

CROSSROADS

An interdisciplinary journal for the study
of history, philosophy, religion and classics

SPECIAL ISSUE – 2008 RHIZOMES CONFERENCE

VOLUME III ISSUE II 2009

ISSN: 1833-878X

Pages 5-11

Ursula Baer

*Violent Naming: Power Relations and Cultural Identities in Representations of
Family-less Children in Modern German-Language Literatures*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of literary narratives in forging individual and collective memories and identities as represented in the fictions of two modern German-language authors. I present the notion of *familienlos* (family-less): children whose parents are unable or not permitted to raise their children, through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, in particular, injurious speech acts, to consider their social and cultural effects on the family-less children characterized in these texts. In particular, I consider violence in content and in the naming of family-less characters in the works of Mariella Mehr and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach. Giving consideration to the limited cultural space permitted to family-less children in these works, I explore associated ruptures in individual and collective identities and memories that result. The potential of these characterizations to stabilize, transform, shift or reflect identities and permitted cultural space of family-less children and of the larger community is also addressed. In doing so, the power relations of family-less characters in these texts and the effects of violent naming within their narratives are considered from literary and performative perspectives.

BIOGRAPHY

Ursula Baer is pursuing a doctorate in German Language and Literature at the University of British Columbia, Canada. She holds an MA in German Language and Literature from

the University of British Columbia, and a Licentiata Philosophiae, lic. phil. 1 from the University of Zurich, Switzerland.

Her current research straddles both sociology and literary analysis, focusing on issues of gender, identity and memory of *familienlose* (family-less) characters in German speaking culture

VIOLENT NAMING: POWER RELATIONS AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN REPRESENTATIONS OF FAMILY-LESS CHILDREN IN MARIELLA MEHR'S *DASKIND* AND MARIE VON EBNER-ESCHENBACH'S *DAS GEMEINDEKIND*

This paper is part of a larger study that addresses naming, memory and individual and cultural identity of family-less characters in German-language Literatures from the 19th century to the present. In considering the characterization in these novels, I explore the role of literary narratives in forging memory and identity in individuals as well as in communities. Ultimately, this work attempts to offer insight into alternative notions of community and family. As fictions across the globe continue to address alterity and collective identity, discourses replete with our current understandings of marginalized and vulnerable communities, this paper attempts to create new spaces for those discussions. Within the two German-language novels, Mariella Mehr's *Daskind* (*Thechild*, 1995ⁱ) and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's *Das Gemeindegkind* (*Their Pavel*, 1887ⁱⁱ), I consider the Butlerian notion of the speech act as a narrative tool to show how language wounds, and the effects such speech acts have on both the recipient and on the community that names. Close examination is given to the Butlerian speech act as carrying within it cultural and historical narratives possibly unknown outside of the negotiated shared memory of the larger cultural group or collective.

These two novels, written more than a century apart and set in different German-language cultures, illuminate the historic marginalizations of family-less characters across German-language literature and allow me to map those historic reverberations as well as to trace potential shifts in representations of alterity over time. To be without family creates barriers to both belonging and identity, a lack that is presented in both novels as a vulnerability associated with injurious speech acts and other out-casting gestures towards the family-less child characters. These writings about home children and foster children give voice to their losses, marginalized agency, and perseverance and allow a glimpse of their history in German-speaking Europe. The location of family-less characters in Mehr and Ebner-Eschenbach can therefore be read as abject, prescribed and in some cases wholly negated.

At the outset of my investigation stand two discourses which have until now been discussed independently: memory and the Butlerian notion of performativity, in particular injurious or violent speech acts. How these two connect is the overarching question in my investigation. To analyze Mehr's and Ebner-Eschenbach's texts for the purpose of this paper, I begin an exploration that emerges from memory discourse and then consider the linkages to speech act theory, in particular to the Butlerian notion of the speech act.

Since the 20th century French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs introduced collective memory as a social phenomenon determined by social factors rather than, as was commonly thought, by biological factors (for example as an inheritable or ethnic memory) its discussion has been of increasing interest to the social sciences and the humanities. For the purpose of this paper, I adopt the term *communicative memory* as introduced by Jan Assmann to describe the social aspect of memory identified by Halbwachs. Further, I am employing the term *cultural memory* as a particular form of communicative memory as Assmann explains it: 'if we think of the typical three-generation cycle of communicative memory as synchronic memory space, then cultural memory, with its traditions reaching far back into the past, forms the diachronic axis.'ⁱⁱⁱ

The complex development of identity emerges via socialization as individuals navigate collective or social and cultural memory intergenerationally.^{iv} Within this complex, speech and texts are vital elements of socialization and are therefore important pillars of individual, collective and cultural memory. Hence, speech acts, I posit, are one way to 'transfer'^v memory. For Butler, the 'moment'^{vi} when an illocutionary speech act 'performs its deed'^{vii} is never just one single moment, but the location of condensed historicity which 'exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance.'^{viii} In other words, Butler acknowledges that when language is used for example to wound or name, it carries with it the weight of history and its effect on memory and identity and proliferates that history into the future. Like Butler, I argue here that injurious speech affirms an historical narrative that, factual or not, permeates a shared collective memory persistent insofar as it is sanctioned by the dominant community. Therefore, the speech act can be seen as a dynamic juncture between the named and those naming in terms of its effect on identity and individual, collective and cultural memory.^{ix} When considering speech acts and, in particular, the Butlerian notion of injurious speech within the context of the two novels analyzed here, I explore the role of injurious speech as a narrative tool constituting identity, as well as communicative memory.

In the context of Mariella Mehr's *Thechild*, and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's *Their Pavel*, this dynamic juncture is most usefully illustrated when we witness the out-cast characters as they intersect with the social order and with other characters who represent the larger, the naming community. In the sense that both novels

represent an outsider character's personal narrative, they can be read as counter-memories that challenge the official hegemonic history.

Both novels present readers with characters whose families are unable or not permitted to look after them. In German, a term, *familienlos*, exists to describe these children. I have translated this term, *familienlos*, into English as *family-less* and by doing so perform a speech act that names family-less characters represented within the two texts in ways that have yet to be considered in literary research. However, since the term *familienlos* is never used in the texts, my use of *family-less* to express or name the experience of the protagonists in the novels does not constitute a reiterative appropriation of injurious speech in the Butlerian sense. My use of this term does exist as a performative act that potentially re-identifies these characters and may support the notion of the novel as a space for insurrectionary cultural memory. Further, one does find the term *familienlos* in recent use in German to denote a number of identifications, most importantly by former family-less children to describe their own uncommemorated experience. My reason for reaching toward an English translation of *familienlos* is multiple. Primarily, by creating a new term, *family-less*, I am able to express more concisely and more exactly the contradiction that family-less characters within these texts navigate, a contradiction that appears to have no other English corollary^x. In order to translate as closely as possible my understandings of that experience, I engaged in an etymological review so as to match the historicity of meanings associated both with the shared root, *familia*, as well as with the additional suffixes *-los*, and *-less*. I am drawn to address the root and the suffixes of both words, the German *familienlos* and the English *family-less*, in order to ascertain the extent to which the historical sediment of language adds moral weight to labeling and naming.

This notion is especially interesting, when considering the historicity of, and location in social time and space that occurs for, both the named and the naming when injurious speech acts are used. I posit here, that in the cultural memories and identities represented in both novels, the name and the notion of family is primary.^{xi} Those who are without a family, or a family name, are considered lacking. In the place of this lack, those with families have communal authority to insert injurious speech in the form of slurs and derogatory names. My own introduction of the term family-less derives from the authoritative cultural identity which is assumed by the societies presented in the texts juxtaposed with the lived experience of family-less characters, as we encounter them as readers.

When considering representations of family-less children in the works of Mehr and Ebner-Eschenbach, the etymological meanings of both the German suffix *-los* and the English suffix *-less*, which are most commonly negative, seem to reverberate through the texts as cultural meanings and memory. For example, in Ebner-Eschenbach's *Their Pavel*, the narrator declares that when a child is left without parents, relatives or a home, the responsibility for the child's food and shelter is to be shouldered by the community, with the child traveling between farms or homes from one day to the next in order to secure his or her basic needs. As an extra burden for many community members, it becomes clear in the text that these basic needs are not generously addressed. The family-less child, in fact, does without proper education, food and clothing in this system which continually separates him or her out as *Other*. The author illustrates this repressed reality of harm, which serves to stabilize the status quo for those who are not family-less, in the voice of the lady of the manor as she speaks to the mayor of Soleschau:

But I know this: the child will go to ruin in your [the community's] hands. And why is it that the child will go to ruin in your hands?^{xiii}

[...]

I know everything. The community is supposed to finance the children's education, but even at age twelve they can't tell the difference between A and Z.

[...]

And the children for whom the community is supposed to buy shoes are all running around barefoot.^{xiii}

In Mehr's *Thechild*, the family-less child, a girl, is brought into a private foster home. The foster mother tells the young female protagonist that she was not picked out of a line in the state home to 'laze about'^{xiv} and therefore should come and help with the household chores. Here, Mehr represents the child as a site of labour, in both domestic and social fora. In addition to her domestic duties, *Thechild* becomes a legitimizing presence with regard to the traditional family construct since, in this particular case, the couple is unable to conceive.

In this novel, Mehr offers a one and a half page listing of gestures and instructions for a parent in response to a crying child. These suggestions, often rooted in superstition and although problematic to current sensibilities, are legitimate cultural gestures of caring and love for a crying child in the context of the book. Conversely, in the case of the nameless protagonist, who is family-less and who cries at night, there is no response to calm or

care for that child by the caregiver. Instead, the only witness to the girl's ordeal as we learn through the narrator, '... may be a careless moon in the sky.'^{xv} The family-less child is left in isolation '... to despair in the hopeless time that turns into eternity.'^{xvi}

The persistence of the old and mostly negative moral meanings of the German *familienlos* seem to echo throughout the communal memories expressed repeatedly in both texts via verbal and nonverbal gestures of the community towards the family-less children. In other words, the negative connotations of the term *familienlos* echo through time and cultural space represented in these novels.

Returning to the question of human vulnerability to language, particularly to the naming which constitutes our individual, collective and cultural identities by bringing the one named, '... into social location and time'^{xvii}, we can now focus on injurious speech in these two texts. Through violent naming or injurious speech, the one named is derogated and demeaned. Within the texts, injurious speech is used often and over time in addition to the marginalizing gestures of the community acted out against the vulnerable, family-less children. Butler posits: 'To be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are. Indeed, it may be that what is unanticipated about the injurious speech act is what constitutes its injury, the sense of putting its addressee out of control. Exposed at the moment of such a shattering is precisely the volatility of one's 'place' within the community of speakers.'^{xviii}

At the outset of Ebner-Eschenbach's *Their Pavel*, the male protagonist is named with the derogatory term, *Gemeindekind* by village authorities. Tatlock translates the 19th-century term *Gemeindekind*, which is no longer used, as *community child* and explains astutely that with it the author refers to Pavel's '... lowly status as the ward of the smallest unit of government in the Empire, the commune.'^{xix} The lady of the manor declares the protagonist worthy of nothing other than being a community child. This initial violent naming condemns the protagonist, Pavel, throughout the novel to years of hunger, poverty, physical and emotional neglect and abuse, and determines his social location as out cast. This location also opens the door to further violent naming by the entire community. Children and adults alike call him 'dog,'^{xx} 'stupid,'^{xxi} 'wicked boy,'^{xxii} 'worst boy in the village,'^{xxiii} but for years never by his given name.

In Mehr's text *Thechild*, the girl remains nameless throughout the entire novel. Here, the function of Butler's notion of injurious naming as an act of violent identification is openly apparent within the text. Thechild, we learn from the narrator, is not allowed to have a name, because she could otherwise not be addressed by the community with countless, often sexually charged, slurs and derogatory terms such as 'little whore,'^{xxiv} 'piggy girl,'^{xxv} 'dirty kid,'^{xxvi} and so on. Hence she becomes in the text Thechild. Notwithstanding the community's professed Christian faith and its associated values, Thechild's namelessness opens a space wherein injurious speech characterizes her entire identity. Her namelessness also provides for the community a sanctioned location to reiterate its conventional and negotiated identity at the expense of the most vulnerable among them, the family-less child. The village subjugates Thechild using superstition, labels the young protagonist with a mixture of repulsion, fear, hatred and greed and utters slurs indicating that she is a child 'off the devil's carriage.'^{xxvii} Thechild, seen by most villagers as a threat to the social order, is claimed as the site of all bad luck in the village, including being responsible for the death of people and cows as well as for bad weather which destroys their crop.^{xxviii}

Reiteration of violent naming as part of communicative memory can support the exchange of shared experiences within a group, and constitute and affirm the community as it is. In other words, because injurious speech is directed at family-less children, all those who live with their families retain authority and authenticity. Both authors, Mehr and Ebner-Eschenbach, express this retention of authority in their books not only through adult characters but also through child figures. In *Their Pavel*, the village children repeatedly address the adult protagonist as 'community child'^{xxix} and 'poisoner.'^{xxx} These slurs act on the family-less character preventing escape from his prescribed social location in the novel. Likewise, for Mehr's protagonist, 'everyone had a punishment for Thechild, the other, including ... the children, who learned it from their parents.'^{xxxi} This reiteration of communicative memory as practiced through injurious speech indicates another performative layer that locates and confines the characters.

Further, in cases where the communicative memory excludes the lived experience of some members—for example, the family-less characters in these novels—a disruption of the sanctioned social order resides within the private experience of both those who have been the site of injurious speech and those who witness it and remain inactive or silent in its presence. In this way, memory may, as Zandy states '... act as a bridge between the subjective and the intersubjective—the private and unprivileged circumstances of individual lives—and the objective—the collective history ...'^{xxxii}

The surprise of Butler's speech act theory resides in her enthusiasm for linguistic survival.^{xxxiii} Her explanation that the performative is the "linguistification" of the political field^{xxxiv} prompts the commentator Vicky Kirby to wonder "[h]ow language can produce failure and conformity as well as unpredictability and innovation."^{xxxv} Butler herself asks whether there is any other possibility for speech acts that are injurious, than 'to cause harm.'^{xxxvi} In identifying the process of the speech act as an instance of injury, Butler posits a further trajectory provided by language itself, one that 'seeks to arrest the force of the prior instance'^{xxxvii} and answers: 'If hate speech constitutes the kind of act that seeks to silence the one to whom it is addressed, but which might revive within the vocabulary of the silenced as its unexpected rejoinder, then the response to hate speech constitutes the deofficialization of the performative, its expropriation for non-ordinary means.'^{xxxviii}

For example, with a keen knowledge of the dynamics of alterity and identity, Ebner-Eschenbach creates in *Their Pavel* a speech act wherein the protagonist claims the derogatory term 'stupid'^{xxxix} and uses it in a counter-hegemonic way, assuming authority over the slur and re-identifying himself. This constitutes the beginning of an identity shift for the protagonist. His initial recognition of an unofficial identity, 'stupid, but not as stupid ...'^{xl} allows the character to perform other re-identifying gestures, some of which provide access to more legitimacy within the larger community as homeowner and landowner. In Butler's words: 'The appropriation of such norms [in this case injurious speech] to oppose their historically sedimented effect constitutes the insurrectionary moment of that history, the moment that founds a future through a break with that past.'^{xli}

In the case of Mehr's *Thechild*, the protagonist is not able to assume authority over violent naming. Outwardly, she reiterates rather than subverts the violent naming which has informed her life. Without speech or social supports throughout the entire book, and exposed almost daily to verbal, physical and sexual abuse, Thechild internalizes the experienced violence and acts on it. However, if we can agree that unsubverted violent naming enforces conformity, then this protagonist too breaks with conformity albeit by re-enacting the violence. Further, if we read Thechild's refusal to speak as an ultimately subversive response to violent naming, then her silence becomes a powerful performative act to counter the authority of the injurious speech she has withstood throughout the novel.

When considering the effect of injurious speech acts on the naming community, we turn to a discussion of cultural memory, particularly to ask how a novel exposing the alterity of the family-less might act on the cultural memory of a group. According to Assmann and Frevert, works of literature are used to store experience and knowledge into long-term memory.^{xlii} The presence of the omniscient narrator in both books creates the possibility for a bridging between what collective identity sanctions and what is lived, as Zandy says, intersubjectively. If we engage with Butler's notion that injurious language can be subverted by reiteration by the subject, then it is possible to argue that these novels themselves act on the individual and the community via its communicative memory in the short term and via cultural memory should the text be canonized, to alter what is understood and taken as identity. In other words, novels that act out an unconventional narrative for the community serve as potential sites of counter-memory, counter-identity and acts of insurrection for the individual as well as the community, potentially forging new cultural space.

By considering and naming family-less characters in Mehr and Ebner-Eschenbach through the lens of Butler's speech act theory, I have traced potential sites of shift in both individual and collective identities and in cultural memory. By considering a performance that renames the protagonists of the novels as family-less, my hope is to open another identifying discursive space. Challenging the memories and identities of the communities that name the family-less with injurious speech acts, as Mehr and Ebner-Eschenbach have done, and which I continue in this paper, performs a possible loosening of the hegemonic story of alterity for the family-less and considers an intersubjective perspective which allows the family-less character, and perhaps the reader, agency to redefine identity, both individual and shared. It is interesting to note that Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's book *Their Pavel* was included in the official school curriculum in Austria until the 1970s, around the time Mehr's narrative is set. While Ebner-Eschenbach is one of the few canonized female German-language novelists of her time, Mariella Mehr's work remains on the periphery of the literary landscape. Underscoring the depth of collective desire toward social cohesion—that when we close the book everything is resolved—as Ebner-Eschenbach's closed narrative provides, perhaps it is possible to constitute Mehr's *Thechild* as a text whose breach of that cohesion opens a harsher territory in which to embed itself in the cultural canon and memory.

REFERENCES

- ⁱ Mariella Mehr, *Daskind* (Zurich, Frauenfeld: Nagel und Kimche AG, 1995).
- ⁱⁱ Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, *Das Gemeindegeld*, ed. Rainer Baasner (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1983); Ebner-Eschenbach, *Their Pavel*, trans. Lynn Tatlock (Columbia, SC: Camden House, INC, 1996).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory* (trans. Rodney Livingstone). (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 8.
- ^{iv} See, for example, Assmann.
- ^v I adopted this term from Paul Connerton who understands “cultural memory” as an ‘act of transfer.’ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 39.
- ^{vi} Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York, London: Routledge, 1997), 3.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*
- ^{ix} See also Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, “Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction,” *Signs* 28 (2002): 1–19.
- ^x Given that family-less characters exist in these novels without acknowledgement by society of their particular losses and marginalization, and by the very simple fact that they are without family in a community where the family grouping is assumed, I posit that they are constituted by a contradictory identity.
- ^{xi} See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *Die verborgenen Mechanismen der Macht* (Hamburg: VSA, 1992).
- ^{xii} Although the narrator refers here to Pavel’s sister, the novel shows that this statement is also true for the protagonist, Pavel.
- ^{xiii} Ebner-Eschenbach, *Their Pavel*, 5.
- ^{xiv} Mehr, 17.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, 104.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 104.
- ^{xvii} Butler, 29.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 4.
- ^{xix} Ebner-Eschenbach, *Their Pavel*, xii.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, 49.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 21.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 10.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 35.
- ^{xxiv} Mehr, 5.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, 12.
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, 184.
- ^{xxix} Ebner-Eschenbach, *Their Pavel*, 129.
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*, 66.
- ^{xxxi} Mehr, 92.
- ^{xxxii} Janet Zandy, *Liberating Memory: Our Work and Our Working-Class Consciousness* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 4.
- ^{xxxiii} Butler draws, for example, from J.L. Austin (performative) but departs from his view of sign in *Excitable Speech*. See for example: Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
- ^{xxxiv} Butler, 74.
- ^{xxxv} Vicky Kirby, *Judith Butler: Live Theory* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006): 87.
- ^{xxxvi} Butler, 20.
- ^{xxxvii} *Ibid.*, 1.
- ^{xxxviii} *Ibid.*, 160.
- ^{xxxix} Ebner-Eschenbach, *Their Pavel*, 21.
- ^{xl} *Ibid.*, 21.
- ^{xli} Butler, 159.
- ^{xlii} Aleida Assmann und Ute Frevert, *Geschichtsvergessenheit—Geschichtsversessenheit* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1999).