Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, 2, 1 (2010) 107-116

Identity and Reminiscence in Works of Jurek Becker. Jurek Becker's Works from a Comparative Point of View

Norbert BUCHHOLCZ

University of Szeged
Department of Comparative Literature
norbert.buchholcz@gmail.com

Abstract. The presentation reports my recent inquiries on reminiscence, memory and narration in Jurek Becker's essays and fictions. The (East-)German author Jurek Becker of Polish-Jewish origin has repeatedly presented the experience of alienation that comes from the lack or strangeness of reminiscence in his works. On the one hand, I attempt to point at the way of self-representation as understanding the self in the other by exploring the problem of remembering, on the other hand, at its consequences for the way of narrating one's own stories and the stories of others. The presentation of the essays *The Invisible City* [*Die unsichtbare Stadt*] and *My Jewishness* [*Mein Judentum*] and that of the novel *Bronstein's Children* [*Bronsteins Kinder*] set different ways of searching for reflections to the following problems: (1) firstly, on the relation between survival and writing (a fiction). The reminiscence—because of the absence of certain experiences of the past from the reminiscence connected to the personal traumas during the Holocaust—is "other," a story told by others. Can one's own story be constructed from the story of others? The problem awakes other questions: should or could others' (unfamiliarly familiar) story that we only have photos of be narrated at the same time? Is it an obligation or is it possible at all, to understand them by the self and the self by them—or by their photos? And, (2) secondly, the question is whether there is a narrative form that can point out the duality of the experienced and the written, the distance of reminiscence from the present of narration and the pre-absorption of reminiscences in the present of narration. Can the strata of massed and mixed reminiscences be divided, or it reveals a stratigraphic form of narration (*Bronstein's Children*) that shows the difficulty of this task?

The researches were published in several journeys and anthologies of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Szeged and discussed in chapters of my MA Thesis (2009).

BDD-A7453 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:56 UTC)

Keywords: identity, reminiscence, Holocaust literature, GDR literature, Jewish literature, Jewish philosophy

1. Introduction

The (East-)German author Jurek Becker of Polish-Jewish origins[1] has repeatedly presented the experience of alienation that comes from the lack or strangeness of reminiscence. In the present study I will attempt to point, on the one hand, at the way of self-representation as understanding the self in the other by exploring the problem of remembering; and on the other hand, at its consequences regarding the way of narrating one's own stories and the stories of others. I analyzed the essay *The Invisible City* and the novel *Bronstein's Children* to explore the literary reflections upon these problems: (1) firstly, reflections on the relation between survival and writing (a fiction). The reminiscence—because of the absence of certain experiences of the past from the memories connected to personal traumata during the Holocaust—is "other," a story told by others. The paradox way of remembering and the view of pictures from a ghetto in the present awake the complexity of understanding of the self and the other; (2) secondly, the question is whether there exists a narrative form that can point out the duality of the experienced and the written, the distance of reminiscence from the present of narration and the pre-absorption of reminiscences in the present of narration in *Bronstein's Children*.

2. Identity and reminiscence

The original meaning of the word "identity" coming from the Latin is 'equality', 'sameness'. It established itself in the humanities as a very problematic notion and term, and there are several approaches to it. I have often used the discussions of the German author Jürgen Straub (2004); he considers identity as

[1] Jurek Becker was born in Lodz, Poland, 1937. After the Nazi invasion of Poland he and his family were isolated with the other Jews of Lodz (approx. 200,000 people) in one of the largest ghettos of Eastern Europe. After the final evacuation of the ghetto the Becker family was split: mother and son (Jurek) was forced to go to Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen, the father was carried to other camps. After the liberation Jurek's mother died but his father survived and tried and managed to find his son. After the reunion the surviving family members moved to East Berlin. Jurek starts speaking German, going to school and being German. His first novel is *Jacob the Liar* (1969) published in the German Democratic Republic. Jacob's story recalls the times of the ghettos during World War II. His third novel *The Boxer* (1976) is the second part of his Holocaust-novels. The third part, *Bronstein's Children* (1982), was already published in West Germany, because he moved from East Berlin to West Berlin in 1977. In addition, he wrote several scripts, comedies and novels before his death in 1997.

BDD-A7453 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:56 UTC)

'aspiration' of the self (Straub 279-80).[2] The identity of the self is not the sum of the reflections of the self on itself at fixed and intended moments from the past, but the experience of "what I want to be". The self can never reach its identity with itself: its identity is always "other," the "future" and exists in the future, but it can only be imagined for the self and the selfness that comes from the "re-presentation" of time and other. The modern feeling of consistence and inconsistence at the same time comes from this duality and forces the self to differ from itself. Identity is also "self-distinction" and its variations can be expressed through the ways of irony in the language (Straub 280).

I approach identity as "the relation of the self to the other and otherness". Identity is *Verstehen des Anderen* ('to understand the other') and *Sich verstehen im Anderen* ('to understand the self in the other')[3] and its problem is rooted in German phenomenology and its criticism. A constructive critical approach of the other that I often use comes from the French interpretation of phenomenology and is explained by Emmanuel Lévinas. He questions the "otherness of the other" that constructs the substance of the self in phenomenology. The self of phenomenology destructs the otherness of the other and makes it a "property". But Lévinas says that the other can only be recognized for/in the self, and then the self gets out of itself. The self has to be ready for the other and the call of the other to recognize its completely "unreadiness" for the other; but after that the self can never completely return to itself (Lévinas 190). It is a philosophical task and an ethical responsibility for the other in Lévinas' works.

I approach the *other* in Becker's works through Lévinas because of the similarity of their thinking. The other is not only outside for him, but also in the self and raises several questions related to it in his essays and fictions: how can the other be understood? How can the understanding of the other and the otherness in the self relate? How can the language present this problem? How can it be said, how can it get a name, how can it be presented in one's own language? Can or how can the otherness of the language of the other be preserved as "other language"?

A possible answer for Becker is that the language of the other can only be presented in the language of the self. However, it loses its otherness; its otherness can only be shown in the language of the self. He attempts to contemplate and write about it as a writer who reckons language and its essence as an existential question for himself in *My Jewishness*. Becker, the thinker and writer recalls an event from his childhood (Becker, "Mein Judentum" 20-21). A guest of his father coming from a foreign land (the "adult" thinker evokes—and (re)presents—him as Jewish-like, but the kid has never seen him before) introduces himself with a

[2] Here I discuss personal identity. The other concept of identity is that of collective identity, the identity of a group which is not the analogy of the former one.

[3] I use German terms to point at the roots of these concepts. German philosophy—especially phenomenology—is the one that inspired the researches of "the self and the other".

BDD-A7453 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:56 UTC)

gesture: he embraces the kid and starts to sob. The kid does not understand him and his father cannot explain the situation.[4] The narrator does not want to explain it with his knowledge which is not that of the kid, he tries to give the words to the kid, who did not and could not have the words in the past. The kid is an 'other' for the adult thinker, and the otherness cannot be bridged by a common language between them created by the adult. The strange way of narrating (the adult does not fill the gaps of the reminiscence and the adult's interpretations on the 'strange man' seem to be strongly divided from the recollection of the past) results in the oscillation between two points of view, which confirms their difference and otherness, and refers to an uncertainty that can be associated with the hesitating kid; he does not know whether he may beg help from his father (to understand the gestures) or get the answer from the strange man directly or indirectly. Imre Kertész represents the same situation of kid, father and adult to utter the deepest problems of a person referring to his personal Jewishness and traumata linked to a community in *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*.

The other notion that has to be approached is "reminiscence". I attempt to explain it in relation to 'memory' but I do not suppose a binary opposition.[5] Memory is the ability of recalling past events, or the totality of past events existing for the self in the present. Reminiscence is "anamnesis," the recollection of events from the past as well as the recalled events. It is the construction of these events and also the construction of the past for the self in the present, in the "Dasein," that dissolves the otherness of the past. Reminiscence is furthermore narrated. In the next section there follows an analysis of the question "reminiscence and memory" in Jurek Becker's essay *The Invisible City*.

3. Understanding the self and the other in *The Invisible City*

The essay *The Invisible City* by Becker analyzes the role of memory [*Gedächtnis*] and reminiscence [*Erinnerung*][6] in constructing the self and for constructing a story. The thinker draws a paradox situation:[7] the ability of memory

[4] We can imagine here a Jewish relative or the father's friend from Poland, a man who had the same fate as the Beckers during the Holocaust. The man tries to express his sympathy in a seemly way, but the kid does not understand it, the father cannot interpret it, and the adult does not find the words for the kid who could not find the words that could not be found and their lack can only be expressed by the adult with other words.

[5] It seems to be very difficult to translate the German words "Erinnerung" and "Gedächtnis" I used in my thesis. The English terminology is temporary, it can be undertaken as a starting point of the researches in the future.

[6] The inquiries on the theme of "identity and reminiscence" are based on German-language researches, that is why I cite several German terms.

[7] Its grounding is biographical: Jurek Becker spent his first eight years in the ghetto of Lodz (Poland) and in concentration camps for families and kids. Although there is biographical and historical

BDD-A7453 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:56 UTC)

has—paradoxically—no access to memories. It can result from personal traumata during the holocaust. The memory of the thinker is *past*, *other*, a *story told by others* but narrated in one's own language. This is no real reminiscence. The essay tries to show that the relation of the written (the fictionally narrated) and the experienced is not clear.

> Ein paarmal hat mein Vater mit mir darüber gesprochen, widerwillig und selten. Solange er lebte, war ich nicht neugierig genug, ihn mit geschickten Fragen zu überlisten, und dann war es zu spät. Dennoch habe ich Geschichten über Ghettos geschrieben, als wäre ich ein Fachmann. Vielleicht habe ich gedacht, wenn ich nur lange genug schreibe, werden die Erinnerungen schon kommen. Vielleicht habe ich irgendwann auch angefangen, manche meiner Erfindungen für Erinnerung zu halten. Ohne Erinnerungen an die Kindheit zu sein, das ist, als wärst du verurteilt, ständig eine Kiste mit dir herumzuschleppen, deren Inhalt du nicht kennst. Und je älter wirst du, um so schwerer kommt sie dir vor, und um so ungeduldiger wirst du, das Ding endlich zu öffnen. [My father talked about it [the ghetto], but rarely and not so cheerfully. While he was alive, I was not curious enough to interrogate him in a tricksome way, and after his death it was too late. Nevertheless, I wrote stories about ghettos, as if I had been a specialist. Maybe I thought, if I wrote stories long enough, the reminiscences [*Erinnerungen*] would come to me. It is possible that I started to reckon my own creations as reminiscence. Living without childhood memories is as if you were doomed to carry a chest and you do not know what is in it. And the older you become, the more you hope to open it.] (Becker, "The Invisible City" 185, trans. by me, N. B.)

I ask hereby the following questions: what kind of language does memory have? Can they be coded verbally or visually? What kind of role do the pictures, the images[8] have in the act of recollecting? We assume that the question of the language of memory is also the question of its representation. Looking at the photos that refer to part of his imagined and possible memories, the thinker recognizes the lack of his memory. The recognition can be expressed verbally, and verbal language and its continuous existence are the only way of dealing with

evidence that can prove that the events of his childhood are real, Becker has no memories of them. He has no memories before his eighth year; however, he knows stories told by his father about these times. The reasons of the lack of memories are difficult: it can be explained by the "change of the language" (Becker moves to East-Berlin with his father after the Holocaust and speaks German forgetting Polish) or traumata caused by direct and indirect suffering (lethargy, apathy, starving). His essay *My Jewishness* tries to find and analyze the reasons for this problem.

[8] I use the word "image" for pictures, photos to make its etymological relation with "imagination" visible.

BDD-A7453 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:56 UTC)

memories: whether memories are constructed or fictionalized or based on real past events, they can and must only be written. This way of writing refers to the problems of recalling memories, of reminiscence and uses the same model as Imre Kertész in his *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*. Whether or not the awakened memories of a moment really refer to a past event, they seem to be created by the act of writing; remembering—and also the holocaust-remembering (of a person)—needs to present itself during writing and represented by writing.[9]

The thinker selects photos of an exhibition in his room and the activity evokes, activates thinking of experiences that could be narrated as fiction or as reminiscences.

> Als ich sie bekam, als ich das Päckchen öffnete und sie auszubreiten anfing, hatte ich bald das Empfinden, sie in eine andere Reihenfolge bringen zu müssen. Doch in was für eine Reihenfolge? Was paßt wozu, und was sollte getrennt sein? Gehören Kinder zu Kindern und Bärtige zu Bärtigen und Händler zu Händlern? Und Polizisten zu Polizisten, und die Blonden zu den Blonden? Jedenfalls stimmt die Reihenfolge nicht, sie ist wie ein Sprung auf einer Platte, der die schönste Aufnahme verdirbt. Ich ordne die Bilder immer wieder neu, ich will unbedingt das Rätsel lösen. Ich lege den Bahnhof nach außen, den Friedhof nach außen, die Straßen in die Mitte, Holzhäuser zusammen, Steinhäuser zusammen, die Werkhallen dazwischen, die Grenze an die Grenze. Immer wieder ist alles falsch, das Lämpchen der Erinnerung leuchtet nicht auf. [As I got them, opened the box and unpacked them, I felt that I needed another order. But what kind of order? Which go well together and how, and which should be separated? Do children with children, bearded with bearded, merchants with merchants match well together? And policemen with policemen, blondes with blondes? This order is false; as if the record got scratched, spoiling the nicest recording. I'm continuosly ordering the images, I want to match the fragments of the puzzle. I set the station outside, the cemetery outside, the streets in the middle, I set the wooden houses in one place, the brick houses to another place, the workhouses to another place and the wall next to the wall. The versions never fit, the lamps of reminiscence do not light up.] (Becker, "The Invisible City" 187-88, trans. by me, N. B.)

[9] " . . . nem emlékezni akarok, . . . habár emlékezni akarok persze, akarok, nem akarok, nem tehetek mást, ha írok, emlékezem, emlékeznem kell, bár nem tudom, miért kell emlékeznem, nyilván a tudás miatt, az emlékezés tudás, azért élünk, hogy emlékezzünk a tudásunkra, mert nem feledhetjük, amit tudunk . . ." [I do not want to remember . . ., although I want to remember, of course, I want it, I do not want it, I cannot do any other thing, if I write, I remember, I must remember, howewer, I do not know, why I must remember, because of the knowledge, it is obvious, remembering is knowledge, because we do not forget what we know . . .] (46-47, trans. by me, N. B.) The knowledge refers to the ethical responsibility for the others or for ourselves (as victims), it opens up collective aspects and the question of the *shame* for the individual (see later in the analysis of the essay).

BDD-A7453 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:56 UTC)

The act of selection is a very important motif and action in the essay: it is deliberate and it imagines and attempts at a possible order and ordering. This motif can be related to the writing of stories in Becker's works. Writing is an endless production of ambiguities for Becker. The role of the wall[10] is also important: I am the one who sets the wall to the wall; this is my will, a result of my selection. This wall shows the borders of reminiscence but the light cannot filter through the wall. This light and its metaphors, the perception of and through the light also have a central role in the essay. What is more, the light is in a very close relation with photography. However, this relation is dual: the light is the condition for taking photos but it destructs photos as time goes by. Thirdly, the light is a symbol of understanding but not without problems. Lévinas sets this problem in his essay about phenomenological understanding of time and the other.

> The light that permits encountering something other than the self, makes it encountered as if this thing came from the ego. The light, brightness is intelligibility itself; making everything come from me, it reduces every experience to an element of the reminiscence. Reason is alone. And in this sense knowledge never encounters anything truly other in the world. This is the profound truth of idealism. (Hand and Lévinas 39)

This criticism of understanding can be shown in Becker's language too. The light, the brightness makes Becker's thinker of the essay blind, as the light makes the photos blurry and the shapes invisible. This problem questions the understanding of the other and others and calls for understanding it/them. The vanishing shapes of the photos and the vanishing of lives of the others can express this problem.

> Ich starre auf die Bilder und suche mir die Augen wund nach dem alles entscheidenden Stück meines Lebens. Aber nur die verlöschenden Leben der anderen sind zu erkennen . . . [I stare at the images, my eyes are looking for all decisively important pieces of my life. But I can only recognize how the others' lives vanish . . .] (Becker, "The Invisible City" 188, trans. by me, N. B.)

We can ask here the following questions: how can one's own life be understood in the others and the others' lives in the self? Is it possible? Do I have to understand them? Is it a moral question? Can one's own story be constructed from the stories of others and the others' from one's own?

[10] The German word 'Grenze' (originally means 'border') has been translated with this word.

BDD-A7453 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:56 UTC)

The ethical responsibility, whether it is possible or not, raises the idea of *shame*: trauma and survival, the death of others and the survival of one's own body and individual constitute a very difficult psycho-physical and mental complex. Writing is a kind of "testimony" or its replacement and the way of talking about events from the past for the traumatized person, as W. G. Sebald says in his essay *Jean Améry und Primo Lévi* (121-122). Imre Kertész talks about this shame: Kertész' narrator (see footnote 9) continues the contemplation of remembering with the necessity of remembering somebody: the recalled is 'us', 'them' and 'he', dead and alive, born and not-born, man and God, the subject and object of responsibility at the same time (Kertész 47): this kind of recalling raises the idea of a community of the subject with lots of spheres of beings, with alien-beings and the Other. Remembering is not only compulsion but also liberation (and later: liquidation) for the self. But Becker does not find the way of liberation, liquidation; writing is the only way not to lose but to represent his problems raised by traumata.

4. Time and narration in *Bronstein's Children*

I analyzed the question of time and narration and the problems of reminiscence and otherness in this novel. Its theme could be the self-seeking of a second-generation-Jew after World War II in East-Germany, as well as the personality and its relation to the personal view of past events and to the intersubjective relations of the person. They are understood as problems of the personality.

Let me summarize the story: Hans—a second-generation Jew, aged 18—catches his father and his father's friends (survivors of the Holocaust) kidnapping and torturing a KZ-Lager inspector in 1973. He tries to convince them to set him free, but he fails. He refuses the intervention of the police and tries to free the man. He finds his father dead of heart attack next to the prisoner. Hans starts to narrate this story at the first anniversary of the father's death and tries to reorganize and reassess his life. He tries to remember clearly, to explain the unexplainable, but it seems to be difficult to achieve.

I analyzed the narration to explain the problems above. Its central motif is the "coming and going" of memories.

> I have only the vaguest idea of what happened to my father, and after his death, to me too. I suppose one must begin by creating the clearest possible picture of events that should be erased from one's memory; and this probably applies even more to the memories one wishes to preserve. But I simply let everything wash over me, the memories came and went randomly, while I just sat there. (Becker, *Bronstein's Children* 8, trans. by me, N. B.)

BDD-A7453 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:56 UTC)

It reminds the reader of Marcel Proust's technique of narration and associates Bergson's philosophy of time.[11] But to create the "clearest possible picture" of the past events, the narrator has to understand this "coming and going" in the right way. The motif concerning Becker, also related to Marcel Proust, can be formulated in the following way: I have not done anything to understand the past, I have not considered it, I do not let the other be understood. That is why I want to understand by understanding of how I could not understand in the past that could not be the same as the present and I could not have the same intersubjective relations and the same language in the past as in the present.

The understanding of the "other past" and the "coming and going" of memories are represented in a special narrative form that has to be "other" than a "presence-dominating" narration. Reminiscence is "work" as "being-towards-the-other" for the narrator, like in Lévinas' philosophy. We can ask here the question: how can the narration reach the other, the past by work without destructing the otherness of the other at the same time. Becker considers the question more important than the answer and the narrative form represents the question in a "stratigraphic form". It is related to work as process and not to the product of this work. "Stratigraphic" might describe the undividable layers of time and reminiscence, their skidding into each other and their presentation of intersubjective relations and self-reflections. But this stratigraphic form seems to absorb in the act of interpretation (interpreting light) and to lose its "otherness," because the story wants its end to be a story, the narration wants to be "other" and the narrator wants both of them to make "the clearest possible picture of the events" and to "select" and "order" reminiscences but wants to find its form too. Here we can ask the final question: can the otherness be preserved or does this form point at the problem of the otherness and the "understanding of the other" and that of its linguistic and narrative form?

Yes, sure. If we want to recall events from the past we do not understand as past because we cannot and could not render them meaningful, we can choose a narrative form to express the dilemmas, hopes and expectations about this rendering. The way of narration is not only the reference to it, but also working out and *work* in this relation. The unexplainable traumata and the narration as an endeavor of understanding them reveal their essential relation in Holocaust literature and a very difficult and complex way of understanding memories, reminiscence, and the self by writing.

[11] The most important element of this philosophy for us is 'duration is creation', interpreted and mediated by Emmanuel Lévinas (Hand and Lévinas 46).

BDD-A7453 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:56 UTC)

5. Conclusion

This paper raised a set of questions related to the theme "identity and reminiscence"—restricted to just the most important ones—to summarize my past inquiries on Jurek Becker. The researches are also contributions to the Holocaust literature not only in Germany, but also in Hungary. This literary tradition—whether it exists or how it exists—seems to be very important to us because of the Nobel Prize of Imre Kertész, and all related analysis can open up a new approach to it. Jurek Becker's novels and essays are perhaps one of them.

Works cited

Becker, Jurek. *Bronstein's Children*. Trans. Leila Vennewitz. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988. Google Books.

---. "Mein Judentum." *Mein Vater, die Deutschen und ich. Aufsätze, Vorträge, Interviews*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007.

---. "Die unsichtbare Stadt." *Mein Vater, die Deutschen und ich. Aufsätze, Vorträge, Interviews*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007.

Hand, Seán, and Emmanuel Lévinas. *The Lévinas reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1989.

Kertész, Imre. *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*. [*Kaddish for an Unborn Child*.] Budapest: Magvető, 1990.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Die Spur des Anderen*. Trans. Wolfgang Nikolaus Krewani. Freiburg / München: Verlag Karl Alber, 1999.

Sebald, W. G. "Jean Améry und Primo Lévi." *Über Jean Améry*. Ed. Heidelberger-Leonard, Irene. Heidelberg: Winter, 1990. 115-123.

Straub, Jürgen. "Identität." *Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaften*. Eds. Friedrich Jaeger, Burkhard Liebsch, Jörn Rüsen, and Jürgen Straub. Frankfurt am Main: Metzler Verlag, 2004. 277-303.

BDD-A7453 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:56 UTC)