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A Postcard Autobiography: Jurek Becker's Unnarrated Response to the Holocaust

ABSTRACT: As the child of German-Polish Jews living in Łódź in the 1930s and '40s, Jurek Becker sustained losses—of his mother, of his childhood, and of his memories of that time period—that haunted him long into adulthood. A short autobiographical text that he wrote a few months before his death of cancer in 1997, sent in the form of a postcard to his friend Joachim Sartorius, employs a kind of ellipsis, interestingly unmarked by any typographical symbols, that stands in for those losses. What Becker *does not* write in his postcard text is as important as what he *does* write. This essay sheds light on the way in which the gaps in Becker's text serve as the actual communicators of its theme, expands upon Robyn Warhol's categories of the "unnarratable," and explores what Becker's text might tell us about the concept of the unnarrated in general.

KEYWORDS: *the unnarratable, ellipsis, postcard autobiography, Holocaust narrative, Jurek Becker*

IN NOVEMBER 1996, just three months before he died of cancer, German-Jewish author Jurek Becker sent a postcard to his friend Joachim Sartorius on which he wrote a pithy autobiography, notable more for what is *not* part of the text than for what is. This "autobiography" consists solely of a series of beginnings, each phrase and sen-

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tence in the text left incomplete. The first sentence, for example, reads: “I was on, in, as an only.”¹ The essential conceit of Becker’s text, then, is that the physical constraints of the postcard genre limit the comprehensiveness of the autobiography. In this paper I wish to shed light on the way in which the gaps in Becker’s text serve as the actual communicators of its theme, to expand upon Robyn Warhol’s categories of the “unnarratable,” and to explore what this particular text might tell us about the concept of the unnarrated in general.

Becker’s postcard text is probably the most strikingly unnarrated German text that I have encountered aside from, say, the twelfth chapter of Heinrich Heine’s *Ideen: Das Buch Le Grand*:

The German censors-----


 -----dumbheads-----

or, perhaps, Eugen Gomringer’s concrete poem “schweigen”:²

silence silence silence
 silence silence silence
 silence silence
 silence silence silence
 silence silence silence

Similar to the gaps in Heine’s and Gomringer’s texts—though less visually salient—the gaps in Becker’s postcard text represent moments of unnarration. Robyn Warhol, in the fourteenth chapter of Phelan and Rabinowitz’s *Companion to Narrative Theory*, refers to the “unnarrated” as “those passages that explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator’s refusal to narrate” (221). Indeed, Becker’s postcard autobiography is essentially a text characterized by a failure to narrate, if not an out-and-out refusal.

Before we go any further into the notion of unnarration, let me quickly present the text itself:

 **Traité** de construction de la tour Eiffel, 1888
Fonds Eiffel
23. Nov. 96

Liese Kilian,
völlig interessiert bist du blide auf
meinen Lebenslauf, an dem ich gerade
arbeite:
Ich wurde am, in, als einziges. Mein
Vater war, meine Mutter. Bei Kriegs-
ausbruch kam ich, wo ich bist du.
Nach Ende des blies mein Vater mit
mir, was ich bis heute nicht. Er
hätte doch auch. Jedenfalls ging ich
zur und wurde ein halbwegs wor-
wabs. Das änderte sich, als ich den
Zweif eins. Wenn ich auf mein
bisheriges zurückblicke, dann umt
ich lides sagen.

 **M**
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
Liese
Olin Jurek

Nov. 23, '96

Dear Achim,

You might like to have a look at
the autobiography I have been
writing:

I was on, in, as an only. My

father was, my mother. When the war
broke out I was, where I until.

After the end of the my father stayed with
me, which I still do not. He

could have. At any rate I went

to and became a halfway nor-
mal. That changed when I the

profession of a. When I look back on my
previous, I have

to say unfortunately.

With love

Your Jurek

(Kiwus, frontispiece and 232)³

Although the autobiography's fragmentary nature is initially hidden by its smooth surface, the (unmarked) gaps are one of its key elements. Reading through the text, one quickly discovers that the expected syntactic and logical completions of each phrase are not forthcoming. Past participles, objects of prepositions, and whole predicates are simply not there.

Warhol delineates four types of the "unnarratable": 1) the subnarratable (that which needn't be told); 2) the supranarratable (that which can't be told); 3) the antinarratable (that which shouldn't be told); and 4) the paranarratable (that which wouldn't be told). I see nineteen gaps in this autobiographical text. (I readily admit that interpretations may vary as to the number and location of the gaps. In fact, one might read the text as if there were no gaps at all. More on this later.) Each of these blanks in the text maps slightly differently onto Warhol's categories of the unnarratable, and a few do not fit her categories at all. Warhol acknowledges that her list is not exhaustive. In this essay, I propose three additional classifications of unnarration, which have their roots, respectively, in the irretrievability of certain information, the desire to avoid unwanted effects, and the specter of censorship. The proliferation of unnarration in Becker's postcard text makes the text fairly inaccessible to the uninitiated reader. After my initial expansion upon Warhol's work, I will go on to explore how an uninitiated reader might try to cope with the blanks in Becker's text. Such a reader must become a sleuth in search of internal clues that can help him or her fill in the gaps or perhaps might take on the role of narrative scavenger, making do with the words and phrases that are actually present in the text.

The Unnarratable

The nineteen gaps I see in Becker's text are as follows, numbered here for ease of reference:

I was [1] on [2], in [3], as an only [4]. My father was [5], my mother [6]. When the war broke out I was [7], where I [8] until [9]. After the end of the [10] my father stayed with me [11], which I still do not [12]. He could have [13]. At any rate I went to [14] and became a halfway normal [15]. That changed when I [16] the profession of a [17]. When I look back on my previous [18], I have to say, unfortunately [19].

Warhol's schema, with its four categories of the sub-, supra-, anti-, and paranarratable, can help us make sense of Becker's gap-ridden text. Although Warhol developed her categories in the context of fictional texts, the categories are equally perti-

ment in this putatively nonfictional text. The relevant categories in this case are those describing what can't be told (the supranarratable) and what wouldn't be told (the paranarratable).

Let us begin with what can't be told. In Warhol's system, each of the four types of the unnarratable is associated with a modal verb accompanied by a negative: needn't, can't, shouldn't, wouldn't. We have then four modalities—necessity, ability, obligation, and desire—that enable us to assign to each instance of missing textual information a basic reason for its absence. We must ask, then: what cannot be told in Becker's text because he was truly *unable* to do so? As it turns out, Becker was stymied from the very beginning of this autobiography-writing project because of his inability to produce an accurate birthdate for himself. If he wanted to stay in the realm of the nonfictional, he was out of luck, because the information was simply irretrievable. Born to Polish Jews in the city of Łódź, Poland, sometime in the late 1930s, Becker had spent his young childhood in the ghetto, where children's ages were often falsified to make them appear more capable of work. So the date that was given by his parents to the ghetto authorities—September 30, 1937—was likely inaccurate.⁴ Eventually the family was deported, with Becker's father sent to Auschwitz and he and his mother to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. After the war, when Becker was reunited with his father, his mother having died in the camp, the elder Becker could no longer accurately say when his son Jurek had been born.⁵

Thus, Becker lived his adult life uncomfortably unsure of whether this foundational piece of information was accurate or invented. For some, this autobiographical gap might have been immaterial, but for Becker, it became symbolic for the way in which he felt unmoored from his own beginnings. And so he writes: "I was [1] on [2], in [3], as an only [4]," leaving out not only the information he cannot retrieve, that is, the birthdate that seems required of gap two, but also the other bits of information one would normally expect to see at the outset of an autobiographical text. He begins then on a note of uncertainty more comprehensive than the available information would necessitate but which matches the intensity of his emotional reaction to the circumstances of his life.

Warhol calls that which can't be told the supranarratable. In her schema, this category of the unnarratable refers very specifically not just to events that cannot be narrated, but to events that cannot be narrated *because they are ineffable*, hence her choice of the prefix "supra." The supranarratable "comprises those events that defy narrative, foregrounding the inadequacy of language or of visual image to achieve full representation, even of fictitious events" (223). Her examples, from *Tristram Shandy* and *Little Women*, center on narrators who suggest that what they have experienced or observed cannot be put into words because of the overwhelming nature of grief or the indescribable sweetness of reconciliation.

We have then in Becker's text a new form of the supranarratable: that which can't be told *because it's irretrievable*. It is somewhat unfortunate that Warhol's naming system is based on her specific examples. The "supra" prefix is obviously more suited to the idea of ineffability than to irretrievability. One might be tempted to create an entirely new set of terms, each with its own Latin or Greek prefix, but such a proliferation of terms would likely prove to be more distracting than helpful. Warhol's system,

which assigns one term to each modality (save one—permission—which I will take the liberty of adding in a moment), is nicely generative and allows potentially related explanations for instances of unnarration to exist under one umbrella term. It would be interesting, for example, to explore a question such as: what does Becker's irretrievability have to do with Shandy's (supposed) ineffability?

Becker could have, of course, simply used the September 30th date if he had wanted to create a gapless autobiography. Or he could have chosen another date at random, engaging in a bit of fictionalizing. His postcard text does, after all, bridge the boundary between the strictly autobiographical and the imaginatively literary. But clearly Becker was invested here not in avoiding this gap in his biography but rather in confronting it and, in doing so, in presenting it to his audience in an inventive way. What begins as a singular unknown (and unknowable) fact ends up proliferating itself, through the additional gaps in the text, throughout the whole. The message we get from the text is: I don't know my birthdate. I don't know a whole lot of other things about myself. And even if I did, it wouldn't all fit on a postcard!

The second of Warhol's categories operative in Becker's text is the paranarratable, that which wouldn't be told. The paranarratable is represented in Becker's text most obviously by the seventh, eighth, and ninth gaps: "When the war / broke out I was [7], where I [8] until [9]." These are gaps Becker seems to have left blank not because he *could not* fill them in, but rather because he *did not want to* fill them in, preferring to leave out the distressing details of his biography that involved the ghetto, deportation, and the concentration camps. When speaking of the Holocaust and the role it played in his life, Becker often took an indirect, restrained, dispassionate approach. In his essay "Die unsichtbare Stadt," he says, matter-of-factly: "That's what I've been told, that's what's in my papers, so I guess that must be my childhood. Sometimes I think: Too bad something else isn't in there" (10). In another essay he casually notes his lack of extended family, saying, "The radio has been important to me from the time of my childhood. I had no one to tell me stories, all of my grandmothers and uncles and aunts were missing" ("Verschwinden" 271). The German verb he uses here is the low-key "abhanden gekommen," which one might be more likely to use to describe a misplaced set of house keys or pair of mittens than members of one's family.

In Warhol's scheme, the paranarratable has to do with formal convention, that is, with the strictures of certain literary genres. She says it comprises "that which transgresses a law of literary genre without being recognizable as sub-, supra-, or antinarratable" (226). The writers of nineteenth-century novels, for example, as Warhol points out, provided only two basic options for their heroines: 1) get married or 2) die. The generic conventions do not allow for any other more creative outcomes. In Becker's text, the gaps that can be ascribed to the paranarratable are not due to literary convention but rather to the emotional demands of the particular text. Leaving certain events in his autobiography unnarrated allowed Becker to keep his text free from sentimentality, an emotion he veered away from whenever possible because he thought it had the tendency to get in the way of genuine emotional engagement. So we have not only a new form of the supranarratable but also a new form of the paranarratable, an instance of unnarration due not to what wouldn't be told because

of formal convention, but rather to what wouldn't be told because it might produce an unwanted effect, in this case, forced sentimentality.

Becker seems to have wanted to avoid a pre-conditioned response from his readers, a response that comes, as it were, on demand, according to what one might call the "Holocaust script." If we turn for a moment to Becker's novel *Jakob der Lügner*, we can see what exactly this script might entail. The narrator of the novel explains that, in his past attempts to talk about his Holocaust experience, his story has engendered one of two different reactions, neither of which he finds satisfactory: defensiveness or pity. The defensiveness he finds insulting; he tells his bar-side interlocutor "kiss my ass" (25) and heads for the door. The pity he finds equally intolerable; he leaves the bed where his lover has begun asking him questions about his past and locks himself in the bathroom to avoid the conversation: "I hear the pity in her voice and go crazy" (25). The problem, the narrator intimates, is that both reactions prevent the audience from truly listening: defensiveness by returning the focus to the listener with his or her own concerns and pity by producing a canned emotional response.

To circumvent such scripted reactions, the narrator of *Jakob der Lügner*, in his "new-and-improved" version of the story that the narration seems to represent, attempts to remove the emotional triggers for these reactions, creating a narrative that focuses on the characters and their relationships to one another rather than on the deprivations and fears of their ghetto existence. As with Becker's later postcard text, the narration of *Jakob der Lügner* excises, as much as possible, the obviously gruesome or severe. Some of the deletions exist at the level of plot or setting—we see no one injured by the ghetto police, we hear hardly a mention of the cold and the hunger. Other deletions exist at the level of sentence structure. Several ghetto ordinances, for example, are related in an elliptical nature, deleting any reference to the violent punishment that will follow noncompliance. In the first instance, the narrator simply breaks off his recitation of the ordinance at the point at which the punishment is stated, ending with an ellipsis: "If, upon the establishment of the ghetto, any wild plants were overlooked, these are to be cleared away immediately. Offenses are to be . . ." (8). In the second instance, the narrator paraphrases the ordinance, moving quickly through it and deftly skipping over the punishment: "That we are to gather at the square in front of the station this afternoon, precisely at one o' clock, five kilograms luggage per person, the apartments are to be left unlocked and in clean condition, anyone found in his house after the stipulated time, the same holds true for the bedridden and invalid, details at one o' clock at the specified location" (273–74). Here, one has to infer the omission from the missing predicate of the unfinished phrase "anyone found in his house after the stipulated time." There is no typographical marker of the elided material, simply a gap neatly camouflaged.⁶

It is this technique of sly deletion—removing vital material while leaving no direct trace of the erasure—that Becker returned to in the case of his postcard text. The text's matter-of-fact tone, its lack of sentimentality, rests on Becker's desire to delete any references to adversity and loss, smoothing over the gaps where those aspects of his life story are allowed to lie unseen.

In addition to these two new forms of the categories that Warhol codified, I would like to propose a fifth main category, which, to follow Warhol's rough pattern,

I will call the extranarratable: that which may not be told. This fifth category has to do not with necessity, ability, obligation, or desire, but instead with *permission*. The Heine passage, with its direct reference to “the German censors” with whom he was in contention in the mid-1800s, could be characterized as a fabricated example of this fifth category. The text that Heine pretends the censors have blacked out is that which may not be told, the permissions for publication lying with the state censors rather than with the author or the publisher.

The extranarratable differs from Warhol’s category of the antinarratable in that it refers to permission rather than obligation, to what *may* be told rather than what *should* or *should not* be told. The antinarratable, as Warhol explains it, refers specifically to what ought not to be told because of social convention: because of taboos about sex and other bodily functions in Victorian fiction and because of an expectation, even sometimes in twentieth-century fiction, that characters will remain silent in the wake of personal trauma. What joins together these two potentially disparate subcategories of the antinarratable—taboo and trauma—is that they are both injunctions against narration that stem from social pressure. Censorship, on the other hand, is an injunction against narration that stems from a specific politically sanctioned authority and can be enforced by the laws of the land.

Jurek Becker, like Heine, was no stranger to the strictures of censorship. Living and working as a public figure in the German Democratic Republic of the 1960s and 1970s, his movements were followed by that state’s *Staatssicherheitsdienst* (as well as, likely, the equivalent West German intelligence agency), and his work was constrained by the expectations of the GDR Writers Association and the restrictions of the government censors. His collection of short stories, for example, *Nach der ersten Zukunft*, was published in West Germany in its entirety but only as a slimmed-down edition in East Germany, with certain objectionable stories removed. Becker felt so hampered by this system of state censorship that he eventually submitted an application to leave the country. In 1977 he was granted a special visa that allowed him to live in West Germany but to continue to visit the GDR.

The gaps in Becker’s postcard autobiography, then, although they are not the result of actual governmental intervention (especially as the postcard was written after the GDR ceased to exist), can be seen as referring in part to the burden of censorship that plagued most of his career as an author. He simply was not allowed to write everything he wanted to write, at least not if he wanted to have his books published in his home country. When Becker writes in his postcard text, “and became a halfway nor- / mal [15]. That changed when I [16] / the profession of a [17],” he seems to be referring to the frustrations of an East German writer sometimes critical of his government. Although he became what he calls a “halfway normal” child despite the deprivations imposed on him by the Nazi state, he found it impossible, under the limitations of the East German administrative structure, to be a “normal” writer, one who was allowed to exercise his own literary judgment and to state his opinions openly.

The Decoders of the Unnarrated: Knowledgeable and Naïve Readers

In this highly elliptical text, the reader necessarily plays a key role. The purported reader, the “Achim” to whom the postcard is addressed, is Becker’s friend Joachim

Sartorius, a diplomat and fellow writer. Sartorius, familiar with Becker's biography, would have been able to fill in most of the blanks to make a plausible completed version of Becker's biography. If he had done so, it might have looked something like this:

I was [1: born] on [2: Sept. 30th, 1937?], in [3: Łódź, Poland], as an only [4: child]. My father was [5: a textile employee], my mother [6: a housewife]. When the war broke out I was [7: forced into the ghetto], where I [8: lived with my parents] until [9: my father was deported to Auschwitz and my mother and I to Ravensbrück]. After the end of the [10: war] my father stayed with me [11: in Germany], which I still do not [12: understand]. He could have [13: returned to Poland or emigrated]. At any rate I went to [14: school] and became a halfway normal [15: child]. That changed when I [16: chose] the profession of a [17: writer]. When I look back on my previous [18: life], I have to say, unfortunately [19: , that . . .].

Of course, the specifics of Becker's biography are, in a way, beside the point. By leaving certain portions of each sentence blank—those portions that would naturally contain the most specific content—Becker created a text that was essentially generic and could therefore communicate not only his own particular experience but also the experiences of many. As we will see in a moment, Becker's gap-ridden text proves to be much more powerful than an actual autobiography written in a "normal" prose style could ever be, given the small space the postcard afforded him.

In 1967, Becker did write a short autobiography in a more pedestrian style, a brief bio that was required for his application for membership in the East German Writers Association. This biography can serve as a sort of "answer key" for at least portions of the postcard text. In the document, Becker wrote: "I was born on September 30, 1937, in the Polish city of Łódź. My father was a salesman for a textile factory, politically completely disinterested, my mother was a housewife" (Kiwus 21) and "My father, who had survived Auschwitz and a work camp near Schwerin, found me after the end of the war. He stayed with me in Berlin, where I began school for the first time in 1946" (23). It is easy enough, then, if one already knows the basic information as Sartorius did, to fill in the gaps with some accuracy.

But Sartorius was not the postcard's only reader. Jan-Ola Östman, in an article entitled "The Postcard as Media," calls the postcard a "semi-public" genre, explaining, "It is explicitly personal (addressed to only one person), but implicitly public (since its text, picture and stamp are readily visible)" (423). Östman points out that a postcard-writer, although he knows his text may well be available to multiple audiences, can always deny that such was his intent (431). Becker was in all likelihood fully aware that he was writing not just for Sartorius but also for a larger reading public. As one of the better-known German writers of the twentieth century, he would have understood that many of his unpublished writings would, after his death, be collected in an archive and made available to scholars and other enthusiasts of his work. Another friend to whom Becker sent many postcards over the years, actor Manfred Krug, expressed this understanding directly: "I noticed that Jurek's cards were getting better and better. The 'personal' was only there anymore in the ironic turns of phrase that

expressed his longing to see us. . . . Most of the pieces from the last ten years are only ostensibly personal postcards. In reality they are works of art. Otti and I were only one of many stations; the public was the intended reader” (Krug 7). Still, as Östman points out, the postcard genre allows one the guise of a private missive. Becker was able to write his postcard autobiography as if Sartorius were its sole intended reader while still taking his larger audience into account.

The gaps in Becker’s postcard text, though somewhat drastic in nature, do not stand completely outside the expectations of the postcard genre, a medium of communication that depends on a certain familiarity between sender and receiver. A postcard can, after all, accommodate only as much text as will physically fit on the card. The spatial limitations of the postcard demand either extreme brevity in the message conveyed or extreme inventiveness.

Because of these spatial restrictions, postcard-writers over the years have made use of a variety of space-saving strategies that rely on the cooperation of the reader. Anett Holzheid, in an article on the function and use of the postcard in East Germany, refers to the postcard’s “guiding principle of economy” (1). She says, “On the encoding level, this stripped medium’s intense efficiency presents itself in thematic minimalization and linguistic directness. Typical handwritten postcard texts are marked by a rudimentary lexicon, associative topic choice, ellipses on the word and sentence level, and the embedding of directive, commissive, representative communication acts . . . in well-known formulas for expressing salutations, greetings, and wishes” (1–2). Östman points out that abbreviations are a common feature of postcard texts due not only to space constraints, but also as a way to protect sensitive or personal information from potential eavesdroppers (432). The corpus of postcards in Holzheid’s book-length exploration of the topic, *Das Medium Postkarte*, includes examples of a broad range of shortening tactics. Such tactics can be used only because the writer of the postcard knows that the intended reader will be able to interpret them. The reader must, then, contribute some work to the interpretation of the message. Sometimes the abbreviations are quite standard and would be universally understandable. Examples include the use of conventional symbols and abbreviations such as “&” or “u.” for “und” (353, 357); the use of the macron to indicate a double “n” or “m,” as in “könen” for “können” (361); and short forms of compound words such as “B’marken” for “Briefmarken” (357). At other times, the abbreviations are more personalized and would be understandable only to a more select group. Examples include the use of shorthand or the enigmatic abbreviation from Holzheid’s corpus, “N.w.d.I.K./W.W.i.1.” (396). The work that the audience must put into (or is able to put into) the interpretation of the message thus varies.

Certain readers might, then, be labeled as “knowledgeable readers,” insiders who can easily fill in the blanks, and certain other readers as “naïve readers,” outsiders who may not have the information they need to decode the text. In the case of Becker’s postcard text, “Achim” is the explicitly named narratee of the message signed by “Jurek.” Inasmuch as we can map this “Achim” onto the tangible, real-life Joachim Sartorius who really did receive a postcard in the mail from the real-life Jurek Becker, “Achim” is a knowledgeable reader, one familiar enough with Becker’s biography to be able to fill in the blanks in the postcard text, at least as well as Becker could have

himself. But a real-life reader other than Sartorius, one who reads this text as a work of literature years after it was written and perhaps in a different context altogether, cannot easily step into the position of this "Achim" unless he or she has a fair amount of background information from external sources such as biographies, essays, and interviews. How, then, are such real-life readers, potentially ignorant of the specifics of Becker's biography, to cope with such an open text? One strategy would be to act as a sort of narrative sleuth, searching inside the text for clues that might lead to the same external information that a knowledgeable reader would have. Another strategy would be to act as a narrative scavenger, searching inside the text for words and phrases that might be used to fill in the gaps in the text. Although "Jurek" seemed confident that his epistolary partner "Achim" would be able to decode the message as is, perhaps the real-life Becker planted clues and possible fill-ins in his text for the benefit of the rest of us. In other words, Becker writes for an authorial audience that will be able to fill in the gaps and does so in a way that allows both initially knowledgeable and initially naïve readers to join that authorial audience.

The Reader as Sleuth

The internal clues that Becker's postcard text offers for its own interpretation come from at least three sources: from the expectations of the autobiography genre, the range of possible collocations, and the exigencies of the German case system. In other words, the text itself can teach its actual readers how to read it. The genre of the text is, as Becker indicates in his introductory sentence, a "Lebenslauf." This word (a literal translation of the Latin *curriculum vitae*), which Becker chose over the more formal "Autobiographie," indicates not a full-scale autobiography complete with reflection and commentary, but rather a list or medium-length narrative summary of the major stations of a public figure's life. The expectations of this smaller genre are much the same as those of a full-length autobiography: 1) a chronological arrangement, 2) a focus on key events or main stations in the writer's life, and 3) the inclusion of certain kinds of "biographical" information such as the writer's date and place of birth, the writer's parents' names and professions, where the writer went to school, and so forth. In the case of the "Lebenslauf" of a well-known author, reference to his or her career or works is also expected.

These generic expectations can help a naïve reader cope with a number of the initial gaps in the text: "I was [1] on [2], in [3]" and "My / father was [5], my mother [6]." Because we can expect the text to follow a chronological arrangement, we can make a fairly confident guess that the first gap should be filled in with the word "born" and gaps two and three with a date and a place name. Even if one does not know the story of Becker's uncertain birthdate, one does know that a date of some sort should fill in that gap. Because we can also expect an autobiography to include information on the professions of the biographer's parents—what Holden Caulfield famously called "that David Copperfield kind of crap"—we can guess that gaps five and six should be filled in with Becker's parents' professions, rather than, say, characterizations of their personalities or references to their hobbies. Thus, the various expecta-

tions of the autobiography genre, though they cannot tell us much about the exact information that should fill in the gaps, can help us determine the *type* of information that seems appropriate.

Certain collocations in the text, that is, set patterns of words that are likely to be found next to each other, can help a naïve reader of Becker's text cope with gaps such as these: "After the end of the [10] my father stayed with / me [11], which I still do not [12]." and "That changed when I [16] / the profession of a [17]." In each clause, a verb is required for syntactic completeness. What kind of a verb can be clarified, at least to some extent, by the collocations created by the words that surround the gaps. In the case of the twelfth gap, a naïve reader can piece together that Becker's father stayed with him [somewhere / at some point] and that the next phrase "which I still do not" refers to Becker's reaction to the step his father took. This gap cannot be filled in by just any verb—"eat" or "jog" or "invoice," but must be filled in by a verb that takes a stand—"comprehend" or "agree with" or "find satisfactory." In other words, we could fill gaps ten and eleven with something completely unlikely, say, "After the end of the circus, my father stayed with me in the stands until the clowns left," and the twelfth gap would still need to be filled by a verb that takes a stance toward the act of staying late at the circus. The phrase "which I still do not" constrains, by the words that are already laid down, what words may logically follow. Similarly, in the case of the sixteenth gap, the verb is determined fairly strictly by the noun that comes after it, "profession." There are only certain things one does with a profession: one can choose or take up a profession, one can be assigned or forced into a profession, one can give up a profession, hate or like a profession. But one cannot drink a profession, calculate a profession, or discombobulate a profession. Again, the collocations constrain the possibilities and allow even a naïve reader to get a general notion of what information Becker left out of the text.

The strict morphological structure of the German language further limits the ways in which one might fill in some of the gaps in the text, especially those gaps that call for nouns. There are eight instances of missing nouns in the text in which this limitation is operative; one gap requires a feminine noun, three neuter, and four either masculine or neuter. The case endings of the definite articles, indefinite articles, and adjectives preceding the gaps pre-determine the gender of the missing nouns. What might appear to be a fairly open gap in the English translation, then, might actually be a rather constrained one in the German original. Such morphological clues can help a German-speaking reader to fill in gaps such as these, for example: "At any rate I went / to [14] and became a halfway nor- / mal [15]." ("Jedenfalls ging ich / zur [14] und wurde ein halbwegs nor- / males [15].") The fourteenth blank requires a feminine noun; the fifteenth a neuter noun. Combined with the generic expectations of the autobiography and the likely collocations of "zur" and "normales," even a naïve reader will probably come up with "zur Schule" ("to school") and "normales Kind" ("normal child") fairly quickly. Other logical possibilities simply do not fit the grammar of the sentence.

Various aspects of the text such as the three detailed above allow an attentive reader to do some work with the text even in the absence of actual biographical information. But although we can make some easy inferences about what kind of word

belongs in a given spot and fill in a few of the gaps with some confidence, giving us an impression of the general tenor of the piece, the text remains gappy and uncertain.

The Reader as Scavenger

Although being a naïve reader would seem to be a disadvantage when reading Becker's postcard autobiography, I suggest that being one or at least attempting to think like one can have some interpretive advantages. An immediate impulse to fill in the gaps, whether or not the appropriate completions are easy to determine, is perhaps a mistaken one. One might be better off resisting this impulse and leaving the gaps as is.

Becker himself once stated a fairly strong position on the immutability of narrative gaps. In an interview with Marianne Birnbaum, he explained his position that an author does not need to depict each character comprehensively: "I believe an author has the right to take from his characters only what he needs. If there's such a thing as an economy of prose, then it is above all about reduction. In the uninteresting books you're constantly finding sentences that are there for the sake of completeness. If an author needs a character's nose, he doesn't have to report on his or her hair color. I think there's nothing that irritates me as much as this superfluous hair color" ("Vorstellbare" 117). He goes on to tell an anecdote about a question he fielded in the question-and-answer period following a reading from his novel *Bronsteins Kinder*. An audience member wanted to know if the protagonist of the novel, Hans, had an interest in painting, a topic that does not come up in the text itself. Becker reports that he gave this reply: "If I'm telling you a story about a good friend, I don't tell you everything I know about this friend, but only the story. You can ask me questions about him and I might be able to answer. But this Hans exists only to the extent that I have created him, not more; that is, he only exists in the book" (118). If we take Becker's approach to narrative seriously, then one way to deal with his autobiographical postcard text is to accept the fact that what is not in the text is simply not there, period, and to read just what is on the page.

If we read Becker's text with an eye to what *is* there rather than to what *is not*, we find that there are words and phrases right there in the text that can serve as very workable scavenged narrative. I see three places in the text where, if one reads the sentence straight through, ignoring the gaps, a new meaning surfaces:

1. My father was my mother.
2. After the end of the [war] my father stayed with me, which I still do not [understand].
3. When I look back on my previous, I have to say, "unfortunately."

I am not ready to claim that Becker intended his text to be read in just this way, with certain words or phrases present in the text taking the place of missing words or phrases. But I find the interpretations that come out of this means of reading the text appealing, and it seems likely that these alternate meanings are operating on a subconscious, associative plane for many readers of the text.

In the first example, I had earlier assumed that there were two predicates missing, one describing Becker's father's profession and one his mother's. But by using scavenged narrative, we can essentially make the gaps disappear, reading the words "my mother" as a predicate nominative completing the sentence. The subject of the second sentence becomes then the (formerly missing) predicate of the first. When we make this interpretive switch, we get a thought-provoking statement about Becker's upbringing rather than a half-finished recitation of his parents' professions. We hear: "My father was my mother." What might seem nonsensical in another context makes perfect sense in the context of Becker's life. After the war, Becker and his father truly only had each other. Becker's mother was dead; the other members of their extended family were dead; father and son had launched themselves into a new life in East Berlin, far from their starting point of Łódź. Becker's father had to fill both parental roles as he provided his son with the support he needed to deal with attending school for the first time, learning the German language from scratch, and recuperating from lingering illness brought on by malnutrition in Ravensbrück.

In the second example, I had earlier assumed that there were three gaps, one of which explained where or at what point Becker's father stayed with him after the war. Indeed, in Becker's essay "Mein Judentum," he writes: "After the war my father stayed with me in Berlin, for reasons that I can again only guess at" (15). The reasons he supposes his father might have had to remain in Germany include 1) if you are not truly at home anywhere, you might as well just stay where you are and 2) since the worst of the anti-Semites were Germans and they were "the losers," Germany is the safest place for Jews. But what if the real question is not why Becker's father stayed with his son in Berlin rather than returning to Poland or emigrating to Israel or to the United States, but why he stayed with him at all? If we use scavenged narrative in this case, the phrase "which I still do not [understand]" refers not to the missing prepositional phrase but rather to the verb, to the very act of staying with him. The phrase "with me" becomes the sole stand-in for the longer expected phrase "with me [in Germany / in Berlin]."

In Becker's novel *Der Boxer*, father and son experience a reunion very similar to that experienced by Becker and his father after the war. In the story, Arno, a Holocaust survivor, engages a search agency to try to find his son. He gives the agency his son's name and approximate age, and they eventually identify a young boy who roughly matches the father's description but who goes by a different name. It is clear that Arno is not entirely sure this boy is his son Mark, but he nevertheless takes the boy home and treats him as his child. Becker's father, in the real-life version of this scene, apparently felt somewhat unsure that the malnourished child he was presented with was Jurek, until he saw a particular pattern of freckles on his son's forehead (Gilman 21). In *Der Boxer*, Becker seems to have been taking an imaginative look at what this experience must have been like for his father. Would it not have been reasonable, he may have been thinking, for his father to have convinced himself that this boy was not his son and to have moved on to a lonelier but easier life on his own? The very fact that his father searched him out and stayed with him was remarkable.

In the third example, I had earlier assumed that there were two gaps, one noun following the adjective "previous" and one dependent clause bringing the sentence

to an end after the word “unfortunately.” In my sample filled-in text, this last gap was the only one I was unable to adequately fill in, so I marked it with an ellipsis: “I have to say, unfortunately, that . . .” I am not at all sure that Sartorius would have known how to fill in this last gap, or that even Becker himself knew how to formulate this retrospective self-appraisal. Using scavenged narrative and making some adjustments in punctuation and capitalization, one can close things up by changing the adjective “previous” to a noun and turning “unfortunately” into a punchy sentence-closer.

In German, as in English, the boundaries between nouns and adjectives are fairly fluid. Turning an adjective, therefore, into a stand-alone adjectival noun is easy—just capitalize the first letter and add “-es.” The adjective “bisherig” in this sentence, “previous,” conveniently already has the “-es” ending required; in a more standard interpretation as I gave above, this would serve as the neuter adjective ending preceding the noun “das Leben.” All we need to do, then, to convert the adjective into a noun is to capitalize the word and make it “Bisheriges,” which translates as “things that have previously happened.” The new noun “Bisheriges” thus substitutes creatively for the expected adjective / missing-noun pair.

Similarly, by adding a simple set of quotation marks, we can transform the word “leider” in this sentence, “unfortunately,” from a part of the sentence awaiting a subordinate “that”-clause (“I have to say, unfortunately, that . . .”) into the single-handed completer of what the narrator must say, a spoken word ringing in the ear at the end of the text: (“Dann muß ich ‘leider’ sagen”). That one word alone, “unfortunately,” carries great power with its dual implications of solemnity and resignation, bringing definite meaning to this otherwise rather enigmatic sentence.

It is possible to make a rather unorthodox reading such as the one I am proposing here because Becker chose to leave the gaps in his text unmarked. Instead of employing a typographical marker to denote the empty spaces, Becker lets his poetic voice simply carry on past each gap, moving assuredly from sentence to sentence as if the narration were whole and well. By leaving the ellipses in the text unmarked and initially inconspicuous, by arranging the sentences on the card as if they together made up a complete, unblemished text, he establishes, through this brief series of half-finished sentences, a simulated normalcy and coherency that his actual autobiography lacked.

Yet I do not think that Becker would have wanted to renounce the gaps altogether. He was well aware that the mystery of his life's beginnings was not only a burden, but also a blessing. Speaking of his attitude toward his Jewish heritage, which was not always rational or consistent, he once called it “a mystery without which my life would be poorer” (“Mein Judentum” 23). I believe that Becker must have felt that, to a large extent, what is known may be less important than what is unknown, what is said may be less important than what is left unsaid. In a 1986 interview with Volker Hage, Becker told an anecdote that sums up this outlook:

Manfred Krug, my best friend, had a bit part at the Berlin Ensemble, Brecht's theater in East Berlin, when he was a young man, 17 years old. Brecht was still alive and putting on a play by Erwin Strittmatter. Krug had a tiny role: he played a member of the Freie Deutsche Jugend [the GDR youth organiza-

tion] and had to sing a song and accompany it on the guitar. Once, Brecht came, interrupted the rehearsal, and said: “You’re playing that guitar completely wrong. It sounds terrible!” Krug, who already had the gift of gab, answered: “Mr. Eisler wrote a melody with eight chords, but I can only play three. I don’t think it’s so bad. I’m playing a boy from the country, not a guitarist.” Brecht listened to this impertinence and somehow it impressed him. “You know what?” he said, “You’re absolutely right. Do me one favor, though: learn the other five chords and then leave them out!” (“Hinter” 333)

Just as Krug chose to make do with the three chords he knew, leaving out the other five, Becker seems to have discovered that working with partial information is not necessarily a tragedy. Sometimes your readers might be able to fill in things for you, and sometimes they might be as much at a loss as you are. The absences in Becker’s text therefore not only depict the missing pieces of his autobiography, plunging the reader into the same uncertainty Becker lived with day by day, but they also invite the reader into a compelling puzzle in which a multiplicity of meanings can be created from the narrative fragments that remain, a puzzle that continues, over multiple readings, to challenge us and to move us.

Endnotes

I would like to thank James Phelan and the anonymous reviewer of this essay for their insightful comments and suggestions. Thanks also go to the Valparaiso Writing Circle for feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

1. Translations from German to English are mine throughout.
2. For a discussion of the privileging of lyricity over narrativity in Gomer’s poem (in its Spanish version “Silencio”), see Brian McAllister’s article in the May 2014 issue of *Narrative*.
3. Interestingly, Becker sent a postcard in this same elliptical style to his wife Christine, dated November 22, 1996. The topic of that text is the story of their romantic relationship. See Kiwus 225.
4. See the document on page 10 of Karin Kiwus’s collection of archival materials. The document is entitled “Der Aelteste der Juden in Litzmannstadt-Getto.”
5. Biographical information throughout comes from Sander Gilman’s *Jurek Becker: A Life in Five Worlds*.
6. In another scene in *Jakob der Lügner*, the narrator reports on a similarly elided reference to punishment, this one when a Nazi guard stops short of telling the Jewish Dr. Kirschbaum what will happen to him if he cannot heal the ghetto commander: “‘If you’re successful in saving the commander, you probably won’t look so good in front of your own people. And if you’re not successful . . .’ Preuß interrupts his incisive analysis, the rest would be tactless, moreover, superfluous” (205).

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