but for Iago's plot. Cavell takes an alternative approach. Rather than emphasizing Iago's role, he diminishes it, and makes Othello himself the cause. As Cavell says, 'Othello's radical, consuming doubt is not caused by Iago's rumoring. Othello rather seizes upon Iago's suggestions as effects or covers for something the object itself already revealed, and claimed, despite its most fervent protestations to the

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<sup>211</sup> Paul W. Kahn, *Law and Love: The Trials of King Lear* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>212</sup> This is Coleridge's view, which I will mention in a moment.

contrary.’<sup>213</sup> I will say more about Cavell’s view of *Othello* in a moment. This should make this quotation more perspicuous. But he is at least suggesting that Iago’s manipulations give Othello a pretext for acceding to pre-existing doubts about Desdemona. So, for Cavell, not Iago but Othello is the key figure when it comes to the cause of the tragedy. Othello’s tragic downfall results not from Iago’s machinations but Othello’s failure to acknowledge Desdemona.

But the question is how Cavell’s reading of *Othello* furthers our understanding of acknowledgment. So, how does the concept of acknowledgment figure in Cavell’s understanding of the play? The central issue for him is not Othello’s uncertainty over whether Desdemona is the faithful wife he wanted. Instead, Othello’s certainty is the root of the problem. As Cavell puts it at the end of *The Claim of Reason*, ‘What [Othello] lacked was not certainty. He knew everything, but he could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it. He found out too much for his mind, not too little.’<sup>214</sup> Cavell presents the tragedy of Othello as concerned not with Othello’s doubts about Desdemona’s faithfulness, but his certainty that she is faithful. He knew all that he could hope to know about Desdemona—that she loved him—but was unwilling to respond appropriately. The problem the play explores is not Othello’s failure to know Desdemona for what she is—that is, as innocent—but a failure to acknowledge her as such. Cavell articulates Othello’s failure in the following way: ‘He seeks a possession that is not in opposition to another’s claim or desire but one that establishes an absolute or inalienable bonding to himself, to which no claim or desire *could* be opposed, could conceivably count; as if [his] jealousy is directed to the sheer existence of the other, its separateness from him.’<sup>215</sup> Here, Cavell is claiming that the real problem for Othello is Desdemona’s separateness from him, her

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<sup>213</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8-9.

<sup>214</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 496.

<sup>215</sup> Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 9.

existence as a distinct individual. He is unable to acknowledge that she is a human being in her own right, that is, that she is someone like him.<sup>216</sup>

There are a few prominent views on *Othello* that seem relevant here. I have already mentioned Samuel Taylor Coleridge's view that Iago is exclusively responsible for bringing about the murder of Desdemona: 'Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in a conviction forced upon him by the almost superhuman art of Iago, such a conviction as any man would and must have entertained who had believed Iago's honesty as Othello did.'<sup>217</sup> Coleridge's argument is relevant because it takes the inverse approach to Cavell. Rather than seeing Othello as the cause of the tragedy, Coleridge blames Iago. Second, Edward Berry explores the racial aspect of the play, an important theme that Cavell takes up only incidentally. Berry argues that racial tension affects all of Othello's relationships in the play, while in the murder scene, 'what Othello tries to kill is...in some sense his own blackness.'<sup>218</sup> Third, Katherine Eisamann Maus inverts Cavell's account of Othello's treatment of Desdemona. To her mind, instead of denying that she is a person in her own right, Othello applies to Desdemona the conditions by which he defines himself. He comprehends Desdemona as a version of himself, and this gives rise to the suspicions that precipitate the tragedy. Being a human being brings with it the possession of

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<sup>216</sup> Stuart Klawans considers one of Cavell's major themes to be 'the need for the man to acknowledge the woman's autonomy, and for her to see that he acknowledges it.' We see it here in Cavell's writing on *Othello* and it also arises in his discussions of film. See Stuart Klawans, 'Habitual Remarriage: The Ends of Happiness in *The Palm Beach Story*,' in *Reading Cavell*, ed. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (New York: Routledge, 2006), 219.

<sup>217</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists* (London: J.M. Dent, 1909), 176.

<sup>218</sup> Edward Berry, 'Othello's Alienation,' in *William Shakespeare's Othello*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 50 and 56.

hidden shames and secrets. ‘Insofar as she is a person, Othello imagines she must have something to narrate; but if she has something to narrate, she is no longer innocent.’<sup>219</sup>

These are each interesting interpretations. However, of greater importance is that grasping the way in which Cavell reads *Othello* broadens our understanding of acknowledgment. While we might describe the situation in *Othello* as one in which the title character fails to acknowledge Desdemona’s feelings for him, Cavell’s reference to separateness suggests that the problem is a larger one. Othello cannot acknowledge Desdemona as a person, as someone who is a human being in her own right. Therefore, acknowledgment pertains not only to sensations such as pain, or feelings such as love, that is, what someone is experiencing in the moment, but can pertain to who someone is—as in the case of *Othello*, her being someone like me.<sup>220</sup>

To conclude this initial discussion of acknowledgment, we must define it. There are three key elements of acknowledgment. First, while it is related to knowledge, acknowledgment goes beyond simply being certain about some fact or other. Rather, it involves a *response* to a piece of knowledge, such as, for instance, saying that you know that someone is in pain, or ignoring them. This leads into the second feature of acknowledgment: it is a category of responses, meaning that acknowledgment is evinced both by successful acknowledgment (affirmation, acceptance) and the failure of acknowledgement (denial, rejection).<sup>221</sup> A (literal) failure to hear

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<sup>219</sup> Katherine Eisamann Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 124. Obviously, Eisamann’s reference to narrative is interesting given my concerns in this dissertation, but I will not have time to explore the role of narrative in *Othello* here.

<sup>220</sup> Hilary Putnam suggests that these amount to the same thing in the end: ‘To really stop and ask the skeptical question when someone is in agony...to ask it *about* the agony, would manifest a failure of humanity. It would be a refusal to acknowledge the other as a person, indeed, as Cavell describes the phenomenology, the other doesn’t so much exist for me as a person if I am in that state of non-acknowledgment.’ For Putnam, to refuse to acknowledge someone’s suffering is to refuse to acknowledge who they are. See Hilary Putnam, ‘Stanley Cavell and Skepticism,’ in *Reading Cavell*, ed. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (New York: Routledge, 2006), 126.

<sup>221</sup> This distinction seems to be missed in the literature, though it seems evident in Cavell’s work. For instance, Bernstein seems to run together acknowledgment and affirmation in the following passage: ‘It is the particular and distinct demand of modernist art that it take the form of acknowledgment (acceptance).’ J.M. Bernstein, ‘Aesthetics,

someone is not an example of a failure of acknowledgment. Third, acknowledgment is a response to a claim on us. An expression of pain demands that we acknowledge it, as does a confession of love. And we can infer from Cavell's reading of *Othello* that other people make claims we are compelled to acknowledge.

This definition should make clear just how acknowledgment differs from knowledge. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell says that acknowledgment 'goes beyond' knowledge.<sup>222</sup> By this, he means not that acknowledgment is a greater feat of cognition—acknowledgment is not some 'higher form' of knowing—but that it involves something more than knowledge. Specifically, it involves at least two things. First, it involves owning up to the fact that you know. Second, it involves taking action in light of what you know.<sup>223</sup> Thus, a good way of making the distinction between knowledge and acknowledgment is to say that acknowledging, unlike knowing, is active. It is a matter of performance in the sense of enactment, not simply perception.<sup>224</sup>

Acknowledgment is consequently highly context-specific. An action that counts as successful acknowledgment in one instance may in another be a failure of it.

In claiming that acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge, Cavell's view appears to be the inverse of Ludwig Wittgenstein's assertion in *On Certainty* that 'knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment.'<sup>225</sup> Wittgenstein makes acknowledgment the prerequisite for knowledge; Cavell makes knowledge the prerequisite for acknowledgment. Given the influence that

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Modernism, Literature: Cavell's Transformations of Philosophy,' in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 124.

<sup>222</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 428.

<sup>223</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 428.

<sup>224</sup> Stephen Melville puts matters well: 'Whereas my recognition of another person is merely an epistemological matter, my acknowledgment (of that recognition) carries with it some burden of action or obligation (albeit as simple as tipping my hat).' See Stephen Melville, 'The Difference Manet Makes,' in *Refracting Vision: Essays on the Writings of Michael Fried*, ed. Jill Beaulieu, Mary Roberts, and Toni Ross (Sydney: Power Publications, 2000), 119.

<sup>225</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper, 1969), 492.

Wittgenstein has on Cavell, seems a noteworthy contrast. Is it as severe as appears to be the case?

Cavell makes it sufficiently clear that acknowledgment occurs on the basis of knowledge and exceeds it. It really does seem that, as William Desmond puts it in contrasting Cavell's view of knowledge with that of Hegel, 'Acknowledgment is just the point at which knowing knows it must go beyond itself.'<sup>226</sup> However, a metaphor Cavell uses outside of *The Claim of Reason*, in his writings on film, seems to close the gap between his view of the role of acknowledgment and Wittgenstein's. In *The World Viewed*, he refers to acknowledgment as the 'home of knowledge.'<sup>227</sup> This is an ambiguous claim that is difficult to unpack. For help, we can turn to J.M. Bernstein, who in exploring the role of acknowledgment in art puts things as follows:

To say that acknowledgment is the home of knowledge is...to say, first, that I pass beyond the doubt represented by the self-declared strangeness (in relation to past convention) and materiality of the work by exposing myself to the work, letting it perform its work of bracketing and reconstitution, so letting it be a work for me, learning what art is from the work; and...second, learning that unless I expose myself to the work, let myself and my possibilities of meaning be tested by it, there is nothing to know and so no meaningful knowledge (art reminds us of what the rest of culture is at pains to forget).<sup>228</sup>

This quotation from Bernstein anticipates much that I will only go on to discuss when I come to look at the concept of theatricality later in this dissertation. However, his point is that acknowledgment holds the key to meaningful knowledge; this is the sense in which

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<sup>226</sup> William Desmond, 'A Second *Primavera*: Cavell, German Philosophy, and Romanticism,' in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 147.

<sup>227</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 110.

<sup>228</sup> Bernstein, 'Aesthetics, Modernism, Literature,' 129.

acknowledgment is the home of knowledge. Acknowledgment is necessary in order for our knowledge to matter to us. Acknowledgement goes beyond knowledge, but it is not as if acknowledging means leaving knowing behind. Acknowledgment makes what we know matter; in this way, knowledge is based on acknowledgment. Thus the apparent divergence between Wittgenstein and Cavell is not as significant as it first appears.

In this section I have set out Stanley Cavell's concept of acknowledgment as it arises in our relations with others. In the next section I will look at Cavell's references to the possibility that acknowledgment also arises in our relationship with ourselves.

### *5.3 Acknowledgment as Intrasubjective*

So far I have taken acknowledgment to be exclusively intersubjective. Acknowledgment arises in my encounters with others. Lear is called upon to acknowledge Cordelia's love. Othello is asked to acknowledge Desdemona as someone separate from him who possesses her own wants and desires.

This is largely borne out by Cavell's work: he for the most part discusses acknowledgment in our relations with others. However, he devotes a few pages of *The Claim of Reason* to our relations with ourselves. In this discussion, the emphasis is on the question of whether or not I can speak in terms of 'believing myself.' The idea of acknowledging myself does not explicitly arise.

Whether it is correct to speak of self-acknowledgment therefore remains, on the basis of Cavell's work, to some extent an open question.

However, there is a hint in *The Claim of Reason* that it is appropriate to speak of acknowledgment in my relations with myself. This comes in a brief reference to the



Michelangelo Antonioni film *Red Desert*. Cavell considers whether the statement ‘I am I’ conveys a piece of information. His initial reaction is that ‘I am I’ cannot convey information since it is tautologous and hence empty, yet the drift of Cavell’s dialogical meditation on this problem is that this response is lacking for a further reason. ‘I am I’ is simply not an answer to the question ‘Who am I?’<sup>229</sup> What, then, would answer this question? Cavell goes on to say, ‘That answer is, or might be, ‘No one.’ It serves to reject, or explain, this answer to respond, ‘I am I’... That I am I thus says that I am not even me—a hilarious, or rather an ecstatic glimpse at the possibility that I am not exhausted by all the definitions the world gives of me to me. Everything that happens to me is my life, the woman says at the end of *Red Desert*. Very well, but I am the one who must take it upon myself.’<sup>230</sup> There are two main ideas in this excerpt. The first is that I am not the same as all the possible definitions of me. The second is that I am the person who must accept what has happened to me as my own.

Antonioni’s existentialist classic is probably less familiar than plays like *Othello* and *King Lear*, and a summary of the film might help us better understand Cavell. In giving this summary, I will focus more on the final scenes, which contain the speech to which Cavell refers. The plot is as follows. Giuliana (Monica Vitti) has been in a car accident, since which time she has suffered depression. She is introduced to Corrado (Richard Harris), a business associate of her husband, who owns a factory. Corrado is attracted to Giuliana and attempts to see her behind her father’s back. Giuliana tells Corrado about a woman who was in hospital with her after her car accident. The woman attempted suicide. Corrado and Giuliana become closer; they are flirtatious but each also makes a confidant of the other. Giuliana reveals to Corrado that there was no woman in hospital; she was the one who attempted suicide. Her mental state grows more precarious and she

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<sup>229</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 389-90.

<sup>230</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 390.

feels more and more alone, especially when she believes her son to be suffering from polio. In one night of panic, Giuliana seeks out Corrado. He attempts to force himself on her, and while she initially resists, ultimately she gives in to him. This only intensifies Giuliana's loneliness and despair.

In the penultimate scene, Giuliana wanders onto a ship, where she is confronted by a sailor whose language she cannot understand. Nonetheless, she tries to explain herself to him, in particular the source of the overwhelming anxiety and depression she has been suffering since a car accident. Then, suddenly changed, she speaks the lines to which Cavell alludes: 'I need to remember that everything that happens to me is my life, that's all.'

In the final scene, Giuliana is outside her husband's factory. Playing with her son, she is in quite a different mood than we have seen her in at other times in the film, happy and at ease. Her son asks why the smoke from the factory stacks is yellow. She explains that it is poisonous and that the birds do not fly into the smoke because they have learned to avoid it. The reference is symbolic. The implication is that Giuliana has elected to distance herself from the troubles that provoked her anxiety and despondency. They are simply what has happened to her: adopting this resigned attitude allows her to escape her inner pain. She has, in Cavell's terms, chosen not to take her life upon herself.

However, the sense we get at the end of *Red Desert* is that while Giuliana may have escaped her anxiety, she has failed rather than succeeded. And this is the aspect of the film that the reference from Cavell draws out. My life—all the things that have happened to me—makes a claim on me. I am required to take the life I have upon myself; my refusal to do so amounts to a failure. But in speaking of taking my life upon myself, Cavell seems to be hinting that I need to *acknowledge*

what has happened to me, to *acknowledge* my life. This implies that we can speak of acknowledgment in an intrasubjective sense. Acknowledgment is not simply a category that deals with my relations with others. Rather, it is a category that can pertain to my relationship to myself.

One way in which we might understand the idea of taking something upon myself is as a form of ratification. If I take something upon myself, I accept the claim it makes on me. This is an idea that emerges in a further discussion by Cavell. In speaking about Othello's jealousy, he says that:

The violence in masculine knowing, explicitly associated with jealousy, seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession, call it private property.

Othello's problem, following my suggestion that his problem is over success, not failure, is that Desdemona's acceptance, or satisfaction, or reward of his ambition, strikes him as being possessed, as if he is the woman. This linking of the desire of knowledge for possession, for, let us say, intimacy, links this epistemological problematic as a whole with that of the problematic of property, of ownership as the owning or ratifying of one's identity.<sup>231</sup>

This quotation suggests that our identity demands ratification. Here we have a curious and not entirely helpful interplay of terms. It is not clear how we should define 'identity' in this case, and no more clear how this concept overlaps with the notion of self I am discussing in this dissertation. Nor is it obvious whether and how the notion of 'life' as used by Cavell in his reference to *Red Desert* fits either of these categories, even if it seems it must. However, Cavell's comment does make it apparent that being a person involves an explicit step of avowal that puts

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<sup>231</sup> Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 10.

us in a relationship with ourselves. This gives us another reason for thinking that acknowledgment is a category that can apply to intrasubjective relations as well as those involving others.

Of course, in light of what I said about acknowledgment in the previous section, this cannot be the whole story. Given the way I have characterized acknowledgment, while ratification of my identity would fit under the category of acknowledgment, so too would the refusal to ratify my identity when presented with the obligation to do so. So here Cavell is saying that there is something right or good about *successfully* acknowledging myself. However, there is much more to be said. Does successful acknowledgment bring us something integral to selfhood that failures of acknowledgment do not? I will answer this question in the next two sections.

At the beginning of this section I asked whether acknowledgment is characteristic simply of my relations to other people, or whether it is also appropriate to speak of it in terms of my relations with myself. I have shown that while the emphasis in Cavell's work is overwhelmingly on acknowledgment as it occurs in relations between distinct individuals, Cavell does discuss our relations with ourselves. Moreover, we have seen one instance in which Cavell draws attention to the importance of our acknowledging ourselves. However, as yet we possess no more than a sketch of the idea of what we might call *self-acknowledgment*.<sup>232</sup> In the following section, I will look into this notion in more detail.

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<sup>232</sup> I have located only one reference to self-acknowledgment in the literature on Cavell, and it is barely a reference. Mulhall writes: 'For Cavell, just as our knowledge of another's pain finds expression in our behavior, so our awareness of our own pain finds behavioral expression; and just as the absence of any response to another's pain is a failure of acknowledgment, so the absence of an expression of one's own pain is a suppression of it. The psychoanalytic concept of repression confirms this in so far as it offers a new way of understanding certain forms of human behavior as suppressions (or displaced expressions) of mind, as failures of (self-)acknowledgment.' Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 119-120.

## *5.4 Acknowledgement and Ourselves*

Here I will deal with three issues, each in a separate subsection. The first considers how we should understand the term ‘self-acknowledgment.’ The second asks whether Cavell is consistent in his discussion of acknowledgment or whether he wavers between two concepts of acknowledgment. The third offers a speculative suggestion as to what Cavell’s view of a self involving acknowledgment might look like.

### 5.4.1 Self-acknowledgment?

As I have already pointed out, Cavell does not speak in terms of a self that we need to acknowledge. Instead, he talks of a life or an identity. And while an identity might be taken to be synonymous with a self (though typically in philosophical contexts this is not the case), it seems impossible to equate a life—especially understood in terms of ‘everything that has happened to me’—with a self. Philosophical notions of self are more robust than ‘everything that has happened to me,’ not least because who I am is not simply a matter of the passive but the active. What I have done is as important as what I have suffered, and on some theories of self—such as Frankfurt’s—all that matters.

Therefore, to speak in terms of self-acknowledgment is misleading. It suggests we are acknowledging a self that already exists. This is not what the quotations from Cavell imply. And I am not trying to claim that we have a self that we then proceed to acknowledge. This is important, because otherwise we would have to ask what acknowledgment actually ends up giving us when it comes to selfhood. What is the difference between an acknowledged and unacknowledged self? If we cannot answer this question then in making acknowledgment prior to selfhood rather than posterior to it, we make it superfluous. If acknowledgment is to have any

importance when it comes to selfhood, then it must be because acknowledgment is at the heart of being a self in the first place. Lacking acknowledgment, I might well have a life, but I do not have a self.

But this begs the question of what I need to acknowledge about myself. The answer Cavell gives—drawing upon *Red Desert* and, I think we have to acknowledge, without giving us much in the way of an argument to justify his position—is the things that have happened to me. We might use Frankfurt's language to describe these elements in our lives and call them those with respect to which I am passive, or those which are external to me. So, for instance, if I was bullied at school, then that is something I must acknowledge.

But the category of things that have happened to me is presumably much broader than this, especially because it is unclear exactly where we should set the limits of 'what has happened to me.' This category need not be restricted to instances in which an isolable external force has acted on me directly. For instance, we might describe the fact that I was born in a particular place as something that has happened to me, to the extent that it is a crucial event in my life that is outside my control.

However, Cavell also claims that we are required to take possession of, that is, to acknowledge, our identities. Again, this significantly broadens the possible content that we need to acknowledge. What might it include? Should it not involve not only events with respect to which we are passive, but the things we have done? Part of my identity is that I am a graduate student, which is a result of efforts on my part to apply to grad school and to fulfill the requirements of my graduate program. I would suggest that there is no clear reason why self-acknowledgment should not be said also to involve those things with respect to which, again to invoke Frankfurt's

Aristotelian language, we are active. Suppose breaking a promise made to a friend resulted in him being hurt. While I might prefer to forget having made the promise in the first place, instead I will be required to acknowledge it.

But then where should we place the limits of the term action? Should we confine it to things we do in the world, excluding the thoughts we have? Where should we do the same with feelings? Both these elements seem to warrant inclusion. Indeed, when it comes to self-acknowledgment, some of the main candidates for acknowledgment are thoughts and feelings with which we might not be comfortable. If we turn to another play by Shakespeare that Cavell does not discuss from the point of view of acknowledgment, *Hamlet*, we encounter a character for whom acknowledging how he feels is of central importance. We might read his relationship with Ophelia in terms of acknowledgment. Hamlet not only fails to acknowledge Ophelia, he also fails to acknowledge how he feels about her. How else can we explain the callousness he shows towards her and his outburst of sorrow once he discovers that she has killed herself?

Consequently, when I speak of self-acknowledgment, I am not proposing that we have selves we may or may not decide to acknowledge. Rather, self-acknowledgment is the way we achieve selfhood. And what I must acknowledge is what has happened to me and what I have done, along with my thoughts and feelings.

#### 5.4.2 Acknowledgment or successful acknowledgment?

I want to argue that self-acknowledgment is essential to being a self. However, there is more to consider in Cavell before doing so. Cavell looks upon acknowledgment as an *existential*, a category of relations with others. I have suggested that he at times also implies that acknowledgment arises in relations to myself: my life and the things I have done are also there to

acknowledge. But a crucial ambiguity remains. In my relations to myself, is acknowledgment as such sufficient for selfhood, or is it successful acknowledgment that is really important?

We can start to come to terms with this question by looking back at some of Cavell's examples, starting with the simplest. Someone says, 'I am in pain.' So long as we do in fact hear what he says, our interactions with him fall under the category of acknowledgment. We can either do something like ignore him, in which case we will have failed to acknowledge him, or we can do something like fetch a doctor, in which case we will have succeeded in acknowledging him. But irrespective of which option we pursue, both success and failure are instances of acknowledgment.

In *Othello*, the title character loves a woman whom he knows to be a human being in her own right, someone separate from him. His action is to doubt Desdemona's faithfulness and eventually murder her. Thus, he fails to acknowledge her. What would successful acknowledgment then look like? Presumably it would involve something like Othello rejecting Iago's allegations and standing by the wife whose faithfulness only Iago's speculations give him a pretext for doubting. But again, both Othello's success and his failure are examples of acknowledgment. The reason is that Othello's denial of Desdemona testifies to the presence of something—fear of being known by a woman and perhaps in that way emasculated—rather than to the absence of any attitude towards her. He knows her and responds to this knowledge. The failure to acknowledge her still counts as acknowledgment.

Lastly, in *King Lear*, the title character is faced with the love of his daughter, a love that places obligations upon him and makes him vulnerable. The action Lear takes is to present Cordelia with a test of her love and to exile her when she refuses to submit to it. Lear's action is a failure



of acknowledgment. An instance of successful acknowledgment would presumably exclude the love test, but if we think about how acknowledgment might arise later in the play given that the love test does occur, it would surely require Lear to recognize his error, perhaps by asking Cordelia for forgiveness. (Which he does by the end of the play, though movingly she does not feel that he is right to beg her pardon).<sup>233</sup> However, as in the last two cases, both Lear's success and his failure are examples of acknowledgment.

So acknowledgment is a category in terms of which we understand certain types of relations. But importantly, *all* these relations fall under the heading of acknowledgment. Doubting someone's faithfulness and avoiding their love are both instances of acknowledgment. Nonetheless, the void that separates failures in acknowledgment from successful acknowledgment does hold special significance for Cavell. In particular, it matters because failures of acknowledgement are the causes of tragedies. Othello kills Desdemona because he cannot accept her as a full-blown person; Lear loses Cordelia as a result of a sequence of events precipitated by his attempt to avoid her love.

Therefore, while Cavell's overall point is that acknowledgment rather than knowledge is the appropriate philosophical concept to employ when speaking about particular kinds of human relations, he also seems to be saying something more. Successful acknowledgment is desirable, while failures of acknowledgment are undesirable.

In light of the examples from Shakespeare, we could say that the reason successful acknowledgment is desirable is because it lets us avoid physical and psychological pain, whereas suffering and indeed death befall us and those we love in instances of failed acknowledgment.

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<sup>233</sup> See *King Lear*, Act 4 Scene 6.

But this is not always the case, and in particular seems not to be the case when we are talking about self-acknowledgment. This emerges from reflection on *Red Desert*. Successful acknowledgment does not constitute the key to Giuliana's avoidance of psychological pain. Quite the reverse. So long as she acknowledges her doubts and fears, she remains tormented and lonely. Only the refusal to acknowledge them, represented by her telling herself that what has happened to her is merely her life, allows her to escape misery.

Yet Cavell says that Giuliana *must* take her life upon herself. Even if she spares herself psychological pain as a consequence of refusing to acknowledge who she is, this refusal is still a failure. And I do not think that Cavell is misreading the film here. Giuliana spares herself pain through failing to acknowledge herself, but this involves shirking the claim her life makes on her.

However, we might ask whether identifying this sense of failure amounts to much more than making an arbitrary value judgment. Does it? Well, we cannot deny that it is a value judgment. But this does not make it arbitrary. Simply put, no one thinks we are better off being an empty shell of a person. No matter if we avoid pain by denying who we are, there is something desirable that is missing from our existence if we fail to take what has happened to us upon ourselves. Perhaps we could endorse the setting aside of what has happened to us as a temporary measure if it really is a matter of life and death, but when asked what constitutes human life as we want to live it, we are left with the idea that it cannot be a matter of perpetual disassociation from ourselves.

Yet what does all this tell us about acknowledgment, particularly the idea of self-acknowledgment? In short, I want to say that *two* concepts of acknowledgment have emerged from these discussions, both of which are operative in Cavell's work. They are:

(1) Acknowledgment in the sense of a *category* in which we think of our relations with other human beings and with ourselves. Under this version of acknowledgment, both successes and failures of acknowledgment count as acknowledgment.

(2) Acknowledgment in the sense of *successful acknowledgment*. This is the concept of acknowledgment that is the root of the tragedies of *Othello* and *King Lear*, and what the woman shies away from at the end of *Red Desert*. It is at the heart of living a non-tragic human life.

One of the projects we might undertake at this point is a survey of Cavell's work. When does he speak about acknowledgment in the first sense and when does he use acknowledgment in the second sense? Perhaps he is not wholly consistent in employing these two senses of acknowledgment. However, this is outside of my interests in this dissertation. I am concerned with the role that narrative plays in selfhood. So, having claimed that there are two concepts of acknowledgment, I want to return to self-acknowledgment and propose that it is acknowledgment in the second sense that figures in selfhood for Cavell.

#### 5.4.3 Cavell's Acknowledged Self

Though Cavell refers to the self in the context of discussions of epistemology, aesthetics and ethics, he does not explicitly define it as many of the writers I have been considering have done. Is there anything like a concept of the self for Cavell? On the basis of the foregoing reflections, I

will speculate about what the self might look like for Cavell. I think his view of the self is something like the following:

(1) What has happened to someone and what she has done, thought, felt (her life)

(2) Her acknowledgment *in the sense of successful acknowledgment* of what has happened to her and what she has done

On the one hand, I have a life that is made up of what I have done and what has happened to me. However, being a self involves acknowledgment, in the sense of taking upon myself what I have done and what has happened to me. That is, being a self is a matter of affirming who I am, accepting the life I have lived rather than rejecting it. To do otherwise makes me a shallow creature, albeit one whose life may be freer of suffering than it would have been had I failed to acknowledge it. A self is robust and deep. This seems implicit in Cavell's reference to *Red Desert*.

Again, I view this understanding of the self as at best implied by Cavell's work. I am not arguing that Cavell tries directly to offer an account of the self. In some sense, then, what I have laid out above is speculative. But it is useful speculation. Reaching an understanding that this is the implication of Cavell's arguments is important as an intermediary step on the way to developing my own account of the self.

But before going on to do that, I want to consider the difference between this account of the self and others I have looked at in this dissertation. The chief difference is that I attain selfhood through an action that sincerely expresses my feelings about myself. In order to be a self, I cannot simply remain passive or ambivalent towards who I am. And crucially, on this model the

attitude I adopt towards myself must be affirmatory. I am not a self if I follow the example of Giuliana from *Red Desert* and disown who I am. We might say therefore that on this account, being a self asks something of us that, say, Frankfurt's view of the self does not. On his account, being a self is something that we just inevitably do. According to the account I have produced on the basis of Cavell's work, only wanting selfhood for myself will let me attain it.<sup>234</sup>

Is this a problem? In one sense we can see how it might be. If we say that one of the reasons that we have a concept of the self is to allow us to map moral responsibility onto individuals, then we would want a self to be the kind of thing that is just there by default; it seems like only problems can eventuate when we start to say that I need to adopt an attitude towards my life in order to attain a self. However, there are other senses of self that are not responses to questions about moral responsibility. In this dissertation I am interested in the self in the sense of self-image, the self conceived in terms of an answer to the question 'Who am I?' Given that I am discussing the self in this sense, an objection to this account that proceeds from the question of moral responsibility has little traction.

However, I do not intend to maintain that there are no problems with this speculative account of how Cavell might understand the self. In the next section I want to present a significant criticism, on the basis of which I will argue that we ought to adopt an alternative understanding of selfhood.

### *5.5 Selfhood and Acknowledgment*

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<sup>234</sup> For these reasons, we might be tempted to introduce a contrast between having a self and becoming a self at this point. But while I have suggested that we do not simply have a self on Cavell's account, I would resist the suggestion that this means that a self is something we become if what 'becoming' means here is growing or developing a self. Selfhood for Cavell does not seem like a matter of cultivation, which is what becoming a self, taken in this sense, would seem to me to imply.

If we ask how selfhood and acknowledgment *might* intersect for Cavell, we seem to reach a picture along the lines of what I have presented above. However, I do not think this is the right view of the self, and in this section I want to say why this is the case. Briefly, I will suggest that while the idea that acknowledgment figures in the self is the right approach to take, acknowledgment in the sense of successful acknowledgment cannot be constitutive of selfhood. Again briefly, the reason for this is that to take successful acknowledgment as a requirement for selfhood makes selfhood dependent on mental and emotional wellness. This is excessive insofar as it involves excluding from the category of selves those who deceive themselves, those who are subject to self-doubt, and those who experience other similar phenomena familiar to us from our mental and emotional lives. Though these are undoubtedly crises and perhaps nadirs, they are the kinds of experiences that selves have, not disqualifications for selfhood. I will claim that acknowledgment is a requirement of selfhood, but not in the sense of *successful* acknowledgment, instead in the *categorical* sense.

My reason for saying that self-acknowledgment must figure in our account of the self is that there is a claim we make upon ourselves to which we need to respond. Perhaps be put in no better way than to say that the makeup of the person I am ought to matter to me. This is not completely the same as saying that I need to take an active stance towards the life-projects in which I engage in order to pursue a meaningful life, though that might be part of it. The sense in which who I am ought to matter to me is largely retrospective. What I have done and how I have acted should not become incidental matters once time has passed. Rather, past events in which I have been involved should continue to be significant to me even long after they have occurred.

But matter to me in what sense? I am not speaking simply in terms of holding on to mementos or keeping a photograph album. Something's mattering to us is not simply a matter of keeping good

records. Our lives need to matter to us in the sense that we continue to take actions on the basis of them though it may be easy to feel remote from what has happened to us and what we have become. Just stating that we acknowledge who we are does not accomplish anything; I need to allow my future to be vulnerable to the ramifications of my past rather than cling to the myth that the future is alienated from the past, renewable and phoenix-like.

This reflects the sense in which we might describe any one moment in which we are called upon to make a decision as the meeting point of the past and the future. Of course, the decisions we make about our future will always be shaped by our past, and we may not always be aware of the extent of its influence or be able to moderate it, especially insofar as our past includes the time at which we live and the language we happen to speak. But there is always the possibility of trying to ‘live for the moment’; this seems like the attitude governing Galen Strawson’s notion of an episodic existence.

But if my criticism of Strawson’s episodic account of the self in the second chapter was that it presented a false picture of the self in that it wrongly asserted that we could completely disassociate ourselves from our pasts, we can also critique it from the point of view of value. Someone who forgets about their past when making a decision about what to do in the future for not other reason than that they *can* disassociate the two would surely count as childish in our eyes. They would be a superficial, immature person—or shallow at best—compared to the person for whom the past connects to the future through the present, someone for whom the future will bear the impression of the past.

So acknowledgment seems like a requirement for selfhood. What we mean when we talk about being a self is more than that we are something or that we have done something. But does this

necessarily mean that we need to acknowledge ourselves in the *affirmatory* sense? This seems like the same as the following question: Is there something lost in failures of acknowledgment that is vital to selfhood? Do we remain immature by virtue of failing to affirm ourselves? Is there something in us that is strangled and that withers away?

I think our intuition is to say that we do lose something. We are deprived of that positive sense of reconciliation to ourselves that comes with the acceptance of who we are. Perhaps we are deprived of contentment, happiness or well-being. When we do not succeed in acknowledging ourselves but fail to do so, we are not resolved with ourselves. The result may be a sense of conflict, a feeling of being at odds with ourselves, or doubts about who we might be. When we experience these feelings, we might with justification be said to be at low points in our lives. However, the question is whether reaching a point of personal crisis—even if it is a nadir—should disqualify us for selfhood.

I think the answer should be no. The attitudes towards herself that we attribute to a person who possesses a healthy and happy personal or mental life are not the only ones we should associate with selfhood. Someone may reach the point at which they lie to themselves in order to nullify truths about themselves, but that should not mean they are any less of a self. In short, I am saying that it is incorrect to suggest that the criteria for mental or emotional health are the criteria for selfhood. Being a healthy human being is distinct from being a self, and we err if we allow the qualifications for being the one thing to lapse into the qualifications for being the other.

For these reasons, we ought to shy away from thinking of acknowledgment in the sense of affirmation as a constitutive element in selfhood. But then our only alternative if we are to hold on to the idea that being a self requires acknowledgment is to turn to the other sense of



acknowledgment. In this sense, acknowledgment includes both successes and failures of acknowledgment. Of course, this will leave open the possibility that we explicitly affirm who we are; however, it will not make affirmation a requirement for selfhood.

There is an immediate challenge someone might present to the claim that acknowledgment in the categorical sense might be a component of the self. This is that we cannot speak about a failure of acknowledgment as a part of the self because a failure of acknowledgment is just that, a failure. Unlike a case of successful acknowledgment, a failure of acknowledgment is not an accomplishment; it cannot add anything to our relationship to ourselves that suffices to mark the point at which we start to talk about this relationship in a very different way, namely in terms of our having or being a self.

We can see why this response is not correct when we look back at our earlier discussion of acknowledgment. In particular, we should draw attention to the earlier example of the difference between a person who hears another say ‘I am in pain’ and yet does nothing, and someone who does nothing when a person says they are in pain but only because they failed to hear what was said. In both instances the response is the same, but only the first is a case of acknowledgment, failed acknowledgment. Therefore, to suggest that a case of failed acknowledgment is trivial involves a misunderstanding of acknowledgment.

But if this objection is mistaken, it does lead us to think more carefully about what acknowledgment actually consists in. Why *is* failed acknowledgment still acknowledgment? This may seem a puzzling question. After all, and as I have said before, failed acknowledgment is far from being nothing. It is more than accidentally failing to see or hear what is in front of us. But what is it about ignoring someone, or changing the subject, or electing not to respond when we

have in fact heard someone's expression of pain that still makes failed acknowledgment a form of acknowledgment rather than something altogether different?

The answer has to be along the following lines. Even the failure to acknowledge that someone is in pain has to include some kind of admission that they are suffering. It is not in question that when we fail to acknowledge that someone is in pain we have to allow that they are in pain. But what makes this an instance of failed acknowledgment is the further fact that it is not this admission that matters in these circumstances. What is important is that, having allowed that someone is suffering, we have not taken the next step—which when it comes to acknowledgment is really the only one that matters—namely the step of putting our arm around the person's shoulders, taking them to the doctor, or whatever the appropriate response may be.

So failures of acknowledgment seem to involve the acceptance of a fact about the world. Where the 'failure' part comes in is our relations to other people, what we let them see of ourselves, especially the extent to which we let them understand the role they play in our lives. One way of phrasing this is to say that a failure of acknowledgment is not simply a matter of ignorance. But does this mean that what Lear and Othello and the person who neglects another's suffering have is simply knowledge? This seems implicit in Cavell's description of acknowledgment as going 'beyond' knowledge. However, this does not go far enough. It cannot be mere knowing that leads someone like Othello to refuse to acknowledge another; the knowledge must have worked its way into his soul; it must have already affected him somehow, to have inspired him in a way he then feels compelled to deny.<sup>235</sup> This why I spoke of making admissions and allowances in the previous paragraph. I am looking for a word that gives the sense of knowing something, but

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<sup>235</sup> When we lead these reflections back to *Othello*, the title character's racial background and a feeling that it is incumbent on him to be manly, may play into his compulsion to deny what he knows.

knowing it in a way that has implications for our private self that we wish to keep from the world or another.

But what about when it comes to self-acknowledgment? We might claim that the situation must be different here. In particular, when it comes to what acknowledgment involves, in this context we are not required to show ourselves to another so much as asked to let we have done and lived through affect us. How can we think of failures of acknowledgment when there is no other whom our acknowledgment affects, at least in a direct way?

Even if the other does not feature in the same way in self-acknowledgment, I do not think that what I have said about acknowledgment ceases to apply. The knowing admission or allowance of which I have spoken in the previous paragraph will still be an element of self-acknowledgment. Of course, self-acknowledgment being at best a relation to myself, if it can be construed as relation at all, a failure of acknowledgment will not involve the withholding of what ought to be expressed openly in order to let someone know and even love us. A failure of self-acknowledgment is more like the refusal to let some part of ourselves out into the world or to let it affect our lives—perhaps to wreak havoc with them. But what is important is that the knowing admission of which I have spoken above still has a place in this picture. We still make an allowance to ourselves, and indeed it is only because we accept this and have an idea of how painful or saddening or inconvenient it will be that we then choose to ignore it, drown it out, or deceive ourselves. Even in the case of self-acknowledgment, it is the knowing admission we make to ourselves that prompts a failure of acknowledgment.

So when it comes to failures of self-acknowledgment, we allow something of ourselves, and then go on to conceal it. A failure of acknowledgment is far from being ignorance, just as it is far

from being nothing. A failure of acknowledgment is still acknowledgment, and the reason is that buried inside it is a knowing admission that we do everything we can to obliterate. But this means that when it comes to self-acknowledgment, a failure of acknowledgment is an interesting process when it comes to our mental and emotional lives. A failure of self-acknowledgment involves attending to the raw elements of who we are, what has happened to us, what we have done, what we have thought and felt, that is, the same kind of attention we might pay to ourselves in cases of successful acknowledgment; the difference is that what in the one case I conceal I in the other case affirm.

This is true even when it comes to self-deception. Even in an instance in which I lie to myself in order to keep something about myself out of my life, I am still attending to what has happened to me and what I have done, albeit perhaps inarticulately and in a confused way. Self-deception strikes me as an exemplary instance of acknowledgment. Not just any lie will do when we deceive someone. We must judge it expertly in order to give out something that could pass for the truth. This seems especially true when we deceive ourselves, because even when we are self-deceived, we know the truth all along. In the case of self-deception it seems we need to work all the harder in order to preserve the plausibility of the deceit, even if we are working against not another's vigilance but our own fear of confronting some truth about ourselves.

If we turn back to my examination of the self, it should be evident that there is a somewhat broader claim in the background of my reflections. This is that when it comes to contributions to selfhood the process of paying attention to ourselves is as crucial as the truths we unearth about our natures. And this process is just as recognizable in failures of self-acknowledgment as successes. The result is that if we hold that acknowledgment has to be a part of the self for the reasons given above, we can see why this need not be successful acknowledgment.

Thus, we have to make room within our category of selves for those who are self-deceived, filled with self-doubt and unhappy. Wellness should not be a criterion for selfhood. This is not to say that individuals with Alzheimer's, schizophrenics and manic depressives are selves—they might or might not be; I do not feel qualified to make a judgment on this point. It is only to say that there is a difference between someone who is suffering a clinical disorder and someone who is miserable or confused, and the latter group of people remain selves in spite of the personal crisis they are enduring.

On the basis of what I have said in this section, we can rethink Cavell's model of the self.

Selfhood is made up of the following elements:

(1) What has happened to someone and what she has done (her life)

(2) Her acknowledgment *in the categorial sense of acknowledgment* of what has happened to her and what she has done

The only change I have made from the conception of the self I drew from Cavell is that I have swapped the categorial sense of acknowledgment with the stage of successful acknowledgment featured in the previous conception. This is not a radical change, but it is a significant one. It modifies our understanding of what selfhood consists in and what is instrumental for us when it comes to giving us a self. But, importantly, acknowledgment in the categorial sense still answers to my original reason for saying that acknowledgment needs to part of our conception of the self. This was, recall, that who I am should matter to me. Just because I fail to acknowledge who I am, even to the extent that I lie to myself, this does not mean that who I am fails to matter to me. Indeed, a failure of acknowledgment seems to say that who I am matters to me all too much, so much so that sometimes I cannot face up to who I am.

## 5.6 Repression and Bad Faith

There are two concepts that resemble a failure of self-acknowledgment that I want to raise at this point by way of comparison with my own position. The first is the psycho-analytic concept of repression. Repression involves forces in the mind opposing the emergence of certain wishes and feelings into consciousness.<sup>236</sup> A wish that is incompatible with an individual's ego is pushed out of consciousness. As Freud puts it, 'An acceptance of the incompatible wishful impulse or a prolongation of the conflict would have produced a high degree of unpleasure; this unpleasure was avoided by means of repression, which was thus revealed as one of the devices serving to protect the mental personality.'<sup>237</sup> So on Freud's account the motivation for repression is the avoidance of pleasure. Moreover, repression is also a form of self-defense.

In general terms, repression resembles a failure of self-acknowledgment. In both cases, something about me is denied. However, the nuances of the concept of repression soon show how it differs. The chief difference is that the concept of repression draws upon the distinction between the conscious and unconscious. In an instance of repression, 'It is true that [patients with repression] have driven [the idea] out of consciousness and out of memory and have apparently saved themselves a large amount of unpleasure. But the repressed wishful impulse continues to exist in the unconscious.'<sup>238</sup> Obviously, my notion of a failure of self-acknowledgment does not involve a commitment to this account of the conscious and unconscious. Something about myself is pushed aside in a failure of self-acknowledgment, but it is not confined to the unconscious in the way Freud stipulates of a repressed impulse. The divergence seems all the more profound when we look at the consequences for a patient who

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<sup>236</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), 21.

<sup>237</sup> Freud, *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, 22.

<sup>238</sup> Freud, *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, 26.

represses his impulses. First, is the connection between dreams and repression. According to Freud, dreams are a way in which dreams are fulfilled.<sup>239</sup> Second, repression, particularly of certain sexual desires, begins in childhood. It seems difficult to reconcile the kind of sophistication required for a failure of self-acknowledgment with a juvenile mind; I suggest that someone must be an adolescent at least before we start to hold them capable of acknowledging themselves.

However, if it is clear that repression is not the same as a failure of self-acknowledgment, Freud's discussion of repression is helpful. It alerts us to the social element of failures of self-acknowledgment. In a discussion of sexual behavior in children, Freud describes the repression of childhood sexual instincts. He says, 'Even before puberty extremely energetic repressions of certain instincts have been effected under the influence of education, and mental forces such as shame and disgust have been set up, which, like watchmen, maintain these repressions.'<sup>240</sup>

Obviously, I do not share Freud's special interest in erotic impulses. I have also already established that a failure of self-acknowledgment is different from repression. Nonetheless, Freud's comments with respect to repression alert us to the way in which what prompts a failure of self-acknowledgment will have social origins. It may be *my* sense of shame or guilt or self-doubt, but my idea of what I should be ashamed of or feel guilty about or when I should doubt myself will have been shaped by my culture or community and be a product of the education I have received.

The chief reason that failures of acknowledgment do not resemble the psycho-analytic concept of repression is the role that the conscious and unconscious play in the latter account. The second

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<sup>239</sup> Freud, *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, 36.

<sup>240</sup> Freud, *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, 48.

view I want to look at, bad faith as described by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, does not invoke this distinction. Sartre explicitly rejects it.<sup>241</sup> I will look first at Sartre's account of bad faith from *Being and Nothingness*, then de Beauvoir's from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

For Sartre, bad faith is the concealment of a truth within myself. 'The one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth.'<sup>242</sup> And importantly, I am not simply hiding this truth from the world, but from myself. Bad faith is a case in which I lie to myself. Sartre gives the example of a woman on her first date. Told she is attractive, she disarms the desire behind the sentence by refusing to see it for what it is; when her date takes her hand she divorces her body from herself and sees her hand as a thing.<sup>243</sup> But in bad faith I do not simply deceive myself in one instance. Instead, my entire life can be a lie. As Sartre puts it, 'A person can *live* in bad faith, which does not mean that he does not have abrupt awakenings to cynicism or to good faith, but which implies a constant and particular way of life.'<sup>244</sup> The clearest example is of a gay man who refuses to admit to himself that he is gay. 'His case is always "different," peculiar; there enters into it something of a game, of chance, of bad luck; the mistakes are all in the past; they are explained by a certain conception of the beautiful which women can not satisfy; we should see in them the results of a restless search, rather than the manifestation of a deeply rooted tendency, etc., etc.'<sup>245</sup> In the case of the gay man who denies his sexuality we see an example whose whole life is lived in bad faith as a result of his refusal to admit to himself what he is.

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<sup>241</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 50-54.

<sup>242</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 49.

<sup>243</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 55-56.

<sup>244</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 50.

<sup>245</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 63.



De Beauvoir's view of bad faith was developed in parallel with Sartre's. The crucial difference between the two conceptions is that whereas Sartre takes bad faith to be inevitable—not only is the gay man who denies his sexuality in bad faith, but also the person who calls upon him to face up to his own nature—de Beauvoir regards it as a state we can overcome.<sup>246</sup> De Beauvoir's view of bad faith resembles Sartre's in that a certain kind of falsehood is always at its core, but she emphasizes the element of escape in bad faith: bad faith seems at times to be no more than an attempt to find a way out of human life, one that does not exist. 'There is no way for a man to escape from this world. It is in this world that...he must realize himself morally.'<sup>247</sup> But at other times, it is the question of freedom that predominates. Bad faith is a lie we tell ourselves about our options for asserting our freedom: 'Freedom is not to be engulfed in any goal; neither is it to dissipate itself vainly without aiming at a goal.'<sup>248</sup>

This last quotation expresses in general terms what de Beauvoir spends a long time arguing in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, namely that certain types of lives are always lived in bad faith. The 'sub-man' lives in bad faith because he refuses to see life as there to be lived and himself as yet to be created.<sup>249</sup> The 'serious man' is in bad faith because he questions nothing, lives with a childish faith in the certainty of things, loves something only as a means of loving himself.<sup>250</sup> The 'adventurer' is in bad faith because while he lives he is indifferent to how he lives; he is 'indifferent to the human meaning of his action...thinks he can assert his own existence without taking into account that of others.'<sup>251</sup> The 'passionate man' lives in bad faith because while in pursuing his own project he asserts his freedom, his passionate devotion to his task means he

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<sup>246</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 63-64.

<sup>247</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 69-70.

<sup>248</sup> de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 70.

<sup>249</sup> de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 42.

<sup>250</sup> de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 47-49.

<sup>251</sup> de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 61.

neglects the freedom of others.<sup>252</sup> However, if each of these sorts of lives are instances of bad faith, there are ways of living that do not fall prey to the evasion and denial of freedom, meaning that bad faith can be avoided.

Both bad faith and failures of self-acknowledgment are forms of self-deception. The difference is as follows. While bad faith may localize itself in the telling of a particular lie or the adoption of a certain way of life, at its root is the denial either of my freedom or the nature of that freedom. Such a commitment is not part of the account I have given of failures of self-acknowledgment. If bad faith is simply self-deception then it becomes hard to distinguish it from failures of self-acknowledgment, but Sartre and de Beauvoir argue that it is more than this. Furthermore, failures of acknowledgment are more than telling myself a lie. Recall that the point with acknowledgment is that it goes beyond knowledge; in our relations with others, there is some action we can take or words we can say that amounts to acknowledgment. If in the case of self-acknowledgment there is not necessarily a similar need for words or actions, the point is that we are called upon to allow our knowledge to affect us in some way—for instance, our past impacts upon our future—and this is what amounts to acknowledgment. We do not see this in bad faith, and this confirms the separateness of these concepts.

### *5.7 Conclusion*

In this chapter I have presented a model of the self by drawing upon the concept of acknowledgment articulated by Stanley Cavell. I argued that acknowledgment is necessary for selfhood. However, I argued further that not only acknowledgment in the affirmative sense has a

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<sup>252</sup> de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 66.

place in the self, but failures of acknowledgment as well. Thus, the categorial version of acknowledgment is needed if we are to present a coherent picture of the self.

In these discussions, I have come up with a model of the self. However, this is not the conclusion of my argument in this dissertation. Though I am concerned with selfhood in general, I am specifically interested in the role that narrative plays in it. In the remainder of this dissertation I want to go on to say how narrative fits in with my model of the self, and how this shifts the discussion about the connection between narrative and the self.

## ***Chapter 6 Literature and Theatricality***

### ***6.1 Introduction***

So far I have been concerned with the relationship between selfhood and acknowledgment. I argued that part of selfhood is acknowledging ourselves in the very specific sense I gave to this term, drawing on the work of Stanley Cavell. But what form does this acknowledgment take? I will spend the rest of this dissertation answering this question. In brief, I will argue that acknowledgment in the sense I have described emerges in the way in which we *theatricalize* ourselves. In this chapter I will turn to the work of Michael Fried, who along with Cavell develops a concept of theatricality that is tied with the concept of acknowledgment. In Chapter 7 I will continue these discussions by attending to plays by William Shakespeare.

This chapter will therefore be a prelude to my remarks on Shakespeare. It will have four main sections. In the first I will offer a justification for my turning to literature at this point in my dissertation. In the second section, I will articulate the concept of theatricality as it is developed in Fried's art criticism. In the third I will look at the concept of theatricality as it pertains to intersubjective relations, a theme developed by Cavell. In the fourth I will offer my own amended view of theatricality in response to Fried and Cavell. This version of theatricality will incorporate the view of acknowledgment I have developed in the previous chapter.

### ***6.2 Literature in Philosophy***

This will eventually lead me to make use of literary works to develop my philosophical ideas. There is much that we can take from literary works, especially the plays of Shakespeare, that can enrich philosophical discussion, and I intend to make full use of the resources they offer.

The idea that literature is important for reasons other than providing an entertaining diversion is increasingly taken for granted in our discipline. Certainly it seems to be an assumption of many of the philosophers I have discussed in this dissertation. Cavell obviously makes extensive use of literary texts in order to develop his philosophical arguments. Shakespeare's tragedies are among the works he discusses most frequently. But Cavell is just one example of a writer who considers literary works to be philosophically important. The most notable philosopher who shares his opinion would probably be Martha Nussbaum, who argues in *Love's Knowledge* that literary works are ethical achievements, and that an engagement with literature is necessary to be a moral person.

I would also argue that the narrative theory of the self rests upon the assumption that literary narratives are important, though this is a view that is seldom defended by the philosophers in question. It is presented most explicitly by Ricoeur, who emphasizes the importance of being a part of a literary tradition in his rendering of the narrative theory of self, which is not to say that tradition rules out the significance of creativity. A literary tradition is changing and alive:

To say that the narrative schema has a history of its own and that this history possesses all the characteristics of a tradition is not at all to defend tradition understood as an inert transmission of dead sentiment. On the contrary, it is to point to tradition as a living passing-on of innovation which can always be re-activated by a return to the most creative moments of the poetic composition. The phenomenon of traditionality is the key to the functioning of narrative models and, consequently, to identifying them.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'Life; a Story in Search of a Narrator,' 125.

We do not acquire a sense of narrative from out of nowhere. Being a reader of narratives, or at least the member of a culture for which narratives are important, is instrumental in arriving at a sense of what narrative is, and therefore of who we are. This is true even if composing a narrative is also a matter of being creative. Admittedly, there might be non-literary means of learning what narrative is, such as films, but literature remains the paradigm way of learning what it consists in.

So I would argue that the notion that literature has a place in philosophy has been an assumption of this dissertation all along. And unproblematically so, because important contemporary philosophers regard literature as being central to their investigations. Consequently, the idea of offering a general defense of the idea that literature can contribute to philosophy seems somewhat redundant. What does not seem redundant is a justification of the specific use to which I will put literary works in the following chapter. If literature has been accepted into philosophy, the grounds on which it has been accepted are by no means uniform. In the remainder of this section I will say a little bit about the use to which I will put Shakespeare's plays in this chapter, and why I am justified in employing them.

Sometimes in literature we engage with representations that correspond exactly with people who exist. Historical or autobiographical novels feature living people who may play large or small parts in the narrative. For example, the Shakespeare plays I will look at in the following chapters have three kings of England, Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V, as central characters. Literary works also often take real settings and times as the basis of their plots. For example, Gustave Flaubert's novel *Salammbô* takes the actual third century BC revolt of mercenaries against their Carthaginian employers as the basis of its story. So the actual or factual can form significant components of narratives.

But even in these instances, the appeal of literature relies on the harnessing of the possible.

‘Poetry is based on what might be, not on what is.’<sup>254</sup> This is not only because literature involves its characters in fanciful situations. Even in works featuring actual characters and settings, the appeal of literature is the possible rather than the actual. In the case of historical fiction, a reader may explore a text out of a desire for an approximation of how things were at some time or other. However, even in these cases, and always when it comes to works that are not historical fiction, literature presents us with what might happen to us. In reading a novel or play, we contemplate a way of life that might be our own, or a fate that might befall us. In literature we see possible examples of how we might live. We do not read philosophical accounts of who we are but suggestions as to how we might be.

But the possible way of life with which we are presented is not something like ‘one day I might be made King of England and need to fight a battle against the French.’ The sense of possibility is more general than this. The sense of possibility is to do with the human relationships in which we may find ourselves, the moral conundrums we might have to resolve or dilemmas from which we may need to extract ourselves. There are aspects of literary works that do not strike us in this way—some gaps are impossible for us to bridge—but when it comes to the more general aspects of a life, we can cross this gap and appreciate what is possible in a literary work.

If there is an exception to this, it is in the case of characters whom we might describe as symbolic. Such characters are important not because of the decisions they make but because of what they represent. A good example is the character of the Polish boy Tazio in Thomas Mann’s novella *Death in Venice*. Tazio represents beauty, both for a reader of the novel and for

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<sup>254</sup> Northrop Frye, ‘How True a Twain,’ in *Northrop Frye’s Writings on Shakespeare and the Renaissance*, ed. Toni Y. Grunde and Garry Sherbert (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 107.

the novella's main character, the poet Gustav von Aschenbach. His importance is less the choices he makes so much as what he symbolizes in the novel.

However, we might also note that characters who are symbolic in the way that Tadzio is need not be purely symbolic. An adept writer is often capable of creating a character who is both symbolic and a 'person' in their own right. A good example would be Lolita from Vladimir Nabokov's novel of that name. Lolita represents beauty both for the reader and for Humbert Humbert. However, her sufferings and the actions she takes to escape from Humbert her captor are important in their own right. Indeed, one of the implications of *Lolita* is to make manifest the immorality of Humbert's tendency to treat Lolita as if she were no more than a symbol (a nymphet).

Overall, I am not set on arguing that literature conveys particular truths. In my discussion of the nature of narrative, I said that one of the ways in which literature relates to the future is by presenting us with possibilities we might elect to live out in the future. This comes in the form of other selves we might choose to be, other ways in which we might decide to live. These alternative selves are of course the characters in the work.

The main characters in any work are placed in situations and presented with alternatives between which they are forced to decide. A typical response to literary characters is to ask what we would have done in their situation, whether, like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, we would have accepted punishment in the end, whether, like the unnamed starving vagrant in *Hunger*, we would have returned the extra change he was given by mistake, whether, faced like Anna Karenina with a choice between child and lover we would prefer our lover. In short, literary characters are often faced with dilemmas. Perhaps part of the reading process is to admire or



condemn a character for the choice he or she makes. But equally it is to wonder whether we would have chosen otherwise, whether to answer in a self-assured way that we would have been stronger than Anna, or to admit to ourselves that we do not have the same moral fortitude as Hamsun's starving writer. Literary characters make us focus on particular life-situations and make us ask ourselves what we might do in such circumstances.

But there is a second way in which literary characters are alternative selves. Characters are often faced with dilemmas they are forced to resolve, which prompts us to wonder whether we would or could have made their choice. However, the choices characters make do not simply invite us to question whether we would have done the same. Rather, characters' decisions inform us about the type of person they are. A literary character represents a way of life, one which is open to us to pursue. When we read *In Search of Lost Time*, we ask ourselves whether we should pursue cultivation and depth of feeling if its cost is self-obsession. When we read *Lolita* we wonder whether we should pursue the object of our lust if it means we become oblivious to the point of cruelty. When we read *The Master of Go*, we wonder whether we should sacrifice ourselves to any one pursuit wholeheartedly when one day the ethos we have cultivated will seem worn-out and questionable in light of the achievements of a fresh generation.

So literary characters frame moral questions that pertain to how we should choose and who we ought to be by exposing us to dilemmas on the one hand and other ways of life on the other. It is the second way in which we respond to literary characters that particularly interests me here. I want to consider one significant character from Shakespeare, namely Prince Hal (later Henry V), who exemplifies what I will call a theatrical life. Of course, showing how he does so will not be a simple matter; it will require looking rather closely at three plays by Shakespeare. But doing so

will give a clearer sense of what theatricality—the term of interest in the remainder of this chapter—really involves.

The most common reason given against the incorporation of works of literature into philosophy, namely that literary characters are representations of people and not actual people and that plays and novels are fictions and therefore not true, do not have traction here. I am not saying on the basis of Shakespeare's plays that this is how things are for all people; I am using them to work through how things might be for some. It is precisely because literary characters are possible rather than actual that they interest me here. And though there is a gap between a representation of a person and a flesh and blood person, these representations of people are not so far removed from us that they can fail to serve as examples of how we might live. Indeed, when we ask ourselves how we might live, it is hard to see that we ever have anything more than an imaginative representation in mind, one we devise for ourselves and which we rely on in making our decision.

But if there is not an objection to answer here, there is still an important question I have left open. Why, in pursuit of examples of how we might relate to ourselves, have I elected to make use of fictional works of literature? Why not biographies or psychological case studies, works at least based in fact rather than fiction? The question could be put in the following way: what is the chief merit of literary works that leads me to employ them rather than some alternative form of discourse?

By way of answering this question I want to refer to Martha Nussbaum's diagnosis of the merits of literary fiction. Nussbaum tends to discuss novels rather than plays, it is true. However, I think that what she says about literature is true, and perhaps especially true, of Shakespeare's plays.

This is because Nussbaum seeks above all to draw attention to the virtuosity of the language we find in literary works, particularly its fine-grained nature. And, in the English language at least, we would be hard-pressed to find a writer who expresses feeling and thought with the same eloquence and attention to detail as Shakespeare. This is not to say that he is always subtle in the way he expresses himself.<sup>255</sup> But if there is a degree of feeling beyond the commonplace that can be rendered through the use of a metaphor or turn of phrase then Shakespeare seems determined to find it.

Nussbaum's collection of essays on literature, *Love's Knowledge*, is on its surface a reaction against the exclusion of works of literature from philosophical discourse. However, it is also an attack on a particular kind of philosophizing, namely one that takes ethics to be no more than a matter of laws that can be applied generally, rather than the kind of close attention that is a requirement for and in some sense constitutes ethical action. She claims that, 'general and universal formulations may be inadequate to the complexity of particular situations.'<sup>256</sup>

According to Nussbaum, a conception of morality that relies exclusively on the generalizations characteristic of moral philosophy is impoverished.

The identification of generalization as a problem leads Nussbaum to argue that the particular is what is missing from moral philosophy. She takes as a 'moral effort' the process of 'straining to see correctly and to come up with the appropriate picture of description.'<sup>257</sup> The natural question is therefore in what kinds of discourse we find the appropriate degree of scrutiny and virtuosity

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<sup>255</sup> Jose Luis Borges goes so far as to accuse Shakespeare of being bombastic: '[Shakespeare] went on with it, with his metaphors and his bombast, because he was bombastic. Even in such a famous phrase as Hamlet's last words, I think: "The rest is silence." There is something phony about it; it's meant to impress. I don't think anybody would say anything like that.' Jose Luis Borges, 'The Art of Fiction No. 39,' interview by Robert Christ, in *The Paris Review*, accessed at <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4331/the-art-of-fiction-no-39-jorge-luis-borges> accessed on 2/12/12.

<sup>256</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 182.

<sup>257</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 88.

in articulation that lets us achieve a nuanced picture of life. The answer is literature, particularly novels, and paradigmatically those of Henry James. Literary works belong in moral philosophy, ‘So long as [these works] are written in a style that gives sufficient attention to particularity and emotion, and so long as they involve their readers in relevant activities of searching and feeling, especially feeling concerning their own possibilities as well as those of the characters.’<sup>258</sup> If we are in search of nuanced description then it is to literary works that we should turn. Their articulacy and the care a good writer exercises in his art justify the place of literary works in moral philosophy. The *perception* that Nussbaum takes to be essential to philosophy is a matter of dialogue between rules and the concrete, ‘in which the general articulates the particular and is in turn further articulated by it.’<sup>259</sup>

Though I am not engaged in moral philosophy in terms of resolving questions of right and wrong, seemingly the kind of questions Nussbaum takes literature to help us answer, the virtues she finds in literary works are very much the virtues that I think makes their presence in my own work necessary. I am in need of virtuosic portrayals of potential choices and possible lives, and these are exactly what literature serves up. However, Nussbaum’s own project goes much further than what I am interested in defending here. At the heart of her project is the claim that a literary artist, through no more than his eloquence and attention to the concrete, is a moral agent. While this is a fascinating thought and perhaps a profound insight, it goes beyond what is needed to justify my inclusion of literary works in this dissertation.

The key insight to which Nussbaum leads us, and which serves to justify the presence of literature in certain kinds of philosophy, including this dissertation, is that literature is a

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<sup>258</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 46.

<sup>259</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 98.

discourse characterized by eloquent attention to particulars. Literature surpasses all other forms of discourse in this respect: what Nussbaum holds to be true of moral philosophy is, with a very few notable exceptions such as Freud's discussions of dreams, true of psychological case studies and histories; they do not manifest the same fine degree of discrimination that a virtuoso writer achieves through her use of language. 'Literature,' as Nussbaum says, 'can show us in rich detail, as formal abstract argument cannot, what it is like to live a certain way.'<sup>260</sup> This is the reason why it belongs in this dissertation.

Someone might level the response that this applies only to novels of a certain genre or literary style, and that I am saying that the nineteenth century novel and literature are one and the same. Obviously this cannot be the case. The term literature is extremely broad, and enfolds numerous literary styles. That said, it is hard to deny that Nussbaum emphasizes the philosophical value of the works of certain writers, specifically James and Proust. And the resultant worry is that Nussbaum's argument secures the importance of these writers while literature as a whole remains marginalized.

The best response to this criticism is to take note of what eloquence and attention to detail consist in. We can indeed identify eloquence with the literary style of Proust and take sentences like the following to embody it:

But this movement which she thus made to get off the train tore my heart unendurably, just as if, contrary to the position independent of my body which Albertine's seemed to be occupying a yard away from it, this separation in space, which an accurate draughtsman would have been obliged to indicate between us, was only apparent, and anyone who

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<sup>260</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 228.

wishes to make a fresh drawing of things as they really were would now have had to place Albertine, not at a certain distance from me, but inside me.<sup>261</sup>

Or we can identify detail with the style of Henry James and see the following kind of sentence as exemplary:

The mere fine pulse of passion in it, the suggestion as of a creature consciously floating and shining in a warm summer sea, some element of dazzling sapphire and silver, a creature cradled upon depths, buoyant among dangers, in which fear or folly or sinking otherwise than in play was impossible—something of all this might have been making once more present to him, with his discreet, his half shy assent to it, her probable enjoyment of a rapture that he, in his day, had presumably convinced no great number of persons either of his giving or of his receiving.<sup>262</sup>

But this is too narrow an understanding of what eloquence and detail consist in. The tendency is to regard eloquence with a florid and beautiful use of language, but to my mind eloquence is about the adept and expressive use of language and need not always tend towards the baroque. A good example is the concluding passage of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*:

Lieutenant Berrendo, watching the trail, came riding up, his thin face serious and grace. His submachine gun lay across his saddle in the crook of his left arm. Robert Jordan lay behind the tree, holding himself very carefully and delicately to keep his hands steady. He was waiting until the officer reached the sunlit place where the first trees of the pine forest

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<sup>261</sup> Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright (New York: Random House, 2003), 704.

<sup>262</sup> Henry James, *The Golden Bowl, Volume 2*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), 150-51.

joined the green slope of the meadow. He could feel his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest.<sup>263</sup>

The reason why this passage is eloquent is precisely because it is not florid or beautiful. It is eloquent because it describes the situation concisely while losing none of the emotion aroused by the situation. Similarly, we need not identify detailed writing with lengthy passages that forever work back on themselves, heaping nuance upon nuance. The following passage from Kafka's *Amerika* is a fine example of detailed writing, but its abrupt, menacing effect is very different from what we experience when we read James:

Now and then the street broadened out into a square, in the center of which a policeman strode up and down on a towerlike platform in order to keep an eye on everything and to use his small baton to direct the traffic on the main street as well as that flowing in from the side streets, which then moved toward the next square and the next policeman without any supervision but kept in reasonably good order by the silent and alert coachmen and chauffeurs. Most remarkable, Karl found, was the general calm, Had the unsuspecting animals bound for the slaughterhouse not bellowed so loudly, one could surely have heard only the clip-clop of the animals' hooves and the whizzing of the tires.<sup>264</sup>

The detail of this writing comes to a head in the effect of the last line, wherein the distress of the death-bound animals is almost disguised beneath the very sounds it actually disguises as a result of the ordering of the sentence. Thus, even if we identify eloquence and detail as the virtues of the novel, the idea that this leads to a fetishization of the literary style of James or Proust, or of the nineteenth century novel, is false. We can mean more than eloquence and detail than the

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<sup>263</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 471.

<sup>264</sup> Franz Kafka, *Amerika: The Missing Person*, trans. Mark Harman (New York: Schocken, 2008), 93.

baroque and heavily embroidered, and these arguments in favor of literature do more than secure the philosophical value of certain styles and genres.

### 6.3 Fried on Theatricality

In this section, I want to develop one more piece of conceptual apparatus, a resource I will be drawing upon in my discussion of the literary works in question. This is the concept of *theatricality*. I will spend the rest of this chapter explaining what I mean.

This concept recurs in books like *Absorption and Theatricality* as well as *Courbet's Realism*; in the art criticism it appears in the famous essay *Art and Objecthood*. But while the concept of theatricality is most evident in Fried's work, it also occurs in Cavell's philosophical writing, as well as his essays on Shakespeare. It seems appropriate to make a brief comment about the connection between Fried and Cavell.

Cavell and Fried worked closely together while at Harvard, and we might regard each of them as being the key 'intellectual interlocutor' of the other.<sup>265</sup> Steven Z. Levine goes so far as to speak of an 'intellectual comradeship' between them.<sup>266</sup> There are also shared intellectual commitments that constitute links between their work. Fried credits Cavell with helping him develop his ideas in 'Art and Objecthood,' and Cavell gives similar credit to Fried in his own work.<sup>267</sup> James

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<sup>265</sup> This is how Jonathan Vickery characterizes the relationship between Fried and Cavell. See Jonathan Vickery, 'Art and the Ethical: Modernism and the Problems of Minimalism,' in *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 113. James Meyer calls Cavell Fried's 'mentor and friend during his years as a graduate fellow at Harvard.' See James Meyer, 'The Writing of "Art and Objecthood,"' in *Refracting Vision: Essays on the Writings of Michael Fried*, ed. Jill Beaulieu, Mary Roberts, and Toni Ross (Sydney: Power Publications, 2000), 72.

<sup>266</sup> Steven Z. Levine, 'Mutual Facing: A Memoir of Freedom,' in *Refracting Vision: Essays on the Writings of Michael Fried*, ed. Jill Beaulieu, Mary Roberts, and Toni Ross (Sydney: Power Publications, 2000), 293.

<sup>267</sup> Fried writes: 'Without numerous conversations with Cavell during the past few years, and without what I have learned from him in course and seminars, the present essay—and not it alone—would have been inconceivable. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood,' *Artforum* 5 (1967): 23. Cavell acknowledges his debt to Fried in the



Meyer views this intellectual dialogue as one in which Fried provides the immediate response to the art world of the 1960s and Cavell the theoretical basis for his views: ‘Fried, inspired by Greenburg, made the initial case for an optical structure that transcended its base materiality, and Cavell in turn substantiated the theoretical claims of this judgment.’<sup>268</sup> Obviously the intellectual relationship between Cavell and Fried is a deep one. And in light of this, it seems appropriate to call my discussion of Fried in some way a continuation of ideas from my earlier discussions. And as we will see, for Cavell (and perhaps implicitly for Fried), the concept of theatricality is closely related to the concept of acknowledgment.

What, then, does theatricality involve? Fried develops this concept in his reflections on the paintings and drawings of important figures from French art, especially Gericault, Courbet and Manet, as well as Denis Diderot’s art criticism. I shall begin with discussion of Diderot. Fried argues that, ‘The fundamental question addressed by [Diderot] in his *Salons* and related texts, concerned the conditions that had to be fulfilled in order for the act of painting successfully to persuade its audience of the truthfulness of its representations.’<sup>269</sup> So the point of a painting for Diderot was to convince an audience of its reality. Fried goes on:

[Diderot] concluded that nothing was more abortive of that act of persuasion than when a painter’s *dramatis personae* seemed by virtue of the character of their actions and expressions to evince even a partial consciousness of being beheld, and that the immediate task of the painter was therefore to extinguish or forestall that consciousness by

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‘Acknowledgments’ section of *Must We Mean What We Say?*: ‘The piece on Kierkegaard, the two on music, and that on Lear—that is to say, the bulk of the latest work—were written during periods in which their controlling ideas were recurrent topics of conversation with Michael Fried and John Harbison.’ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xv.

<sup>268</sup> James Meyer, ‘The Writing of “Art and Objecthood,”’ 76.

<sup>269</sup> Michael Fried, *Courbet’s Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6.

engrossing, or, as I chiefly say, *absorbing* his dramatis personae in their actions and state of mind.<sup>270</sup>

For Diderot, the ideal work of art represented its figures as involved in what they were doing to the exclusion of all else. The figures in a work of art were to appear to be oblivious to what was going on around them, and more importantly, to the fact that anyone was looking at them. As Fried puts it, ‘A personage so absorbed appeared unconscious or oblivious of everything but the object of his or her absorption, as if to all intents and purposes there were nothing and no one else in the world.’<sup>271</sup> An absorbed, oblivious figure appeared to be alone in the world, and gave a painting the *naïveté*, that according to Fried, ‘for Diderot...amounted to the highest praise.’<sup>272</sup>

The aim of any artist was therefore to be to persuade the viewer that the figures in the painting were absorbed and oblivious, and to create the impression of *naïveté*. The result of the failure to achieve this was a mannered, false, hypocritical impression. The painting expressed the figures’ awareness that they were being beheld. The result was that, ‘The painting as a whole, far from projecting a convincing image of the world, became what Diderot deprecatingly called a theater, *un théâtre*, an artificial construction whose too obvious designs made it repugnant to persons of taste.’<sup>273</sup> Consequently, the rejection of theatricality was for Diderot a principle of good taste. Theatricality involved a mannered falseness that expressed an awareness to be attributed to the figures in a painting that they were objects of contemplation. To the poverty of taste recognizable in a theatrical work could be contrasted the authentically dramatic. ‘Diderot’s use of the word *theater* in this connection reveals the depth of his revulsion against the conventions then

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<sup>270</sup> Fried, *Courbet’s Realism*, 7.

<sup>271</sup> Fried, *Courbet’s Realism*, 7.

<sup>272</sup> Fried, *Courbet’s Realism*, 7.

<sup>273</sup> Fried, *Courbet’s Realism*, 7.

prevailing in the arts of the stage, but it also suggests that if those conventions could be overcome it would mean simultaneously the death of theater as Diderot knew it and the birth of something else—call it drama.<sup>274</sup> So in theater itself theatricality was something to be overcome. Theatricality was a problem that was in evidence not simply in painting but also in other art forms.

Thus, the concept of theatricality appears in the critical writings of Diderot on the paintings of his time. Fried argues that Diderot ‘maintained that it was necessary for the painting as a whole actively to ‘forget’ the beholder, to neutralize his presence, to establish positively insofar as that could be done that he had not been taken into account.’<sup>275</sup> The concept of theatricality emerges in Fried’s reflections on Diderot and the paintings on which he focuses, and remains a theme in Fried’s writings on painters such as Courbet and Manet. But does this mean that theatricality and the resistance to it are tendencies that arise in one historical period and are confined to it? Is theatricality simply a trend in French artworks of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? This is not the case. Fried also used the concept in the 1960s to think about the contemporary art scene.

In ‘Art and Objecthood,’ Fried’s provides critical grounds for separating the work of one group of sculptors from the work of another group, and to argue that one group of sculptors are engaged in producing ‘art’ while the other are concerned with nothing more than ‘theater.’ In ‘Art and Objecthood,’ the avoidance of theatricality is a principle through which to make value judgments about paintings. To make this somewhat clearer, in his books on Diderot’s art criticism, Courbet and Manet, Fried seeks to draw attention to the recurrence of the avoidance of theatricality as a critical and artistic principle in the works of particular artists; in ‘Art and

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<sup>274</sup> Fried, *Courbet’s Realism*, 7.

<sup>275</sup> Fried, *Courbet’s Realism*, 7.

Objecthood' he is using the avoidance of theatricality as an evaluative criterion through which to label some works of art good and others bad. The avoidance of theatricality may or may not be what makes Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa* art; Fried does not hold an opinion on this question. But for Fried its theatricality is what disqualifies the work of Tony Smith from being art.

But how does theatricality emerge in 'Art and Objecthood'? In this essay, Fried develops a contrast between two movements in art, on the one hand the 'literalism' of sculptors like Tony Smith, Robert Morris and Donald Judd, and the other the 'modernism' of sculptors like Anthony Caro and David Smith. For Fried, literalism is perverse, degenerate and inartistic, while modernism is authentically artistic.<sup>276</sup> And the reason why literalism is inartistic is the inherent theatricality that literalist works possess and which modernist works overcome. The conflict between literalism and modernism that Fried identifies in the art world in the 1960s therefore amounts to a 'war' in which 'theater and theatricality' contends with 'art as such.'<sup>277</sup>

For Fried, the theatricality of literalist works is comprised of three features. First, literalist works are explicit about their existence as objects to be beheld. By virtue of their size and the fact that they are not a relation of different parts to each other but a singular shape, literalist sculptures establish distance from the beholder, so that the viewer of a literalist work experiences not a work of art but an object in a situation.<sup>278</sup> Fried goes so far as to say that literalist works seem to be waiting to be beheld.<sup>279</sup> Second, literalist works have, in Fried's words, a kind of 'stage presence.'<sup>280</sup> A literalist work is obtrusive and aggressive; it 'demands that the beholder take it

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<sup>276</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 168.

<sup>277</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 163.

<sup>278</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 153.

<sup>279</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 163.

<sup>280</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 155.

into account, that he takes it seriously.<sup>281</sup> As James Meyer has put it, ‘Where the modernist sculpture alluded to the spectator’s signifying gestures in daily life—to his or her status as a communicative, socialized subject—the theatrical work intruded directly *into* his or her existence.’<sup>282</sup> In this respect, literalist works verge upon being statues or even surrogate people.<sup>283</sup> Third, because they are objects in a situation and because they solicit the viewer’s gaze, literalist works invite scrutiny from many angles. They make the beholder aware that they are the objects of inexhaustible, endless interest. This means that the task of contemplating them can never be finished; literalist works emphasize the duration of the experience of viewing them. To the consciousness of their spatial existence that literalist works create in the viewer is added the consciousness of them as objects that are beheld in time.<sup>284</sup>

One way of summarizing these three features is to say that literalist works of art force self-awareness upon someone who engages with them. More specifically, the objecthood of literalist works brings about an awareness of her own subjectivity in the viewer. Literalist works insist that the viewer is a being who exists along with them in space and time. Now, we might want to say that this kind of self-awareness is positive. However, Fried claims at the end of his essay that there is nothing particularly artistic about this effect. He says, ‘I want to call attention to the utter pervasiveness—the virtual universality—of the sensibility or mode of being that I have characterized as corrupted or perverted by theater. We are all literalists most or all of our lives.’<sup>285</sup> With this quotation, Fried returns to his central claim—that literalism is inartistic. All literalist works do is reproduce the circumstances we inhabit in our everyday lives. Art

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<sup>281</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 155.

<sup>282</sup> James Meyer, ‘The Writing of “Art and Objecthood,”’ 71.

<sup>283</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 155.

<sup>284</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, p. 166.

<sup>285</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 168.

presumably has some other, higher, function. So the problem with literalist works, what ought to disqualify them from being works of art, is that they emphasize their own objecthood and the viewer's subjectivity. But how does this compare with the group of works that Fried does consider to be works of art, namely modernist works?

For Fried, in contrast to literalist works, modernist works are inherently anti-theatrical; they are works of art rather than objects.<sup>286</sup> Modernist works are about the relation of their parts to each other, rather than of the relation of the whole sculpture to the situation in which it is beheld.

Modernist works are unobtrusive and if not passive at least subtle and far from aggressive.

According to Fried, Caro's sculptures imitate, 'not gestures exactly, but the efficacy of gesture; like certain music and poetry, they are possessed by the knowledge of the human body and how, in innumerable ways and moods, it makes meaning. It is as though Caro's sculptures essentialize meaningfulness as such.'<sup>287</sup> Finally, modernist works give the impression of not existing in time: '*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.*'<sup>288</sup>

The end result for Fried is that modernist works, unlike literalist works, are not theatrical. They are works of art, rather than objects. I am in no position to judge whether Fried's claims about the virtues of literalist works are correct, but whether or not they are does not bear on my argument in this chapter. What is important is the connection between the view of theatricality developed in Fried's art criticism and the one that arises in 'Art and Objecthood.' How should we understand this?

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<sup>286</sup> A comment from J.M. Bernstein on theatricality in art may be helpful here in understanding the virtues of modernist artworks: 'On Fried's analysis, theater is the form of fraudulence common to our situation, and its defeat requires the defeat of the reduction of the work to thinghood.' J.M. Bernstein, 'Aesthetics, Modernism, Literature,' 122.

<sup>287</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 162.

<sup>288</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 167. The italics are Fried's.

I think the connection is the emphasis placed in both cases on being beheld. The heart of the theatricality of the literalist works is the emphasis they place on being beheld. In much the same way as the French paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were respectively held by Diderot to be artistic or inartistic insofar as the figures in them appeared to be unaware or aware of being beheld, so too literalist works are inartistic and theatrical insofar as they solicit the interest of a beholder and make her conscious of her existence as a subject in space and time. Modernist works are by contrast artistic and anti-theatrical insofar as they do not do these things. The nature of the relationship of the work to the beholder draws the line between the theatrical and the anti-theatrical.

At present, on the basis of Fried's work, it looks like theatricality is either a concept from art history or a principle of good taste. Even if at some moments in 'Art and Objecthood' Fried seems to be making fairly radical claims about the differing ontological status of modernist and literalist works of art, theatricality is still a label that separates good art from bad art, or art from non-art. Here I will show how theatricality becomes a concept with applications that extend beyond discussions of painting and sculpture by turning back to Cavell.

#### *6.4 Cavell on Theatricality*

I have already given an account of the relationship between Fried and Cavell. I have also noted that their writing manifests continuity in terms of themes and approach. We will see how this is the case now that we turn to Cavell's work on theatricality. In the work of Fried and Cavell, we see an idea being developed by two authors in cooperation. And I think we will see that the continuity in their work justifies speaking of a single concept of theatricality, rather than two.

In Cavell's work, the ideas which in Fried's books and essays are applicable solely to reflections on works of art take on more than an aesthetic relevance. Theatricality pertains to inter-subjective relations. In this section I want to look at how this is the case in order to arrive at a concept of theatricality that applies not only to works of art but to human life.

Cavell engages with the notion of theatricality in several different contexts, particularly in his discussions of cinema. Since I have already discussed theatricality in sculpture, and because the philosophy of film is not among my interests in this dissertation, I will not dwell on theatricality and film here.<sup>289</sup> Instead, I will return to the more familiar territory of literature by exploring Cavell's essay on *King Lear*, 'The Avoidance of Love.' While the first part of this essay is devoted to meditation on the play itself, the second part is made up of broader reflections on theater and tragedy. The discussion of theatricality occurs in this latter section. Cavell's purpose here can seem curious and even opaque. He argues that when it is a work of art, theater defeats its theatricality. It becomes art when it transcends mere spectacle. The highest possibility for theater is to escape its own theatrical condition. We could refer to Fried's idea that drama follows the death of theater at this point.

Cavell begins with the question of why, when we are in the audience at a play like *King Lear* or *Othello*, we do not get out of our seats in order to prevent the tragic events from coming to pass. He uses this question to sharpen his understanding of what acknowledgment amounts to firstly in the context of our experience of the theater and secondly in terms of inter-subjective relations. It might seem that full acknowledgment of events on stage would involve bringing them to a halt. Being genuinely struck by horror at, say, Othello's murder of Desdemona, would have to prompt

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<sup>289</sup> Cavell discusses film in *The World Viewed* and *Pursuits of Happiness*. Fried alludes to the potency of cinema as a way of escaping theatricality. See Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 140-41.



us to intervene. But of course we do not intervene. What would count for acknowledgment in the context of theater is precisely *not* stepping onto the stage to intercede before Othello kills his wife. Cavell argues that, ‘What is the difference between tragedy in a theater and tragedy in actuality? In both, people in pain are in our presence. But in actuality acknowledgment *is* incomplete, in actuality there is no acknowledgment, unless we put ourselves in their presence, reveal ourselves to them.’<sup>290</sup> For Cavell, the key to acknowledgment in the theater is openness to the characters onstage. We acknowledge them not by intervening to save them but by allowing ourselves to suffer on their account. Standing up and interrupting the performance would annihilate any opportunity for openness to the characters.<sup>291</sup> Taking them seriously, treating them as if they matter, involves tolerating the events on stage rather than intervening to end them. This will hurt—we will be saddened by Desdemona’s murder and Othello’s suicide—but the willingness to accept this pain, to witness events onstage and feel something rather than sit resolutely in the darkness the theater offers and avoid emotional disturbance, constitutes acknowledgment in the context of the theater.

And Cavell wants to say that when it comes to acknowledgment, life resembles theater. The key to acknowledgment in inter-subjective relations that occur outside of the theater is also openness. We can imagine being faced with an emotional situation involving a friend or loved one, a situation in which we are liable to get hurt. We could imagine making a joke to defuse the tension in the interaction, or being less than sincere about our feelings. In this way we might spare ourselves pain. However, by shutting ourselves off in this way we have failed to

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<sup>290</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 332-33.

<sup>291</sup> If we wonder how Cavell might respond to the obvious objection of how we can speak of acknowledging characters, which are fictional, not real, we can quote Mulhall: ‘In Cavell’s view, such a reaction is simply another way of failing to acknowledge those characters; for it takes to be obvious what fictional existence means, and what our relation to fictional characters is, rather than allowing our experience of plays such as *King Lear* to teach us the beginnings of answers to these questions.’ Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 197.

acknowledge the other person. Both in the presence of art and other people, openness and making ourselves vulnerable are the keys to acknowledgment.

Therefore, acknowledgment amounts to ‘revealing ourselves’ or ‘allowing ourselves to be seen.’<sup>292</sup> It is an acceptance of vulnerability. A failure of acknowledgment is the refusal to be open. And for Cavell the result of the refusal to reveal ourselves is theatricalization of the other. He claims, ‘When we do not [reveal ourselves], when we keep ourselves in the dark, the consequence is that we convert the other into a character and make the world a stage for him. There is fictional existence with a vengeance, and there is the *theatricality* which theater such as *King Lear* must overcome, is meant to overcome, shows the tragedy in failing to overcome.’<sup>293</sup> Cavell therefore argues that the role of theater is actually to *overcome* theater, or at least to transcend theatricality. Of course, here we are reminded of Fried’s reference to Diderot’s objection to the mannered, false style of performance that he identified in the theater of his age, and whose echoes in the painting of his time he criticized. But more importantly, in Cavell’s reflections we see the conversion of theatricality into a concept that can pertain to our relations with others, not just to our engagements with art. In refusing to make ourselves vulnerable, we theatricalize another person. We make a spectacle of her, endowing her with the stage presence of a theatrical character while refusing to allow her to be present to us as a fellow human being. Thus, Cavell’s reflections broaden the concept of theatricality. But though the concept has been extended so that it applies to inter-subjective relations and not simply works of art, Cavell does not lose the core of theatricality as Fried understood it. This is the sense of something or someone being present simply in order to be *beheld*. In Fried’s discussion of Diderot’s art

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<sup>292</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 334.

<sup>293</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 334.

criticism, theatricality manifested itself as the preference for display and the figures' awareness of the viewer's attention. In literalist sculptures it appeared in the tendency to solicit the attention of the beholder, as if they were waiting to be seen. In Cavell's reflections in 'The Avoidance of Love,' it comes out as our preparedness to treat the other as if she were a character on stage, someone who can expect only our attention and not our openness.

That being said, there does seem to be at least one important difference between the concept of theatricality as Fried explicates it and the way in which it is explicated by Cavell. (I leave aside the fact that the former investigates artworks and the latter our inter-subjective relations.) Fried claims that works of art or the figures in them present themselves as there to be beheld. The *object* with which we engage puts *us* in the place of a beholder. In contrast, Cavell says that *we* are responsible for theatricalizing *others*, turning them into characters on a stage, by refusing to reveal ourselves. We reduce the person with whom we interact to no more than something to be beheld.

In spite of this difference, I think we can still say that the same concept of theatricality is at work in both Cavell and Fried. The difference is one of orientation, arising out a divergence when it comes to what or who does the theatricalizing, rather than a difference in the meaning of the term. In the next section I look at how the intersection of the work of Fried and Cavell on just this point can be illuminating, and suggest that there is a more to be said about the concept of theatricality. In particular, I want to countenance the possibility that we might engage in theatricalizing ourselves.

### *6.5 Rethinking Theatricality*

In my discussion so far I have examined the concept of theatricality as Fried and Cavell present it. However, there is another way of looking at this concept, one they do not consider, which is related to the self as I understand it. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explain how this is the case. I plan to rethink the concept of theatricality presented by Fried and Cavell in two ways. The first pertains to the concept of acknowledgment. In his consideration of theatricality, Cavell invokes acknowledgment in terms of *successful* acknowledgment, the kind of acknowledgment that is at stake in tragedies. I want to ask how our interpretation of theatricality changes if we invoke acknowledgment not in this form, but in the broader sense that I discussed in the previous chapter.

The second shift is somewhat different. Given my purposes in this dissertation and the arguments I have presented with respect to the self, the inevitable question is whether we can theatricalize *ourselves* and what the effect of doing so might be. Cavell looks at the way in which theatricality arises in the context of our inter-subjective relationships; we turn the other into a character on stage, treating him as if she were there simply to be beheld. But might we not do the same thing to ourselves? Then we need to ask whether the only outcome of doing so is to close ourselves off, presumably from ourselves, or whether theatricalization might constitute a form of acknowledgment.

Before beginning this discussion, I want to make one point of clarification. For me, theatricality is a descriptive rather evaluative concept. My use of theatricality will therefore be closer to the way in which Fried invokes it in his art historical work rather than the essay ‘Art and Objecthood.’ In the latter essay, theatricality is pernicious and undesirable. Art should overcome it. I am not employing the concept of theatricality in a pejorative sense. In part this is because I think there is more to be said about theatricality that gets left out of account by letting it become

a value-laden concept too early on. But it is also because in the next chapter a theatrical existence will come to seem quite ambivalent, one that has beneficial and detrimental effects.

We might summarize how things have gone so far in the following manner. Fried argues that literalist works (objects) present themselves as things to be beheld. They invite the beholder, as if they were waiting for him. Cavell says that we (human beings) theatricalize others by closing ourselves off and turning others into characters on a stage. But he leaves out of the discussion our ability to do just the same thing with respect to ourselves. That is, just as we are capable of turning others into characters whom we contemplate, we are capable of transforming ourselves into a character for others to look at. Obviously, such self-theatricalization seems like a version of what Cavell proposes in his essay on *King Lear*, insofar as it involves turning a person (in this case ourselves) into something to be beheld. But it is equally a version of what Fried is talking about. When we theatricalize ourselves, we are like the literalist works Fried condemns, beings with stage presence, anticipating contemplation by others.

Now, for Cavell, theatricalization of others counts as a kind of closedness. It constitutes the refusal to reveal ourselves to others, that is, to acknowledge them. And even though he is speaking of works of art and not people, Fried uses similar language to Cavell. Literalist works appear hollow; they have an inside, one that resists contemplation. As Fried says of literalist works, 'It is, as numerous commentators have remarked approvingly, as though the work in question has an inner, even secret, life—an effect that is perhaps made most explicit in Morris' *Untitled* (1965-66), a large, ringlike form in two halves, with fluorescent light glowing from within at the narrow gap between the two. In the same spirit Tony Smith has said, "I'm interested

in the inscrutability and mysteriousness of the thing.”<sup>294</sup> So both in the case of people and literalist artworks, theatricalization is a form of closedness to the outside. This is what makes it an instance of failed acknowledgment. Are we to say the same of theatricalization of ourselves? That is, does the closedness and, we might add, the artificiality prompted by the awareness of attention from outside, that characterize theatricality eradicate any possibility for acknowledgment in this case as well?

On the one hand, it seems like we should answer this question in the affirmative. There is reason to think that in *all* instances of theatricalization we are involved in a failure of acknowledgment, because theatricalization is always a kind of closedness. This is because at the heart of theatricalization is the notion of beholding. When we theatricalize ourselves, we are involved in the same kind of artificiality of which Fried speaks of Diderot complaining in his writings on the theater of his time, even if it might not be so overt and mannered. In theatricalizing ourselves, aware that we are being looked at, we turn ourselves into a character, thereby closing ourselves off from others. At first glance, this looks like a failure of acknowledgment.

However, as I argued at some length in the previous section, even an instance of failed acknowledgment, such as might arise when we close ourselves off from others, remains a form of acknowledgment. Even the closedness that comes about in theatricalizing ourselves is a case of acknowledgment. If we emphasize one aspect of ourselves for appearance’s sake, then deep down we are still acknowledging who we are. We acknowledge who we are insofar as we know we take account of something in ourselves we can never let others understand. And even if our theatricalization of ourselves involves falsification or deception, then we still acknowledge

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<sup>294</sup> Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 156.

something about ourselves in concealing it, because concealment and deception, just as much as affirmation of who we are, involves self-acknowledgment.

In short, my claim is that when it comes to theatricality Fried and Cavell provide us with only one side of the story. The import of their arguments is that theatricality is never anything more than an instance of failed acknowledgment. Conversely, drawing upon what I have discussed in the previous section, I have argued that we can see that even the failure of acknowledgment that theatricality represents is a form of acknowledgment in the broad sense. Another way of putting this is to recall the distinction I made in the previous chapter between acknowledgment as a category of relations and acknowledgment as affirmation of others or ourselves. Self-theatricalization is not a form of affirmation, but it is a form of acknowledgment (of ourselves) in the first, broader sense.

This complicates the relationship between theatricality and acknowledgment. In making ourselves a character we may well be closing ourselves off from others. We can imagine that this might have deleterious consequences for our relationships with others—that is, so long as one of the things we are looking for in such relationships is something like sincerity. We are not always doing so.<sup>295</sup> However, in theatricalizing ourselves we are still always acknowledging ourselves, and if acknowledgment is essential to selfhood, then selfhood might on occasion be achieved at the cost of our relationships with others.

The two shifts of which I spoke at the beginning of this section point to a single conclusion, which will constitute an important step in this dissertation. We need to adopt an amended notion of theatricality. Theatricality is more than Cavell and Fried take it to be. While we can

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<sup>295</sup> See Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.

theatricalize others, we can also theatricalize ourselves. And crucially, when we theatricalize ourselves, we acknowledge ourselves. When I turn myself into someone like a character on stage, the requirements of what we might look upon as a performance constitute self-acknowledgment. In turning myself into someone who is there to be beheld by someone else (or perhaps even there for me to behold, as if in a mirror), I participate in the kind of self-scrutiny and self-reflection that comprises self-acknowledgment.

### *6.6 Conclusion*

In this chapter I have done two things. First, I have defended the specific use I intend to make of works of literature in the following chapter. I will employ them for the sake of arriving at an example of the way we might live. Although I do not consider that the use of works of literature in philosophy is so outlandish as it might once have seemed to be, even in the analytic tradition, and even though I have already drawn extensively on works by philosophers who make use of literature in developing their philosophical arguments, nonetheless it seemed necessary to set out my particular reasons for turning to literature at this point in my dissertation.

Second, I have presented the concept of theatricality as Fried and Cavell articulate it in their work, then argued that in light of the revised understanding of acknowledgment I offered in the previous chapter, we need to rethink what theatricality involves. While in theatricalizing ourselves we are indeed closing ourselves off to others, what is involved in making beholders of others and turning ourselves into characters for them is constitutive of self-acknowledgment.

It may be tempting to say that my response to Cavell and Fried has been to offer something like a ‘good’ version of theatricality whereas they focus on ‘bad’ theatricality. There is some truth to



this, but I think it is an oversimplification for two reasons. First, I have changed the locus of theatricalization from others to ourselves: in self-theatricalization we turn ourselves into something like performers on a stage. So I have modified the concept of theatricality in this essential respect, not simply presented it in a more positive light. Second, I have deliberately avoided making theatricality an evaluative term, preferring to use it to characterize a particular relationship to ourselves. Even if I have suggested that at the very least theatricality is not the undesirable and pernicious concept that Cavell and Fried take it to be in all cases, I have been ambivalent about whether self-theatricalization is positive or negative. An answer to this question is something that the resources of literature seem more capable of offering us than philosophy. But the point is that to judge that I have offered a ‘good’ form of theatricality seems erroneous.

Having given this account of theatricality, in the next chapter I will go on to look at William Shakespeare’s *Henriad*. What is lacking in the discussion I have had so far about theatricality are examples of the way in which self-theatricalization might arise in our lives. In the following chapter I want to contend that the *Henriad* offer us an example of someone with a theatrical life. I will reflect on these plays and use them to further enrich our understanding of theatricality, in anticipation of my return to the narrative conception of self in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

## ***Chapter 7 Mask of Blood, Coat of Folly: Theatricality, Loneliness and Affection in Shakespeare's Henriad***

### *7.1 Introduction*

In the previous chapter I argued that literature gives us examples of possible lives we might lead. I also introduced the concept of theatricality and suggested that it was a way in which someone might acknowledge herself. In this chapter I will reap the benefits of these two arguments. I will give a literary example of someone who lives theatricality, namely Hal (later Henry V) in William Shakespeare's tetralogy *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*, known as the Henriad.

My claim will be that Hal's life is defined by theatricality, but that his relationship to what is nothing less than the condition of his existence is at best ambivalent. Theatricality promotes loneliness. Thus Hal attempts to escape appearing as himself by adopting disguises and ultimately, as Henry V, by his wooing of Katherine. Henry V's marriage in the final act of the play that takes his name represents his elusion of theatricality through the blindness offered by affection.

Because not all the readers of this dissertation will be familiar with the events of the Henriad, I will briefly run through them. The first play, *Richard II*, describes the end of the life of the faltering King of England Richard II and a rebellion against his rule. Richard expels Henry Bullingbrook from his realm, only for Henry to return and, with the help of other dissatisfied nobles, seize Richard's crown for himself. The play ends with the Bullingbrook crowned Henry IV and Richard executed in obedience to Henry's wishes.

The two parts of *Henry IV* are composed of two subplots. The first deals with Henry IV's efforts to put down rebellions against his rule. In *1 Henry IV*, a group of nobles with Henry Percy as their champion rise up against what they take to be Henry's unjust rule. This uprising is put down at the Battle of Shrewsbury and the play ends with the defeat of Percy at the hands of Henry son, Prince Hal. In *2 Henry IV*, a second rebellion against Henry IV's rule occurs, but is overcome through the cunning of Prince John, Hal's brother. The play ends with the death of Henry IV and sees Hal beginning his reign as Henry V.

The second subplot centers on the friendship between Prince Hal and the aging rogue Sir John Falstaff. *1 Henry IV* deals with the ragged life Hal spends with Falstaff at Eastcheap. Hal's behavior attracts the disapproval of his father, at least until he is called away to fight at Shrewsbury, where he excels. Falstaff also goes to Shrewsbury, where he combines the attempt to escape harm with claiming all possible glory for himself. In *2 Henry IV*, the bond between Hal and Falstaff has weakened, with the two scarcely appearing on stage together. Falstaff's dissoluteness seems to have increased, and he is involved in legal troubles. Hal is called away to help deal with the second rebellion. When Hal is crowned King Henry V, Falstaff hurries to his side, expecting to be richly rewarded by his friend, but the new king claims not to know him.

The final play of the tetralogy, *Henry V*, deals with the beginning of Henry V's reign. Falstaff dies during the course of the play and does not appear onstage. Henry makes a claim to the throne of France and leads an army across the channel. After victories at Harfleur and Agincourt, where he is dramatically outnumbered, the French are compelled to make peace. As part of the treaty, Henry claims the King of France's daughter Katherine as his wife. The play ends with the expectation of a glorious future, which historically was never to come to fruition due to Henry V's early death.

Because theatricality is a vague term that might have numerous meanings in the discussion of a Shakespeare play, I want to sketch what I will mean by this concept. I take Hal's theatricality to be composed of two elements. The first is made up of Hal's status of being a man always on view—as if he were standing before an audience—and his eagerness to solicit more beholders. As heir to the throne, Hal recognizes that he is always being watched, and he is eager for the size of his audience to increase. The second is Hal's readiness to become a character, as if he were a member of a theatrical production. I mean more by this than I would were I to say that Hal plays a variety of roles. In becoming a character someone fills the part he is cast in, so that it makes sense to ask where the role stops and the actor begins.<sup>296</sup>

Therefore, with the term theatricality I am picking out something predominantly visual. My choice of the word theatricality is intended to draw attention to Hal's concern with how he appears to others and at times the mere fact that he is seen at all. I am aware that in using the word theatricality to track what is by and large a visual phenomenon I may be seen to be forgetting that theater is a medium with many dimensions. However, I am not doing this at all, and I think the term theatricality is appropriate here—more so than a word like 'visibility'—because some of the elements that will be vital in my discussion of the character of Hal in the Henriad, such as audience and character, are connected with the stage.

This chapter will be organized thematically, with examples from the three plays in which Henry features worked into my argument. First, I will look at existing scholarship on theatricality.

Second, I will define theatricality in more detail. To this end, I will draw on Hal's first soliloquy

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<sup>296</sup> So I do not quite agree with M.C. Bradbrook's association of role-playing with 'adaptability.' Bradbrook argues that *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* are linked by 'adaptability, the imaginative ability to create a part and play it.' See M.C. Bradbrook, 'Role-Playing in *Henry IV*,' in *William Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 2*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 71.

and his mid-play discussion with his father in *1 Henry IV*. I will also refer to Hal's rehearsal for that interview and his speech outside Harfleur from *Henry V*. Third, I will say how Hal's relationship to theatricality is ambivalent in that it leads to loneliness. This will be seen from discussion of why Hal does not abandon Falstaff after Shrewsbury, his final rejection of Falstaff, and his 'ceremony' speech on the eve of Agincourt. Fourth, I will look at how Hal manages temporarily to escape from the theatrical condition of his life by adopting disguises. The tricks he plays on Falstaff in both parts of *Henry IV* and similar ruses from *Henry V* will illustrate this. Finally, I will propose that we should understand the importance of the final act of *Henry V* as Hal's attempt to achieve a permanent haven from theatricality, which he discovers in affection.

### *7.2 Existing Scholarship on Theatricality in the Henriad*

Theatricality is not a new term so far as reflection on the Henriad by Shakespeare critics is concerned. In this section I want to describe the way in which theatricality in the Henriad has previously been understood. This will set the claims I am making in this chapter in the context of existing scholarship on the Henriad. More importantly, it will be a first step towards establishing what I mean by this term. There are three main ways in which theatricality has been conceived: (i) as a form of role-playing; (ii) as a means of deception and manipulation; (iii) as a means of subversion. I will describe each of these accounts, then note how my own view of theatricality differs from them.

The diagnosis of theatricality as a form of role-playing recurs in the secondary literature on the Henriad, but has been argued most eloquently by Alvin B. Kernan. As part of his thesis that the Henriad represents the erosion of the notion that identity is stable, singular and permanent and the acceptance of the idea that identity is temporary and changeable, he construes theatricality as

the adoption of different roles.<sup>297</sup> In the last plays of the Henriad, life has become a play and human beings are revealed as actors.<sup>298</sup> With Hotspur the sole exception, ‘Men in the world of *Henry IV* no longer take their identities as settled but assume that life is a succession of roles, played with skill and style to achieve a desired end.’<sup>299</sup> By the end of the tetralogy, Henry has become the ideal theatrical man, someone devoid of an authentic self and imprisoned in a role by political necessity.<sup>300</sup> We see something similar in James L. Calderwood’s account of the Henriad. For Calderwood, ‘To play the king is to play the actor, for the king must have many roles in his repertoire.’<sup>301</sup> Just as for Kernan, for Calderwood the tetralogy traces Henry’s loss of self and his assumption of the role forced upon him by the office of king.<sup>302</sup>

The idea that theatricality is a form of deception and manipulation is at the heart of the account of the Henriad that Stephen Greenblatt gives in the famous essay ‘Invisible Bullets.’ Greenblatt argues that, when it comes to Hal’s rule as Henry V, ‘The characteristic authority of the king, like that of the stage, depends upon falsification.’<sup>303</sup> Here, theatrical performance and dissimulation bleed into each other, each being a form of untruth. Later, Greenblatt argues that, ‘In Hal, Shakespeare fashions a compelling emblem of the playwright as sovereign “juggler,” the maker of counterfeit coins, the genial master of illusory subversion and redemptive betrayal.’ Whether or not we accept Greenblatt’s assertion that Hal represents the playwright, we cannot miss the imputation that being a paradigm of theatricality involves purveying counterfeits and

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<sup>297</sup> Alvin Kernan, ‘The Henriad: Shakespeare’s Major History Plays,’ in *Modern Shakespeare Criticism: Essays on Style, Dramaturgy, and the Major Plays*, ed. Alvin Kernan (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), 246.

<sup>298</sup> Kernan, ‘The Henriad,’ 254.

<sup>299</sup> Kernan, ‘The Henriad,’ 254.

<sup>300</sup> Kernan, ‘The Henriad,’ 275.

<sup>301</sup> James L. Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare’s Henriad: Richard II to Henry V* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 170.

<sup>302</sup> Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare’s Henriad*, 178.

<sup>303</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 63.

illusions. Finally, in emphasizing that the Henriad possesses a sinister edge, Greenblatt writes that ‘The Henry plays confirm the Machiavellian hypothesis that princely power originates in force and fraud even as they draw their audience towards an acceptance of that power.’<sup>304</sup> Again, Hal, the theatrical prince, is associated with deception, and theater itself with the manipulation of an audience. Jean E. Howard likewise takes theatricality to be distortive and sees it as central to maintaining power. ‘Hal’s seductive stagecraft is integral to his successful statecraft.’<sup>305</sup>

In contrast to Greenblatt’s account, according to which the deception characteristic of theatricality is exercised in the interests of power, Phyllis Rackin argues that theatricality is a means of subverting existing power structures. As she sees it, in Shakespeare’s time, ‘Theatrical performance was always potentially subversive.’<sup>306</sup> Unlike the authors discussed so far, for her the ultimate theatrical man is not Henry V but Falstaff. And he provides the link between theatricality and subversiveness. Rackin argues that ‘The most purely theatrical character in The Henriad, Falstaff is also the most subversive. The prince plays even more roles than Falstaff does, but from his first soliloquy, we know that no matter how long we have to wait, we will finally see the sunlike majesty that marks the mirror of all Christian kings and that beneath the roles there is a single, historically responsible character.’<sup>307</sup> By comparison, Falstaff lacks a single identity and resists attempts to force a place in the social hierarchy. A chameleon, ‘he threatens to destabilize the entire hierarchical order.’<sup>308</sup>

The specific ways in which the theatricality I see in the Henriad differs from these accounts will emerge in the next section. However, I will note an important difference. The common theme

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<sup>304</sup> Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 65.

<sup>305</sup> Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 140.

<sup>306</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 235.

<sup>307</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, 235.

<sup>308</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, 235.

that runs through the accounts is that theatricality arises out of changes in the political landscape and serves political goals. The account that emphasizes theatricality's deceptive nature regards it as a means of securing power. The inverse account offered by Rackin views theatricality as a means of undermining hierarchical structures. Even the notion that theatricality should be understood in terms of the ability to play multiple roles, which is a thesis about the erosion of an essential or authentic self, regards the origin of this shift as being the demands of political existence.<sup>309</sup> In contrast to these views, I will argue that a theatrical existence, while expected of a king of England, is personal rather than political and a commitment of Henry's self rather than the eradication of it. This is shown no more clearly than in the connection of theatricality with loneliness.

Consequently, it is of less interest to me why Shakespeare chooses to dramatize these issues of theatricality by looking at the life of a prince and king. If there is an answer to this question then it surely has to do with the life of a king being 'the largest in the state,' to take a phrase from Cavell.<sup>310</sup> There is something obvious and relevant about the life of someone of royal blood that makes it appropriate for drama—at least this was once the case, even if it is no longer. Perhaps the smallness of other lives means that they can never attain the same extraordinary level of theatricality as Henry's. Then again, the better question might be why Shakespeare chose to dramatize a prince and king by revealing the theatricality of his private existence. But then the answer may be nothing more than that Shakespeare could not portray the life of a man without revealing something of its contradictions and depths.

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<sup>309</sup> Kernan, 'The Henriad,' 275; Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad*, 178.

<sup>310</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 343.



### 7.3 Theatricality

Hal's theatricality is composed of two elements, the first of which involves his being beheld and attempting to solicit a greater audience for himself, the second of which involves creating a character.

#### 7.3.2 Audience

We gain insight into the importance of audience for Hal almost as soon as we meet him in *I Henry IV*. In his first soliloquy, he says:

I know you all, and will a while uphold  
The unyoked humor of your idleness,  
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,  
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds  
To smother up his beauty from the world,  
That when he please again to be himself,  
Being wanted, he may be more wond' red at  
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists  
Of vapors that did seem to strangle him.  
If all the year were playing holidays,  
To sport would be as tedious as to work;  
But when they seldom come, they wish'd for come,  
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.  
So when this loose behavior I throw off  
And pay the debt I never promised,

By how much better than my word I am,  
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes,  
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,  
My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,  
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes,  
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.  
I'll so offend, to make offense a skill,  
Redeeming time when men think least I will. (*IHV 1.2.195-217*)

Here we glean our first insight into Hal's sense that he is being observed. He speaks of the character he will adopt at Eastcheap as a form of concealment, akin to the clouds that cover the sun. He announces he will later slough off his rambunctious behavior, and expose the brilliance that lies beneath. So, for the time being at least, Hal intends to act so as to create the impression that he is dissolute in the minds of his observers. He will wear what the Constable of France in *Henry V* will call a 'coat of folly' to create a false impression (*HV 2.4.38*).

However, if this impression is all a matter of appearances, it seems equally clear that whatever emerges from behind the concealment he takes on will also be a matter of how he appears. Indeed, if anything the impression he makes following the abandonment of his dissolute manner will be even more of a matter of being looked upon. Once he ends his deception, he expects to be wondered at and to 'attract more eyes' than he would had he never engaged in it.

Therefore, even if, as the metaphor of the sun and the clouds suggests, ditching his Eastcheap manner will constitute a return to his former self, being who he is is no less theatrical than pretending to be someone he is not. He is looked upon at all stages of his life. Indeed, he expects

and wants his life to become more theatrical once he has given up his pretence.<sup>311</sup> So this first soliloquy sees the initial development of the first element of theatricality. Henry realizes that he is beheld and wants to exploit that fact by making a bad impression on his audience for the sake of attracting more onlookers once he abandons his pretence.

The encounter in Act 3 of *1 Henry IV* between Hal and his father Henry IV reveals more about this first element of theatricality. Hal has been called to see his father, ostensibly to answer for his misbehavior at Eastcheap. However, Henry's reproofs of Hal focus less on the company Hal keeps—though the King does mention this—than on the frequency with which Hal appears in public. In the course of their conversation, Henry IV compares himself to Richard II. He says of the man from whom he took the English crown:

So when he had occasion to be seen,  
He was but as the cuckoo is in June,  
Heard but not regarded; seen, but with such eyes  
As, sick and blunted with community,  
Afford no extraordinary gaze,  
Such as is bent on sunlike majesty  
When it shines seldom in admiring eyes;  
But rather drows'd and hung their eyelids down,  
Slept in his face and rend' red such aspect  
As cloudy men use to their adversaries,

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<sup>311</sup> This idea of the emergence of a true self from behind a disguise seems like an account that is fairly consistent throughout the Henriad. At the end of *2 Henry IV* Hal speaks in terms of laying one self aside for another, without the suggestion that one self is more really him than the other: 'I have turn'd away my former self' (*2HIV* 5.5.58). But earlier in the same speech, he describes Falstaff as being among the contents of a dream, from which he now finds himself awake (*2HIV* 5.5.49-51).

Being with his presence glutted, gorg'd, and full. (*IHIV 3.2.74-84*)

According to Henry, Richard was too often seen; as a result, when he was looked upon, he struck people as common and uninteresting. Henry IV argues that Hal's behavior has had the same effect. He says to his son:

Not an eye

But is a-weary of thy common sight,

Save mine, which hath desir'd to see thee more,

Which now doth that I would not have it do,

Make blind itself with foolish tenderness. (*IHIV 3.2.87-91*)

According to his father, Hal has wearied his audience through being seen too often. Henry argues that Hal should limit his appearances in public, and presumably the circumstances in which he makes them. In that way, rather than seeming dull, he will achieve a brilliant effect.

Henry acknowledges the theatricality of his son's life. Royalty will always invite the attention of onlookers. However, he understands the efficacy of this condition very differently than his son. Hal presumes that people will always look at him and attempts to make the best of things by giving the appearance of dissoluteness in order to increase the splendor of the effect he achieves later. Henry argues that a prince can only seem brilliant by withholding himself. It seems clear that he adopts this position on account of failing to consider that anything like Hal's pretence might be possible. This is shown by his reproaching Hal for his moral failings and not just his presence at Eastcheap. He takes Hal to be genuinely corrupt, and goes so far as to question whether he might be capable of fighting on the side of the rebels against him (*IHIV 3.2.124-126*).

Hal makes two responses to his father's accusations. The first comes following Henry's suggestion that Hal's presence at Eastcheap is wearying to onlookers. Hal responds by saying that: 'I shall hereafter, my thrice-gracious lord, / Be more myself' (*IHV* 92-93). We might give several interpretations to this commitment on Hal's part, though textual support for Stephen Greenblatt's suggestion that "'To be oneself" here means to perform one's part in the scheme of power rather than to manifest one's natural disposition,' seems lacking.<sup>312</sup> Graham Holderness points out the ambiguity of this statement: Hal agrees to be more himself, 'without specifying what that self actually is.'<sup>313</sup> But the implication is that not only the problem of dissoluteness but that of the dull image he is presenting to his onlookers will be resolved through Hal's being more himself.

Hal's second response is in answer to the suggestion that he will betray his father and fight on the side of the rebel Percy. It is striking not only for its visceral language but also the visual metaphor he employs. After Henry complains of him, Hal declares:

I will redeem all this on Percy's head,  
And in the closing of some glorious day  
Be bold to tell you that I am your son,  
When I will wear a garment all of blood,  
And stain my favors in a bloody mask,  
Which wash'd away shall scour my shame with it. (*IHV* 3.2.132-137)

So Hal's answer to his father involves not simply the promise to moderate his behavior by being more himself and to create a better impression in that way, but to be bathed in blood to such an

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<sup>312</sup> Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 46.

<sup>313</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare's History* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985), 77.

the extent that it comes to resembles a costume, one that will presumably achieve its own striking effect. Certainly this goes much further than Hal's plan to seem dissolute and then emerge from behind his pretence and strike an audience as brilliant. The reference to the mask and garment composed of what can only be Percy's blood is an embellishment of Hal's initial plan. Rather than switching seamlessly from devil to prince, Hal introduces the intermediary step of victory in battle, characterized in terms of the terrible costume he will adopt.

Both Hal's first soliloquy and the discussion between father and son in the third act argue for the theatricality of Hal's life. People in Shakespeare's fiction are always observing Hal, and he wants to attract more onlookers by creating the most brilliant impression possible. His father also acknowledges the necessity of being seen, but says it must be a matter of being seen at the right times. His objections prompt Hal to reveal more of his plan, or perhaps to amend it. The death of Percy is suddenly integral to his return to himself and the impression he will ultimately make.

### 7.3.2 Character

The second aspect of Hal's theatricality is his creation of a character. His adoption of the pretence he describes in his first soliloquy is one instance. Hal pretends to be someone he is not for the sake of having an effect on the people watching him. We can see the character he creates when he ascends to the throne as Henry V.

However, before looking at this example of creating a character at some length, I will consider two other examples more briefly. The first comes from *I Henry IV* and is the prelude to the interview with his father already described. Falstaff tells Hal that his father will chide him for his behavior when they meet, and that Hal should practice how he will answer the accusations the

king will raise against him.<sup>314</sup> First, Hal plays the part of himself to Falstaff's King Henry. The old knight takes the chance for self-valorization and recommends himself as Hal's only companion (*IHIV* 2.4.422-431). When Hal faults Falstaff's performance, the two then swap parts, so that the old man plays his protégé and the prince his father. As king, Hal mocks Falstaff, who seemingly stuck by Hal's barbs, insists on his virtue and indispensability (*IHIV* 2.4.466-480).

Falstaff and Hal are playing and nothing much is at stake in this exchange. The sincerity or otherwise of Hal's accusations are unclear, and the same goes for Falstaff's replies. The significance of the play within the play is surely Hal's hint that he will eventually reject Falstaff (*IHIV* 2.4.481). However, it interests me here because it shows the creation of a character in miniature. Hal plays at being himself and the king. But he does not disappear into or behind his part; there is something distinctive about Hal in his performance, particularly when he plays his father and takes the opportunity to ridicule Falstaff (*IHIV* 2.4.445-459).

The same holds true when we move out of the context of an instance of performance that is overtly a fiction and into the theatricality that characterizes Hal's life. Perhaps the best example of such a performance is the pretence that Hal adopts as part of his plan to create the finest possible impression on his audience. The character of a dissolute youth is the first that Hal creates. We are right to call this 'coat of folly' a character because Hal makes clear that this is not who he really is; when the time comes to throw aside the traits that define his Eastcheap persona he will find it easy to give them up. And indeed, when he is crowned at the end of the second part, the shift into the royal idiom appears seamless.

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<sup>314</sup> Of course, if this is a practice for Hal's meeting with his father, it is also a practice for Hal's eventual dismissal of Falstaff, as Harold Goddard argues. See Harold C. Goddard, 'The Rejection of Falstaff,' in *William Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 2*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 14.

But the clearest instance of creating a character can be found in Hal's reign as king. Henry V creates the character of a soldier and a general, and I want to consider this example at greater length. We might be less inclined to see this as an example of creating a character, the reason being that while monarch Henry at no time expresses his intention to pretend to be someone he is not. Indeed, *Henry IV* has apparently seen the abandonment of the pretence of dissoluteness and the restoration of the prince's true self. This is true, but it seems equally correct to say that Henry is creating a character when he becomes king, this character somewhat paradoxically being based on himself. If we look at a couple of excerpts from *Henry V* we will see how this is the case.

First, consider the famous speech Henry V makes to his troops outside the walls of the French town of Harfleur. He cries:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;

Or close the wall up with our English dead.

In peace there's nothing so becomes a man

As modest stillness and humility;

But when the blast of war blows in our ears,

Then imitate the action of the tiger;

Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,

Disguise fair nature with hard-favor'd rage;

Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;

Let it pry through the portage of the head

Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it

As fearfully as doth a galled rock

O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,



Swill'd with the wild and wasteful ocean.  
Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,  
Hold hard the breath, and bend up every spirit  
To his full height (*HV 3.1.1-17*).

In this speech made to rally his men, Henry encourages them to take on certain physical characteristics so as to make their faces resemble those of tigers. Of course, in encouraging his men in this fashion, he is also encouraging himself. The fifth line of the speech refers to the wind that blows in 'our' ears, as opposed to the wind that blows in 'your' ears. In making a speech to steel the spirits of his men, Henry is also strengthening his own courage.

But note that being courageous is not only a matter of spiritual fortitude but also something visual. Rather than encourage his men to acquire qualities of spirit, Henry tells them to put on a particular face. Being a good soldier is a matter of acquiring an appearance, the set teeth and jutting brow of a warrior. The attendant virtues are apparently sure to follow. Moreover, this fearsome appearance disguises the 'fair nature' that lies underneath. In short, just as Hal's dissolute behavior in *Henry IV* is pretence, so too is the bravery Henry V shows in battle.

But even if Henry tells his soldiers to 'disguise' their fair nature, there is an important way in which the terrible face that Henry would have them adopt is not a disguise. The reason is that the soldiers' features will form the base for this ferocious expression. And if Henry also means to adopt this fearsome aspect, the same will be true of him. The appearance of a warrior alters his face, but it does not conceal it or leave it unrecognizable. The features are still Henry's, even if they are changed. As in the case of his dissolute youth, when it comes to the characteristics of a

warrior that he adopts in battle, there is no suggestion that this person is not Henry; it is still him, only changed.

Of course, whereas Hal's pretence in *Henry IV* involved taking on bad qualities, in this instance he is taking on good qualities, specifically courage and resolve. The puzzling aspect of this speech is that it shows how qualities that we might be inclined to associate with Henry's true self, the one that was concealed by the ruse of misbehavior at Eastcheap, are also a matter of display. It is not that his courage does not belong to him; it is his, but the fearsome look he will adopt embellishes it. We get a sense of this in the lines from Henry's speech that immediately follow:

On, on, you noblest English,  
Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!  
Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,  
Have in these parts from morn till even fought,  
And sheath'd their swords for lack of argument. (*HV 3.1.17-21*)

Henry asks his soldiers to adopt a war-like aspect. However, they are the descendents of men who have already shown their qualities in war. So the expression that Henry asks his men to adopt overlays a spirit that is already attuned to fighting. The display makes manifest what is hidden within. So, in this instance, the character Henry plays is based on himself.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Perhaps this is not a unique occurrence in Shakespeare. Reflecting on *Measure for Measure*, Greenblatt says: 'The deputy's enforcement of the laws is a disaster, and the duke can only resolve the tangle of hypocrisy, false accusations, slander, and arbitrary use of authority by staging the public, *theatrical performance of himself*, complete with loud applause and *aves* vehement, that he despised.' Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 17, my italics.

So Henry creates characters at different junctures in the three plays in which he features. The first time that he does so is the pretence he adopts of a dissolute youth. The second major time that he does so is when he is fighting in France. But I have used the language of character here, rather than say that Henry is playing a role. The notion of character captures more of the richness and uniqueness of Hal's performances than the idea of a role. A role strikes me as being something that one person can perform as well as another. In her discussion of *Henry IV*, Bradbrook says that, 'Within *Henry IV*, each character plays several roles, and the leading characters often substitute for each other.'<sup>316</sup> But these connotations of the prince and king performing a set of functions that any other person could carry out with equal adeptness are misleading. Henry's characters have their own unique qualities that they possess only by virtue of the fact that he is playing them. Henry's own face will still show through the expression adopted on the battlefield. Similarly, Hal's dissolute youth and fearsome soldier are idiosyncratic; no one else could replicate them.<sup>317</sup>

But if Hal is theatrical in this way, then it excuses him from the aspersion that he is a Machiavellian figure, someone whose theatrical nature necessarily makes him duplicitous and manipulative. The theatricality that I have argued we see in Hal is not the deceptive theatricality that Greenblatt identifies. If Hal is a bad person then duplicity is not the cause; it is cruelty. Which is not to deny that he is shrewd. It hardly seems conceivable that Hal could put himself before an audience and play several characters if he lacked perceptiveness and intelligence. Hal seems especially cruel because wrongs done by those who know better are egregious. And

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<sup>316</sup> Bradbrook, 'Role-Playing in *Henry IV*,' 73.

<sup>317</sup> Andrew Jones Hartley has argued for a similar understanding of character and role when it comes to theatrical performance. He says, 'Character for me... is the hybrid production of actor and scripted role, something that cannot inhere merely in the material document (the play in the book) and requires the equally material conditions of the stage in order to come into being.' Andrew Jones Hartley, 'Character, Agency, and the Familiar Actor,' in, *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, ed. Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 159.

recognizing this same intelligence seems the beginnings of an argument—which I cannot mount here—against David Scott Kastan’s assertion that Henry V is a moral idealist with an ‘uncritical moral intelligence.’<sup>318</sup> Hal is no thickhead; he knows when he does wrong, or should know. At the moments when we hate him, this is the cause.

#### 7.4 Loneliness

However, if I have argued that Hal desires to live theatrically at the beginning of *I Henry IV*, I think his relationship to it is actually ambivalent. In particular, he grows disenchanted with theatricality because a theatrical life is a lonely life. The term loneliness does not seem altogether the most suitable, but neither do any others. Terms like separateness, isolation, and even estrangement might seem compelling alternatives, but I take loneliness to be a word that captures some or part of all of these others. The danger in using the word loneliness is that it will lead us to take Hal for the kind of character he is not. In characterizing Hal as lonely I do not mean to make him out to be a figure of melancholy. Nor is he a pessimist who suffers his humanity and would prefer death to life; Hal is not as gaudy as this, and remains too enterprising for the doldrums. He is ebullient and witty when at Eastcheap and brave on the battlefield, where he also has the energy to inspire men when he leads them. He cannot be confused for a brooding tragic hero.

But Hal is lonely in his own way. I regard the root cause of Hal’s loneliness as being the theatricality of his life. There is more to it than the fact that Hal ‘cannot have personal friends as other men do.’<sup>319</sup> I will discuss three events from the Henriad in support of this view. The first

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<sup>318</sup> David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 64 and 73.

<sup>319</sup> Anne Barton, ‘The King Disguised: The Two Bodies of Henry V,’ in *William Shakespeare’s Henry V*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), 16.

comes from *1 Henry IV* and is Hal's decision not to abandon Falstaff immediately following Shrewsbury, despite all the circumstances seemingly being in place for him to do so. The second comes from *2 Henry IV* and is Hal's eventual rejection of Falstaff once Hal is king. The third is Henry V's speech on the subject of ceremony and the responsibilities of kingship delivered on the eve of Agincourt.

Why does Hal not abandon his dissoluteness, and Falstaff with it, after Shrewsbury? It is tempting to take this as unexplained, as a discontinuity between the two parts of *Henry IV*. However, the concluding moments of the first part do suggest that Hal will not give up his dissoluteness just yet. The signal is that when Falstaff emerges and claims to be responsible for vanquishing Percy, Hal has the opportunity to object and take the honor that is rightfully his. Yet he demurs, telling Falstaff, 'If a lie may do thee grace,/ I'll gild it with the happiest terms I have' (*1HIV 5.4.157-158*). This exposes a continued loyalty to Falstaff, or one that had faded and all at once reawakens. How do we explain this?

The place to begin is with the speeches Hal delivers after defeating Percy. He speaks thus over Percy's body:

For worms, brave Percy. Fare thee well, great heart!

Ill-weaved ambition, how much art thou shrunk!

When that this body did contain a spirit,

A kingdom for it was too small a bond,

But now two paces of the vilest earth

Is room enough. This earth that bears thee dead

Bears not alive so stout a gentleman.

If thou wert sensible of courtesy,  
I should not make so dear a show of zeal;  
But let my favors hide thy mangled face,  
And even in thy behalf I'll thank myself  
For doing these fair rites of tenderness.  
Adieu, and take thy praise with thee to heaven!  
Thy ignominy sleep with thee in the grave,  
But not remembered in thy epitaph! (*IHV 5.4.87-101*)

This speech is heir to one I have already examined. In the interview with his father, Hal predicted that the defeat of Percy would constitute his redemption in the eyes of the world. Now he has defeated him, and seems on the verge of erasing the shame of which he spoke to his father. But whereas in the dialogue with Henry, Hal views Percy as the means by which he will cast aside his dissoluteness, describing him as the 'factor' whose numerous victories will embellish his own glory, once fallen, Percy becomes an end in himself—an inherently noble man whose death is a misfortune (*IHV 3.3.147*). This lack of continuity is emphasized when we turn to the metaphor of the bloody mask that Hal spoke to his father of adopting. The gruesome, violent mood of that metaphor is absent from the battlefield speech. One of the combatants does wear a mask, but it is the vanquished Percy, who assumes it only because Hal takes it upon himself to cover the dead man's 'mangled face' with his 'favors.'<sup>320</sup> Hal's speech over Percy is tender in a way we might not expect.

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<sup>320</sup> Hal's feelings towards Percy have been mixed at this point. As Howard and Rackin put it, 'In the Boar's Head Tavern, Hotspur is the subject of Hal's ridicule, but in his father's court and on the field at Shrewsbury, Hal acknowledges that he will have to appropriate Hotspur's honor in order to affirm his own right to the crown.' See Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering A Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 190. *IHV 4.1* shows Hotspur's lack of respect for Henry.

This is not so true of the speech that Hal delivers immediately afterwards, when he comes upon the body of Falstaff. The old knight is merely feigning death, but Hal imagines the battle to have claimed him. He speaks over him just as he did Percy:

What, old acquaintance! could not all this flesh  
Keep in a little life? Poor Jack, farewell!  
I could have better spar'd a better man.  
O, I should have a heavy miss of thee  
If I were much in love with vanity!  
Death hath not strook so fat a deer to-day,  
Though many dearer, in this bloody fray.  
Embowell'd will I see thee by and by,  
Till then in blood by noble Percy lie. (*IHV 5.4.102-110*)

The significance of this speech is surely drowned out on stage when Falstaff opens his eyes as soon as Hal exits. But the speech is important in that it demonstrates the closeness Hal feels to Percy and the distance he sees between himself and Falstaff. Hal has already associated Percy with Falstaff in the preceding speech. Percy is 'stout' insofar as he is strong and worthy. Falstaff is also 'stout,' but this is because he is 'fat.' The implication is that Hal values Percy for his stoutness more than he does Falstaff for his, in spite of the former's being his enemy and the latter his supposed friend.

There are several more ways in which this speech marks out the relationship between Hal and Falstaff. Hal refers to Falstaff as an 'acquaintance' rather than the obvious alternative 'friend.' He then declares that his sadness over his death would be greater were he more taken with

frivolity,<sup>321</sup> suggesting that Falstaff's death is not a significant blow to him. He goes on to say that many dearer to him than Falstaff have been slain in the battle that day, though none fatter than he. (We should note the use of the word 'dear' in the speech over Falstaff, also employed in the remembrance of Percy, as a link between the two speeches, though should probably not overemphasize its importance.) He says that Falstaff will lie in blood beside Percy, meaning that if we follow through on what Hal promised his father, it is Falstaff who has come to wear the garment of blood rather than Hal. Finally, Hal's praise of Falstaff is delivered in rhyming couplets, which seems too artificial a scheme to convey genuine feeling and is in contrast to the blank verse in the speech over Percy, aside from the half-rhyme that occurs in the last two lines.<sup>322</sup>

There are two general claims we can make about these speeches. First, both contain some emotion and reflect attachment. Even if Hal shows that he cares more for Percy than he does Falstaff, he does still care for the latter. The speeches are proof of connections which, broken, leave Hal sad.<sup>323</sup> Second, we see how the plan to renounce his dissoluteness that Hal sets out in his first soliloquy, later modified in his conversation with his father, culminates not in the violent mask of blood that Hal predicted he would adopt, but in a respectful, almost tender speech over a vanquished enemy and a less emotional but by no means unfeeling lament for a lost friend.

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<sup>321</sup> Following the Riverside text, which glosses 'vanity' as 'frivolity.'

<sup>322</sup> I acknowledge that we might explain the artificial tone created by the rhyming couplets in another way. Since Falstaff is not dead and the audience knows this, too grave a tone would have made Hal seem ridiculous. Therefore, the rhyming couplets lend lightness to Hal's speech, even as he mourns Falstaff. Calderwood says of Hal's speech over Falstaff, 'By means of humorous understatement it suggests in Hal a depth of feeling that would have looked specious otherwise.' See Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad*, 84. The problem with this explanation is that we seem compelled to conclude that Hal knows that Falstaff is feigning, which is difficult to reconcile with the remainder of the play. Calderwood has difficulty with this result. See Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad*, 84-85.

<sup>323</sup> I take Hal's speech over Percy evidence enough to reject A.C. Bradley's suggestion that there is no sign of strong affection in him. At best it seems the case that he shows strong affection when we least expect it of him. A.C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 258.



How does this help us to explain Hal's decision? If we skip over Hal's speech in praise of what he takes to be Falstaff dead, we might say that pure affection for his Eastcheap companion decides the issue for him. So long as Falstaff lives, he will not renounce him. But if we have read the speech in question we will know that his love for Falstaff is not as deep as all that, meaning this cannot be right. But then something about it is correct; certainly there is a warmth in Hal's language once Falstaff proves not to be dead that was not present before. It seems appropriate to assign much of this new feeling to relief. But then that leaves the same question unanswered. Why would Hal be relieved to find Falstaff alive, and is this relief enough to prompt him to put his intention to abandon his dissoluteness on hold? Even if his relief is in proportion to the sadness he originally felt, it still does not seem enough to warrant giving up his plan.

If we want to know why Hal does not take his place as heir at the end of the first part, we need to ask ourselves what has gone awry in Hal's plan that makes him opt to put off its conclusion. And what has most clearly miscarried is the manner of his victory over Percy. Instead of adopting the 'garment all of blood' and 'bloody mask' of which he spoke to his father, Hal speaks tenderly over Percy's body. Hal's victory plays out as a reverential scene in which he emphasizes his connection to the dead man and his care for him. This is the unexpected event that compromises Hal's plan. Instead of being able to treat Percy merely as a factor, someone whose death counts only because it enriches his own glory, Hal finds that Hotspur matters in himself, and that his death gives rise to sadness. And the process is repeated when it comes to Falstaff, though with a less severe emotional toll on Hal.

So Hal has just been surprised by a sense of loss. After the battle, he finds himself facing loneliness. He congratulates his brother John for having 'flesh'd' his 'maiden sword' in battle, but the brutish language with its phallic, misogynistic associations harks back to the conversation

with his father, which if it rang true to Hal then must sound false now (*1HIV* 5.4.129-130). Hal knows that there is more to battle and death than this, and if these words are the only ones he can speak to the members of his family then he can only be out of place among them. But beyond them Hal has only the company of the scores of eyes that will turn his way once he takes his place as heir. This is why Falstaff's appearance, revived apparently by some miracle, is a relief. It promises a temporary suspension of the solitude he will suffer if he follows through on his plan. The best company he could hope for would be dead, blind Percy: he feels the most affection for the dead rebel. But since Percy is gone, Falstaff is the closest thing Hal has to a friend. This accounts for Hal's elation and, since Falstaff is plainly incompatible with Hal's being a true heir to his father, it also explains his decision to postpone the abandonment of his pretence.

But if Hal decides against abandoning Falstaff after Shrewsbury, he does separate from the old knight once his father has died and the English crown has passed to him. This occurs at the end of *2 Henry IV*. Henry V's means of dispatching Falstaff is famously severe. When his Eastcheap acquaintance appears at court, Henry dismisses and ridicules him. He says:

I know thee not, old man, fall to thy prayers.  
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!  
I have long dreamt of such a kind of man,  
So surfeit-swell'd, so old, and so profane;  
But being awak'd, I do despise my dream.  
Make less thy body hence and more thy grace,  
Leave gormandizing, now the grave doth gape  
For thee thrice wider than for other men.

Reply not to me with a fool-born jest,  
Presume not that I am the thing I was,  
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,  
That I have turn'd away my former self;  
So will I those that kept me company. (*2HIV* 5.5.47-59)

The king announces the conclusion of the plan he began as prince by insisting that he is no longer the same man as he used to be. He also carries out the action he foresaw in the rehearsal for the interview with his father (*IHIV* 2.4.481). So if the distance and cruelty of Henry's speech is difficult to stomach, the end it achieves cannot be unexpected.<sup>324</sup> Things are not as they were, and Falstaff has no place at court.

The response of a reader to this scene is bound to be sympathy for Falstaff and condemnation of Henry, not necessarily for the action itself but the way in which he carries it out. Of course, Falstaff could have been let down more easily. At best, depending on whether we follow the stage directions in the First Quarto or First Folio, which give different ideas of who is on stage at the time, the cruelty of the speech can be explained by Henry's desire to impress or reassure the Chief Justice. At worst there is no explanation for it other than the wish to humiliate Falstaff or indifference to how he suffers. But I am not so interested in the degree to which Henry is cruel in this scene. The real importance of this speech and what might furnish the best dramatic explanation for it is that it obliterates any feelings the audience might have had on Hal's account.

What might these feelings have consisted in otherwise? The most plausible candidate is pity. The drunken knight cannot take a place at court; he does not belong there. Henry is compelled to give

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<sup>324</sup> Beatrice Groves, *Texts and Traditions: Religion in Shakespeare 1592-1604* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 129.

up his Eastcheap acquaintance. But now he finds himself alone. Unquestionably he has what he wished for, in that now the eyes of the entire world will be upon him. Yet he already saw after Shrewsbury that this was an unappealing way of being. As a result of his father's death he finds himself pushed into a lonely situation, one he has already rejected once, but which he cannot now refuse because taking it is his duty. However, this means that Hal will be alone. And if he has won any part of a reader's sympathy in *Henry IV*, the result will be pity for him.

Yet this is hardly the right sentiment for an audience to experience at the climax of a play that has witnessed Henry's ascent to the monarchy. Pity is also the wrong emotional note to strike for a king such as Henry will turn out to be, the 'ideal king of English history.'<sup>325</sup> While it might suit a weaker ruler such as Richard II and even be appropriate to the relatively stronger Henry IV, it is inappropriate for the beginning of the reign of the king who is to be counted England's greatest. So Shakespeare needs to ensure that the audience does not pity Henry, and they do not because they are too busy condemning him for the unwarranted harshness with which he rejects Falstaff. And if this means that the audience starts to dislike Henry and think him cruel, dramatically this is still better than their pitying him.

Thus if the response to this claim that Henry is lonely at the end of *2 Henry IV* is that we do not get a sense of it at the time, the reply must be that we should not because we are not intended to. Yet becoming king does not mean that Henry loses the capacity for human feeling of which we know he is capable. This is why his treatment of Falstaff seems unconscionable—we know he must know how Falstaff suffers. But this entails that Henry, too, is capable of experiencing inner pain, specifically loneliness, even if we are not open to noticing it ourselves in the moment that it strikes him.

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<sup>325</sup> J. Dover Wilson, *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 33.

So here are two instances in which Hal is lonely. The third is more obvious and can be found in *Henry V*, once Henry has lead his army to France and is on the verge of fighting at Agincourt. Henry makes his famous long speech on ‘ceremony,’ in which he bewails the conditions of kingship. He begins:

Upon the King! Let us our lives, our souls,  
Our debts, our careful wives,  
Our children, and our sins lay on the King!  
We must bear all. O hard condition,  
Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath  
Of every fool whose sense no more can feel  
But his own wringing! What infinite heart’s ease  
Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!  
And what have kings, that privates have not too,  
Save ceremony, save general ceremony?  
What kind of god art thou, that suffer’st more  
Of moral griefs than do thy worshipers?  
What are thy rents, what are thy comings-in?  
O Ceremony, show me but thy worth! (*HV 4.1.230-244*)

If Hal’s first two instances of loneliness were not immediately obvious and required careful interpretation to discern, this third case is right there in the text. In this speech Henry V makes his feelings of isolation clear, and they are feelings that derive from his status as king.

Henry is bewailing a couple of aspects of rule in this speech. First, his subjects look to him to bear their burdens. He seems to appreciate that the bargain he has made in winning the attention of which he spoke in his first soliloquy in *1 Henry IV* is to accept others' expectations. Eyes are attracted to him less because he makes a brilliant impression than because he represents his subjects' hopes and is supposed to bear their guilt. In short, the theatrical condition of his life renders him alone. Second, Henry laments the insubstantiality of the benefit that he derives from being king. Ceremony is superficial and meaningless: 'O, be sick, great greatness, and bid thy ceremony give thee cure!' (*HV 4.1.251-252*). This magnificent, 'thrice-gorgeous' quality, which creates awe and fear in his subjects, is bereft of importance so far as Henry is concerned (*HV 4.1.247 and 266*).

But if this is the most explicit sign that Henry is lonely, it also has two other features that we need to note. The first is that it constitutes the inversion of Hal's position in his first soliloquy. It does not seem outlandish to claim that everything Hal claimed to desire in that speech is just what seems empty and isolating to him on the eve of Agincourt. As Henry V he creates a brilliant impression and has the eyes of the world upon him, yet he sees that he is not to be envied. The second is that this speech emphasizes the fact that the source of Henry's loneliness is his theatrical condition. He is isolated by his subjects who look to him to take responsibility for them. He finds no consolation in ceremony, which if it is a matter of 'place, degree, and form' is also a matter of visual paraphernalia—'The balm, the sceptre, and the ball,/ The sword, the mace, the crown imperial' (*HV 4.1.246 and 260-261*).

Kernan has a poignant reading of this speech. He views it as the moment at which the last vestiges of Henry the private man vanish and he becomes a creature of pure ceremony. And he suggests that not only is this process occurring in this soliloquy, but Henry is aware that it is

occurring. ‘Rather than revealing a self [in this speech], it is as if some vague memory of a real self were sadly contemplating its final disappearance into a role, into ceremony.’<sup>326</sup> While Kernan elegantly characterizes Henry’s mood, I think he misdiagnoses it as resignation. Henry’s drive towards theatricality was never inevitable; his theatrical condition was an end that he pursued. In the speech before Agincourt we hear not resignation but disenchantment with the state he has attained—disenchantment prompted by loneliness. And the disenchanted see possibilities for change that the resigned overlook. What he embraces at the beginning of *I Henry IV*, by the eve of Agincourt in *Henry V* he is out of love with and will seek to escape.

### 7.5 Disguise

Beyond the decision to push back the rejection of Falstaff at the end of *I Henry IV*, there is also a recurrent strategy that Hal employs in order to evade theatricality. This is his adoption of disguise. Of course, Hal puts on disguises for very specific purposes, usually involving a trick he is playing on one character or another. Therefore, each disguise has its own unique goal. However, overall, and given the theatrical condition of Hal’s life, the use of disguise stands out as a playful strategy, whereby Hal can escape the eyes that typically focus on him and disappear into obscurity. Three examples demonstrate Hal’s consistent employment of disguise.

Of course, Hal is not the only character who disguises himself. In fact, the whole theme of disguise perhaps belongs under the broader heading of the false or counterfeit. We see examples of this in the final act of *I Henry IV* in the form of soldiers disguising themselves in Henry IV’s colors at Shrewsbury and Falstaff’s playing dead while on the battlefield (*IHIV* 3.3 and 5.4.110-128). We also see a gesture towards the use of disguise in Hal’s reproof of the disloyal lords

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<sup>326</sup> Kernan, ‘The Henriad,’ p. 273.

Scroop, Cambridge, and Grey (*HV* 2.2). Hal's use of disguise is therefore only one aspect of a broader form of deception and is not uniquely his.

The first case in which Hal adopts disguise in the Henriad is the Gadshill incident in *1 Henry IV*, wherein Hal and Poins conceal their identities in order to steal loot that Falstaff and his band of thieves have just secured (*IHIV* 2.2). However, here the scheme is wholly devised by Poins and Hal is merely following his lead (*IHIV* 1.2.160-180). The situation is different in *2 Henry IV*, where Hal and Poins are again involved. The following exchange occurs between them:

*Prince:* How might we see Falstaff bestow himself to-night in his true colors, and not ourselves be seen?

*Poins:* Put on two leathern jerkins and aprons, and wait upon him at his table as drawers.

*Prince:* From a God to a bull? a heavy descension! it was Jove's case. From a prince to a prentice? a low transformation! That shall be mine, for in every thing the purpose must weight with the folly. (*2HIV* 2.2.169-176)

Though in this instance Poins is responsible for suggesting that they use disguise, it is Hal who voices the desire not to be seen in order to be able to spy on Falstaff. And as it plays out, Hal is able to observe Falstaff in the company of Doll Tearsheet and mocks him from the shadows. As Doll scratches Falstaff's head, Hal says to Poins, 'Look whe'er the wither'd elder hath not his pole claw'd like a parrot' (*2HIV* 2.4.258-259). Through the adoption of a disguise, Hal briefly escapes attention, before stepping back into the light. Here he falls under the gaze not also of Falstaff but also Hostess Quickly, who reacts by saying, 'O, the Lord preserve thy Grace! By my Troth, welcome to London. Now, the Lord bless that Sweet face of thine!' (*2HIV* 2.4.291-293).



By assuming a disguise, Hal has temporarily evaded the kind of isolating gaze represented by Hostess Quickly's enthusiasm, and briefly blended among unremarkable men.

The two further examples of the use of disguise come from *Henry V*. Indeed, the two are closely connected. One is the incident on the eve of Agincourt in which Henry roams the English camp disguised in a borrowed cloak and travelling under the name of 'Harry le Roy' (*HV 4.1*). By disguising himself in this instance, Hal can speak with his men in ways that would be impossible otherwise. He is able to learn the opinions of his soldiers on the coming battle. Indeed, it is gaining insight into his men's thoughts in this way that prompts the loneliness of his 'ceremony' speech. But, more broadly, this use of disguise enables Henry to escape the theatrical condition of his life. Incognito, he attracts only as much attention as would any soldier found wandering alone through camp.

The other has its origins in this nocturnal journey through the camp. While he is among the soldiers, Henry, still disguised by his cloak, reacts angrily to the suggestion that the English king will have himself ransomed after the battle. He quarrels with a soldier, Michael Williams. The two exchange gloves so that should they meet later they will be able to recognize and challenge each other (*HV 4.1.203-221*). The quarrel is seemingly forgotten, but once the French are defeated, Henry spots Williams wearing his glove in his cap (*HV 4.7.118*). This prompts a further, rather novel, instance of disguise. Henry takes the glove he received from Williams and asks Fluellen to wear it in his own cap (*HV 4.7.153-154*). The result is that Williams strikes Fluellen, taking him for Henry, whom he of course knows only as the stranger who walked through the English camp the night prior to the battle. Williams and Fluellen fight, but Henry intervenes and rewards Williams with gold (*HV 4.8.24-72*).

My reason for mentioning this instance of disguise is not only that it rounds off the incident of Henry's walk through the English camp. It is of interest because it involves the inversion of Henry's typical approach to disguise, whereby he conceals his appearance and travels incognito. In this case, Henry makes another person resemble him (through having Fluellen wear the mischievous glove). And while Henry again has his own point in doing so, namely playing a trick on the quarrelsome Williams, this instance can also be looked upon as one instance in which he evades theatricality. He momentarily escapes the theatrical condition of his life by ceasing to be the object of others' attention. Though it strikes me as a use of disguise, because it involves Henry concealing his identity by having Fluellen pass himself off as the man who quarreled with Williams, we might also regard it as a form of diversion, in that it leads the eyes that usually focus on Henry.

The three instances in which Hal disguises himself arise for specific reasons, but each is also a case of Hal withdrawing himself from the theatrical condition that usually defines his life. Therefore, the adoption of a disguise differs from the creation of a character. They might be taken for the same, in that each involves Henry in being someone is not. However, this is not correct. While adopting a disguise always involves Henry in being someone he is not, creating a character also allows Henry to play himself, as we saw in the speech he makes before Harfleur. Moreover, Henry creates a character in order to win more attention, as in the case of his youthful pretense of dissoluteness, whereas he adopts a disguise in order to disappear and thereby evade theatricality. We might add that in all cases, the characters that Henry creates are considerably richer than the disguises he adopts, even in the case of Harry le Roy. Therefore, these two phenomena, which might initially appear similar, are in fact very different.

But Hal's escapes from theatricality are brief and only temporary. Disguise cannot offer Henry any permanent relief from the theatrical condition which, by the time of his 'ceremony' speech, he clearly resents. In order to achieve this he must seek an alternative means of escape. This is love and marriage, which are embraced with Henry's wooing of Katherine in the final act of *Henry V*.

### 7.6. Affection

Samuel Johnson held the great defect of *Henry V* to be the 'emptiness and narrowness' of the final act, and if this is the case then the *Henriad* as a whole must be said to suffer in the same way.<sup>327</sup> In this section I will argue that Johnson is mistaken. The wooing of Katherine delivers Henry a permanent escape from theatricality and loneliness, and is significant for that reason.

The interaction that interests me follows the wooing, and involves Henry and the Duke of Burgundy. It invokes the theme of blindness, which strikes me as the most complete escape from the theatricality that oppresses Henry. While we might as a matter of course regard marriage as an antidote to loneliness, the particular focus on blindness suggests that Henry is most of all trying to seal himself off from the special loneliness brought on by theatricality.

The exchange between Henry and Burgundy is lighthearted and begins with a confession from Henry that he finds himself becoming tongue-tied and is unable to 'conjure up' the true likeness of love in Katherine (*HV* 5.2.286-290). In response, Burgundy invokes the language of the blindness of love:

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<sup>327</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare: Essays and Notes Selected and Set Forth with an Introduction by Walter Raleigh* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 133.

If you would conjure in her, you must make a circle; if conjure up Love in here in his true likeness, he must appear naked and blind. Can you blame her then, being a maid yet ros'd over with the virgin crimson of modesty, if she deny the appearance of a naked blind boy in her naked seeing self? (*HV 5.2.291-298*)

Burgundy suggests that the reason why Henry cannot make love arise in Katherine is that she is overcome by shame and will not permit it: 'It were, my lord, a hard condition for a maid to consign to' (*HV 5.2.298-299*). Burgundy goes on to suggest that when a woman closes her eyes, she will be more receptive to love (*HV 5.2.302-303*). This prompts Henry to request Burgundy to teach Katherine to 'consent to winking' (*HV 5.2.304-305*).

The final part of the exchange is the most important. It runs as follows:

*Burgundy*: I will wink on her to consent, my lord, if you will teach her to know my meaning; for maids, well summer'd and warm kept, are like flies at Bartholomew-tide, blind, though they have their eyes, and then they will endure handling, which before would not abide looking on.

*King Henry*: This moral ties me over to time and a hot summer; and so I will catch the fly, your cousin, in the latter end, and she must be blind too.

*Burgundy*: As love is, my lord, before it loves. (*HV 5.5.306-315*)

The conversation is bawdy at best and misogynistic at worst, and in either case unflattering to Katherine.<sup>328</sup> But it is no less startling for that. The reason is that Henry sees the blindness of a

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<sup>328</sup> Some feminist critics might hold this conversation to fit the paradigm by which Katherine is the victim of rape by Henry. Howard and Rackin argue that the French princess, 'has all the traditional attributes of a rape victim.' They go on to identify her with famous rape victims from mythology and Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus*: 'First characterized in language that associates her with the conquered cities of France, Katherine is then subjected to a

woman who is ashamed as a desirable quality. He does not want Katherine to overcome her blindness. Instead, he is keen for her to learn to be blind.

In the limited context of this discussion, the references to blindness may seem merely lascivious: Henry wants to sleep with Katherine so is eager for her to learn to suppress her shame. However, when we look over the entire play, bearing in mind not only the significance of theatricality but Henry's recourse to disguise, we can attribute a very different significance to the exchange with Burgundy. In Katherine, Henry is faced with more than an opportunity to indulge his sexual appetite; he is presented with the possibility of escaping the theatrical condition of his life. Katherine is someone who will not seek him out with an isolating gaze in the way to which Henry is accustomed. In his relationship with Katherine he will be as far as possible from the theatrical condition that seemed so attractive to him in his first soliloquy in *I Henry IV*, but with which he is now disenchanted.

Of course, we do not see anything of Henry and Katherine in their married life, so the end to theatricality and loneliness that this relationship promises is no more than that, promised. So why should we consider that blindness represents the possibility that Hal can escape his loneliness? To justify this position I turn back to the most significant of his interactions with someone who cannot see him. To my mind, this is his speech over the body of Percy in *I Henry IV*. Hal goes unseen here because Percy is dead, but Hal also symbolically covers his enemy's face during the course of his speech. In my discussion of this speech I have already noted the affection for his

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symbolic rape when Henry forces her to endure his kiss. From that moment on, she has not another word to say. Silenced, like Philomel and like Shakespeare's own Lavinia, Katherine provides the proof of Henry's manhood as well as the legitimization of his identity as king.' See Howard and Rackin, *Engendering a Nation*, 214-15. I disagree with this reading. To say that Henry's kiss symbolizes rape strikes me as hyperbolic, while his inept, slightly absurd interchange with Katherine, quite the reverse of the dominant, enterprising and decisive way in which he defeated the French, breaks down any analogy we might be tempted to make between Henry the general's conquest of France and Henry the man's winning of Katherine.

fallen foe that Hal expresses, affection deeper than that he feels for Falstaff. However, we can also notice that Hal finds himself able to be sincere: 'If thou wert sensible of courtesy, I should not make so dear a show of zeal.' This is a second reason for thinking that blindness offers Henry the most real possibility for escaping theatricality. He not only evades his estrangement from others; he also has the opportunity to cease to be estranged from himself through being sincere.

David Scott Kastan argues that we should see the prospective marriage of Henry and Katherine not in terms of love but of Henry's aggrandizement and political advantage. 'Only Henry is ennobled by this marriage...and his territorial drive is too naked for the promised wedding to authenticate the harmony it would effect.'<sup>329</sup> As I have shown, however, Henry is after something else from his marriage, and while it might be tempting to equate this with sexual indulgence, when we are aware of Henry's theatrical project and his disenchantment with it, acquiring a sensitivity to the symbol of blindness as it emerges in the discussion with Burgundy, we see that he does not desire to add to his image of the illustrious king but to escape from the eyes on whom it is impressed. We cannot deny that Henry wants something from Katherine, but she is more than a means towards ennobling himself, and cannot be associated some territorial drive. Henry hopes to find in her a reprieve from his theatrical condition.

The love Henry finds with Katherine therefore offers him a more permanent relief from theatricality than disguise. And since the promised escape answers to the disenchantment Henry feels with theatrical condition that had so appealed to him in his first soliloquy in *1 Henry IV*, I think we are wrong if we follow Johnson in regarding the final act of *Henry V* as empty. The act

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<sup>329</sup> Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time*, 74.

represents the conclusion to one of the play's dominant themes, namely the theatricality of Henry V's life, and is important for that reason.

### *7.7 Conclusion*

If I am correct, then the *Henriad* shows not simply the upward trajectory of one of England's great kings, but the aspiration of a young man for a particular condition for life, his disenchantment with it, and his eventual escape from it through love. So if we take part of the merits of a literary work to be its ability to show us a life and suggest whether that life is livable or unendurable, we get the sense from the *Henriad* that a theatrical life is not choiceworthy; at least, it is not one we can live without wanting to escape from it.

Of course, we are free to disagree with the judgment we find in the plays. In particular, I think we would be right to object to the tone in which Henry speaks about Katherine and perhaps the idea that she is a means to some goal, rather than someone he values in her own right. But I do not think that this justifies the conclusion that the entire verdict on a theatrical life that the *Henriad* represents is mistaken. There is something more worthy of our aspirations than theatricality, and I would suggest that this is a life of sincerity involving affection.

## ***Chapter 8 Literary Narrative and Self-Acknowledgment***

### *8.1 Introduction*

The character of Hal from the *Henriad* is an example of someone who lives theatrically. We are all capable of living theatrical lives, though of course these lives will be composed of fewer extremes than that of a Prince and King of England. However, what really interests me is the possibility that theatricalization can occur not in the life we live, but rather in what we put down on paper. Why does theatricalization have to be enacted in the world? Literary theatricalization might achieve the same ends. We can play at being different all different sorts of people in the lives we lead. However, it is equally conceivable that we might theatricalize ourselves by writing about our lives.

I will argue that the role narratives play in selfhood is to provide a context in which we can theatricalize and thereby acknowledge ourselves. Telling stories about our lives is a way in which we achieve selfhood. There may be other ways, but in this chapter I will bring out the particular virtues of narrative when it comes to theatricalizing and acknowledging ourselves. I will thereby answer the question of the relation between narrative and selfhood. Even though I have rejected the idea that our self-narrative gives us who we are, I will still show that narrative can be instrumental in achieving selfhood.

### *8.2 Creating Character*

In the last chapter, I said that Hal created a character in order to have a certain effect on the people around him. An example was the dissolute youth described in Hal's first soliloquy in *Henry IV*. Another was the character of the soldier Henry V describes in front of the walls of



Harfleur. In both instances, Hal creates a character in order to attract spectators and to affect them in a particular way.

So I have been speaking of creating a character in terms of stage performance. However, another context in which it is appropriate to speak of creating a character is literature. In conventional literary narratives, a large part of an author's work is creating characters to populate it. In the Romanes Lectures of 1931, John Galsworthy referred to 'vitality of character creation' as 'the key to such permanence as may attach to the biography, the play, the novel.'<sup>330</sup> William H. Gass argues that, 'Great literature is great because its characters are great, and characters are great when they are memorable.'<sup>331</sup>

But if the significance of character is obvious, what do I mean by a character? Equally importantly, what is involved in creating a character, and why is there a strong, if not necessary, connection between narrative and character? In order to answer these questions, it seems best to look back at what I said about narrative earlier. By revisiting some the core features of narrative, we will see how literary narrative is an ideal medium in which to develop character. I will deal with the questions I have raised in two subsections.

### 8.2.1 What is a character?

Not all the human existents in a narrative are characters in the sense I intend. What makes someone a character in the sense I am speaking about is depth and individuality. In my chapter on narrative I referred to Forster's distinction between 'round' characters and 'flat' characters, the former being deeper than the latter. I am not of a mind to retain this distinction. It seems hard

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<sup>330</sup> John Galsworthy, *The Creation of Character in Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 3.

<sup>331</sup> William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 35.

to distinguish a round character from a flat one. Round characters may be presented in a flat way. For example, we would probably say that the characters in Kafka's novels are round, but the style in which they are rendered often makes them appear flat. Hence, I will introduce a single concept of character. There is a distinction between those human existents who are characters and those who are not.

The basis for this distinction is as follows. If a human being is merely representative of her species, then I would suggest that the title of character should not be applied to her. A good example of human beings who are not characters are victims who are killed off at the beginning of novels, particularly murder mysteries. The reader is given no chance to appreciate their depth and individuality. However, even this example admits of exceptions. A great writer like Dostoyevsky thinks enough about what he is writing to trouble to turn a murder victim like Alyona Ivanovna into a character in her own right. I will dwell a little on this example.

The pawnbroker Alyona Ivanovna is filled with mistrust, which she overcomes only in order to satisfy her avarice. She is described in the following way on her initial meeting with Raskolnikov: 'She was a diminutive, withered-up old woman of sixty, with sharp, malignant eyes and a sharp little nose. Her colorless, somewhat grizzled hair was thickly smeared with oil, and she wore no kerchief over it. Round her thin long neck, which looked like a hen's leg, was knotted some sort of flannel rag, and in spite of the heat, there hung a mangy fur cape, yellow with age. The woman coughed and groaned at every instant.'<sup>332</sup> Alyona Ivanovna's avarice is conveyed in the exchange with Raskolnikov that follows: "But the time is up for your last pledge. The month was up the day before yesterday"; "But that's for me to do as I please, my

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<sup>332</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Heinemann, 1961), 4

good sir, to wait or to sell your pledge at once.”<sup>333</sup> Her mistrustfulness comes through prior to her murder by Raskolnikov, engaged in a struggle with her greed: ‘The old woman glanced for a moment at the pledge, but at once stared in the eyes of her uninvited visitor. She looked intently, maliciously and mistrustfully. A minute passed; he even fancied something like a sneer in her eyes, as though she had already guessed everything.’<sup>334</sup> This complex struggle between avarice (betrayed by a half-glance at the item Raskolnikov has come to pawn) and mistrustfulness makes a character out of an existent who occupies only a few pages of Dostoyevsky’s novel.

Characters are usually human, or if they are not human then they are anthropomorphized.<sup>335</sup> Why are human beings the kinds of things that can be characters, whereas a house or an animal is not? Human beings are most able to manifest the depth and uniqueness necessary to a character. This is a result of a number of features, which can be summarized as the complexity of human beings compared to other organisms. By virtue of possessing language, human beings can express themselves with greater nuance than animals. Human beings take on obligations that are particular to them as individuals, realize that these obligations conflict, and attempt to resolve or avoid resolving them. The moods and emotions of human beings can be infinitely complex. They may become melancholy or feel disparaged or contemned.

Of course, we cannot deny that if human beings are more unique and more complex than other organisms, this only makes them rich subjects for a writer’s artistry and endeavor. Just because the potential is there for human beings to be deep and unique existents, not everyone who writes

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<sup>333</sup> Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 5.

<sup>334</sup> Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 69.

<sup>335</sup> Fotis Jannidis, writing in the entry on character in the *Handbook of Narratology*, specifically includes a human or human-like nature in her definition of character. Fotis Jannidis, ‘Character,’ in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn *et al* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 14.

is capable of creating great characters.<sup>336</sup> We are all familiar with novels whose populations are wooden or shallow or sadly predictable. They hardly seem distinct as individuals; we feel that the same story would result were we to switch the characters around and have them fill each others' roles. And the creation of truly memorable characters of the sort Gass has in mind is the province of writers of genius.

When I speak of complexity I am not pointing to a certain level of mental sophistication. There are characters in narratives who are not intellectually sophisticated. Examples include Lennie Small from John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Boo Radley from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Benjamin 'Benjy' Compson from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Though these characters do not have the same intellectual abilities as other characters in the narratives they populate, they are deep in other respects. Lennie is capable of knowing he has done something wrong without understanding quite what it is; Boo suffers shyness and self-doubt; Benjy has his own distinctive form of panic that stems from the insistent, hapless belief that disparate elements of the world that cannot be reconciled must somehow cohere. Each of these unsophisticated characters has his own complexity and individuality.

But if characters are defined by the possession of rich inner lives, they are by no means divorced from a social context. Though the object of a reader's interest in a character is often her inner experiences, this does not mean that a character is simply a soul without social ties. And of course there are characters whose inner lives are shaped by their place in their society. Good examples are John and David, the main characters in James Baldwin's novels *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* respectively. Their experiences as in the case of John an

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<sup>336</sup> Some writers are not interested in doing so. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan gives the example of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute. See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 29.

African-American in the USA and in the case of David a gay man in France shape their reflections. We need not go so far as Elizabeth Fowler who, in writing about character in early English literature, says that “character” is how literature expresses the social figure in its social form.<sup>337</sup> That is, we should not overlook a character’s inner, private life. However, we do need to recognize that characters are not abstracted from their social environments and therefore possess a social as well as inner existence, with the latter shaped by the former, as well as vice versa.

So when I talk about a character, I am speaking about someone with depth and individuality. Creating a character is a matter of an author’s crafting this uniqueness and making it manifest. But how does it become manifest in the context of narrative? For an answer we must turn to the virtues of narrative when it comes to the creation of character.

### 8.2.2 Character and Narrative

I want to speak about three elements in this subsection. The first and second pertain to narratives in general, while the third applies specifically to literary narratives. The first and second elements I have already raised in my earlier discussion of narrative, and my reflections on them will consequently be briefer than my discussion of the third aspect, which I am introducing for the first time. The three aspects of narratives I will examine are (a) temporality, (b) beginnings and endings, and (c) internal and external perspectives.

#### (a) Temporality

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<sup>337</sup> Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 28.

In my chapter on narrative I said that narratives are retrospective, but that they also invoke the future. Narratives make an issue of the future of the characters in the story as well as the way in which the reader will choose to live in the future or what she may or will inevitably be called upon to face. But when it comes to the creation of character, most important is the way that narrative offers up a succession of instants that allows a reader to recognize character traits and identify change.

In the course of an earlier discussion of visual art, I pointed out the tendency to use the term ‘figure’ when referring to the existents in a painting rather than the term ‘character.’ There does seem to be a difference between a figure and a character. A figure we behold trapped in a moment, whereas we are in the presence of a character for an extended period. A character is created over time, unlike the figures in a painting, which impress themselves on the viewer from within the confines of an instant.

The temporal sequence of a narrative allows a character’s traits to emerge. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan says of this process, ‘If a common denominator emerges from several aspects [of a character], it can then be generalized as a character trait, and in a similar way the various traits combine to form the character.’<sup>338</sup> Perhaps this suggests another way of putting the distinction between characters and non-characters (mere existents): characters are existents who are sufficiently exposed to a reader for her to recognize the traits that generate a character.<sup>339</sup> The predominant way in which the temporality of a novel contributes to the development of character is by allowing traits to emerge and define an individual. This is achieved through the repeated

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<sup>338</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 38.

<sup>339</sup> But even then the traits will have to be of a particular kind, suggestive of complexity and individuality.

appearance of a character in a succession of scenes. Traits can be directly ascribed to a character or they can be communicated to a reader through a character's actions, thoughts and words.<sup>340</sup>

But equally, the representation of a character involves showing how he changes over time. It is a commonplace about good writing that its characters alter during the course of a literary narrative. Hans Castorp from *The Magic Mountain* is far from the same person he was at the beginning of Mann's novel. By the end of *War and Peace*, Pierre is not the same open and warm-hearted young man he was at the book's outset. We might go further and say that part of being a character is having the ability to change and doing so in a coherent and meaningful way. The most meaningful changes are often gradual, and part of the point of a novel is to chart their progress. *Great Expectations* is an excellent example of such a narrative. Sometimes these changes are more radical and sudden, though it seems important that they are not inexplicable. An example of a sudden but not inexplicable change is the deterioration Sue Bridehead undergoes in the last chapters of Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure*, following Little Father Time's suicide and murder of Sue's children. The reason why narrative is so conducive to the creation of character is that it allows the development of character over time, part of which is the representation of change.

And of course only the possession of traits established over time allows characters to act in ways that surprise the reader. This ability on the part of characters to do the unexpected is essential to characters in literary novels. Maria DiBattista takes the ability to surprise to be the 'defining element' of literary character. She says, 'Novelistic characters in particular are notorious for defying as much as fulfilling our expectations and hopes for them. We need to acknowledge and accept...that they would not be novelistic characters if they did not possess and exercise their

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<sup>340</sup> Jannidis, 'Character,' 15.

capacity to surprise—including their capacity to surprise themselves.’<sup>341</sup> A good example is the Baron de Charlus’ rendezvous with Jupien the tailor at the beginning of Proust’s *Sodom and Gomorrah*. There has been no hint that the Baron is homosexual before this moment; everything has pointed in the other direction, though following this discovery much that was inexplicable (particularly the Baron’s outbreaks of rage) becomes understandable. We should not mistake the unexpected for the inexplicable. The unexpected is out of step with what we know of a character, but there is still an explanation for it. So the successiveness of time in a narrative not only allows a character to develop traits, but also to take a reader by surprise, which, as Battista notes, is crucial to literary characters.

However, not only temporal successiveness is important here. In the case of change and the unexpected, other aspects of the temporality of narrative become significant. The ability to look back from one point in time and bring to the reader’s attention an earlier moment when things were different makes the changes that characters have undergone more evident. A good example can be found in the last volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. After many years, the narrator meets Gilberte, his first love, and recalls a time when, while still a young man, he spied her on the Champs-Élysées with another man:

I did not think to ask her who the young man was with whom she had been walking along the Avenue des Champs-Élysées on the day when I had set out to call on her again, when I might have been reconciled with her while there was still time, that day which would perhaps have changed the whole course of my life, if I had not caught sight of those two shadowy figures strolling side by side in the dusk. If I had asked her, she would perhaps have confessed the truth, as would Albertine had she been restored to life. And indeed

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<sup>341</sup> Maria DiBattista, *Novel Characters: A Genealogy* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.



when we meet again after many years women whom we no longer love, is there not the abyss of death between them and us, quite as if they were no longer of this world, since the fact that our love exists no longer makes the people that they were or the person that we were then as good as dead. Perhaps, too, she might not have remembered, or she might have lied. In any case I was no longer interested, since my heart had changed even more than Gilberte's face.<sup>342</sup>

The narrator's recollection of an earlier time when he loved Gilberte brings to the reader's mind thoughts of the ways in which the narrator has changed since his youthful ardor for Gilberte.

It should be acknowledged that change can be represented in paintings. In a diptych or triptych, the same existents can be shown at different times, and the representations in such works seem to lie somewhere between figures and characters. Similarly, when the same individual is portrayed in several paintings, particularly over a long period of time, the individual illustrated is perhaps more like a character than a figure. Good examples would be Rembrandt's self-portraits or Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings and posters of Jane Avril. However, even in these instances, the 'characters' we encounter are thinner than a character we would encounter in even a brief, sparse narrative.<sup>343</sup>

#### (b) Selectiveness

I have already described the selection of events, particular beginnings and endings in my chapter on narrative. I want to look at the opening paragraph of Charles Dickens' novel *David*

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<sup>342</sup> Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright (New York: Random House, 2003), 6.

<sup>343</sup> We might also mention religious and historical paintings here, which often contain a narrative, but a narrative we already know. Paintings of the Crucifixion are good examples. I will come back to this idea later in the chapter and refer to specific examples.

*Copperfield* as a way of approaching selectiveness in this specific context. The lines that interest me read: ‘Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o’clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.’<sup>344</sup> We might be tempted to say that these lines show an obvious connection between narrative and character. The narrative begins with the start of David’s life. There is a natural intersection of character and narrative.

However, this is not true of narratives as a whole. The beginning of a narrative seldom coincides with the birth of the main character.<sup>345</sup> And just as the author chooses where a narrative begins and ends, she also chooses what we will know about a character. I know that Lenz went into the mountains on the twentieth of January but I do not know the date of his birth; it does not seem important. Apparently Kafka’s K came to the town in *The Castle* to survey the land, but it is never absolutely clear that this is the case; a reader always wonders about the purpose of his relocation, and that is part of the novel’s brilliance. Just as in the narrative an author chooses where to begin, so too when it comes to a character she chooses how much a reader will be told.

And of course the same point I have already made about narratives as a whole also applies to characters. Just as there is no primitive narrative or single story that can be told about a particular set of events, so too there is no rule about where to begin and where to end. We could imagine *David Copperfield* beginning somewhere else than with the main character’s birth and a reader’s sense of who he is as a character not being remarkably different. And we could say the same of

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<sup>344</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (Bath: The Bath Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>345</sup> Though more frequently they end with his death.

other narratives, though we should not deny that the circumstances in which a reader meets a character can make a lasting impression on her opinion of him.

But does this mean that an author's choice of what we learn about a character is arbitrary? Often the information we receive about a character is influenced by concerns about plot, theme, and aesthetic effect—whatever the author is trying to accomplish in the novel. But if asked for a general guide I would look back to the first line of the opening paragraph of *David Copperfield*.<sup>346</sup> The question of whether a character is to be the hero of his life seems like one that guides many narratives. J.M. Reibetanz takes it to be perhaps the central issue of *David Copperfield*. He argues that, 'From the very start, Dickens separates David's role as central character and narrator of the novel from the concept of the hero. The problem, then, is whether David unites them in the end.'<sup>347</sup> In writing on the same novel, Bert G. Hornback describes this question of heroism as a 'difficult question' because it is one we seldom ask ourselves. 'I expect to be the hero of my life—automatically.'<sup>348</sup> Which, of course, makes the question all the more meaningful when we do ask it.

Of course, this notion of a hero has more than one sense. Mieke Bal identifies several ways in which a hero, as a literary artifact, may be distinguished from other characters who are not heroes—provision of comprehensive information, frequent occurrence, independence and so on—but her notion of a hero seems to apply more to the question of how to identify the main

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<sup>346</sup> Discussion of this novel in this dissertation does not seem inappropriate given its thematic concerns. Beth F. Herst says that, 'The adult David's experience is, in essence, a dramatization of the difficulty of overcoming [his] childhood inheritance in order to achieve a full, and integrated, selfhood.' See Beth F. Herst, 'David Copperfield and the Emergence of the Homeless Hero,' in *The Hero's Journey*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 42

<sup>347</sup> J.M. Reibetanz, 'Villain, Victim, and Hero: Structure and Theme in *David Copperfield*,' in *The Dalhousie Review* 59 (1979): 328.

<sup>348</sup> Bert G. Hornback, *'The Hero of My Life': Essays on Dickens* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 16

character in a novel.<sup>349</sup> This does not seem to encapsulate what Dickens has David wonder about his life. Bal goes on to suggest that heroism is a matter of being an ‘active’ and ‘successful’ person.<sup>350</sup> This strikes me as more correct, but this notion of success seems ambiguous.

In some narratives, the hero accomplishes an exemplary deed. In Theodor Storm’s novella *The White Horse Rider*, Hauke is faced with a series of challenges, including the opposition of the town in which he lives, as he labors to ensure that the population is protected from flooding. Then, when despite his efforts the town is ultimately threatened with catastrophe, he chooses to sacrifice himself in hope of saving the town. This is an example of one form of heroism. But heroism can also be construed more modestly, perhaps in moral terms that are not so obviously supererogatory. An example would be Hamsun’s *Hunger* where the main character is faced with the question of whether he can live up to the moral standards he sets for himself, in spite of his indigence. In instances like this, the question of whether the main character will display good conduct is posed, and what we learn of the character is shaped by the steps the author takes in answering it.

Then again, success need not be moral. For example, it may be romantic, artistic, or even philosophical. There are any number of literary romances that end with the marriage of two characters who are romantically involved. Dorothea’s marriage to Ladislaw at the end of *Middlemarch* is one example. And heroism is occasionally derived from an individual’s brilliant vision of success rather than its actual attainment. Literary narratives often chart determined efforts in pursuit of a goal that the hero ultimately fails to reach. Claude Lantier in Zola’s *The Masterpiece* aspires to artistic greatness but falls short of it in the end.

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<sup>349</sup> Bal, *Narratology*, 133.

<sup>350</sup> Bal, *Narratology*, 133.

But even if what counts as being successful will change depending on the work, it is at least clear that some characters are not heroes but villains, even if many villains are such by virtue of their pursuing a mistaken conception of the good. So when it comes to these existents, the question is not whether they are the heroes of their lives but rather how great their wickedness will grow before they see their errors. I take Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment* to be this kind of villain.<sup>351</sup> Of course, many villains—willful villains, such as the wicked characters in fairytales—are not characters in the sense that I have used the term, but are human existents because they lack individuality and complexity.

But just as interesting as these characters whose story is determined by whether or not they are to be the heroes of their lives, are those characters for whom the question of heroism or villainy does not arise or is harder to answer. Such characters are staples of works of modernist literature, in which the question is not so much whether life will offer the opportunity for heroism but whether life's banalities and frustrations can even be suspended, let alone overcome. Characters in novels such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* are good examples.

But even in these cases, the question of the heroism or villainy of characters still stands, even if an affirmative answer to whether they are heroes might seem petty compared to the kind of heroism displayed by a character like Hauke. In *To the Lighthouse*, the failure to be a hero is represented in Mr Ramsay's life by the fact that he never became a great philosopher. Successful heroism emerges in Lily Brisco's resistance to Mr Ramsay's expectation that she will show him sympathy and praise him. In *Ulysses*, the failure to be a hero is represented by Bloom's various

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<sup>351</sup> Perhaps it is only because I do not care much for the novel that I call Raskolnikov a villain. I apply this phrase to him because his crime is so egregious and his justification for it so weak that it is unequivocally a wicked act, too wicked to let him remain a mere anti-hero.

failings and disappointments on which he reflects throughout the novel, perhaps chief among which are his wife's affair with Blazes Boylan and the death of his son Rudy. Broadly speaking, in modernist works, then, it is perhaps the negative rather than the positive answer to the question of whether someone is to be a hero in their own life that influences what we learn of a character and what we do not. Such characters probably belong under the heading of antiheroes.

The resolution of the question of whether a character is to be the hero of his life has consequences for the entire narrative. If the question of heroism is posed from the outset—though seldom as explicitly as in *David Copperfield*—then the attempt to answer it will have consequences for which events arise in the middle of the narrative. Equally, it will shape the end of the narrative insofar as it is here that the heroism of a character will finally be affirmed or denied.

But nothing is set in stone here. An author chooses to communicate the heroism of a particular character through the selection of certain events; she might have achieved the same end by preferring others. There is still no primitive account of a character to which to refer. And even if we say that the question of whether someone is a hero influences what we learn of a character, it is at best a guiding principle. A literary narrative is the answer to questions other than whether this or that character is a hero. There are thematic and aesthetic purposes to be served in a narrative; it does not all come down to character.

### (c) Inner and External Worlds

The third way in which character is manifested pertains to literary narratives in particular.

Though I have hitherto been drawing out qualities of narrative in general, there is one quality unique to literary narrative that I want to consider. This is the ability of literary narrative not only

to show how an existent looks from the outside and report her actions, but to give access to her thoughts and feelings. I call this the ability of literary narratives to communicate both an inner and external worlds.

We must not confuse this distinction with two others. It is not the same as the fact that a story may be told in either the first person or the third person. Both of these narrative viewpoints are capable of describing the inner life of a character and her actions. A first person narrative may be more amenable to presenting a character's inner life. A character's thoughts are reported to the reader in her own words, so to speak. But a first person narrator can still talk about outer world, even if her reflections are always colored by a character's own relation to what is being described. An example might be the long description of the sleeping Albertine from *The Captive*. And not all first person narrators are the subjects of the stories they tell. A good example is the mysterious narrator in Iris Murdoch's novel *The Philosopher's Pupil*. Conversely, a third person narrator, writing with a god's-eye view, may be better placed to describe the external world. However, this presents no obstacle to communicating a character's inner life, even if these thoughts and feelings are not reported in the character's own words.

A related—but again distinct—concept is the notion of focalization, the 'restriction or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters, or other, more hypothetical, entities in the world.'<sup>352</sup> The term focalization is roughly synonymous with terms like 'perspective' and 'point of view.'<sup>353</sup> Depending on the identity of the narrator (and whether the narration is first or third person) and based on the degree of epistemic access of the narrator, more or less information will be communicated in the narrative.

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<sup>352</sup> Burkhard Niederhoff, 'Focalization,' in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn *et al* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 115.

<sup>353</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 71.

A first person narrative will restrict the information communicated to what that the character can know. A narrative in the third person may have no such limits; the reader may learn more than it is possible for any one person to know. Alternatively, a narrative in the third person may focus on one character and mediate the world through her experiences, rather than adopting a completely abstracted perspective.

My reason for not confining myself to discussion of focalization here is because, as the word implies, it is concerned with the narrowing of the information presented in a narrative. I am interested more in the expansiveness of the possibilities narrative offers. Moreover, I am less concerned with knowledge and information, the explicit concerns of focalization, than with an author's choice whether to depict actions in the world or the fluctuations of a character's mental and emotional life. Finally, I am concerned with the content of a narrative and anxious to avoid the visual connotations associated with even a term like focalization (as opposed to perspective or point of view).

With these distinctions in mind, an example will illustrate what I mean by inner and external worlds. In Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* we read of one of the main female characters, Kitty Shcherbatskaya:

She went to the furthest end of the little drawing-room and sank into a low chair. Her light, transparent, skirts rose like a cloud about her slender waist; one bare, thin, soft, girlish arm, hanging listlessly, was lost in the folds of her pink tunic; in the other she held her fan, and with rapid, short strokes fanned her burning face. But while she looked like a butterfly



clinging to a blade of grass, and just about to open its rainbow wings for fresh flight, her heart ached with a horrible despair.<sup>354</sup>

This excerpt from one of Western literature's great novels exemplifies the special capacity of literature to communicate, if not simultaneously, at least close to it, not only a character's appearance and the actions she takes but also the inner world—thoughts, feelings and emotions—that is so important in giving a character depth and making her unique. Since the full depths of a person are only fathomed by surveying not merely what she does but her inner life—what she thinks and feels—this ability of literature to communicate both the inner and external worlds is crucial when it comes to creating a character.

It might be objected that literature is not the only form of narrative that is capable of achieving this. We can glean some insight into a person's thoughts in films through close-ups or voice-overs that explain what a character is thinking. We understand someone's thoughts in a play by Shakespeare through the soliloquies. The communication of mental and emotional life is possible in visual arts in painting and sculpture. We cannot deny that sculptures by Auguste Rodin such as *Venus and Psyche* and *Orpheus and Eurydice* give insight into the inner world of their subjects. However, if these art forms can indeed offer this access, it is not as rich and nuanced as it is in literary narratives. A literary narrative can offer a character's thoughts at a length that could not be supported by a film and which is impossible in painting and sculpture.

A second objection might be that it is not always the case that literary narratives provide access to a character's inner world. For instance Tom McCarthy's novel *C* leaves the reader ignorant of the emotional life of the protagonist. Nussbaum gives another example in the form of Theodor

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<sup>354</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1966), 90-91.

Fontane's novel *Der Stechlin*, of which she says, 'We do not have access to [*Der Stechlin*'s] characters inside their heads, so to speak. Fontane's austere experiment denies us this voyeuristic sort of drama, as surely as it denies us plot. The characters tell us exactly what they tell one another, and no more.'<sup>355</sup> However, even if some literary narratives do not represent both inner and external worlds, this does not mean that narrative as such fails to present us with this possibility. The fact that some authors in some literary works choose not to explore this opportunity does not mean that it ceases to be among the capacities of literary narratives.

This ability to present both inner and outer worlds seems at first glance to presuppose the presence of a god-like, omniscient narrator. *Anna Karenina* is a good example of a narrative in which the narrator can as it were see inside the mind of all of his characters. The most famous example is Anna's suicide at the train station towards the end of the novel.

In contrast, a fine example of a narrative whose narrator is not omniscient is Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. In this novel, the fact that the narrator just does not and cannot know what is 'really' happening—either in the events he discusses or the minds of the people in the story he is telling—is key to the story's famous sadness. An example comes from the closing pages of the novel. The narrator says, 'Anyhow, I don't know whether, at this point, Nancy Rufford loved Edward Ashburnham. I don't know whether she even loved him when, on getting, at Aden, the news of his suicide she went mad. Because that may just as well have been for the sake of Leonora as for the sake of Edward. Or it may have been for the sake of both of them. I don't know. I know nothing. I am very tired.'<sup>356</sup> The fact that the narrator of *The Good Soldier* is a

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<sup>355</sup> Martha Nussbaum, 'A novel in Which Nothing Happens: Fontane's *Der Stechlin* and Literary Friendship,' in *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, ed. Alice Crary (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 333.

<sup>356</sup> Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 282.

character in the story means that of course he does not possess insight into the thoughts of the other characters; most of the time it seems that he cannot even make a good guess. Part of this ignorance can be put down to the narrator's listless, somewhat oblivious nature. But of course it is part of the human condition never to know what others are thinking.

However, even in a narrative in which the lack of insight into others' thoughts is so manifest and crucial a part of emotional effect on the reader as *The Good Soldier*, a reader still accesses an inner world because we are given access to the thoughts and emotions of the narrator of the story. These at least are not hidden from us. Therefore, the internal perspective is still represented even in narratives that lack a god's eye view.

A more challenging objection comes in the form of the unreliable narrator. We encounter such unreliability in *The Good Soldier* in the form of the various inconsistencies and absent explanations that occur in the narrative. However, there are perhaps more notorious instances of unreliable narrators, ones who are not merely ignorant, but rather deceptive. The one I want to focus on is Humbert Humbert from *Lolita*. Like *The Good Soldier*, Nabokov's novel is narrated in the first person. However, whereas in Ford's work the question that arises with respect to the narrator is how much he knows, when it comes to Humbert Humbert the issue is whether we can believe him. The problem largely arises with respect to our final verdict on Humbert as a character. Max F. Schulz argues that, 'Humbert's obsession with nymphets, which entralls him in bestiality, has its paradigm in the fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast*. And just as love breaks the spell cast upon Beast, transforming him back into Prince, so Humbert's love for Lolita helps him shed his nympholepsy and allow the redeemed human to emerge.'<sup>357</sup> One of the questions of

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<sup>357</sup> Max F. Schulz, 'Characters (Contra Characterization) in the Contemporary Novel,' in *The Theory of the Novel: New Essays*, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 146.

the novel is whether we accept that Humbert has been redeemed by its end. Though he is unquestionably an appalling person, should we moderate our opinion of him on the basis of what seems like regret for having behaved despicably? Should we take his expressions of remorse at face value, or should we be skeptical of their sincerity as a result of Humbert's past lies and deceptions?

It is not my purpose to resolve these questions here. Nor do I want to say whether we should always believe or be suspicious of narrators; the question has to be resolved case by case. I do want to say that while unreliable narration may seem like a form of concealment, constitutive of a refusal on the part of the author to allow the reader access to the narrator's internal world, even statements on the part of narrators who we believe to be unreliable can offer such access.

Turning back to the example of Humbert, if we judge his expression of remorse for having harmed Lolita to be untrue, then our reflections do not stop there. Rather, we imagine what must be leading Humbert to pretend that he loves Lolita. In this way we acquire our own insight into who he is. We participate in creating the inner life of the character. And I think that this reflective and imaginative process is one we undertake with respect to all unreliable narrators that we find sufficiently interesting to justify the effort. An unreliable narrator therefore still gives us insight into a character's inner life, but it is insight that the reader is as responsible as the writer for developing.

### *8.3 Autobiographical Writing and Character*

Thus far, I have been discussing fiction. But what about when the narrative is populated by real people or characters based on real people? In particular, what happens when the main character

is the author of the work or based on the author?<sup>358</sup> Of course, in the first instance I am talking about autobiographies and in the second autobiographical novels. A classic example of the former is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. At the beginning of this book, Rousseau declares that, 'I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I portray shall be myself.'<sup>359</sup> A classic example of the latter is Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. In this novel, the characters, such as the Baron de Charlus and Robert de Saint-Loup are based on people whom Proust knew and whose narrator seems to share at least a first name with the author. The main character is also an aspiring author who shares Proust's love of art and music.<sup>360</sup>

Given that the focus of this dissertation has from the beginning been self-narratives, it is precisely autobiographies and autobiographical fictions that are of most interest. But the first question that arises is whether the existents that populate these narratives can really be called characters if they are meant to be real people or are at least based on real people. I think it is easiest to respond to this question in the affirmative in the case of narratives that contain existents that are based on actual people. It seems difficult to deny that the existents that populate an autobiographical novel are characters. To insist that the Baron de Charlus is not a character, even though he is based on the Comte Robert de Montesquiou, seems odd. The reason it is easy to say that the Baron de Charlus is a character is because even if he is based on another person, as a fictional entity he is independent from him.

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<sup>358</sup> I appreciate that I have used examples from *In Search of Lost Time* already in this dissertation. But I have not looked at the novel from this perspective.

<sup>359</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J.M. Cohen (New York: Penguin, 1953), 17.

<sup>360</sup> The resemblance of Marcel Proust to the 'Marcel' of the novel lies largely in their shared habit of visiting the salons of Paris and their shared love of music and literature. There are difference, most notorious among which is probably Proust's homosexuality and Marcel's heterosexuality and what we would today probably regard as homophobia.

In contrast, it is difficult to respond in the same way in the case of autobiographies, that is narratives whose existents are real people. It does not seem immediately obvious that Jean-Jacques Rousseau from *The Confessions* is a character. The existent in the book is meant to be the same person as the author of the book—they are connected by the personal pronoun ‘I.’ What makes it difficult to say that an existent in an autobiography might be a character is that there is purportedly nothing fictional in her to distinguish them from the person who actually exists.

This is shown more clearly by the absence of any corresponding difficulty when it comes to real people who are characters in fictional works. It seems straightforward that the Niccolo Machiavelli who occurs in George Eliot’s novel *Romola* is a character because the actions Niccolo Machiavelli performs in the novel include interactions with fictional characters, which necessarily could not have occurred in real life, meaning that the Niccolo Machiavelli in *Romola* and the Niccolo Machiavelli who is not in *Romola*, while they may have some aspects in common, are not the same people. Similarly, it is easy to call the Martin Amis who occurs in *Money: A Suicide Note* a character because though there is a Martin Amis who wrote *Money: A Suicide Note* and who might share many of the same features as the Martin Amis in the novel, they are not the same people because the author of the novel *Money: A Suicide Note* did not undertake the fictional actions that the Martin Amis in the novel undertakes.

What distinguishes an existent it is easy to call a character from an existent it is difficult to call a character therefore seems to be their fictionality. Characters are fictional whereas existents who are not characters are real. However, this does not seem right given the way in which I have used the term character in this chapter. One reason is that the distinction just given leaves out of account the difference between the murder victim of the crime thriller and Alyona Ivanovna from

*Crime and Punishment*. I gave several quotations that showed why we should think of her as a character and as more than a mere existent.

But is fictionality the only relevant difference here? Is there any possibility of confusing Jean-Jacques Rousseau, living, breathing French philosopher, with the existent we meet in the *Confessions*? Of course not. The first is a human being while the second is a textual being. They are unique ‘individuals,’ even if there is a strong resemblance between them. And this resemblance is only natural. After all, the textual being is a representation in words of the living, breathing person. But it is only a representation, and a representation is always different from the original. So we are justified in speaking of even the existents in autobiographies as characters. Fictionality is not a criterion that separates characters from non-characters.

In the last chapter, I said that Hal is concerned with being beheld, at least before disenchantment sets in. This is true both when he is the dissolute disciple of Falstaff at Eastcheap and when he is Henry V, King of England. Hal is always aware that he is being perceived. And I said that part of Hal’s theatricality is the creation of a character. He is doing much the same thing that a novelist does in creating the characters who populate his narrative, namely presenting someone who is unique and deep to an audience.

The same is true of an author when he is writing his autobiography. He always knows that he is presenting his subject (himself) to his audience. At least, this seems to be true: it hardly seems likely that someone would write an autobiography in the hope that no one will read it.<sup>361</sup> We get a sense of this in Rousseau’s exemplary biography *The Confessions*. Whenever Rousseau returns to his motivation for writing his autobiography, he always comes back to his wish for his

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<sup>361</sup> As opposed to keeping a journal, say.

audience to be able to form an opinion about him based on the truth. He goes so far as to say at the beginning of his autobiography that he will produce it in order to justify himself at the final judgment.<sup>362</sup> The fact that he is being beheld and judged by an audience always seems uppermost in his mind. Two quotations stand out. First:

Since I have undertaken to reveal myself absolutely to the public, nothing about me must remain hidden or obscure. I must remain incessantly beneath his gaze, so that he may follow me in all the extravagance of my heart and into the least corner of my life. Indeed, he must never lose sight of me for a single instant, for if he finds the slightest gap in my story, the smallest hiatus, he may wonder what I was doing at that moment and accuse me of refusing to tell the whole truth.<sup>363</sup>

And second:

I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader's eye, and for that purpose I am trying to present it from all points of view, to show it in all lights, and to contrive that none of its movements shall escape his notice, so that he may judge for himself of the principle which has produced them.<sup>364</sup>

In the *Confessions*, Rousseau is conscious of being beheld. And the desire for his audience to form a judgment on him is his central motivation in writing his autobiography.

So three processes that on the face of it look very different all turn out to be instances of the same thing. The literary novelist populating his work, Hal pretending to be a dissolute youth, the autobiographer penning his life-story—all three are examples of the creation of a character. And

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<sup>362</sup> Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 17.

<sup>363</sup> Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 65.

<sup>364</sup> Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 69.



obviously, given my focus on the role of narratives in selfhood, the last of these three interests me most. In writing an autobiography, an author creates a character—one based on himself. But what are the consequences of this conclusion for our thinking about the role that narratives play in selfhood?

Before answering this question, we should ask whether there are really no differences between the creation of a character in a novel and the writing of an autobiography. In the introduction to *Speed* by William S. Burroughs, Jennie Skerl asks whether the work should be considered fictional or a piece of Autobiography. She writes, ‘Perhaps it can be considered a work of fiction because of its unity: the work focuses on one character, one point of view, one action with a definitive beginning, middle, and end. Further, the first-person narrator indulges in little self-examination and rarely uses his own name, treating himself more like a character than an autobiographer’s self.’<sup>365</sup> Is there a distinction to be made between these two activities, the creation of a literary character and the writing of an autobiography?

If there is a difference then I would argue that it is not of the kind that Skerl notes. It is not so much a matter of structure as emphasis, and that the difference is far from consistent. In an autobiography it is typically the life of the subject that is of interest. Everything is structured around them. Consequently, they tend to be predominantly introspective and reflective. On the other hand, in many novels even the main character fits into a plot in which other characters are involved. So even the main character is not the center of attention all the time. However, this difference is not universal. Many of the novels to which I have referred in this dissertation are almost solely focused on the main character. This includes *In Search of Lost Time*, *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, and *Lolita*. Conversely, while always centering on an author’s

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<sup>365</sup> Jennie Skerl, introduction to *Speed*, by William Burroughs Jr. (Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1984), vii.

experiences, some autobiographies are very much concerned with the events in which the author was involved. War memoirs would be good examples of this class of writings.

#### *8.4 Literary Character and Self-Theatricalization*

Here I will argue that creating a character in a literary sense is a form of self-theatricalization. When we participate in the process in which Rousseau is involved in writing *The Confessions*, or the process in which Proust involved himself in writing *In Search of Lost Time*, we create a character. At the same time, we put ourselves before an audience. In narrating our lives we make ourselves something to be beheld.

Immediately, two objections present themselves, both pertaining to the idea that autobiographical writing involves presenting ourselves to an audience. First, the sense of there being an audience to an autobiography or autobiographical novel is spurious since just because a narrative is composed does not mean it will ever be read. Second, while a narrative may be intended for an audience, its author has no sense of who will make up the actual audience.

We can answer these objections by saying more about the role of an audience when it comes to self-theatricalization. The function of the audience is not to recognize or ratify the author's identity. The conviction that the narrative is being composed for someone provides the very impetus required for the composition of a narrative. And it *is* being composed for someone: 'Nothing the writer does can be finally understood in isolation from his making it all accessible to someone else—his peers, himself as an imagined reader, his audience.'<sup>366</sup> More importantly, the awareness of a potential audience guides the creative process; it helps the author shape the

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<sup>366</sup> Wayne Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 397.

narrative. If a narrative is composed for someone, then the author must always ask herself whether the narrative will be understood, whether some aspect might be made more perspicuous, and whether another might be irrelevant.

Naturally, this is hard to work out alone. What seems obvious to the author may be anything but. And this is why narrating a life is an intersubjective process. The author is in a position of authority because theirs is the life being narrated, but this authority is rivaled by the authority of the person who can say that elements of the narrative cannot be understood, that they are vague or clumsy or ineffective. Thus the role of a literary editor or even a confidante, of whose productive influence on a narrative I spoke in my chapter on the narrative self, reemerges as significant at this point.

Does this make autobiographical writing solipsistic? If we could be content to say that autobiographies or autobiographical novels are at heart meant for no one beyond their authors, then I think this would be true. But the aspirations of autobiographical writing are larger than this. Writing an autobiography is not the same as keeping a journal. And part of what differentiates it from keeping a journal is its narrative structure. Narrative is a public literary form that responds to tradition and conventions and which has the virtue of accessibility, at least in principle.<sup>367</sup>

So we can respond to the first objection by saying that even if an autobiography is never read, this is unimportant because what matters is the intention on the part of the author that it be read. This provides a response to the second objection. What matters is not that the audience is

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<sup>367</sup> I mean by this that there are narratives that are difficult to read. But in these instances a reader often clings to the narrative form as a means of finding his way through a work.

composed of particular individuals, but that there exists someone whom an author can solicit as an audience and to whom he can present himself.

But if this makes the role that audience plays in the process of narrating somewhat clearer, it gives rise to another objection. Is presenting oneself to an audience an artificial process? This objection derives from Heinrich von Kleist's essay 'The Puppet Theater.' Kleist describes a beautiful young man who becomes aware that on assuming a certain pose he resembles a famous Greek statue. The youth notices the resemblance quite by accident, but when he tries to reproduce the pose that had awakened the resemblance finds it impossible. Kleist goes on:

From that day, as though from that very moment, an inconceivable transformation began in that young man. He would stand whole days before the mirror; one charm after another fell from him. An invisible and incomprehensible force, like an iron net, seemed to spread over the free play of his gestures, and when one year had passed not a trace could be detected of that sweetness which had once so delighted the sight of all who surrounded him.<sup>368</sup>

In this excerpt, Kleist suggests that grace is only possible absent an awareness that one is being observed. As soon as the youth realizes that he is beautiful he loses the obliviousness necessary for grace and becomes clumsy. Might not the same be true of being beheld in the case of narrating? Might self-narration not lead to artificiality? This seems like a return to the view of theatricality that was expressed in Michael Fried's discussion of Diderot's art criticism. The mannered and fake style of performance that Diderot found so objectionable in actors in the French theater seemed to result from their giving too much importance to their being before an audience.

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<sup>368</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, 'The Puppet Theater,' in *An Abyss Deep Enough: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist with a Selection of Essays and Anecdotes*, ed. and trans. Philip B. Miller (New York: Dutton, 1982), 215.

Obviously, just as readers will find a mannered or excessive narrative displeasing, so too they will find a false or embellished narrative unpleasant. A reader will think less of the author of an autobiography who falsifies information about her life as she endeavors to make herself appear more accomplished than she really is. However, we need to think not merely of how an audience responds to the narrative but how the process of composition figures in the life of the author who creates it. And from this perspective, even an embellished narrative that contains false information counts as a process of self-theatricalization. The point is that the author creates a character out of herself. Neither the failure of what results from this process to be entirely faithful to life nor its seeming mannered subvert the process of self-theatricalization.

The reason is as follows. I have not argued that the narrative we come up tells us who we are. I have claimed that the process in which we engage when we formulate a narrative is essential to being a self. It involves the kind of close attention and interest in ourselves that prevents us from becoming the sort of empty shell of a person that I insisted could not count as a self.

And it seems as well not to depend on the completed narrative for selfhood. First, narratives often go uncompleted. We can attempt to write an account of our lives only for the process to be interrupted. Second, a narrative is always ripe to be revised down the line. Even when an autobiography is completed, later events may prompt us to take a second look at it. The passage of time and the increasing maturity and sense of perspective that come with age will lead us to look differently on what we believed we understood. For these reasons, to hang everything on the actual completion of a narrative seems like a mistake.

So the narrative at which we eventually arrive need not be complete. What is important is that we reflect on ourselves and take account of who we are. But more importantly, the account we come

up with need not be strictly true to life. This is the case even when it seems as though in presenting a false account of my life I am among those being deceived. All that matters is that I am turning myself into someone to be beheld. Very often the cause of my dissimulation is my awareness of being beheld and the fear and anxiety that this realization provokes. But apprehensiveness and shame and anxiety are all signs that we matter to ourselves in the way required for selfhood.

Indeed, it seems only right to expect falsification in this process, or at least to allow for it. How else should we understand that mannered style to which Fried has Diderot objecting than as a kind of falsification, in which the humble is exaggerated and the simple made baroque? If in writing my autobiography I exaggerate elements of myself for the sake of impressing a reader or making sure that she does not fail to see some part of me, then I am still involved in theatricalizing myself. Indeed, this seems like a paradigmatic instance of self-theatricalization.

But what about the inverse situation? Rather than embellishing or exaggerating an element of my life, might I not choose to diminish its importance or omit it? Can I really be said to be theatricalizing myself for a beholder if I deliberately prevent that beholder from learning something about me? Again, the way to respond to this objection is to reiterate that self-theatricalization is the awareness of being beheld. Turning myself into a character might involve disguising details of life that I am uncomfortable with, or omitting them altogether. The important thing is that I confine these details to the shadows because they matter to me, not because I am blasé about them or think them trivial.

But what about the incorporation of false details into my autobiography? This seems like the most egregious form of deception that might arise when composing a self-narrative. Yet this

should not defeat our willingness to speak of the composition of an autobiography as a form of self-theatricalization. There are two stages to my response to this objection. First, because the self-narrative at which I arrive is not constitutive of who I am, the inclusion of an event that did not actually occur in my life in my self-narrative does not mean that I am that person, the one with that event in his life. Second, self-theatricalization involves writing with the idea that I will be contemplated by an audience. It does not seem obvious how the incorporation of false details into my self-narrative is in conflict with this process.

Of course, some versions of this incorporation of false details into my autobiography will seem intolerable and not conducive to self-theatricalization. There has to be a 'tipping point' at which a piece of writing ceases to be non-fiction and becomes fiction, a point at which it is my life that is described in the autobiography. Similarly, there is a point at which an autobiographical novel ceases to be that. A narrative in which none of the events described correspond to my own life ceases to be autobiographical. It does not touch me in the same way. I am not troubled by whether to put something on show or whether to conceal it. But so long as the author can compose a narrative with the idea that they are being beheld by an audience in mind, the process remains a form of self-theatricalization.

There is still a further objection to what I have said. It concerns my ambivalence when it comes to autobiographies and autobiographical fictions. I have argued that both of these literary genres should be regarded as forms of self-theatricalization. But what justifies the inclusion of even narratives that do not purport to be non-fiction among instances of self-theatricalization?

The answer comes back to the notion that my self-narrative does not define who I am. In composing a self-narrative I acknowledge myself. The process of writing an autobiographical

novel must contain reflection on which events from my life to include and which to omit, which to falsify and which to represent as they are. It must include asking and answering the question of which people from my life to incorporate into the story, which to omit, which to represent faithfully and which to distort. Some of my thoughts and passions will make their way into the novel; others I will exclude. And these decisions will be governed not simply by the economy of the narrative, the need or desire for a coherent plot, but what I feel I can admit to others and what I feel compelled to conceal. Do I want to seem the hero of my life, or to become its villain? And perhaps the decision to write an autobiographical novel rather than an autobiography might stem from the desire to cover up rather than reveal details about myself. Cavell, whose views on autobiography I will turn to in a moment, says, ‘Trying to fall asleep last night I realized that had I wished to construct an autobiography in which to disperse the bulk of the terrible things I know about myself, and the shameful things I have seen in others, I would have tried writing novels in which to disguise them.’<sup>369</sup> Cavell is enigmatic here, but he seems to suggest that writing a novel would offer the opportunity of concealing who he is. Does this perspective on autobiographical novels change things when it comes to self-theatricalization?

I do not think it does. The crucial point is that self-theatricalization always involves being beheld. What counts is not that I am putting on display every detail about myself, but that I am aware of falling under the attention of an audience. Even if the narrative that is produced in the form of a fictional autobiography contains a protagonist who bears at best a slender resemblance to me, I am still approaching myself with the thought that someone will see what I am doing. This is enough to justify speaking of self-theatricalization.

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<sup>369</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 5.



## 8.5 Cavell's Autobiographical Writings

I now want to turn to Cavell's view of autobiography. My reasons are twofold. First, the prominence of Cavell in this dissertation suggests that I pay attention to his own ideas on autobiography. Second, the method he adopts in his autobiographical writings seem at first glance to form a counterexample to the view of autobiography I have given.

Cavell presents his ideas on autobiography in the semi-autobiographical *A Pitch of Philosophy*, a collection of essays delivered as the Jerusalem-Harvard lectures. In his view, autobiography has a twofold philosophical purpose. The first is somewhat idiosyncratic. Part of the motivation behind *A Pitch of Philosophy* is to reconsider ideas that have preoccupied him during the course of writing other books. He says early on, 'I feel the need to recount what I have so far written, to add it up again—as if in the very achievements in which I take some pride I have kept things unsaid unnecessarily, which hence press to be said.'<sup>370</sup> The second is more broadly applicable to philosophy as a whole. Cavell argues that, 'The philosophical dimension of autobiography is that the human is representative, say imitative, that each life is exemplary of all, a parable of each; that is humanity's commonness, which is internal to its endless denials of commonness.'<sup>371</sup> So while the purpose of autobiography may seem purely personal, at least in the case of *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Cavell suggests that it may have broader applications. As he sees it, each life contains a lesson for all.

Cavell has also written an autobiography called *Little Did I Know*. This is a narrative account of his life. It is in this text that we find Cavell's most significant discussion of autobiography. Its

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<sup>370</sup> Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>371</sup> Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 11.

importance lies first in Cavell's distinctive understanding of the goal of his autobiography, and second in his adoption of a method at the beginning of his autobiography that seems at odds with Rousseau's approach.

When it comes to the goal of his autobiography, Cavell resists the notion of its having a goal. He downplays its directedness. He speaks of autobiographies as typically 'leading fairly directly to death,' an outcome he wishes to avoid.<sup>372</sup> Life's convergence upon death conceals its singularity. He takes another approach when it comes to his self-narrative. 'What interests me is to see how what Freud calls the detours on the human path to death—accidents avoided or embraced, strangers taken to heart or rejected, talents imposed or transfigured, malice insufficiently rebuked, love inadequately achieved, mark our for me recognizable efforts to achieve my own death.'<sup>373</sup> So if death still preoccupies him in his autobiography, he pursues it not directly, but in a roundabout way. Choosing detours over a direct path, he emphasizes what we might call, using words that arises frequently in Cavell's work, the 'everyday' or the 'ordinary.'<sup>374</sup>

If this seems a curious goal, then no less curious is the method Cavell adopts in pursuit of it. This involves separating sections of his autobiography according to the date of their composition. As Cavell explains in a long passage:

In my case the experiment of calling upon a steady companionship of philosophy in telling my life involved a decision, or it was coming accidentally upon the simple thought, to begin entries of memories by dating myself on each day of writing (not however on consciously doubling back for the purpose of editing or elaborating an entry), allowing me

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<sup>372</sup> Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 4.

<sup>373</sup> Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 4.

<sup>374</sup> Cavell's uses of these words are too many to mention, but it might be worth mentioning the title of one of Cavell's books '*In Quest of the Ordinary*' as evidence for the focus he places on the ordinary and everyday.

to follow a double time scheme, so that I can accept an invitation in any present from or to any past, as memory serves and demands to be served, that seems to have freed me to press onward with my necessity to find an account of myself without denying that I may be at a loss as to who it is that at any time, varying no doubt with varying times, to whom or for whom I am writing.<sup>375</sup>

It is somewhat difficult to divine the meaning of this excerpt. But Cavell seems to be explaining his decision to separate the entries in his autobiography as the result of the desire to write freely. This seems like another instance of recoiling from directedness. Through taking this method, Cavell can ‘accept an invitation’ from any time, responding to the promptings of memory rather than pursue a fitting conclusion for his narrative. However, it also allows him to disavow the unity that a reader might expect to find in an autobiography. In what is again a somewhat lengthy quotation, Cavell describes the brokenness that will be manifest in his self-narrative:

This presuppositional agreement with myself to compose by means of dated entries (with an underlying expectation of maintaining an overall temporal directedness in the material depicted, however unsynchronized as it were with the times of depiction) brings attention back regularly to the fact that the most I can expect to provide will be excerpts from a life—so that I can finesse the question of beginnings by repeatedly bringing a day’s or an hour’s writing to a close without anticipating when a further time for beginning, of inspiration or of opportunity, will present itself.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 8-9. This quotation and indeed ones that follow will be extensive, but this is unavoidable due to the somewhat overly verbose nature of Cavell’s autobiography.

<sup>376</sup> Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 9.

By using the phrase ‘excerpts from a life’—the subtitle for his autobiography—Cavell emphasizes the fact that he will offer at best segments of himself and never the complete story. And this betrays the Rousseauian aspiration when it comes to an autobiography—the desire to present an entire self to a reader. Rousseau attempts to paint a portrait of himself that is true to nature. Cavell considers this an impossible and undesirable task. Does this mean that Cavell’s approach to autobiography undermines my arguments?

About sixty pages into his autobiography, Cavell reevaluates his method. The most interesting comment reads as follows:

Noting the date of the present antichronological entry is meant not only to give me the freedom to explore various degrees of preparation in allowing the story or stories to continue, but is also meant, as my overall progress in my depicted age is consistently reaching that of high school, to register that the ratio of memory to expression, or its economy, is changing. Memories, having on the whole reached my twelfth year, are becoming less mysterious in their presentation, and the impulse is less to decipher the surroundings of their isolated occurrence than to follow links between events that I feel I can in principle tell infinitely, perhaps to the point of extinction.<sup>377</sup>

This suggests that Cavell is modifying his method as he tells his life story. One feature is especially significant. Cavell seems less able to separate memories from each other: the dissolving of the mysteriousness of his memories involves recognizing and describing the links between them. The result is a shift towards unity and away from fragmentariness.

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<sup>377</sup> Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 60.

The idea of a new tolerance for unity is supported by a further passage. Here Cavell charts a connection between unity and the significance of his life. He says that, ‘As in dating the entries in recording a dream...the point of dating entries of conscious thought, of marking the separation of registering thoughts, is its provision of a way to refuse the already formed significance that more unified narratives, so many of which I have told or heard in my life, would have me accept. Put otherwise, only in defeating such significance is my interest in telling my story graspable, alive for me.’<sup>378</sup> Even if it contains a further gesture towards the idea that the separation of entries is fundamental to the composition of his autobiography, this quotation does suggest that Cavell is not eschewing unity for its own sake. Rather it is unity understood in terms of the pre-formed—perhaps the generic—to which Cavell objects. Shying away from the aspiration to compose a unified story leaves Cavell free to pursue the significance unique to his own life and keep it ‘alive.’ He does not object to unity as such, or discount the possibility that his autobiography could emerge as a manifest unity by its conclusion. Rather, he opposes the application of preconceived notions of an autobiography to his life on the grounds that this is likely to keep its significance hidden.

So Cavell does not seem to regard unity as undesirable in itself. Rather, he objects to pursuing it as a goal of autobiography, and to mistaking its attainment for the achievement of meaningfulness. A unified narrative would be tolerable to Cavell so long as not pursued for its own sake. And as Cavell revises his method sixty pages into his autobiography, exactly this kind of unity does seem to be emerging. I have already mentioned the links that Cavell finds between different events in his life and the urge he has to pursue them as each memory sheds its mysteriousness.

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<sup>378</sup> Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 61.

So is an autobiography composed of ‘excerpts from memory’ so very different from any other? A hard distinction between a unity and fragmentariness here seems false.<sup>379</sup> Any autobiography, even Rousseau’s *Confessions*, paradigmatic of unified autobiography, is at best composed of excerpts. *Pace* Rousseau’s claim that he wants to present his entire self to his reader so that he may be judged, writing an autobiography remains a matter of excerpting. Partly this is a result of forgetfulness; our accounts of our lives are at best incomplete. But it is also a consequence of the impossibility of writing everything down, the fact that something must be omitted. The question of an autobiography is always what makes it into the narrative and what does not.

Still, it is a mistake to say that there is no difference between Cavell’s project and Rousseau’s. But the difference does not consist in the approach taken so much as the particular insight that Cavell possesses into autobiographical writing. In Cavell we find the frank admission that writing an autobiography is always a matter of excerpting because writing an autobiography is about incorporating fragments and seeing and following the links that bind them. Cavell makes a method of the fact that writing an autobiography is always a matter of excerpting from memory.

Thus, Cavell’s approach is not so radically different from other biographies. Irrespective of his claims about fragmentation, his self-narrative manifests unity. And another of Cavell’s reassessments of his method lends further support to this conclusion. He writes:

I have felt the need to go back over the material, both to remember its successions and to find where clarifications and more background and points of reference will help an interested reader continue with it; it will not be possible to note and date each of even the substantial elaborations I enter. The supplementary bargain I am making with myself is

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<sup>379</sup> In a later section I will look at non-narrative fragmentation in the form of William S. Burroughs’s ‘cut-up’ method.

that no change will be entered that is not motivated by, and can become continuous with, an entry already in place.<sup>380</sup>

So the revising of a narrative dissolves the fragmentariness that Cavell sets it out to retain. Cavell finds it impossible to preserve firm distinctions between sections based on the date of their composition. The need to revise, make additions, and rewrite breaches the separateness each entry possesses by virtue of being a record of a single day's writing. This makes *Little Did I Know* a whole rather than an assembly of parts.

But is Cavell creating a character in his autobiography? There seems no reason to reject this idea. Of course, it will be a character of a particular kind, as a further quotation from the text shows. Cavell writes, 'I am not unaware that events in my life are becoming intellectual events, nor that this links up with what in my early pages I noted as the tendency of my narration of events to be overtaken by the desire to articulate the event of narration itself, or say, the conditions of the present in which what there is to say can be said in the way it is given to me to say it.'<sup>381</sup> In light of the events on which Cavell focuses it seems clear that the character will be one in whom the inner world is most prominent. But this is no reason to reject the notion that a character is created in *Little Did I Know*. Nor should we deny that Cavell is creating a character on account of his initial self-conscious attention to excerpting rather than developing continuity in his autobiography. Such excerpting is characteristic of any autobiography in which character is developed; Cavell is merely more explicit about it than other writers.

But we can locate another possible distinction between the process in which Cavell engages and what Rousseau is doing in *The Confessions*. There is always the question of motivation. Here

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<sup>380</sup> Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 62.

<sup>381</sup> Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 62.

Rousseau and Cavell seem to differ. Rousseau gives his motivation as the desire to present himself for judgment by his audience. It is as if he already has a clear idea of himself that he wishes to communicate. For Cavell, circumstances seem to be otherwise. In a section from which I have already quoted, he refers to the desire to ‘find an account of himself.’ Cavell lacks an idea of who he is and seeks to discover (or perhaps construct) one through writing his autobiography. Can we then still say that Rousseau and Cavell are involved in the same kind of activity? In particular, can we still say that Cavell is in the process of theatricalizing himself, in the manner of Rousseau in the *Confessions*?

I think Cavell is still engaged in self-theatricalization. Where he differs from Rousseau is that the process of self-theatricalization is oblique compared to the one we find in Rousseau. Whereas Rousseau presents himself from a position of certainty, Cavell positions himself from a position of inquiry. Rousseau’s *Confessions* says, ‘This is who I am, now judge me,’ whereas Cavell’s autobiography admits that he must work out who he is. And this is not an escape from self-theatricalization so much as an intensification of it. Presenting a life-story as if everything were still in question is one way of securing the attention of an audience. In asking who he is, Cavell makes the answer to that question a goal pursued in the work. It is a literary strategy that does not deliver him from his audience but encourages a reader to scrutinize him all the more attentively.

#### *8.6 Autobiographical Writing and Self-Acknowledgment*

Even in unusual cases like *Little Did I Know*, writing an autobiography is always an example of self-theatricalization. Since I have already shown that self-theatricalization is a form of self-



acknowledgment, perhaps little more needs to be said. However, it might be as well to mark out the connection between writing an autobiography and self-acknowledgment more directly.

The process of creating a character, which I identified as an instance of theatricalizing ourselves, seems amenable to self-acknowledgment. In creating a character based on ourselves, we are compelled to face up to elements of our lives and either express or suppress them. Whichever choice we make, we are still involved in acknowledging ourselves, because in contemplating whether we can countenance including this detail in our account of who we are it begins to matter in a way it did not before.

This clarifies a critical element of what I have said. There is a significant difference between the details included in my self-narrative, that is, the literary artifact that others will see, and what I acknowledge about myself. As I showed in my discussion of acknowledgment, self-acknowledgment can involve suppressing something about myself that I cannot bear to let others know. Acknowledging myself does not always amount to affirmation. In acknowledging myself I still might engage in deceiving others, or even in deceiving myself. But in doing so I show that something matters to me. It matters so much that I can hardly face it. And while the healthier position might be to affirm everything I have done, this is not necessary for acknowledgment. I can acknowledge myself through a lie.

This calls to mind the example of *In Search of Lost Time*. In this novel, there is on the face of it a deep contradiction between the expressed attitudes towards homosexuality on the one hand and Proust's own homosexuality on the other. The attitude towards homosexuality is hostile, even allowing for the ambiguities in the novel, not least the famous masculinity of the names of the narrator's main love interests Albertine and Gilberte. This possible subtext does not make the

negative portrait of homosexuality moot so far as Proust's authorship is concerned.<sup>382</sup> I am not saying that I can explain why the attitude towards homosexuality expressed in *In Search of Lost Time* conflicts with the fact that it was Proust's own sexual orientation. I am arguing that such a conflict is not destructive of Proust's selfhood but constitutive of it since it is a moment in which Proust acknowledges himself through what looks like an instance of self-contempt.

Obviously, my arguments in this chapter reaffirm the extent to which I have abandoned the narrative conception of self. On this account of selfhood it was always desirable to have a complete account of myself, because my self-narrative is who I am: its incompleteness is a problem. I focused on these issues in the third chapter. There I argued that it was a fatal objection to the narrative conception of self that it was possible to write several narratives about the same life. Given that several narratives could be written about the same life, it seemed like more than one self could be associated with the same life.

On my view, my self-narrative need not be complete. This is because it is the process of constructing a narrative that is important, not the end result. A complete narrative of a life might be most desirable even on my account, but only because it reflects a generally desirable sense of contentment and reconciliation with my past. It is not more or less desirable in the sense that it is the only thing that can provide me with a self. We must acknowledge who we are in order to have a self, and we do not need to compose a complete account of our lives in order to accomplish this.

But then how complete must this process be? If the account I finally present of myself can be incomplete, must I survey my entire life in composing it? There are several responses to this

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<sup>382</sup> On this count I disagree with Lucille Cairns, who argues the reverse. See Lucille Cairns, 'Homosexuality and Lesbianism in Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe*,' in *French Studies* 51 (1997): 45.

question. First, ideally the process of writing my life-story would involve surveying my entire life. The reason is that if I am to acknowledge myself then I must either affirm a fact about my life or suppress it, include it in my self-narrative or omit it. If I fail to consider an event from my life then I can hardly claim to be acknowledging myself. So, ideally, writing my life story will involve surveying the whole of my life. Only thus can I be said to be completely acknowledging myself.

Second, obviously the completeness of the process described above is nothing more than an idealization because of the practical obstacles to considering all aspects of my life. There are natural limits to what I can remember. My memory of my life is not complete, so there will be gaps even when I engage in good faith efforts to remember what I did or what befell me. There may of course be more than one reason why I fail to remember something. We seem entitled to posit a difference between those minor events that I cannot remember because they disappear into the fog created by hundreds of other similar events that populate a lifetime and major events that I cannot recall for other reasons. I cannot for instance recall what I had for breakfast on 29 September 1997. But in this instance the reason for the failing in my memory is the banality and insignificance of the detail in question. My failure to acknowledge such events does not seem like a problem when it comes to self-acknowledgment.

But we cannot take this for a hard and fast rule. Even events that might on the face of it seem trivial may be significant. There are two reasons for this. First, some events we might be tempted to put in the class of the trivial exclude from a self-narrative are significant. The recollections in *In Search of Lost Time* are prompted by no more than tasting a madelaine dipped in tea. Second, events we may designate as trivial at one time may later turn out to be significant. For example,

as a boy, Chandragupta Maurya happened to meet Alexander the Great.<sup>383</sup> Chandragupta Maurya's grandson later turned out to be Ashoka the Great, one of India's greatest emperors. In light of the identity of one of Chandragupta Maurya's descents, we might count his meeting with Alexander as more profound than it seemed at the time.<sup>384</sup> So there are a range of events that I cannot remember because they are uninteresting, and these are events that I may not feel compelled to acknowledge. But we cannot say that a certain kind of event will always be trivial and uninteresting, or not in need of acknowledgment. Nor can we deny that an event that once seemed trivial might emerge as significant later on.

But there is a further problem, this time pertaining to events that are obviously significant and life-changing. I might be unable to remember one of these events, whether because of a failing memory or because while important the event is troubling and I develop a psychiatric disorder that leads me to repress it. What are we to say about this situation? In contrast to the previous kind of failure of memory, what I have forgotten is not insignificant. It seems that if I really am to acknowledge who I am then I must confront this important detail. An example might be someone who was sexually abused as a child. In order to acknowledge themselves through constructing a self-narrative, he would have to at least consider incorporating this detail into his autobiography. But if he does not remember the experience because he has repressed it then it seems hard to see how he could possibly be expected to acknowledge it.

The first response is to say that this is just how it is. Knowing precedes acknowledging, and if we do not know something then we just cannot acknowledge it. If the person genuinely does not remember that they were sexually abused as a child because they have developed a psychiatric

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<sup>383</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 403.

<sup>384</sup> Thanks to Dr Emily Grosholz for this interesting example.

disorder and repressed their memory of the experience in question, then it seems unreasonable to stipulate as a condition of selfhood their acknowledging something about themselves that genuinely lies beyond the reach of recollection. A repressed experience that someone does not remember does not have to go into their autobiography.

There is something to this answer, but it does not tell the full story. It assumes that the creation of a self-narrative is a purely individual process. However, this gives a false picture of authorship, which is the combined activity of more than one person. The author presumably lies at the center of the process, but an editor, friends, family members and other interlocutors each make their own contributions. If we pursue this analogy through to the issue of whether we should be expected to acknowledge something we no longer remember, then we need to take account of what others remember about us or what they can help us remember when thinking about the contents of our self-narrative. We might think of seeking assistance from an old friend in remembering what befell us in our childhood. If the memory in question is one repressed as a result of mental illness then we might be able to make use of professional help in order to recover it.

But it is important to state that the process of acknowledging myself through composing the narrative of my life must not be held hostage to the idea that there is such a thing as an ideal narrative. We could write numerous narratives about a life, and even the narrative we regard as complete is revisable down the line. The story I tell about my life will change as I do more and as more happens to me. It will be revised in light of new experiences. Similarly, it will change as a result of my acquiring a new perspective on what happened to me. The distance time offers will enable me to look back on my experiences and reach a fresh judgment on the importance of particular events. My self-narrative will alter as a consequence.

So at any one time in my life my autobiography will not be complete in the specific sense of including all the events that have occurred in my life. It might even be that events that really stand out as important in my chronicle of who I am are not included in my self-narrative. And this might be not because I faced up to the things that happened to me and decided not to include them, but because I could not remember some pieces of information about myself. How then can we say that this is a kind of self-acknowledgment?

The reason is because self-acknowledgment amounts to no more than the idea that who we are should matter to us. Rather than telling us who we are, meaning that any self-narrative that was not exhaustive and complete would be inadequate, a self-narrative establishes a relationship with ourselves. A self-narrative expresses the fact that the answer to the question of who we are matters to us, and therefore need not involve a complete account of our lives.

### *8.7 Alternatives to Narrative*

But is a self-narrative necessary for self-acknowledgment? Why could another form of expression not allow us to acknowledge ourselves? I want to briefly consider this question before concluding. We do not even need to step outside of literary works for an example of this. A good example of autobiographical, literary, yet non-narrative writing is the work of William S. Burroughs.<sup>385</sup> His cut-up technique demolishes the narrative continuity and therefore unity we find in other autobiographies. Is it possible that Burroughs' work might also be an instance of acknowledgment?

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<sup>385</sup> Thanks to Brady Bowman for first bringing this example to my attention.

A good non-literary instance would be a series of self-portraits painted across an artist's life. The most famous example in the history of art would probably be Rembrandt's self-portraits, which depict him as a young man and into old age. Given the notable introspective character of these self-portraits, particularly the later paintings such as *Self-Portrait with Beret and Turned-Up Collar* (1659) and *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63* (1669), might we not claim that they too count as instances of self-acknowledgment?<sup>386</sup> We might draw in a further case, this time from film. Federico Fellini's film *8 ½* is semi-autobiographical. It centers on the experiences of a film director struggling to complete a film. The title of the film directly alludes to Fellini's own career insofar as it is Fellini's eight and a halfth film.<sup>387</sup> We might wonder whether Fellini's film is also a form of self-acknowledgment.

I feel quite well disposed to this objection. It seems to me that any form of artistic expression that has an individual's own life for its subject matter is a plausible candidate for an instance of self-acknowledgment. The reason is that an individual who engages in this kind of reflective artistic expression always means dwells on her own life. Therefore, I do not think we should rule out the possibility that other art forms that are non-narrative, or which are narrative but predominantly visual rather than verbal, for example Fellini's film, might also be forms of self-acknowledgment.

It is worth revisiting the reasons for claiming that narrative was a form of self-acknowledgment.

I did not directly argue that there is a direct connection between narrative and self-acknowledgment. Rather I suggested that narrative is a form of self-acknowledgment because it

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<sup>386</sup> Another example would be Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*. H. Perry Chapman ultimately attributes Rembrandt's choice to depict himself as St Paul to a deep affinity for the 'the self-searching nature of Paul's writing.' H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth Century Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 127.

<sup>387</sup> He collaborated on one.

is a type of self-theatricalization. We make a character out of ourselves and turn ourselves into something to be beheld. Narrative is a form of self-acknowledgment by virtue of its being concerned with the development of character and because literary narratives involve being beheld by an audience. So I can see how the autobiographical writings of Burroughs, insofar as they involve the creation of character, might be an instance of self-theatricalization. However, we would have to see how the work that I have argued narrative is ideally suited to accomplish is accomplished by non-narrative writing.<sup>388</sup>

But when it comes to painting it is not clear to me that we get anything like a character being developed. I have already referred to our tendency to speak not of characters in paintings but figures. This term seems to reflect the idea that in pictures we find forms and shapes. We focus on their spatial existence. Certainly the person depicted has an inner life, but that inner life can reach only as far as the surface of their skin. Contrast this with a literary narrative, which, as I have described, can offer direct access to a character's thoughts. Likewise, though painting can show the effects of time, for instance the traces of its passage on the face of the subject of a portrait, it cannot do so in the same deep way as literature, by exposing character traits, revealing change, and enabling a character to take us by surprise.

There are exceptions. The most significant are representations of mythological, religious or historical figures or events. When it comes to, say, El Greco's *Scourging the Money-Lenders from the Temple* (c. 1600) we are not likely to forget that Jesus is meant to have thousands with seven loaves and fishes, or that he was eventually crucified at Calvary. In these pictures, the main figure does seem to be a character. However, what remains in question is the contribution

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<sup>388</sup> I must confess to near-ignorance of Burroughs' work, so find myself unable to comment meaningfully any further on this topic.



that the painting makes to developing the character. One explanation might be is that the painting hardly contributes to creating the character, but simply draws upon an account of a person that exists elsewhere (such as the biblical account of Jesus' life in the case of the El Greco painting). There is a narrative in the background that is common knowledge. We might say something similar of a work like Edgar Degas' *Interior* (1905), also known as *The Rape*, which has often been explained as a depiction of an incident from a novel, with Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* one suggestion.<sup>389</sup>

But we need to make clear why we do not encounter characters in these non-narrative contexts. There are two reasons, both tied to the abilities of narrative to create character. First, we can question the effectiveness of an image in representing an individual's state of mind. It is tempting to say that, though a painting is capable of representing an individual's thoughts and emotions, it can be less capable when it comes to communicating the multitude of experiences—and perhaps their richness—that fill a human life. But this does not quite seem right. Consider a description from H. Perry Chapman of Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul* (1661). She writes:

A directed but atmospheric light draws the figure from the enveloping darkness but is focused most strongly on his expressive face. His penetrating gaze forcefully engages the eyes of the beholder. Upon close inspection, however, this seeming immediacy gives way to an inscrutably complex facial expression... Even after lengthy contemplation, the subtleties of his facial gesture are difficult but not impossible to read. His deeply furrowed forehead, arched eyebrows, and wide-open eyes reveal a thoughtful, questioning mind. His

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<sup>389</sup> Henri Loyrette, 'Interior, also called *The Rape*,' in *Degas*, ed. Jean Sutherland Boggs (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), 145. Loyrette does not dispute that the painting has a literary source, but rejects the notion that it might be *Therese Raquin*.

slightly pursed lips and the muscles that tighten at the corners of his mouth betray an element of uncertainty.<sup>390</sup>

Chapman seems to be emphasizing precisely the ability of a painting—albeit one by a genius—to communicate the inner life of its subject. Even if the sentence in question is somewhat contradictory—the inscrutability of the face is no obstacle to its revealing the nature of the subject’s mind—nonetheless Chapman indicates that we can learn Rembrandt’s thoughts and feelings from his self-portrait.

However, we might still aver that literary narratives have the advantage over visual representations. This is because of the specificity and clarity achievable in language. We should not neglect the inscrutability, or perhaps ambiguity, that first strikes Chapman. There is a level of uncertainty that can strike us when it comes to a portrait, not only examples of portrait-painting in which an expression is poorly portrayed, but even in superlative instances such as the work of Rembrandt. Which is not to say that there is no similar ambiguity when it comes to language, only that it is less severe and easier to escape. The reason why ambiguity in language is generally easier to resolve is due to language being shared by a community. And membership in that community of language-users is natural in a way that membership in a community of visual artists is not. Short of mental disability, human beings are all sophisticated users of language in a way that they are not all sophisticated users of visual means of communication.

Second, in paintings we do not grasp an individual as they pass through time. We can imagine a series of self-portraits that represent incidents from the artist’s life. However, it is possible only in principle to conceive of a series of paintings that represent everything that would be contained

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<sup>390</sup> Chapman, *Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits*, 120.

in an autobiography.<sup>391</sup> A literary autobiography has the distinct advantage of conciseness over a series of paintings when it comes to the representation of an entire life. If words at times seem inexpressive, and to require a certain virtuosity when handling them in order to render an emotion exactly, they have the virtue of brevity. And this is an advantage because, as has been implicit in the account I have given throughout this dissertation, it is precisely the acknowledgment of a life that is at issue. The best example of self-portraits spanning a life would again be Rembrandt's self-portraits. However, even here only glimpses of the man Rembrandt are presented. This is undeniable, even if we accept that in his portraits 'Rembrandt is *seeking* to formulate and reveal a conception of his own psychological identity, the unique person that he was.'<sup>392</sup> Though the face may indeed be 'the primary vehicle for expression' of seventeenth century artists, and even if 'the deepest recesses of the human psyche' are revealed in a portrait, nonetheless the privileging of the face invites abstraction from the stuff of a life, the acts and events whose acknowledgment makes an individual, as both an agent and a patient, a self.<sup>393</sup>

This justifies holding literary narratives to possess significant advantages over visual representations, particularly self-portraits. And though I have not directly answered the objection that films might also count as a form of self-acknowledgment, the advantages with which I have credited literary narratives also seem to hold here, even though these are typically also narrative in nature. The ambiguity of visual representations is no less evident in film than in paintings. And though films are narratives and therefore in theory capable of representing an entire life,

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<sup>391</sup> I take this to be obviously true even of great works such as Rembrandt's. I agree with George Simmel's judgment that, 'In the physiognomies of Rembrandt's portraits we feel clearly that the course of a life, heaping fate on fate, creates this present image.' However, this says nothing about the actual content of the course of that life. Nor does a portrait chart the twists and turns of a life, in the way in which an autobiographical narrative is so adept at doing. See George Simmel, *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, trans. Alan Scott and Helmut Staubmann (New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.

<sup>392</sup> Cynthia Freeland, *Portraits and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 175-76, my italics.

<sup>393</sup> Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits*, 17.

again language has the advantage of conciseness. Though a film is not completely in real time, each scene is, which sets a practical limit on what can be communicated through this medium. Therefore, literary narratives have the same advantages over films as they do over paintings.<sup>394</sup>

### 8.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that turning ourselves into characters and putting ourselves before an audience is the means through which we theatricalize ourselves and acknowledge ourselves in self-narratives. Narrative can be a context in which we achieve selfhood. I also considered two potential objections to the stipulated relation between self-narratives and acknowledgment. First, faced by the possibility that an autobiography like Cavell's does not seem like a form of acknowledgment, I showed that much the same thing was going on during its course as was occurring in Rousseau's *Confessions*. Second, confronted by the idea that non-narrative or strictly visual forms might be ways in which we acknowledge ourselves, I responded that there are advantages that narrative possesses over other media when it comes to self-acknowledgment, though I am generally receptive to the idea of non-narrative forms of acknowledgment.

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<sup>394</sup> There is obviously more to be said here. However, to embark on this argument properly would require a separate research project, presumably embracing the question of the relation between film, theatricality and acknowledgment, which would surely be nothing less than a response to *The World Viewed*, Cavell's main work on film.

## *Conclusion*

In this dissertation I have argued that we should understand narrative not from the point of view of self-constitution but from the perspective of self-acknowledgment. Our self-narrative does not make us who we are, rather in composing it we acknowledge ourselves. In creating a character out of myself and presenting myself to an audience I theatricalize myself. And in theatricalizing myself I acknowledge myself. Self-acknowledgment is a necessary element of selfhood.

Therefore a self-narrative contributes to my being a self, though it does not constitute me.

At least one question has gone unanswered in this dissertation. This is the motivation for acknowledging ourselves in the way I have described. The obvious response is that self-acknowledgment is a necessary step towards selfhood, but this begs the question of the desirability of being a self. The question seems especially pertinent given my reflections on the *Henriad*. Hal becomes disenchanted with the theatrical life he pursued and, as Henry V, seeks permanent relief from it through the affection to be found in marriage. Shakespeare does not portray a theatrical life as a happy one.

We might respond that for all the pain that doubtless goes in to the composition of an autobiography or autobiographical novel, theatricalizing ourselves in this way is not the same as living theatrically like Hal. In making a literary character of ourselves we are not consumed by that character in the way that seemed true of Hal. We can achieve distance from it in a way that did not seem possible for him. Self-theatricalization in a literary context strikes me as more desirable on the face of it than a life lived in that fashion. We might add that by writing an autobiography we add to our understanding of ourselves in ways that are not possible through merely living.

But if this suggests that self-theatricalization through narrative does not doom us to unhappiness, this is still not a positive reason for engaging in it and pursuing self-acknowledgment. We need to say something more to reach this point. Why is selfhood as I have described it desirable?

I will refer to two sources to answer this question. Both are already familiar. The first is Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. The second is David Velleman's work on the narrative self. In the last volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator realizes that the subject-matter for the literary work he has been hoping to write since he was a child is nothing other than the events of his own life. The discovery is described as follows:

And then, a new light, less dazzling no doubt, than that other illumination which had made me perceive that the work of art was the sole means of rediscovering Lost Time, shone suddenly within me. And I understood that all these materials for a work of literature were simply my past life; I understood that they had come to me, in frivolous pleasures, in indolence, in tenderness, in unhappiness, and that I had stored them up without divining the purpose for which they were destined or even their continued existence any more than a seed does when it forms within itself a reserve of all the nutritious substances from which it will feed a plant.<sup>395</sup>

This discovery comes when the narrator is already an old man. It seems like the discovery of his subject matter is the first step towards what will be the culmination of his life—the writing of his novel. We might also note that Proust died before he finished writing *In Search of Lost Time*.

But lives do not always end with the writing of our self-narratives, even if they are sometimes written with death in mind, especially how the author will be remembered after he is gone. So

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<sup>395</sup> Proust, *Time Regained*, 304.

rather than thinking of life having been lived for the sake of providing the material for a work of literature, as Proust's narrator imagines, we need to ask what the correlative project would be. The narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* lives his life and thereby learns what he should write about. Might we not propose the reverse? Perhaps writing about our lives can tell us how we should live in the future.

In my discussion of the narrative conception of the self, I referred to Velleman's idea that a narrative can have a prescriptive element. It can weigh into our consideration of what to do next. As Velleman understands things, a self-narrative shapes our future actions through our desire to bring the emotional cadence of a narrative to a satisfying resolution. We look for an action that will 'bring closure to our past efforts.' So the idea that a self-narrative can shape our future arises in material I have already discussed.

I am not certain whether Velleman's claims are true. However, I would argue that deciding upon an action based on whether it will result in a satisfactory emotional cadence is not advisable. Taking the conditions for a good and enjoyable life to be the conditions for good, enjoyable art seems fraught with danger. Why is it advisable to make life-choices on what are really aesthetic grounds? An artist has her material before her, whereas everyday life is filled with unexpected events. If an artist makes a mistake in creating a work of art, she at most risks her reputation, whereas the life-choices can have much weightier consequences. The differences between life and art are so great as to make the criteria on which decisions are made in one arena ill-suited for making the correct decision in the other.

So while this is a suggestion about the relevance of narratives to the future, it is not what I have in mind. In my discussion of narrative I have already spoken about the bearing narratives can

have on the future. I said that narratives present us with possible alternative selves. In them we see how other people live, and are called upon to consider whether we too might live that way in the future. The characters we encounter in literary narratives influence our own lives and shape them, because they are examples we can choose either to emulate or reject.

And the same can be true of our self-narratives. My self-narrative presents me with a character whose example I can emulate or disavow. But of course, the character is a representation of me. And because I am responsible for composing it, I know that the character that is presented to the audience is not the whole truth. Around the character accrue those truths about myself I could not quite face and so concealed. In acknowledging myself and thereby achieving selfhood I have a sense of who I am thrust upon me.

But the point is that I am still free to like or dislike myself. If I like myself, then my life beyond the completion of my self-narrative will be a matter of attempting to live up not to the character so much as the image and its relief—the protruding character I made and the shadows of all that I omitted from my narrative. If I do not like myself, then I can take the point when the narrative is finished as an opportunity to depart from myself and become a different kind of person. Or I can decide that the struggle is too hard and live on, dealing with my dislike for myself as best I can. In either case, the achievement of selfhood through narrative gives me a basis from which to move forwards.

And we cannot forget that my self-narrative can have importance for people other than myself. Cavell explained this in terms of each life story serving as a parable of the human condition, so that there is a lesson others may learn from our autobiographical writings. I prefer not to think about it in terms as strong as these, but to cling to the idea stated above, and which has recurred



throughout this dissertation: literature gives us examples of possible lives we might choose to lead. I do not see why my autobiography should not be useful to others in this way.

We might say that the point of the achievement of selfhood is a small amount of wisdom, so long as we use the term loosely. Perhaps we could return to the notion of acknowledgment as the ‘home’ of knowledge. The wisdom in question is not a set of lessons that it would be easy to impart to others, nor indeed a truth that would be much use to someone else. Except, that is, insofar as we are to figure in another’s self-narrative in turn. And we may want to remember that having returned to life from a narrative does not entail that the self-narrative we have composed is final. There is always more to be said. We are led out of narrative and back into life, but then life will lead us back into narrative. So narrative will not constitute who we are, but narrative will be indispensable in being a self—so long as that remains a project that captivates us.

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