



PROJECT MUSE®

Giving an Account of Oneself

Judith Butler

Diacritics, Volume 31, Number 4, Winter 2001, pp. 22-40 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2004.0002>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/52357>

GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF

JUDITH BUTLER

In recent years, the critique of poststructuralism, itself loquacious, has held that the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding undermines the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself. Critics have argued that the various critical reconsiderations of the subject, including those that do away with the theory of the subject altogether, cannot provide the basis for an account of responsibility, that if we are, as it were, divided, ungrounded, or incoherent from the start, it will be impossible to ground a notion of personal or social responsibility on the basis of such a view. I would like to try to rebut this view in what follows, and to show how a theory of subject-formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can work in the service of a conception of ethics and, indeed, of responsibility. If the subject is opaque to itself, it is not therefore licensed to do what it wants or to ignore its relations to others. Indeed, if it is precisely by virtue of its relations to others that it is opaque to itself, and if those relations to others are precisely the venue for its ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it sustains some of its most important ethical bonds.

In all the talk about the social construction of the subject, we have perhaps overlooked the fact that the very being of the self is dependent not just on the existence of the Other—in its singularity, as Levinas would have it, though surely that—but also on the possibility that the normative horizon within which the Other sees and listens and knows and recognizes is also subject to a critical opening. This opening calls into question the limits of established regimes of truth, where a certain risking of the self becomes, as Levinas claims, the sign of virtue [see Foucault]. Whether or not the Other is singular, the Other is recognized and confers recognition through a set of norms that govern recognizability. So whereas the Other may be singular, if not radically personal, the norms are to some extent impersonal and indifferent, and they introduce a disorientation of perspective for the subject in the midst of recognition as an encounter. For if I understand myself to be conferring recognition on you, for instance, then I take seriously that the recognition comes from me. But in the moment that I realize that the terms by which I confer recognition are not mine alone, that I did not singlehandedly make them, then I am, as it were, dispossessed by the language that I offer. In a sense, I submit to a norm of recognition when I offer recognition to you, so that I am both subjected to that norm and the agency of its use.

As Hegel would have it, recognition cannot be unilaterally given. In the moment that I give it, I am potentially given it, and the form by which I offer it is one that potentially is given to me. In this sense, one might say, I can never offer it, in the Hegelian sense, as a pure offering, since I am receiving it, at least potentially and structurally, in the moment, in the act, of giving. We might ask, as Levinas surely has, what kind of gift this is that returns to me so quickly, that never really leaves my hands. Is it the case that recognition consists, as it does for Hegel, in a reciprocal act whereby I recognize that

the Other is structured in the same way that I am, and I recognize that the Other also makes, or can make, this very recognition of sameness? Or is there perhaps an encounter with alterity here that is not reducible to sameness? If it is the latter, how are we to understand this alterity? On the one hand, the Hegelian Other is always found outside, or at least it is first found outside, and only later recognized to be constitutive. This has led critics of Hegel to conclude that the Hegelian subject effects a wholesale assimilation of what is external to it into a set of internal features of itself, and that its characteristic gesture is one of *appropriation*. There are other readings of Hegel, however, that insist that the relation to the Other is ecstatic,¹ that the “I” repeatedly finds itself outside itself, and that it cannot put an end to this repeated upsurge of its own exteriority. I am, as it were, always other to myself, and there is no final moment in which my return to myself takes place. In fact, the encounters I undergo, if we are to follow the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, are those by which I am invariably transformed; recognition becomes the process by which I become other than what I was and, therefore, also, the process by which I cease to be able to return to what I was. There is, then, a constitutive loss in the process of recognition, a transformation that does not bring all that once was forward with it, one that forecloses upon the past in an irreversible way. Moreover, it is one in which the “return to self” becomes impossible for another reason as well: there is no staying inside. I am compelled and comported *outside myself*; I find that the only way to know myself is precisely through a mediation that takes place outside of me, exterior to me, in a convention or a norm that I did not make, in which I cannot discern myself as an author or an agent of its making. In this sense, then, the subject of recognition is one for whom a vacillation between loss and ecstasy is inevitable. The possibility of the “I,” of speaking and knowing the “I,” resides in a perspective that dislocates the first-person perspective whose very condition it supplies.

The perspective that both conditions and disorients me from the very possibility of my own perspective is not reducible to the perspective of the Other, since the perspective is also what governs the possibility of my recognizing the Other, and the Other recognizing me. We are not mere dyads on our own, since our exchange is mediated by language, by conventions, by a sedimentation of norms that are social in character. So how are we to understand the impersonal perspective by which our personal encounter is occasioned and disoriented?

Although the Hegelian account has been criticized for its insistence on the dyad, the Subject and its Other, it is important to see what the struggle for recognition reveals about the inadequacy of the dyad as a frame of reference. After all, what follows from this scene, eventually, is a system of customs and, hence, a social account of the norms by which reciprocal recognition might be sustained in ways that are more stable than the life-and-death struggle would imply. When we ask, by virtue of what exteriority is recognition conferred?, we find that it cannot be the particular endowment of the Other who is able to know and to recognize me, since that Other will also have to rely upon a certain criterion to establish what will and will not be recognizable, a frame for seeing and judging. In this sense, if the Other confers recognition—and we have yet to know precisely in what that consists—it does this not primarily by virtue of special internal capacities. There is already not only an epistemological frame within which the face appears, but an operation of power as well, since only by virtue of certain kinds of anthropocentric dispositions and cultural frames will a given face seem to be a human face to any one of us. After all, under what conditions do some individuals acquire a face, a legible and visible face, and others do not? There is a language that frames the

1. See Rotenstreich, “On the Ecstatic Sources of the Concept of Alienation”; Nancy, Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative.

encounter, and embedded in that language a set of norms concerning what will and will not constitute recognizability. This is Foucault's point and, in a way, his supplement to Hegel, when he asks, as he does, "What can I become, given the contemporary order of being?" He understands that this "order" conditions the possibility of his becoming, and that a regime of truth, in his words, constrains what will and will not constitute the truth of his self, the truth he offers about himself, the truth by which he might be known and become recognizably human, the account he might give of himself.

If the social theory of recognition, however, insists upon the impersonal operation of the norm in constituting recognizability, a critique from another direction demands a rethinking of singularity. In a Levinasian vein—though perhaps more decidedly Arendtian—the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero argues that the question to ask is not "what" we are, as if the task were simply to fill in the content of our personhood. The question is not primarily a reflexive one, as it is for Foucault, when he asks, "what can I become?" For her, the very structure of address, that through which the question is posed, gives us the clue to understanding the significance of the question itself. For her, the question most central to recognition is a direct one, and it is addressed to the Other: "who are you?" This question assumes that there is an Other before us, one we do not know, whom we cannot fully apprehend, one whose uniqueness and nonsubstitutability set a limit to the model of reciprocal recognition offered within the Hegelian scheme, and to the possibility of knowing another more generally. Cavarero argues that we are beings who are, of necessity, *exposed* to one another, and that our political situation consists in part in learning how best to handle this constant and necessary exposure. In a sense, this theory of the "outside" to the subject radicalizes the ecstatic trend in the Hegelian position. In her view, I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions of myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no "you" to address, then I have lost "myself." In her view, one can only tell an autobiography, one can only reference an "I" in relation to a "you": without the "you," my own story becomes impossible.

For Cavarero, this position implies a critique of conventional ways of understanding sociality, and in this sense she reverses the progression we saw in Hegel. If the *Phenomenology of Spirit* moves from the scenario of the dyad toward a social theory of recognition, for Cavarero, and in a way, for Levinas as well, it is necessary to ground the social in the dyadic encounter. She writes:

the you comes before the we, before the plural you and before the they. Symptomatically, the you is a term that is not at home in modern and contemporary developments of ethics and politics. The "you" is ignored by the individualistic doctrines, which are too preoccupied with praising the rights of the I, and the "you" is masked by a Kantian form of ethics that is only capable of staging an I that addresses itself as a familiar "you." Neither does the "you" find a home in the schools of thought to which individualism is opposed—these schools reveal themselves for the most part to be affected by a moralistic vice, which, in order to avoid falling into the decadence of the I, avoids the contiguity of the you, and privileges collective, plural pronouns. Indeed, many "revolutionary" movements (which range from traditional communism to the feminism of sisterhood) seem to share a curious linguistic code based on the intrinsic morality of pronouns. The we is always positive, the plural you is a possible ally, the they has the face of an antagonist, the I is unseemly, and the you is, of course, superfluous. [90–91]

For Cavarero, the “I” encounters the Other not as a specific set of contents, but as a being fundamentally exposed, visible, seen, existing in a bodily way and of necessity in a domain of appearance. It is, as it were, *this* exposure that I am that constitutes my singularity. I cannot will it away, for it is a feature of my very corporeality and, in this sense, my life, and yet it is not that over which I can have control. One might borrow Heideggerian parlance to explain Cavarero’s view and say that no one can be exposed for me, that I am, in this way, nonsubstitutable. But does the social theory derived from Hegel, in its insistence on the impersonal perspective of the norm, establish my substitutability? Am I, in relation to the norm, substitutable? And yet, as a being constituted bodily in the public sphere, argues Cavarero, I am exposed, and this is as much a part of my publicity, if not my sociality, as the way that I become recognizable through the operation of norms.

Cavarero’s argument limits the claims of Hegelian sociality upon us, but it also offers direction for a different theory of recognition. There are at least two points to be made here: the first has to do with our fundamental dependency on the Other, the fact that we cannot exist without addressing the Other and without being addressed by the Other, that there is no wishing away our fundamental sociality. (You can see that I resort here to the plural *we*, even as Cavarrero advises against it, precisely because I am not convinced that we must abandon it.) The second, however, limits the first point. No matter how much we each desire recognition and require it, we are not therefore precisely the same as the Other, and not everything counts as recognition in the same way. Although I have argued that no one can recognize another simply by virtue of special psychological or critical skills, and that there are norms that condition the possibility of recognition, it still matters that we feel more properly recognized by some people than we do by others. And this difference cannot be explained solely through recourse to the notion that there is a variable operation of the norm at work in these instances. Cavarero is braver than I am and remarks that there is an irreducibility to each of our beings, one which becomes clear in the distinct stories we have to tell, so that any effort to fully identify with a collective “we” will fail. The way that Cavarero puts it is, “what we have called an altruistic ethics of relation does not support empathy, identification, or confusions. Rather this ethic desires a *you* that is truly an other, in her uniqueness and distinction. No matter how much you are similar and consonant, says this ethic, your story is never my story. No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I still do not recognize myself *in* you and, even less, in the collective *we*” [92]. The uniqueness of the Other is exposed to me, but mine is also exposed to her, and this does not mean we are the same, but only that we are bound to one another by what differentiates us, namely, our singularity.

The notion of singularity is very often bound up with existential romanticism and with a claim of authenticity, but I gather that precisely because it is without content, my singularity has some properties in common with yours, and so is, to some extent, a substitutable term. In other words, even as she argues that singularity sets a limit to substitutability, she also argues that singularity has no defining content other than the irreducibility of exposure, of being *this* body exposed to a publicity that is variably and alternately intimate and anonymous. But Hegel’s analysis of the “this” points out that it never specifies without generalizing, that the term, in its very substitutability, undercuts the specificity it seeks to indicate. Insofar as this fact of exposure is a collective condition and characterizes us all equally, it not only reinstalls the “we” but establishes a certain principle of substitutability at the core of singularity. You may think that this conclusion is too happily Hegelian, but I would like to interrogate it further, since I think it has ethical consequences for the problematic of giving an account of oneself, and of giving an account for another. This exposure, for instance, is not precisely

narratable. I cannot give an account of it, even as it structures any account I might give. The norms by which I seek to make myself recognizable are not precisely mine. They are not born with me; the temporality of their emergence does not coincide with the temporality of my own life. So in living my life as a recognizable being, I live a vector of temporalities, one of which has my death as its terminus, but another of which consists of the social temporality of norms by which my recognizability is established. These norms are, as it were, indifferent to me, my life, and my death. This latter temporality interrupts the time of my living, but it is, paradoxically, this interruption, this disorientation of the perspective of my life, this instance of an indifference in sociality, that sustains my living.

In a sense, my account of myself is never fully mine, and is never fully for me, and I would like to suggest that this “interruption” of the account always takes place through a loss of the sense of its being mine in any exclusive way. This interruption and dispossession of my perspective *as mine* can take place in different ways. There is the operation of a norm, invariably social, that conditions what will and will not be a recognizable account. And there can be no account of myself that does not, to some extent, conform to norms that govern the humanly recognizable, or that negotiate these terms in some ways, with various risks following from that negotiation. But, as I will try to explain later, it is also the case that I give an account to someone, and that the addressee of the account, real or imaginary, also functions to interrupt the sense of this account of myself as mine. If it is an account of myself, and it is an accounting to someone, then I am compelled to give the account away, to send it off, to be dispossessed of it at the very moment that I establish it as *my* account. No account takes place outside the structure of address, even if the addressee remains implicit and unnamed, anonymous and unspecified.

If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life, but this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or what is not mine alone. And I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognizable. The narrative authority of the “I” must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story.

We can surely still tell our stories—and there will be many reasons to do precisely that—but we will not be able to be very authoritative when we try to give an account with a narrative structure. The “I” cannot tell the story of its own emergence, and the conditions of its own possibility, without in some sense bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, prior to one’s own becoming, and so narrating that which one cannot know. Fictional narration requires no referent to work as narrative, and we might say that the irrecoverability of the referent, its foreclosure to us, is the very condition of possibility for an account of myself, if that account is to take narrative form. It does not destroy narrative but produces it precisely in a fictional direction. So to be more precise, I would have to say that I can tell the story of my origin and even tell it again and again, in several ways; but the story of my origin I tell is not one for which I am accountable, and it cannot establish my accountability. At least, let’s hope not, since, over wine usually, I tell it in various ways, and the accounts are not always consistent with one another. Indeed, it may be that to have an origin means precisely to have several possible versions of the origin—I take it that this is part of what Nietzsche meant by the operation of genealogy. Any one of those are possible narratives, but of no single one can I say with certainty that it is true.

Indeed, I can try to give narrative form to certain conditions of my emergence, try, as it were, to tell a story about human exposure to the Other, what it was to be this emergent body in that public sphere, try to tell a story about norms as well, when and

where I learned them, what I thought of them, which ones became incorporated at once, and in what way. At this point the story that I tell, one that may even have a certain necessity, cannot assume that its referent can adequately take narrative form. (The narrative works as allegory, attempting to give a sequential account for that which cannot, finally, be grasped in sequential terms, for that which has a temporality or a spatiality that can only be denied or displaced or transmuted when it assumes narrative form. Indeed, it may be that what I am perhaps boldly calling the referent here works as a constant threat to narrative authority even when it functions as the paradoxical condition for a narrative, a narrative that gives provisional and fictive sequence to that which necessarily eludes that construction.)

There are, then, several ways in which the account I may give of myself has the potential to break apart and to become undermined. My efforts to give an account of myself founder in part upon the fact of my exposure to you, an exposure in spoken language and, in a different way, in written address as well [see Felman]. This is a condition of my narration that I cannot fully thematize within any narrative I might provide, and that does not fully yield to a sequential account. There is a bodily referent here, a condition of me, that I can point to, but I cannot narrate precisely, even though there are no doubt stories about where my body went and what it did and did not do. But there is also a history to my body for which I can have no recollection, and there is as well a part of bodily experience—what is indexed by the word “exposure”—that only with difficulty, if at all, can assume narrative form. On the other hand, exposure, like the operation of the norm, constitutes the conditions of my own emergence and knowability, and I cannot be present to a temporality that precedes my own capacity for self-reflection. This means that my narrative begins *in media res*, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story in language possible. And it means that my story always arrives late. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, even as I produce myself differently in the very act of telling. My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I have no definitive story. I cannot explain exactly why I have emerged in this way, and my efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision. There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account. But does this mean that I am not, in the moral sense, accountable for who I am and for what I do? And if I find that despite my best efforts, a certain opacity persists and I cannot make myself fully accountable to you, is this ethical failure? Or is it a failure that gives rise to a certain ethical disposition in the place of a full and satisfying notion of narrative accountability?

It may be that a certain ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in identity allows one to affirm others who may or may not “mirror” one’s own constitution. After all, the mirror always tacitly operates in Hegel’s concept of reciprocal recognition: I must somehow see that the Other is like me, that the Other is making this same recognition of our likeness. There is lots of light in the Hegelian room, and the mirrors have the happy coincidence of usually being windows as well [see Abrams; Kearney]. In this sense, we might consider a certain post-Hegelian reading of the scene of recognition in which precisely my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be perhaps an ethics based on our shared, and invariable, partial blindness about ourselves. The recognition that one is, at every turn, not quite the same as what one thinks that one is, might imply, in turn, a certain patience for others that suspends the demand that they be selfsame at every moment. Suspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence, seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence that demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same. For subjects who live in time this is a hard norm to satisfy, if not impossible. For subjects whose very capacity to recognize and become recognized is occasioned by a norm which has a

temporality other than that of a first-person perspective, a vector of temporality that disorients one's own, it follows that one can only give and take recognition on the condition that one becomes disoriented from oneself by something which is not oneself, that one undergoes a decentering and "fails" to achieve self-identity.

Can a new sense of ethics emerge from that inevitable ethical failure? I suggest that it can, and that it would be spawned from a certain willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgment itself, that when we claim to know and present ourselves, we will fail in some ways that are nevertheless essential to who we are, and that we cannot expect anything else from others. If we speak about an acknowledgment of the limits of acknowledgment itself, are we then assuming that acknowledgment in the first sense is full and complete in its determination of the limits of acknowledgment in the second? In other words, do we know in an unqualified way that acknowledgment is always qualified? Is the first kind of knowing qualified by the qualification that it knows? This would have to be the case, for to acknowledge one's own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency. To know the limits of acknowledgment is a self-limiting act and, as a result, to experience the limits of knowing itself. This can, by the way, constitute a disposition of humility, and of generosity, since I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot fully know, what I could not have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves.

If the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us, and marks immediately an excess and opacity that fall outside the terms of identity, then any effort made "to give an account of oneself" will have to fail in order to approach being true. As we ask to know the Other, or ask that the Other say, finally, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction, and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the Other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the Other live is part of a new definition of recognition, then this version of recognition would be one that is based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of its limits. In a sense, the ethical stance consists in asking the question, "Who are you?," and continuing to ask the question without any expectation of a full or final answer. This Other to whom I pose this question will not be captured by any answer that might arrive to satisfy the question. So if there is, in the question, a desire for recognition, this will be a desire which is under an obligation to keep itself alive as desire, and not to resolve itself through satisfaction. "Oh, now I know who you are": at this moment, I cease to address you, or to be addressed by you. Lacan famously cautioned, "do not cede upon your desire." This is a complicated claim, since he does not say that your desire should or must be satisfied. He says only that desire should not be stopped. Indeed, sometimes satisfaction is the very means by which one cedes upon desire, but it can also be the means by which one turns against it, arranging for its death.

Hegel was the one who linked desire to recognition, providing the formulation that was recast by Hyppolite as the desire to desire. And it was in the context of Hyppolite's seminar that Lacan was exposed to this formulation. Although Lacan will argue that misrecognition is a necessary by-product of desire, it may be that an account of recognition, in all its errancy, can still work in relation to the problem of desire. For us to revise recognition as an ethical project, it would have to become, in principle, unsatisfiable. For Hegel, it is important to remember, the desire to be, the desire to persist in one's own being, a doctrine articulated first by Spinoza, is only fulfilled through the desire to be recognized. But if recognition works to capture or arrest desire, then what has happened to the desire to be and to persist in one's own being? In a sense, Spinoza marks for us the desire to live, to persist, upon which any theory of recognition



is built. And because the terms by which recognition operates may seek to fix and capture us, they run the risk of arresting desire, and of putting a certain end to life. As a result, it would be important to consider that any theory of recognition would have to give an account of the desire for recognition, and recognize that desire sets the limits and the conditions for the operation of recognition itself. Indeed, a certain desire to persist, we might say, following Spinoza, underwrites recognition, such that forms of recognition or, indeed, forms of judgment that seek to relinquish or destroy the desire to persist, the desire for life itself, undercut the very conditions of recognition itself.

In this sense, recognition could not be reduced to making and delivering judgments about others, although the latter would be obligated to honor the conditions for recognition. In fact, recognition sometimes obligates us to suspend judgment in order to apprehend the Other. We sometimes move too quickly to summarize another's life, and think that the ethical posture is, and must be, the one that judges, that can show not only that it can and will make judgments, but that it can justify the judgments that it makes. What is the scene of recognition, however, that is presupposed by the act of judgment? And does recognition provide a broader framework within which moral judgment itself might be assessed? Does it allow us to ask the question, "What is the value of moral judgment?," in a way that recalls Nietzsche's question, "What is the value of morality?" When he posed it, he also posited a value in the very way that the question was posed, for if there is a value to morality, it is one that we find outside of morality, by which we gauge morality, thus asserting that morality does not have a monopoly on the field of values.

The scene of moral judgment, when it is the judgment of persons that is at issue, is invariably one which establishes a clear moral distance between the one who judges and the one who is judged. If you consider, for instance, Simone de Beauvoir's question, "Must We Burn Sade?," matters become more complicated. It turns out that it may be that only through an experience of the Other under conditions of suspended judgment do we finally become capable of an ethical reflection on the humanity of the Other, even when that humanity has turned against itself. And though I am certainly not arguing that we ought never to make judgments—they are necessary for political and personal life alike: I make them, and I will—I think that it would be important, in rethinking the terms of the culture of ethics, to remember that not all ethical relations are reducible to acts of judgment. The capacity to make and justify moral judgments does not exhaust the sphere of ethics, of either ethical obligation or ethical relationality. Indeed, prior to judging an Other, we must be in some relation to him or her, and this relation will ground and inform the ethical judgments we finally do make. We will, in some way, have to ask the question, "Who are you?" If we forget that we are related to those we condemn, even those we must condemn, then we lose the chance to be ethically educated or "addressed" by a consideration of who they are and what their personhood says about the range of human possibility that exists, and even to prepare ourselves for or against such possibilities. We also forget that judging an Other is a mode of address: even punishments are pronounced and delivered to the face of the Other, requiring that Other's bodily presence. *Hence, if there is an ethic to the address, and judgment, including legal judgment, is one form of address, then the value of judgment will be conditioned by the form of address it takes.*

Consider that one way we become responsible and self-knowing is precisely by deferring judgments, since condemnation, denunciation, and excoriation work as quick ways to posit an ontological difference between judge and judged, and even to purge oneself of another so that condemnation becomes the way in which we establish the Other as nonrecognizable. In this sense, condemnation can work precisely against self-knowledge inasmuch as it moralizes a self through a disavowal. Although self-knowledge

is surely limited, that is not a reason to turn against it as a project; but condemnation tends to do precisely this, seeking to purge and externalize one's own opacity, and in this sense failing to own its own limitations, providing no felicitous basis for a reciprocal recognition of human beings as constitutively limited.

Similarly, condemnation is very often an act that not only "gives up" on the one condemned, but seeks to inflict a violence upon the condemned in the name of "ethics." Kafka offers several instances of how this kind of ethical violence works. We might consider in this regard the fate of Georg in the story called "The Judgment," in which his father condemns him to death by drowning; Georg is rushed from the room, as if by the force of the utterance itself, and over the side of the bridge. Of course, that utterance has to appeal to a psyche disposed to satisfy the father's wish to see the son dead, as the story also confirms, so the condemnation cannot work unilaterally in that sense. Georg must take the condemnation as the principle of his own conduct. Georg's suicidal impulse, however, does not take away from the fact that if condemnation does seek, in the extreme, to annihilate the Other, then it not only, quite obviously, destroys the conditions for autonomy, but erodes the capacity of the addressed subject for both self-reflection and social recognition, two practices that are, I would argue, essential to any substantive account of ethical life. It also, of course, turns the moralist into a murderer. When denunciation works to paralyze and deratify the critical capacities of the subject to whom it is delivered, it undermines or even destroys the very capacities of the addressee that are needed for ethical reflection and conduct, sometimes leading to suicidal conclusions. This suggests that recognition must be sustained for ethical judgment to work productively; that is, for it to come to inform the self-reflective deliberations of a subject who stands a chance of acting differently in the future, it must be a recognition in the service of sustaining and promoting life. In a real sense, we do not survive without being addressed, which means that the context of address can and should provide a sustaining condition for ethical deliberation, judgment, and conduct. In the same way, I would argue, the institutions of punishment and imprisonment have the responsibility to sustain the very lives that enter their domains precisely because they have the power, in the name of "ethics," to damage and destroy lives with impunity.

So how do these concerns relate to the question of whether one can give an account of oneself? Let us remember that one gives an account of oneself to another, and that every accounting takes place in the context of an address. I give an account of myself *to you*. Further, the context of address, what we might call the rhetorical context for responsibility, means that I am engaging not only in a reflexive activity, thinking about and reconstructing myself, but also in speaking to you and thus instituting a relation in language as I go. The ethical valence of the situation is thus not restricted to the question of whether or not my account of myself is adequate. One must also ask whether in giving the account, I establish a relationship to the one to whom my account is addressed, and whether both parties to the interlocution are engaged in a sustaining address, a revised scene of reciprocal recognition in which full accountability is neither expected nor provided. Within the context of the transference, the "you" is often a default structure of address,² the elaboration of a "you" in an imaginary domain, and an address through which prior, and more archaic, forms of address are conveyed. In the transference, speech works primarily not to convey information (including the information about my life), but as the conduit for a desire, and as a rhetorical structure that seeks to alter or act upon the interlocutory scene itself. Psychoanalysis has always understood this dual dimension of the self-disclosing speech act, that it is, on the one hand, an effort to reveal oneself

2. *I am grateful to Barbara Johnson's forthcoming work on Baudelaire, Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation, for the notion of a default structure of address.*

and, on the other, the constituting of a relationship on the basis of a transference [see Felman].

If we consider how narrative functions, then, within the context of the transference, it is not only a means by which information is conveyed, but a rhetorical deployment of language that seeks to act upon the Other, motivated by a desire or wish that takes an allegorical form in the interlocutory scene of the analysis. The “I” is not only narrated, but also posited, and in ways, and for purposes, that very often confound the intentional aims of speaking. The “you” is variable and imaginary, and it posits an aim for the trajectory of a desire that cannot be fully transparent to the one who uses language to tell its story. So “I” tell a story to “you,” and we might consider the details of the story that I tell. But if I tell them to you in the context of a transference, I am doing something with this telling, and this telling is doing something with me; it is riding a desire whose aims are not fully transparent to me.

Within some psychoanalytic circles, doctrines, and practices, one of the stated aims of psychoanalysis is to offer the client the chance to put together a story about herself, to recollect the past, to interweave the events—or, rather, the wishes—of childhood with later events, to try to make sense through narrative means of what this life has been and what it might become. Indeed, some have argued that the normative goal of psychoanalysis is to permit the client to tell a story about herself, to produce a coherent narrative, a goal that seeks to satisfy the wish to know oneself, and to know oneself in part through a narrative reconstruction in which the interventions by the analyst or therapist contribute in many ways to the making of the story. Roy Schafer has surely argued this position, and we see it in several versions of psychoanalytic practice described by clinicians in scholarly and popular venues.

But what if the narrative reconstruction of a life cannot be the goal of psychoanalysis, and that the reason for this has to do with the way in which the life of the subject is constituted? If a life is constituted through a fundamental interruption, even *interrupted prior to the possibility of any continuity*, then narrative reconstruction will also have to be subject to an interruption if it is to approximate the life it means to convey. Of course, learning to construct a narrative is a crucial practice, especially when discontinuous bits of experience remain dissociated from one another by virtue of traumatic conditions. And I do not mean to undervalue the importance of narrative work in the reconstruction of a life. But what is left out if we assume, as some do, that narrative gives us the life, or that life takes place in narrative form? What intervenes upon narration to make narration possible that is not, strictly speaking, subject to being narrated? We might approach an answer to this question by noting that the “I” who begins to tell its story can only tell it according to recognizable norms of life narration, we might say; to the extent that it agrees, from the start, to narrate itself through those norms, it agrees to circuit its narration through an externality, and so to disorient itself in the telling. Of course, Lacan has made clear that whatever account is given about the primary inaugural moments of a subject is belated and phantasmatic, and that developmental narratives tend to err by assuming the narratability of an origin that is only made available retroactively and through the screen of fantasy. The mental health norm which tells us that giving a coherent account of oneself is part of the ethical labor of psychoanalysis misconstrues what psychoanalysis can and must do, subscribing to an account of the subject that, in fact, belies part of the very ethical significance of its formation.

If I give an account, and give it to you, then my narrative depends upon a structure of address. But if I can address you, it must be that I was first addressed, brought into the structure of address as a possibility of language before I was able to find my own way to make use of it. This follows not only from the fact that language first belongs to the Other, and that I acquire it through a complicated form of mimesis, but also from the

fact that the very possibility of linguistic agency is derived from the situation in which one finds oneself addressed by a language one never chose. If I am first addressed by another, and if this address comes to me prior to the question of my individuation, then in what sense does it come to me? Levinas has claimed that the address of the Other constitutes me. And Jean Laplanche, within a psychoanalytic vein, argues something similar when he claims that the address of the Other, conceived as a demand, implants or insinuates itself into what will later come to be called, in a theoretical vein, “my unconscious.” In a sense, this nomenclature will always be giving the lie to itself. In a sense, it will be impossible to say “my unconscious,” because it is not a possession; it is precisely that which I cannot own. And yet the grammar by which we seek to give an account of this psychic domain that I do not, and cannot, own paradoxically attributes this unconscious to me, as that which belongs to me, the subject, as any number of other features might be said to belong to me, the subject. To understand the unconscious, however, is precisely to understand what cannot belong, properly speaking, to me, precisely because it is a way of being dispossessed through the address of the Other from the start. For Laplanche, I am animated by this call or this demand, and I am at first overwhelmed by this demand; the Other is, from the start, too much for me, enigmatic, inscrutable. And this “too much-ness” must be handled and contained for something called an “I” to emerge in its separateness. The unconscious is not a topos into which this “too much-ness” is deposited. The unconscious is formed, as a psychic requirement of survival and individuation, as a way of managing—and failing to manage—that excess and, in that sense, as the continuing life of that excess itself.

The transference is precisely the emotionally laden scene of address, recalling that Other and its overwhelmingness, rerouting the unconscious through an externality from which it is returned in some way. So the point of the transference and the countertransference is not only to build or rebuild the story of one’s life, but also to enact what cannot be narrated, and to enact the unconscious as it is relived in the scene of address itself. If the transference recapitulates the unconscious, then I undergo a dispossession of myself in the scene of address. This does not mean that I am possessed by the Other, since the Other is also dispossessed, called upon, and calling, in a relation that is not, for that reason, reciprocal. Nevertheless, just because the analyst handles this dispossession better than I do, there is a dislocation that both interlocutors undergo in order for access to the unconscious to take place. I am caught up in that address, even as the analyst contracts not to overwhelm me with her need. Nevertheless, I am overwhelmed by something, and I think I am overwhelmed by her; she is the name I have for this “too much-ness,” but there is always the question of the “who”—by whom am I overwhelmed? And who is she? The “Who are you?” is in a sense the question that the infant poses toward the demands of the adult (“Who are you, and what do you want of me?”). In this respect, the Laplanchean perspective offers us a way of revising Cavarero’s claim that the question that inaugurates ethics is, “Who are you?” In the case of the analyst, I cannot know, but the pursuit of this unsatisfiable question elaborates the ways in which that enigmatic Other inaugurates and structures me. It also means that she is interpellated for me as both more and less than what she is, and this incommensurability accounts for the countertransference. She is, in her own way, dispossessed in the moment of acting as its site of transfer for me. What am I calling on her to be? And how does she take up that call? What my call recalls for her will be the site of the countertransference, but about this I cannot know. Vainly I ask, “Who are you?,” and then, more soberly, “What have I become here?” And she asks those questions of me as well, from her own distance, and in ways I cannot precisely know or hear. This not-knowing draws upon a prior not-knowing, the not-knowing by which the subject is inaugurated, although that “not-knowing” is repeated and elaborated in the transference without precisely becoming a site to which I might return.

If the inaugural moments of the “I” are those in which I am implicated by the Other, the Other’s address, the Other’s demand, then there is some convergence between the ethical scene in which my life is, from the start, bound up with others, and the psychoanalytic scene that establishes the intersubjective conditions of my own emergence, individuation, and survivability. The transference, insofar as it recapitulates and reenacts in refracted form the primary scenes of address, operates not only in the service of narrating a life, assisting in the building of a life story, but as a force that interrupts the suspect coherence that narrative forms sometimes construct, and that can displace from consideration the rhetorical features of the scene of address, those that simultaneously draw me back to the scene of not knowing, of being overwhelmed, but that also, in the present, sustain me. The transference not only, at its best, provides what Winnicott terms a holding environment, but offers a bodily presence in a temporal present that provides the conditions for a sustaining address. This is not to say that transference does not contribute to the narrating of a life, that one may be able to tell one’s story better when being “held” in the Winnicottian sense. And it does not mean that narrating a life, in its partiality and provisionality, is not an important thing to do. I am sure that transference can facilitate narration, and that narrating has a crucial function. No one can live in a radically non-narratable world or survive a radically non-narratable life. Indeed, even in Kafka’s story, when Georg appears to throw himself off the bridge and to end his life, a narrative voice uncannily remains, reporting on the noises that populate that event’s aftermath. The final line of that text, “at this moment an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge,” is spoken by some voice that claims to be present to the moment described, and the third-person perspective is disjoined from the character of Georg, who has already let himself drop below. Although Georg is gone, some narrative voice remains, suggesting that narration offers resources for survival. Even so, no one survives without being addressed, no one survives to tell his or her story without first being addressed, given some stories, brought into the discursive world of the story, and then finding one’s way in language only later, only after it has been imposed, only after it has produced a web of relations in which one is caught, and in which one also thrives.

My suggestion here is that the structure of address is not precisely a feature of narrative, one of its many and variable attributes, but an interruption of narrative itself. The moment the story is addressed, it assumes a rhetorical dimension that is not reducible to a narrative function, and further that address, as non-narrative, is nevertheless what supports narrative itself. I am preparing to make another such argument about making moral judgments as well, that the structure of address conditions the making of judgments about someone or his or her actions, but that it is not reducible to the judgment, and that the judgment, alleviated of the structure of address, tends toward violence.

But here, and for the time being, my concern is with a suspect coherence that sometimes attaches to narrative and, specifically, with the way in which narrative coherence may foreclose upon an ethical resource, namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others. It may even be that to hold a person accountable for his or her life in narrative form is to require a falsification of that life in the name of a certain conception of ethics. Indeed, if we require that someone be able to tell in story form the reasons why his or her life has taken the path it has, that is, to be a coherent autobiographer, it may be that we prefer the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call the truth of the person, a truth which, to a certain degree, and for reasons we have already suggested, is indicated more radically as an interruption. It may be that stories have to be interrupted, and that for interruption to take place, a story has to be underway. This brings me closer to the account of the transference I would like to offer, a transference that might be understood as a repeated ethical practice. Indeed,

if, in the name of ethics, we require that another do a certain violence to herself, and do it in front of us, offering a narrative account or, indeed, a confession, then, conversely, it may be that by permitting, sustaining, accommodating the interruption, a certain practice of nonviolence precisely follows. If violence is the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to mastery that our obligations to others require.

Although some would say that to be a split subject, or a subject whose access to itself is opaque and not self-grounding, is precisely not to have the grounds for agency and the conditions for accountability, it may be that this way in which we are, from the start, interrupted by alterity and not fully recoverable to ourselves, indicates the way in which we are, from the start, ethically implicated in the lives of others. The point here is not to celebrate a certain notion of incoherence, but only to consider that our incoherence is ineradicable but nontotalizing, and that it establishes the way in which we are implicated, beholden, derived, constituted by what is beyond us and before us. If we say that the self *must* be narrated, that only the narrated self can be intelligible, survivable, then we say that we cannot survive with an unconscious. We say, in effect, that the unconscious threatens us with an insupportable unintelligibility, and for that reason we must oppose it. The “I” who makes such an utterance will surely, in one form or another, be besieged precisely by what it disavows. This stand, and it is *a stand*, it must be *a stand*, an upright, wakeful, knowing *stand*, believes that it survives without the unconscious or, if it accepts an unconscious, accepts it as something which is thoroughly recuperable by the knowing “I,” as a possession perhaps, believing that the unconscious can be fully and exhaustively translated into what is conscious. It is easy to see this as a defended stance, for it remains to be known in what this particular defense consists. It is, after all, the stand that many make against psychoanalysis itself. In the language which articulates the opposition to a non-narrativizable beginning resides the fear that the absence of narrative will spell a certain threat, a threat to life, and will pose the risk, if not the certainty, of a certain kind of death, the death of a subject who cannot, who can never, fully recuperate the conditions of its own emergence.

But this death, if it is a death, is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy, and so a loss of what one never had.

One goes to analysis, I presume, to have someone receive one’s words, and this produces a quandary, since the one who might receive the words is unknown in large part, and so the one who receives becomes, in a certain way, an allegory for reception itself, for the phantasmatic relation to receiving that is articulated to, or at least in the face of, an Other. But if this is an allegory, it is not reducible to a structure of reception that would apply equally well to everyone, although it would give us the general structures within which a particular life might be understood. We, as subjects who narrate ourselves in the first person, encounter in common something of a predicament. Since I cannot tell the story in a straight line, and I lose my thread, and I start again, and I forget something crucial, and it is too hard to think about how to weave it in, and I start thinking, thinking, there must be some conceptual thread that will provide a narrative here, some lost link, some possibility for chronology, and the “I” becomes increasingly conceptual, increasingly awake, focused, determined, it is at this point that the thread must fall apart. The “I” who narrates finds that it cannot direct its narration, finds that it cannot give an account of its inability to narrate, why its narration breaks down, and so it comes to experience itself, or, rather, reexperience itself, as radically, if not irretrievably, unknowing about who it is. And then the “I” is no longer imparting a narrative to a receiving analyst or Other. The “I” is breaking down in certain very specific ways in front of the Other or, to anticipate Levinas, in the face of the Other (originally I wrote,

“the in face of the Other,” indicating that my syntax was already breaking down) or, indeed, by virtue of the Other’s face. The “I” finds that, in the face of an Other, it is breaking down. It does not know itself, and perhaps it never will. But is that the task, to know itself, to achieve an adequate narrative account of a life? And should it be? Is the task to cover over the breakage, the rupture, which is constitutive of the “I” through a narrative means that quite forcefully binds the elements together in a narration that is enacted as if it were perfectly possible, as if the break could be mended and defensive mastery restored?

Before the Other one cannot give an account of the “I” who had been trying all along to give an account of itself. And so there is a certain humility that must emerge in this process, perhaps also a certain knowingness about the limits of what there is to know. Perhaps every analysand becomes, in this sense, a lay Kantian. But there is something more: it is a point about language and its historicity. The means by which subject constitution occurs is not the same as the narrative form that the reconstruction of that constitution attempts to provide. So what is the role of language in the constituting of the subject? And what different role does it assume when it seeks to recuperate or reconstitute the conditions of its own constitution? First, there is the question: how is it that my constitution became “my own”? Where and when does this presumption of property and belonging take place? We cannot tell a story about this, but perhaps there is some other way in which it is available to us, and even available to us through language. In the moment in which I say “I,” I am not only citing the pronomial place of the “I” in language, but at once attesting to, and taking distance from, a primary impingement, a primary way in which I am, prior to acquiring an “I,” a being who has been touched, moved, fed, changed, put to sleep, spoken to, and spoken around, and these impressions are all signs of a certain kind, signs that register at the level of my formation, signs that are part of a language irreducible to vocalization. These are signs of an Other, but they are also the traces from which an “I” will eventually emerge, an “I” who will never be able, fully, to recover or read these signs, for whom those signs will remain in part overwhelming and unreadable, enigmatic and formative.

Levinas speaks of a passivity prior to passivity, and there he means to indicate the difference between the passivity that a subject undergoes and relates to through a certain act of reflexivity, and a passivity that is prior to the subject, the condition of its own subjectivation, its primary impressionability. We might relate this to the Freudian insight that the infant will be disposed to love any and everything that emerges as an “object” (rather than not love at all). And this is a scandal, since it shows us that love from the outset is without judgment, and that, to a certain extent, it remains without judgment, or at least without good judgment, for the rest of its career. What I am trying to describe is the condition of the subject, but it is not *mine*: I do not own it. It is prior to what constitutes the sphere of what might be owned or claimed by me. By virtue of its status as a continuing condition of subjectivation, it persistently undoes the claim of “mineness,” mocks it, sometimes gently, sometimes violently. Primary impressionability is not a feature of myself so that I might say, by way of a warning, “I am impressionable.” I mean, I can say that, but it would be a paradoxical form of speaking. It is a way of being constituted by an Other which precedes the formation of the sphere of the *mine* itself. But at this level, we are not yet referring to boundaries in the process of formation, we are not yet seeking recourse to a capacity for reflexivity, for self-reference, the linguistic support for self-possession. This is a domain in which the grammar of the subject cannot hold, for dispossession in and through another is prior to becoming an “I” who might claim, on occasion, and always with some irony, to possess itself.

You may think that I am in fact telling a story about the prehistory of the subject, one that I have been arguing cannot be told. And there are two responses to this: (1) that

there is no final or adequate narrative reconstruction of the prehistory of the speaking “I” does not mean we cannot narrate it. It only means that at the moment when we narrate we become speculative philosophers or fiction writers. And (2) it is this prehistory which has never stopped happening and, as such, is not a prehistory in any chronological sense. It is not done with, over, relegated to a past, which then becomes part of a causal or narrative reconstruction of the self. On the contrary, it is that prehistory which interrupts the story I have to give of myself, which makes every account of myself partial and failed (and constitutes, in a way, my failure to be fully accountable for my actions, my final “irresponsibility,” one for which I may be forgiven only because I could not do otherwise, and that not being able to do otherwise is our common predicament). Indeed, consider that the way in which that prehistory continues to happen is that every time I enunciate myself, I undergo something of what cannot be captured or assimilated by that “I,” that I always come too late to myself (remember Nietzsche’s bees) and, in that sense, can never provide the account of myself which both certain forms of morality as well as models of mental health require, namely, that the self deliver itself through coherent narrative. The “I” is the moment of failure in every narrative effort to give an account of oneself. It remains the unaccounted for and, in that sense, constitutes the failure that the very project of self-narration requires. It is the failure that every effort to give an account of oneself is bound to encounter and upon which it founders.

To tell the story of oneself is already to act, since telling is a kind of action, and it is performed with some addressee, generalized or specific, as an implied feature of this action. So it is an action in the direction of an Other, but also an action that requires an Other, for which an Other is presupposed. The Other is thus in the action of my telling, and so it is not simply a question of imparting information to an Other who is over there, beyond me, waiting to know. On the contrary, the telling is the performing of an action that presupposes an Other, posits and elaborates the Other, is given to the Other, or by virtue of the Other, prior to the giving of any information. So if, at the beginning—and we must laugh here, since we cannot narrate that beginning with any kind of authority, indeed, such a narration is the occasion in which we lose whatever narrative authority we might otherwise enjoy—I *am only in the address to you*, then the “I” which I am is nothing without this “you,” and cannot even begin to refer to itself outside the relation to the Other by which its capacity for self-reference emerges. I am mired, given over. Even the word “dependency” cannot do the job here. And what this means is that I am also formed in ways that precede and enable my self-forming and that this particular kind of transitivity is difficult, if not impossible, to narrate.

So what will responsibility look like according to such a theory? And haven’t we, by insisting on something non-narrativizable, limited the degree to which we might hold ourselves or others accountable for their actions? I want to suggest that the very meaning of responsibility must be rethought on this basis; it cannot be tied to the conceit of transparency. Indeed, to take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-understanding and to establish this limit not only as a condition for the subject, but as the predicament of the human community itself. But I am not altogether out of the loop of the Enlightenment if I say, as I do, that reason’s limit is the sign of our humanity. It might even be understood as a legacy of Kant to say so. My account of myself breaks down, and surely for a reason, but that does not mean that I can supply all the reasons that would make my account whole. There are reasons that course through me that I cannot fully recuperate, that remain enigmatic, that abide with me as my own, familiar alterity, my own private, or not so private, opacity. I speak as an “I,” but do not make the mistake of thinking that I know precisely all that I am doing when I speak in that way. I find that my very formation implicates the Other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. Do I need to

know myself in order to act responsibly in social relations? Surely, to a certain extent, yes. But is there an ethical valence to my unknowingness? I am wounded, and I find that the wound itself testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control. I cannot think the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the Other, or if I do, I have taken myself out of the mode of address that frames the problem of responsibility from the start.

This is not to say that being addressed cannot be done in a harmful way. Or that being addressed is not sometimes traumatic. For Laplanche, the primary address overwhelms; it cannot be interpreted or understood. It is the primary experience of trauma. To be addressed carries with it a trauma, resonates with the traumatic, and yet this trauma can only be experienced retrospectively through a *later* occurrence. Another word comes our way, a blow, an address or naming that slaughters, even as one lives on, strangely, as this slaughtered being, speaking away.

Given that we are vulnerable to the address of others in ways that we cannot fully control, no more than we can control the sphere of language, does this mean that we are without agency and without responsibility? For Levinas, who separates the fact of responsibility from the possibility of agency, to be subject to the unwilling address of the Other heightens responsibility. This is part of what he means when he claims, maddeningly, that to be persecuted creates a responsibility for the persecuted. Most people recoil in horror when they first hear this statement, but let us consider carefully what it does and does not mean. It does *not* mean that I can trace the acts of persecution to the deeds I have performed, that I have brought it on myself, and that it is only a matter of finding the acts I performed but disavowed. No, persecution is precisely what happens without the warrant of any deed of my own. And it returns us not to our acts and choices, but to the region of existence that is radically unwilling, the primary impingement, the primary, inaugurative impingement on me by the Other, an impingement that is prior to any “me.”

The Levinasian position is not compatible with a psychoanalytic one, finally, even as it might appear that this primary persecution parallels Laplanche’s notion of a primary address that overwhelms. The Levinasian position cannot accommodate the notion of a primary set of needs or drives, or even of a primary desire to persist in one’s own being. And this becomes the basis of Levinas’s resistance to Spinoza. For Spinoza, there is no passivity prior to passivity, no primary impressionability, and this is true for Laplanche as well, for whom a certain drive already operates, even if it is always instigated and structured by the enigmatic address of an Other.

But can we say that the experience of being imposed upon from the start, and against one’s will, heightens a sense of responsibility? Have we perhaps unwittingly destroyed the possibility for agency with all this talk about being given over, being structured, being addressed? In adult experience, we no doubt suffer all kinds of injuries, and even violations, and these expose something of a primary vulnerability and impressionability and may well recall those experiences in more or less traumatic ways. Do such experiences form the basis for a sense of responsibility? And in what sense can we understand a heightened sense of responsibility to emerge from the experience of injury or violation? Let us consider for a moment that by responsibility I do not mean a heightened moral sense that consists simply in an internalization of rage and a shoring up of the superego, nor am I referring to a sense of a guilt that seeks to find a cause in oneself for what one has suffered. These are surely possible and prevalent responses to injury and violence, but these are all responses which heighten reflexivity, shore up the subject, its claims to self-sufficiency, its centrality and indispensability to the field of its experience. Bad conscience is a form of negative narcissism, as both Freud and Nietzsche have told us in different ways, and it is important to remember that the negative narcis-

sism of conscience is still a narcissism. And as a narcissism, it recoils from the Other, from impressionability, susceptibility, vulnerability. The myriad forms of bad conscience that Freud and Nietzsche analyze so deftly show us that moralizing forms of subjectivity harness the very impulses they seek to curb. Moreover, they show that the very instrument of repression is wrought from those impulses, creating a tautological circuitry in which impulse feeds the very law by which it is prohibited. But is there a theorization of responsibility beyond bad conscience? To the extent that bad conscience withdraws the subject into narcissism, to that degree it works against responsibility, precisely because it forecloses upon the primary relation to alterity by which we are animated. What might it mean to undergo violation, to insist upon not resolving grief and vulnerability too quickly into violence, and to practice, as an experiment in living otherwise, nonviolence in an emphatically nonreciprocal response? What would it mean in the face of violence to refuse to return it? Perhaps we might have to think, along with Levinas, that self-preservation is not the highest goal, and the defense of a narcissistic point of view, not the most urgent psychic need. That we are impinged upon primarily and against our will is the sign of a vulnerability and a beholdenness that we cannot will away. We can defend against it only by prizing the asociality of the subject over and against its difficult and intractable, even sometimes unbearable, relationality. What might it mean to make an ethic from the region of the unwilling? It might mean that one does not foreclose upon that primary exposure to the Other, that one does not try to transform the unwilling into the willed, but to take the very unbearability of exposure as the sign, the reminder, of a common vulnerability, a common physicality, a common risk.

It is always possible to say, "Oh, some violence was done to me, and this gives me full permission to act under the sign of 'self-defense.'" Many atrocities are committed under the sign of a "self-defense" that, precisely because it achieves a permanent ethical justification for retaliation, knows no end, and can have no end. Such a strategy has developed an infinite way to rename its aggression as suffering, and so provides an infinite justification for its aggression. Or it is possible to say that I or we have brought this violence upon ourselves, and so to account for it through recourse to our deeds, as if we believed in the omnipotence of our deeds. Indeed, guilt of this sort exacerbates our sense of omnipotence sometimes under the very sign of its critique. Violence is neither a just punishment we suffer nor a just revenge for what we suffer. It delineates a physical vulnerability from which we cannot slip away, which we cannot finally resolve in the name of the subject, but which can provide a way to understand the way in which all of us are already not precisely bounded, not precisely separate, but in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy. This is a situation we do not choose; it forms the horizon of choice, and it is that which grounds our responsibility. In this sense, we are not responsible for it, but it is that for which we are nevertheless responsible.

WORKS CITED

- Abrams, Meyer Howard. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953.
- Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Trans. Paul A. Kottman. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Felman, Shoshana. *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.
- Foucault, Michel. *Fearless Speech*. Ed. Joseph Pearson. New York: Semiotext(e), 2001.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Kafka, Franz. "The Judgment." *A Country Doctor*. Trans. Kevin Blahut. Prague: Twisted Spoon, 1997.

- Kearney, Richard. *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989.
- Laplanche, Jean. *Essays on Otherness*. Ed. John Fletcher. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*. Trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002.
- Rotenstreich, Nathan. "On the Ecstatic Sources of the Concept of Alienation." *Review of Metaphysics* 63.3 (1963): 550-58.