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# **Are there authentic self-narratives? A discussion with Paul Ricoeur and Judith Butler**

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► **To cite this version:**

Chiara Pavan. Are there authentic self-narratives? A discussion with Paul Ricoeur and Judith Butler. 2025. <hal-04577854>

**HAL Id: hal-04577854**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04577854v1>**

Preprint submitted on 14 Mar 2025

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## Introduction

The success of the narrative theory developed by Paul Ricœur from the 1980s is due to the fact that it seems to provide an original solution to the problem of personal identity – the problem of knowing what remains through all the changes that affect us during our life, what establishes the continuity that allows us to speak about ourselves and to claim this life as ours. This theory states that our identity is not already given in life as it is lived, but must be constructed through narration: telling our life means configuring the heterogeneous elements in order to bring them together under a same narrative thread extending to the whole of our life. The originality of this narrative theory would then consist in its ability to propose a model of identity over the long term, without reducing it to the permanence of a substrate, without emptying it of any historical and personal dimension, and in defining it on the contrary through contents that give a concrete meaning to our sense of being the same over time.

On the one hand, in fact, Ricœur maintains the idea that there is no bodily aspect, no character trait or psychic element that remains the same throughout our lives. Hume and Nietzsche's criticisms prevent us to ground the continuity of the self on a permanent substance: the qualities we can observe, whether physical or psychic, never remain constant. On the other hand, Ricœur, who refuses to conclude from this that identity is defeated, also sets himself apart from Kant or Locke, who avoided this difficulty by stripping identity of any particular trait, and by conceiving it respectively as a purely transcendental dimension, or as the simple continuity of

consciousness<sup>1</sup>. These approaches, insofar as they define identity in a way that is indifferent to the contents and modifications beyond which it asserts itself, end up neglecting the personal dimension of the self. In other words, it underestimates the problem that change poses in our lives. According to Locke, for example, we remain the same person as long as we have the feeling of being the same, that is as long as our consciousness of ourselves accompanies us. It doesn't matter if we find ourselves in a different body every day: it would make no difference because these bodily changes would not affect our pure feeling of being the same. Ricœur's narrative theory, on the contrary, proposes to reinject some content into the definition of identity: this content has not to be understood as the permanence of the same element, but rather as the result of the narrative we build.

However, it is legitimate to ask whether this way of reinjecting content into the definition of personal identity – a content which is not given but *produced* by the narrative – does not raise another specific problem: the problem of the truth or authenticity of this content. What can offer us guarantees that our story is the story of the life it claims to tell? Certainly, if the identity we tell is not already given in life, but is produced by the story itself, it does not seem possible to evaluate the correspondence between the story and the narrated life. But then, on which grounds are we entitled to claim that the identity we build through self-narration rightly describe who we are? Shouldn't we at least ask the question of the authenticity of the story, by asking questions about the type of coincidence that can be found between what we say about ourselves and what we actually are? Could it be said, for example, that in Woody Allen's *Zelig*, the continually changing narrative of the main character is a narrative that succeeds in producing its identity? Although Ricœur questions the veritative dimension of the hermeneutics of the self, and analyzes the differences between story and life, or between fiction and reality, his work does not address

these questions about the truth of the story that is supposed to constitute our identity through time directly. The idea that life and narration are not entirely different from one another, as well as the hermeneutic principle that no interpretation is the only one, in the sense that “it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives”<sup>2</sup>, inevitably seem to lead to the conclusion that *any* plotting of our lives must succeed in producing our identity. If so, narratives can never truly fail to account for our lives. It looks as if the reinjection of content into personal identity, which seemed to make the specificity of Ricœur’s narrative theory, finally lacked a serious consideration of this content. In 2005, Ricœur wonders whether it is not “our most authentic identity, the one that makes us who we are, that demands to be recognized”<sup>3</sup>. But to raise such a question, shouldn’t we be able to define the conditions of truth and falsity of self-narratives? Doesn’t this question demand that we examine their conditions of success or failure?

Therefore, we still have to face the question as to whether the coherence required by any narrative construction does not already imply a betrayal of the discontinuity of life, if the narrative is not rather a way of hiding that which cannot be told in a story, or if it does not aim for a form of social recognition that requires its submission to certain standards. Isn’t the story we tell of ourselves at a certain moment in our life the result of interests or demands that end up taking it too radically away from life as it is lived? These are some of the decisive questions Judith Butler raised in her 2005 book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, even though her critical approach is not directly addressed to Ricœur’s narrative theory<sup>4</sup>. Butler emphasizes that self-narratives, like all the other acts through which we constitute our identity, must be understood as responses to an injunction that comes from others and that is always linked to certain norms we did not choose. This means that self-narratives are not mere attempts to get to know ourselves or to communicate information about our past, but also, and perhaps above all, ways of placing

ourselves in a normative context, by conforming to imperatives of coherence and intelligibility which end up distancing narration from our life and our singularity<sup>5</sup>. We may then wonder whether the stories we tell are truly ours, or rather if they do not slip away from us insofar as they need to be constructed as coherent, intelligible and recognizable stories.

Through the analysis of Ricœur's narrative theory and the examination of Butler's critical point of view, this chapter will emphasize the conditions of success and failure of self-narratives. We will first see how the Ricœurian formulation of narrative identity urges us to refuse the criterion of truth as the correspondence between narratives and life. We will show, secondly, that the question of truth within Ricœur's hermeneutics gives rise to the concept of attestation ("*attestation*"), which nevertheless remains insufficient since it does not concern the content of self-narratives, but only our ability to tell. The examination of Butler's work will allow us, in a third step, to specify the possibilities of failure of the narrative. We will finally show, in the last section, that the story of oneself, whose success is held between two types of possible failure – its loss in life or its distance from it –, can only manage to constitute our identity if we *recognize* ourselves in the narratives we have produced.

## I. Paul Ricœur: refusing truth as correspondence

### Ricœur's narrative identity thesis

We will examine first Ricœur's formulation of the narrative identity thesis. This thesis affirms that our personal identity is not already constituted, that it is not already present in the life we

live. On the contrary, it is necessary to construct it by an explicit act of narration that configure the heterogeneity and discontinuity we experience while living.

The reason why Ricœur uses the narrative form consists in the fact that this discursive practice, understood on the basis of Aristotle's *mimesis* as a "creative imitation" of human action<sup>6</sup>, can give rise to a "discordant concordance", or to a "synthesis of the heterogeneous"<sup>7</sup>. Narration articulates disparate events through temporality, and thus offers a united thread that runs through them without eliminating the ruptures by which these events threaten the identity of the narrated character. It is through the stories we find in literature that we learn to build plots and tell stories, and it is by making these stories interact with our lives that we learn to narrate a story about ourselves and to constitute our own identity.

According to Ricœur, this specificity of narration provides a solution to the aporias of personal identity, or at least it offers a way to rethink these aporias differently<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, the problem of personal identity depends on the gap between, on the one hand, the fact that we can re-identify ourselves as being the same thanks to the permanence of something (namely our physical resemblance, our way of acting and thinking, our awareness of ourselves), and on the other hand the fact that we can lose the support of these stable elements and that our identity is then only understood as a self-maintenance that remains entirely problematic. These are the two poles of identity Ricœur calls identity-*idem* and identity-*ipse*, respectively described through the models of character and promise. The narrative configuration is placed precisely in this gap between sameness and selfhood, since it mediates them: narration can unmake the stability of the character and highlight changes, or it can recreate some identity when nothing seems to be continuous. In other words, narration enables us to consider personal identity as a unit that is not based on the permanence of a substrate and that leaves the space for discontinuity open.

This does not mean, however, that the identity would be fabricated by the story from scratch. It is indeed a creative imitation, an act of shaping the identity of a life that does not already have one. Yet, according to Ricœur, this act of narration is only possible because it does not arise from nothing: the lived experience the story tells is endowed with a “prenarrative quality”<sup>9</sup>, to such an extent that we can understand life as a set of potential stories, ““(as yet) untold’ stories, stories that demand to be told”<sup>10</sup>. This circularity, explicitly assumed by Ricœur as a virtuous one, does not mean that the story would already be located in lived life, but simply that life is not foreign to meaning and discourse, and that one finds in it actions that are already structured and organized, in such a way that life provides an anchoring quite conducive to narration. Ricœur gives us some insights of these structures: basic actions are linked in linear relations of causality and finality; they are also structured by relationships of subordination in practices such as trades, arts and games; and these practices are in turn integrated into life plans, that is to say into broad practical units such as family life or professional life, above which stands the narrative unit of life the story constructs – narrative unit that can, in turn, provide the basis for understanding actions and practices<sup>11</sup>. Ricœur can then conclude, without irony, that “nothing is more propitious for narrative configuration”<sup>12</sup>.

In such a definition of narrative identity, does Ricœur ask the question of truth or authenticity of self-narrative? Does he consider the possibility that the story we tell fails to construct our identity?

Applying fiction to life?

We can emphasize, first of all, that Ricœur seems to be interested in the question of truth of narratives. This interest can be found in his work as the problem of *applying* fiction to life<sup>13</sup>, a problem that arises from the definition of narration as an act of explicit configuration of the discontinuity of life. Unlike Alasdair MacIntyre or Wilhelm Schapp, according to whom narratives are already situated in a certain way in life, Ricœur insists on the need for an active configuration, an explicit narrative act, an act that requires time and effort because of the tensions generated by divergent practices, contradictory stories or unresolved conflicts<sup>14</sup>. This creative activity marks “the entry of narrative into the sphere of fiction”<sup>15</sup>, not only because self-narratives must be nourished by the stories offered by literature, but more radically because narratives produce something new, something that did not exist in life. In other words, the story needs to separate itself from life in order to tell it, and this separation corresponds to the order of fiction, the realm of what we build. It is here that appears, for Ricœur, the “very thorny problem to reconnect literature to life”<sup>16</sup>. Ricœur elaborates the answer to this problem in two different places.

1. In the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, where narration is explored in relation to the problem of time, Ricœur analyzes the objection according to which the narrative is a pure fiction. Insofar as it imposes consonance where there is dissonance, the narrative would be a literary artifice, or a violent interpretation of reality<sup>17</sup>. This objection is immediately rejected. It would be valid, according to Ricœur, if life were opposed to narrative as dissonance is opposed to consonance. Against the idea that life is absolutely formless, and against the understanding of narrative as a sort of triumph of order, Ricœur’s strategy is to argue that dissonance and consonance both lie on the side of life, where we experience continuity and rupture, as well as on the side of the story, so that a harmony of structure seems to emerge between the story and life.

2. In *Oneself as Another*, this same question is addressed when Ricœur notices the existence of some structural differences between life and narratives, differences which seem to undermine the possibility for narratives to constitute the unity of life. Ricœur lists four differences: we are not the authors of our lives as we are the authors of a story; in narratives there is a beginning and an end, that are proper to the narrative form and not to the events we tell; our lives are so intertwined with the life of others that one can doubt the possibility to speak of the narrative unity of life; and finally, the story can only cover the past life by articulating it with future expectations and projects. Once again, these difficulties are very quickly resolved: we are not the authors, but the co-authors of the meaning of our life; narratives help us define real beginnings and relate to death; literature offers models for the entanglement of stories; and narratives, insofar as they take expectations and plans into account, relate not only to the past but also to future life<sup>18</sup>.

A certain isomorphism, that is to say a certain structural equivalence, is thus guaranteed between life and narratives. And although Ricœur, in these same pages, employs expressions that seem to exacerbate the fictitious character of the stories – by asserting for example that narrations establish real beginnings by “straining this feature somewhat”<sup>19</sup>, or that the setting in intrigue produce “the inversion of the effect of contingency into an effect of necessity”<sup>20</sup> – the conclusion does not change. Applying fiction to life, or capturing life through narration, is possible, or at least it is not a major issue. We will come back to this problem later. Let us answer another question now. Does this theme of applicability show that narratives, according to Ricœur, need to correspond to life? Does this mean that correspondence is a criterion for judging the truth of the story we tell about our life?

## The insufficiency of the correspondence criterion of truth

It is rather the opposite. Ricœur can resolve so quickly the problem of the application of narratives to life only because he does not understand it as a correspondence between life and narratives. Indeed, if narration were required to be an adequate imitation or representation of life, which one could judge by a criterion of correspondence, then the structural differences between the two would undermine the very possibility of narration. But this request derives, for Ricœur, from “a naive conception of *mimesis*”<sup>21</sup>, that is to say from a misunderstanding of the status and role of narration in relation to life. How should we understand, more precisely, the refusal of this criterion of verification?

1. A first reason for rejecting the possibility of evaluating narratives in terms of correspondence is provided by the very definition of the concept of *mimesis*. In the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, when he introduced this Aristotelian concept, Ricœur insisted on the need not to translate it by the simple idea of imitation or representation, which would reduce the narrative configuration to “a copy or identical replica”<sup>22</sup> of experience, and which would bring it closer to Platonic *mimesis*, but rather by the expression “creative imitation” whose correlate would be the *muthos*, the arrangement of facts. In other words, narration is a creative act that weaves discordant events together, and in doing so, it does not repeat but transforms them and creates something new. Insofar as Ricœur raises the question of the applicability of fiction to life, one could wonder whether this distance does not necessarily falsify any narrative. Yet this position, according to Ricœur, remains naive, because it asks narratives to be a faithful repetition of life, and thus to be what they cannot and should not be. They cannot be a faithful repetition of life because narration belongs to discourse and not to life. And they should not be it because in

this case they would fail to constitute an identity. On the contrary, narratives need to separate themselves from life in order to give rise to an identity which precisely could not emerge from life as it is lived. This is why it is then impossible to judge narratives through the criterion of their correspondence to life, be it to affirm their truth or their falsity.

2. We can highlight, in the frame of Ricœur's narrative thesis, a second reason for refusing this criterion of truth as correspondence. This criterion would indeed boil down self-narratives to the model of sameness. As seen above, narration holds together two models of permanence in time, namely sameness, which is grounded on the permanence of a substrate, and selfhood, that is a self-maintenance without a stable basis. The construction of our identity in narratives cannot let aside sameness, since the self could not affirm itself as the same if everything changed continuously, if it did not find any support in a certain stability of characters. Nor narratives can let aside selfhood, insofar as this stability of characters does not stand the test of time. Now, when Ricœur distinguishes these two models of permanence in time, he specifies that their mode of verification is not the same. While identity in the sense of sameness lends itself to verification tests, since the stability of a character functions as a criterion to confirm or falsify re-identification, identity in the sense of selfhood cannot be verified through the permanence of a certain element and can only be understood as a commitment, or a "willingness"<sup>23</sup> to remain, in a certain sense, the same. Here is how Ricœur presents this distinction:

A criterion is what allows us to distinguish the true from the false in competing truth claims. Now the question is precisely whether selfhood and sameness lend themselves in the same way to the test of truth claims. In the case of sameness, the term "criterion" has a very precise sense: it designates the tests of verification or falsification of statements

concerning identity as a relation: the same as [...]. One can legitimately term a criterion the test of the truth of assertions concerning sameness. Is the same thing true with respect to selfhood<sup>24</sup>?

Ricœur's answer is negative: selfhood cannot be subjected to tests of verification or falsification, insofar as it is not based on anything stable. And this conclusion also tells us something about self-narrative. For narratives are constructed through a dialectic between sameness and selfhood, they cannot be subjected to tests of verification and falsification either. Narratives cannot become a factor or a criterion for the possible re-identification of an individual, except to destroy the specificity of narration and its distinction from a simple descriptive assertion<sup>25</sup>.

Since it is so obvious, for Ricœur, that narratives cannot be judged through a criterion of correspondence to life, one could then ask why Ricœur cares about the question of the application of fiction to life. In other words, since it is only for a naive conception of *mimesis* that the difference between fiction and life becomes a real problem, why does Ricœur strive to show a certain structural homogeneity between the two? Doesn't the refusal of the correspondence criterion make this demonstration useless? Ricœur certainly refuses to conceive the truth of the story in terms of correspondence to life, and yet he seems to want to ensure the possibility for self-narratives to grasp life, to be an appropriate means for the creative imitation of life, a means that is not entirely heterogeneous with respect to it. Therefore, can narration, which turns out to be appropriate to account for life, be verified or invalidated otherwise than on the basis of its correspondence to life? Is there, in Ricœur's work, another sense of truth that would better fit the success or failure of self-narratives?

## II. Paul Ricœur: truth as self-attestation through narratives

A possible approach for describing the truth of self-narratives would be to consider the performative dimension of narration. Even though Ricœur does not use this expression, we can find traces of this performativity in his work. The story, that is a “category of action”<sup>26</sup>, makes us become ourselves, not only in the sense that we build an identity that is not already given in life, but also because the story is integrated into a life that it orients and redirects. Narratives transform the relationship to oneself, to others and open other possibilities: “the narrative is part of life before being exiled from life in writing; it returns to life along the multiple paths of appropriation and at the price of the unavoidable tensions just mentioned”<sup>27</sup>. The truth of self-narratives would then depend on their ability to transform the person who creates it. However, this solution remains unsatisfactory and only postpones the problem. On the one hand, Ricœur does not explicitly emphasize the veritative dimension of this capacity of narratives. On the other hand, this definition only states that narratives can manage to engender our identity, but it does not offer a precise criterion to show how narratives can succeed or fail.

We can then explore another possibility, that concerns the concept of attestation. Ricœur, who refuses to submit selfhood to a criterion of verification, introduces indeed the idea that there is a test of truth of another order, that would be appropriate to identity in the sense of selfhood. This other test of truth is described through the notion of attestation, that Ricœur explains in the introduction of *Oneself as Another* and that he analyzes then in the discussion of narrative identity<sup>28</sup>. By this term, Ricœur means the type of certainty to which the hermeneutics of the self can claim. It is not the certainty required by a philosophy of the subject that wishes to guarantee it against any possibility of doubt. The hermeneutics of the self can only reach the subject via a

detour through the long path of signs, works and more generally otherness. The attestation has thus to be understood as a form of belief, or trust, of the same order as the belief we accord to a testimony: this trust is essentially fragile, vulnerable, haunted by a suspicion that cannot be eliminated<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, one might think that this notion of attestation enables us to define the truth of self-narratives without reducing them to the model of sameness as the criterion of correspondence does. It is true, in fact, that attestation highlights a first type of failure of self-narrative, which consists in the failure of our ability to tell a coherent story. However, this concept remains insufficient within the framework of Ricœur's analysis since it does not allow an evaluation of the very content of self-narratives.

First of all, how does this notion show a possible failure of narration? Ricœur considers the possibility that our capacity to tell may be lacking. It is possible that we experience a certain powerlessness to tell, or that the discontinuity of life is such that we do not manage to gather it together under the same narrative thread. Ricœur leads this exploration of the limits of narration namely through the study of *The Man Without Qualities* by Musil. Ulrich, the main character, who can no longer count on the stability of his properties and of a character, becomes "ultimately nonidentifiable" and makes the novel lose "its own properly narrative qualities, even when these are interpreted as above in the most flexible and most dialectical manner possible"<sup>30</sup>. Ricœur's interpretation unfolds in three steps. *a)* We first have the impression that the narrative and the identity of the character are immediately saved. Ricœur rushes to understand this fiction of the loss of identity not as a loss of identity as such, but rather as a way of "exposing selfhood by taking away the support of sameness", so that "what is now lost, under the title of 'property', is what allowed us to equate the character in the story with lasting dispositions or character"<sup>31</sup>. The self would therefore be maintained, even if it cannot be identified with something stable. In this

sense, Musil would only confirm narrative identity as a dialectic between sameness and selfhood, and there would be no loss of identity. *b)* It is however a few pages later that we note the insufficiency of this rescue: “this plea for selfhood [...] begins to shift into its opposite when, as fiction returns to life, the readers in quest of identity find themselves confronting the hypothesis of their own loss of identity”<sup>32</sup>. In other words, what appears in the realm of fiction as a way of working on the gap between selfhood and sameness, is not acceptable in life, and plunges us into an identity crisis. “Then are extinguished not only the identity of the same but also the identity of the self, which was believed to have been saved from the disaster that befell the former”<sup>33</sup>.

It is indeed the attestation that shows this failure: we can perhaps produce a discourse that concerns us, but this discourse, which lacks unity and coherence, gives us no confidence in our existence as someone, as ourselves. We will therefore retain, from these analyses, an initial sense of failure of self-narratives: narratives fail if they do not manage to find some unity through the heterogeneity of life, if they fail to constitute themselves through a narrative thread. And Ricœur highlights this powerlessness to tell in other texts, such as “Multiple strangeness” (“Multiple étrangeté”)<sup>34</sup> and “Suffering is not pain” (“La souffrance n’est pas la douleur”)<sup>35</sup>, in which he shows how suffering can interrupt the unity and the coherence of a story, how it can attach us to the present and prevent us from telling ourselves. Why is then Ricœur’s notion of attestation unable to evaluate the content of self-narratives?

1. The first reason that leads us to this conclusion corresponds to the third moment of Ricœur’s analysis of Ulrich, that ends up relativizing the failure of the ability to tell. *c)* Self-attestation that does not succeed through narration can seek refuge in ethics. This proves that the decisive moment of self-maintenance is ethics, and that narrative “exercises the imagination more than the will”<sup>36</sup>. In other words, when the self seems to be erased on the narrative level, it is

on the ethical level that it can be maintained, and this thanks to its capacity to respond to the moral injunction coming from others. When we cannot say who we are, we can nevertheless say ‘Here I am!’ to the other who is calling us. And it is thus ethics, rather than narration, that ultimately decides the success of self-attestation and the maintenance of identity. Why then does this correspond to a relativization of the failure to tell? Even though Ricœur inscribes this “living dialectic”<sup>37</sup> between narrativity and morality within a reflection on the limits of narration, we can ask whether this is not an attempt to rescue our ability to tell ourselves. Selfhood is indeed defined through the model of promise, which implies a moral relationship to the other. That we affirm our identity by responding to others simply means that our identity is not only based on stable and recognizable features, but also on a desire for self-maintenance that has an ethical value. More than a limit of the story, this ethical identity seems to be one of the conditions of narration<sup>38</sup>. Insofar as our identity is maintained and reaffirmed in the responsibility for the other, we are still there, beyond the crisis of the sameness, and we are again able to produce a narrative. Therefore, this relativization of failure, meaning that self-attestation is still possible despite the destruction of the narrative, revalues the first point of Ricœur’s reading of Ulrich and shows the indifference of this notion of attestation with regard to the content of the narrative. Even if narratives come undone, the attestation can still count on an ethical maintenance of the self, so that narratives remain, in a sense, still possible.

2. More generally, we can emphasize that Ricœur defines attestation as a belief in the self, and namely in the capacities such as the power to tell. Attestation does not concern directly, nor primarily, the truth of the content produced by narration. Attestation, which is “fundamentally attestation *of self*”<sup>39</sup>, is thus a confidence in one’s abilities, or a self-confidence we achieve through the exercise of our abilities. It is even in the definition of attestation that Ricœur

emphasizes the capacities as the specific object of this form of trust: while doxic belief, whose form is ‘I believe-that’, indicates an uncertain knowledge, attestation is characterized by the form ‘I believe in it’, which means, if we refer to the formulation of *The course of Recognition*, ‘I believe that I can’<sup>40</sup>. This emphasis on capacities rather than on effectuation defines the general sense of Ricœur’s hermeneutics of the self, i.e., the idea that the self affirms itself and reaches the assurance of being oneself – or of being a self – by discovering its ability of saying, of doing, of telling itself, and of responding to moral accusation<sup>41</sup>. What does this add to our investigation of the truth of self-narratives? Not only that narration, that constitutes our identity over time, is only one of the multiple paths of self-attestation. But it shows above all that what enables the self to attest itself is the fact of producing a story, of being able to narrate itself. Ricœur’s emphasis on capacities, on the power of telling oneself, seems in this sense to divert attention from the content of the story, and from the question of the truth attached to it. No matter what we say about our life, the construction of a story among infinite possible stories will be enough to attest the self as capable of telling, and thus as a self.

We must then conclude that even though Ricœur emphasizes the difficulty of producing a narrative, he does not clearly indicate the conditions for the success or failure of self-narratives. We have shown a first condition for the failure of the story: it fails if it does not manage to grasp a certain unity through the heterogeneity of life, if it does not succeed in constituting a narrative unity. Yet Ricœur’s work lacks a question about the value of the content we tell. In other words, Ricœur never seems to consider the possibility of a story that fails insofar as it strays too far from life, the possibility of a narrative that is coherent but that we could not consider as the story of our life. Only one passage, in *The Course of Recognition*, explicitly evokes this theme:

In the test of confronting others, whether an individual or a collectivity, narrative identity reveals its fragility. These are not illusionary threats. It is worth noting that ideologies of power undertake, all too successfully, unfortunately, to manipulate these fragile identities through symbolic mediations of action, and principally thanks to the resources for variation offered by the work of narrative configuration, given that it is always possible, as said above, to narrate differently<sup>42</sup>.

This remark seems decisive to us, because it puts the finger on a fundamental issue of narrative theories. However, nothing in Ricœur's text prolongs this comment. How can such manipulation be observed, insofar as it is always possible to tell one's life in multiple ways? Can we tell the difference between a story that succeeds and a story that fails to tell us? Since, as Ricœur points out, "understanding oneself is being able to tell stories about oneself that are both intelligible and acceptable, above all acceptable"<sup>43</sup>, don't we need to ask whether these intelligibility and acceptability are in fact the expression of norms and forms of power to which narratives are submitted? The analysis of Butler's work will help us through these questions.

### III. Judith Butler: truth as narrative failure

It is above all from an ethical perspective that Judith Butler, in her 2005 book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, examines the idea that individuals constitute themselves through narratives. By criticizing a definition of narratives which seems at first sight entirely opposed to the one Ricœur defends, Butler considers indeed that the narrative theory is founded on the idea of an autonomous subject, master of himself, and that narration risks for this reason to create or justify situations of ethical violence. This is not only because we can confine ourselves to a story that

claims to be true and self-sufficient, thus losing our relationship to the other, who is on the contrary at the heart of our constitution as subjects. But above all because we may demand that the other be accountable, that he be a coherent biographer of himself and that he produce a discourse on himself that can be recognized according to a common framework of intelligibility<sup>44</sup>. Butler explores then the risks included in narrative practice and provides us another way of understanding the failure of self-narrative, from the point of view of its content and not only of our ability to tell. Self-narrative can fail because it needs to be told in a language and according to norms that make it recognizable by others, but that can also make it move too far away from the discontinuity of our life.

The starting point of Butler's analysis consists in bringing to light the "scenes of address"<sup>45</sup> within which self-narration takes place. By subscribing to Nietzsche' and Foucault's critical perspective, Butler states that self-narratives are never a spontaneous production of a single individual trying to get to know himself or to cultivate a relationship with himself, but that they always take place as responses to questions coming from others. Someone asks us who we are, why we have acted in such a way or whether we are responsible for something, and it is in order to satisfy this demand that we produce a discourse about ourselves. Although Butler refuses to reduce this scene of address to a scene of accusation, as Nietzsche does<sup>46</sup>, and although she admits other senses of address such as the desire to know and to understand, to recognize and to be recognized, the potential violence of this scene is maintained. The address does not simply take place between two singular individuals. On the contrary, this dyadic structure must be understood with reference to a normative framework on which our discourse and our constitution as subjects depend. And it is in particular with reference to this normative framework that Butler clarifies the limits of self-narration. What are these limits?

On the one hand, Butler emphasizes that narration, that seeks to account for oneself – and this formulation already marks a shift from Ricœur’s narrative theory, since narration does not only mean telling one’s life, but above all constituting individuals as responsible subjects<sup>47</sup> – can in no way be a complete narration. We are social beings, exposed to others and situated in a context of norms that we have not chosen, or even of which we are not aware. This means that no “I” can go back, through narration, to the conditions of its emergence. Butler writes, for example, in a famous passage of *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

When the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist<sup>48</sup>.

Therefore, no narrative can be complete. We cannot master the norms that precede us and that have contributed to our constitution; we have an unconscious, which we cannot fit into a narrative – and Butler refuses in this respect the psychoanalytical theories which would make the narrative reconstruction of life the goal of the care of a patient<sup>49</sup>; and the “I” who narrates cannot include himself in the narrative, because he always arrives too late, as an untellable point of view. Readers accustomed to Ricœur’s hermeneutics might be surprised by this insistence on the impossibility of constructing a complete narrative. Ricœur himself frequently asserts that multiple narratives are possible and that none of them can be considered as complete. Yet with regard to this incompleteness, a gap already emerges between Ricœur’ and Butler’s position.

Butler refuses the idea that experience is already pre-narrative, and emphasizes the areas of our existence that are not relatable<sup>50</sup>.

On the other hand, Butler does not only point out that all narratives are incomplete. She also specifies that narratives risk moving away from our lives, insofar as they need to be formulated in a language that is not ours and to occur in a coherent form that can be understood and recognized as acceptable by others. Narratives risk thus betraying the incoherence and discontinuity of life. They risk losing what constitutes our singularity, our mineness:

If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life. But this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or not mine alone. And I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognizable. The narrative authority of the “I” must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story<sup>51</sup>.

In other words, according to Butler it is impossible to produce a discourse that supports our “living self”<sup>52</sup>, because this discourse must be constituted according to standards that are not ours, and this deprives it of the mineness that one experiences while living. If we try to account for ourselves to someone, whether this other is actually in front of us or not, we are then dispossessed of what we are accountable for, in the sense that this product we create no longer speaks of us and no longer truly belongs to us. The consequence is the emphasis on the fictional character of narration: “narration is surely possible under such circumstances, but it is [...] surely fabulous”<sup>53</sup>. Ricœur and Butler thus seem to converge in the acknowledgment that narratives belong to the realm of fiction. Yet, they do not agree on the value and consequences of this

fictional character. For Butler, this means precisely that narration has no referent and that we are not its authors.

Now, this critique of the normativity of self-narratives does not presuppose a naive opposition between an absolutely singular life and a standardized story. Following Foucault, Butler emphasizes that norms do not simply play a restrictive role with regard to individuals, but on the contrary constitute them as subjects, so that it is impossible for individuals to exist outside a certain relation to norms<sup>54</sup>. How should we understand, then, the singularity and the mineness of life that a coherent and intelligible narrative would miss? To answer this question, it is useful to go back to Butler's early work, and in particular to the theory of performativity Butler elaborated in *Gender Trouble*, in order to define the way in which norms constitute us as subjects.

According to Butler, in fact, norms are not determining for us, in the sense that they do not automatically produce a subject that would be constituted in a certain way. On the contrary, a subject must embody them, perform them, and it is the repetition of acts imitating the norms that gives the illusion that there is an inner identity from which the acts would derive. This theory of performativity, on the one hand, denounces the idea of a gender identity that would correspond to an inner essence. It reveals that this identity is the effect and not the cause of what we do:

“[Acts, gestures and desire] are *performative*, in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means”<sup>55</sup>. On the other hand, this theory shows that identity occurs by imitation, which means that the result of this repeated performance can neither be a perfect embodiment of the norm nor a stable and constant identity:

Gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized; “the internal” is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time [...] the abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *discontinuity*, reveal the temporal and contingent groundless of this “ground”<sup>56</sup>.

This means that the singularity of an individual does not depend on his possibility of existing and of constituting himself outside a normative framework, but rather on the fact that the norms are always embodied, repeated and imitated in a certain way, that is to say in a way that ruins their universality and that introduces in life some discontinuity, contingency and incoherence. Butler does not reject entirely the notion of identity – she still speaks of an “identity tenuously constituted in time”<sup>57</sup>, expression that seems to recall Ricœur’s definition of personal identity – but this notion of identity becomes problematic and above all it rejects singularity on the side of discontinuity and incoherence.

Butler’s analysis of self-narratives has to be understood within this framework. The story, far from being a simple transmission of information about ourselves and our past, is also and above all an *act*, a way of doing something, of doing it to ourselves and to those to whom the story is addressed. It is an act that constitutes our identity, or rather that gives the illusion that there is a stable and inner identity that we are describing or recounting, and it does so by imitating and reproducing norms. Certainly, according to Butler’s theory of performativity, every act contributes to producing this illusion of a stable identity. But narratives, that one could take for a more flexible and open form of self-explanation, do it as well, and they do it particularly through their reflexive dimension, which claims to recapture the whole of life in a unitary form. Hence,

Butler affirms that self-narratives risk neglecting the discontinuity and singularity of our life, especially when they claim to fully account for us. Narratives, far from being reduced to an exchange of informations, are also a way of reproducing norms of intelligibility and recognizability, so that it is the singularity of their actualization that we end up neglecting. This is why Butler remains skeptical about the coherence of self-narratives:

Indeed, if we require that someone be able to tell in story form the reasons why his or her life has taken the path it has, that is, to be a coherent autobiographer, we may be preferring the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call the truth of the person, a truth that [...] might well become more clear in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness – in enigmatic articulations that cannot easily be translated into narrative form<sup>58</sup>.

Butler does not conclude that we should not tell ourselves. On the contrary, she constantly reaffirms the importance of the narrative, and specifies that we could not live in a “radically non-narratable world”<sup>59</sup>. Nor does she state that narratives cannot be anything other than the mere repetition of norms. One of the major challenges of Butler’s work is precisely to identify areas of freedom that allow us to reconfigure our relationship to norms. In fact, although narratives cannot be produced outside a normative context, the type of relationship they establish with regard to norms is not already decided in advance<sup>60</sup>. It is therefore in the attempt to describe the possibility for narratives to create a critical relation to norms that Butler tries to set the conditions for the failure and success of self-narratives.

First, Butler underlines the limits of self-narrative by asserting that narratives are always based on a failure, namely the failure of narratives claiming to be able to tell everything<sup>61</sup>. We

will leave aside this first sense of failure, that disappears when we consider that narratives, by definition, are incomplete and provisional. This failure, even according to Butler, is simply the condition on which narratives are built. Yet there is another type of narratives that Butler considers as a failure: narratives that are too accomplished, that succeed too well, and that present themselves as coherent stories, certainly too far removed from the fundamental discontinuity of life<sup>62</sup>. By extending Foucault's analyzes of confession, Butler affirms that "there is a price for telling the truth about oneself"<sup>63</sup>, consisting in the fact that through narratives claiming to reveal us we place ourselves in a non-critical relationship to norms. In other words, a story that does not arise any problem of coherence, a story that would be immediately understandable and recognizable, is a story that embodies the norms instead of calling them into question.

Contrary to this failure, one can consider the success of self-narrative as a creation implicating the awareness of its limits. Narratives succeed when they show and reproduce the discontinuity and interruption that characterize life, instead of hiding them<sup>64</sup>. How could then narratives satisfy these criteria? We may imagine that the solution is the multiplication of stories, and the habit of not considering a single story as the true one – a solution to which Ricœur would fully subscribe<sup>65</sup>. But this is not enough to take the radicalism of Butler's work into account. This radicality becomes visible in another passage of *Giving an Account of Oneself*, that provides an example of narrative structure, but that may be taken in fact for the paradigmatic structure of any successful narrative: "The 'I' who narrates finds that he cannot direct its narration, finds that it can give an account neither of its inability to narrate nor of why narration breaks down. It comes to experience itself, or, rather, re-experience itself as radically, if not irretrievable, unknowing about who it is."<sup>66</sup> Butler explains that narration can only reflect the discontinuity of life if it is

itself discontinuous and interrupted, which means, if it does not manage to come to an end, and if it needs the support of others to continue and to relate critically to the norms<sup>67</sup>. Self-narratives, in this sense, are not to be abandoned. It is relevant and even necessary to narrate and constitute our identity through a story, provided that we make critical use of it, and this implies moving away from the idea of a successful and coherent narration, which would exclude the other to whom we address our story.

What interests Butler in these attempts to define the success and failure of self-narratives is above all the explanation of the ethical dimension of the address within which we are led to tell ourselves. It is morally necessary, according to her, to produce a scene of address in which one can tell this kind of story, i.e., an open and incomplete story, a story that is aware of its limits and is therefore a critical narration. Butler insists particularly on the need not to confuse the otherness of the other, a 'you' who stands in front of us and who is responsible for the injunction he addresses to us, and the point of view of the norms, in respect to which this dyadic relationship can become critical<sup>68</sup>. The establishment of a scene where the limits of self-narratives are questioned is a way of fighting against the forms of ethical violence that are linked to self-narration.

We can then conclude that Butler's merit is to have highlighted the way in which narratives, taking place in a scene of address, risk losing the singularity of the life they are supposed to tell. Narration can fail to tell the life it claims to tell, and it can even exert a form of ethical violence on individuals. Nevertheless, we can ask whether Butler's formulation of the failure and success of self-narratives does not finally use an overly rigid criterion of correspondence, which reduces coherence to the reproduction of norms, and which assigns a superiority to incoherence, insofar as it adequately represents the discontinuity of life. It seems that this insistence on the necessary

incoherence of narratives makes the criterion of the success of narratives too formal, too attached to the narrative style, rather than to the content of the story. Is it the only form of narratives, or their simple multiplication, that can actually decide their success or their failure? Shouldn't we look for another criterion to determine if the story is too far removed from the life it is supposed to tell? A criterion that would be linked to the content of the story, and not only to its form?

#### IV. Truth as self-recognition in narratives

The analyzes carried out so far lead us to consider the success of self-narrative as what lies between two possible ways of failure, corresponding respectively to an excessive proximity to life or to an excessive distance from it.

a. The first type of failure is the one Ricœur mentions, despite his attempt to relativize it, as the difficulty of constructing a narrative. We can affirm then, by pursuing this direction, that narratives fail if they are too close to life, that is to say if they do not manage to sufficiently separate themselves from it, in order to recapture the discontinuity in a unitary form. This failure can occur in different ways, that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The story can get lost in the heterogeneity of events without succeeding in finding a continuous thread, as seems to happen in Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. The lived experience can manifest itself, as in the case of suffering, in a way that resists narration, that interrupts it and prevents it from being constituted. Or the story can present itself as a repetition of life, rather than its story, as seems to be the case, for example, in a certain use of social networks that shows life and renounce to narrate it<sup>69</sup>. In all these situations, narratives do not succeed: they are destroyed or interrupted, they do not make sense, they lack unity and coherence.

b. The second type of failure, that emerges from Butler's work, is the opposite one. It occurs when narratives are too far removed from life to be able to recapture it. This takes place not only in cases of lies or bad faith, but more generally when discontinuity is neglected at the cost of consistency, when conformity to standards takes precedence over singularity and mineness, and thus when the identity the story creates is equivalent to a fixed image. In these cases, narratives fail because they become a fiction, not in the sense of Ricœurian *mimesis*, but in the sense of a fictional construction, an invention of which we are no longer the referent. Narratives, after being detached from life, no longer succeed in recapturing the life they claim to tell.

These two ways of failing show that, if on one hand stories are not simple descriptions or summaries that could be evaluated according to a criterion of correspondence to life, on the other hand we cannot affirm that any narrative succeeds in telling our life and constituting our identity. Discourses, and therefore also self-narratives, certainly have a performative dimension, in the sense that they do something to us or to those to whom we speak, but this performativity should not be understood as though any narrative could automatically produce our identity. It is therefore true, as Ricœur highlights, that "the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself"<sup>70</sup>, and that in this sense every narrative produces a certain effect. However, not every narrative, every story we tell about ourselves produces the effect we are looking for here, namely the constitution of our identity. If we refer to Austin's analyzes of the performativity of language<sup>71</sup>, that Butler also uses in *Excitable Speech* to describe how hate speech is able to hurt<sup>72</sup>, we can specify that self-narratives do not produce immediately an identity as if they were illocutionary acts, whose effect in a certain context coincides with what one utters, but that these narratives are rather perlocutionary

acts, i.e., acts whose effect on reality is not determined in advance and depends on the contrary on the interaction within which it takes place.

This means that the effect of self-narratives, and thus their ability to constitute our identity, does not depend exclusively on the narrative itself, as though it were sufficient to evaluate its conformity to reality. Its success depends, also and above all, on what happens in the moment of its enunciation, on the scene in which the story is told. We need to examine, then, this context. In what sense and how can it decide the success or failure of self-narratives? How can we decide whether the story we tell is too close or too distant from life? And since we criticized both Ricœur and Butler for formulating the success of self-narrative in a way that does not sufficiently take into consideration the content of the story, how can the scene of enunciation allow us to highlight this content?

1. The first element of this scene consists in the relation we establish with our narratives. Once we have constituted a story of our life, we also need to recognize ourselves in this story, to manage to consider it as our own narrative.

In order to develop this point, it is worth returning to Ricœur's notion of self-attestation we examined above. Our disappointment was due to the fact that Ricœur's insistence on the capacity of telling gives the impression that narration could always succeed in attesting the self. There is, however, another formulation of the link between attestation and narratives, even though Ricœur puts little emphasis on it. This idea enables us to link this form of trust to the content of the story more than to the ability to produce it, and it allows us to understand the failure of narratives in the two senses we listed here above. In the introduction to *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur writes indeed that attestation is the confidence not only in the power to tell one's story, but also in the power to "recognize oneself as a character in a narrative"<sup>73</sup>. Telling a story about oneself, and

constructing one's identity through this story, does not signify telling any story about oneself, but telling a story in which it is possible to recognize oneself.

*Oneself as Another* does not insist more on this aspect of recognition. It is only in 2005, in *The Course of Recognition*, that Ricœur highlights the strict relationship between attestation and recognition, yet without drawing any other consequences for his narrative theory<sup>74</sup>. But this idea of recognition, in 1990, goes hand in hand with the concept of appropriation, that indicates the interaction between the world of the text and the world of the reader, and more precisely the way in which a text comes back to life after having been separated from it<sup>75</sup>. Ricœur writes, for example, with regard to the structural differences between narratives and life, that these differences do not destroy the possibility of self-narratives, but that they need “to be incorporated in a more subtle, more dialectical comprehension of *appropriation*”<sup>76</sup>. What is the relationship between appropriation and self-narrative then? One could think that the appropriation of a text only concerns the stories we receive and we read, and not our own narratives, the ones that we tell with regard to our life. Why should we appropriate these stories, if they come from us and if it is our life that they tell? Yet, in a passage of *Time and Narrative* about the narrative identity of a community, Ricœur suggests that appropriation also concerns self-narratives: “the historical community called the Jewish people has drawn its identity from the reception of those texts that it had produced”<sup>77</sup>. Is it only because it is about the identity of a community, that is to say because the identity must be transmitted and renewed through generations, who find themselves in the position of readers, listeners or receivers? It seems to us that this dynamic of appropriation must necessarily concern narrative identity in general, that is to say not only the identity of a community, but also the identity of an individual<sup>78</sup>. Insofar as the constitution of the story implies its separation from life, then this story becomes a foreign product that it is essential to

reclaim, to put in interaction with our life. This is therefore what justifies the fact that Ricœur asks the question of the application of fiction to life: this question does not conceal the exigence of a correspondence between narratives and life, but rather the possibility, or the necessity, to recognize oneself in its own narratives.

Hence, although narratives are fictions that separate themselves from life, it is possible to confer them the value of the story of our life and not of a simple fiction. And this possibility is strictly tied to the content of the story, because it depends on the way in which we appropriate it, the way in which we manage to recognize it as the story of our life. It is in a story that states a certain content, and not any content, that we recognize ourselves, that we gain confidence in our ability to tell ourselves and that finally we attest to ourselves. As Ricœur says, quoting Proust, “the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its veracity”<sup>79</sup>. It is then by recognizing oneself in the story that the reader attests to the truth of it, and it is by the recognition of the truth of the book that the reader manages to recognize himself.

2. However, we cannot take the recognition of oneself in the narrative for a simple and unproblematic process. Another element must be considered, that is the role played by others: self-recognition in the story is only possible in an intersubjective context, where the other is the one who asks questions about myself, but also the one who listens and reacts to my story.

Ricœur underlines this aspect very little. Not that he neglects the relationship with others and the way in which otherness contributes to our constitution. The other is present in the narration we make of ourselves, because we are only the co-authors of narratives that are always entangled with the stories of others<sup>80</sup>; the other is the one for whom I constitute myself as responsible, and it is even this responsibility that allows us to maintain our identity where the support of sameness is lacking<sup>81</sup>; the other finally appears in the need of a mutual recognition as what overcomes the

struggle and the constraint of reciprocity<sup>82</sup>. However, Ricœur's work lacks a more concrete analysis of the role played by others in the process of self-recognition in narratives. On the contrary, Butler's reflections allow us to fill this gap, especially thanks to her critical perspective on the theories of recognition, that make the existence of the subject depend on the recognition of others or on mutual recognition. Insofar as recognition can only proceed from a certain normative horizon, the scene of recognition is always likely to engender a form of ethical violence, which destroys and denies the subject instead of making it exist<sup>83</sup>. The address scene can be a violent scene, which leads us to subscribe to certain standards, and to produce a story in which it becomes difficult to recognize ourselves, or in which we end up recognizing ourselves but at the cost of loss and suffering. This is why one should not believe that the other occupies a privileged point of view, in the sense that his recognition would always be the necessary and sufficient condition for self-recognition, as if the other alone decided on success or failure of self-narratives. But on the other hand, it is impossible to entirely ignore the presence and the role played by others. Confidence in this self-recognition in the story cannot be understood as the result of a solitary work, and it would be difficult to believe in the validity of our story if this story was not, at least in a small measure, shareable and understandable by others. Others are those who provide support for the recognition of ourselves in the story through their own trust in the story we are telling. He or she can even be the one we ask for help, the one with whom we test our story<sup>84</sup>. The other is also the one who deprives us of this confidence, who questions our story or leads us to reconsider the moral evaluation we attach to our life. As Butler points out, in fact, the perspective of the other must not be confused with the point of view of norms and, in this sense, it is quite possible to envisage a relationship with the other which is related to certain norms, but that establishes a critical relationship to them. As well as our relation to norms is

inevitable, but not decided in advance, the intersubjective scene in which self-narrative takes place cannot be indifferent to the normative framework that makes it possible, but can act in a critical way with regard to this framework.

We can thus redefine self-attestation, in order to make it appropriate for determining the success or failure of self-narratives. The attestation, indeed, is not only the confidence in our power to tell a story among infinite possible stories: it is rather the confidence in the recognition of the story we tell as the story of our life. A true, or authentic, story is then a story that manages to separate itself from life, but without moving away from it. And this delicate position of balance is not an automatic effect of the mere act of telling, nor can it be judged by a simple criterion of correspondence to life, but is established by the confidence, nourished by others, in the recognition of ourselves in the story. Of course, this self-recognition in narratives never reaches the epistemic value of absolute certainty. As Ricœur states it in 1990, attestation is a question of trust precisely in the sense that it is always haunted by a form of suspicion, from which it is impossible to deliver it<sup>85</sup>. Any story, even the one in which we believe the most, is always potentially suspect, because it is likely to be seen as a simple repetition of norms by someone, or as an incoherent and incomprehensible story by others. The success of the story cannot, therefore, be established with certainty and once and for all. But this suspicion, far from destroying the question of the truth of narrative, ends up strengthening this very question. This suspicion shows the difficulty of producing a self-narrative which is held in balance between its confusion with life and its distance from it.

## Conclusions

This contribution aimed at exploring one of the major difficulties of the narrative thesis: the problem of knowing in what sense narratives, that are supposed to constitute our identity, can be considered to be true. On one hand, the criterion of correspondence between stories and life is not adequate to describe the truth of self-narratives; on the other hand, it is problematic to affirm that we can tell infinite stories about our life and that all these stories equally constitute our identity.

This is why we wondered whether the concept of authenticity, which expresses a certain form of coincidence between what one says about oneself and what one actually is, could give another meaning to the definition of the truth of narration. But how can this coincidence between discourse and being occur, if it is not in the form of a correspondence between our discourse and our life? Since narratives construct an identity that is not already present in life as it is lived, then the meaning of this coincidence is expressed by the performative dimension of narratives, that is, by their capacity not only to describe, but to engender the identity that defines *who* we are. We questioned thus the conditions for the success of self-narratives – the success in the production of our identity –, by asking in which cases it could be said that these narratives fail.

The analyzes of Ricœur' and Butler's work, that do not always directly raise the question of the truth of self-narrative, have led us to define two possible ways of failure of the story: self-narratives fail if they remain too close to life and do not succeed in bringing out its unity, but they fail as well if they become a standardized story that loses its anchorage in the singularity of life.

Yet this success cannot be determined by the comparison between stories and life, nor with certainty and once and for all. The success of narratives is only established by the confidence in the recognition of ourselves in them, confidence which finds resources in the intersubjective

scene in which the narration occurs. This trust is the only way to determine whether narratives succeed or fail, and this is because it is not limited, as in Ricœur' and Butler's work, to the formal aspects of the story, but addresses to the content of the story one tells about oneself.

It is therefore legitimate to be wary of expressions such as "a true story", which gives the impression that only one story is true, or "an authentic story", which seems to presuppose the existence of an identity outside the narration. But this distrust should not lead us to eliminate the question of the truth of self-narratives, that resurfaces on the contrary in new terms, as the question of the success of self-narratives in their attempt to construct our identity. The suspicion that haunts the confidence depends less on the impossibility of asking the question of truth than on the immense difficulty of producing a self-narrative that balances itself between the two incompatible conditions that define it, the requirement of intelligibility on the one hand, and the requirement of singularity on the other.

## NOTES

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Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 3, trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 248.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. D. Pellauer (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 31.

<sup>7</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 141.

<sup>8</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 147.

<sup>9</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, 74.

<sup>10</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, 74.

<sup>11</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 153-157.

<sup>12</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 158.

<sup>13</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 161. The term "application" is taken from Gadamer's hermeneutics. See Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, 70.

<sup>14</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 159; Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 159.

<sup>16</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 159.

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- <sup>17</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, 72.
- <sup>18</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 159-163.
- <sup>19</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 162.
- <sup>20</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 142.
- <sup>21</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 161.
- <sup>22</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, 34.
- <sup>23</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 129-130: “This ipseity, unlike the sameness typical of biological identity and fundamental character of an individual, consists in a will to self-constancy, to remaining true to form (*de maintien de soi*), which seals the story of a life confronted with the changes in circumstances and changes of heart.”
- <sup>24</sup> P. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 129.
- <sup>25</sup> Ricœur states, in *Time and Narrative*, that “the historical component of a narrative about oneself draws this narrative toward the side of a chronical submitted to the same documentary verifications as any other historical narration, while the fictional component draws it toward those imaginative variations that destabilize narrative identity” (*Time and Narrative*, volume 3, 248-249). Yet the junction of these two components in self-narrative makes the simple use of a correspondence criterion insufficient.
- <sup>26</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 3, 249.
- <sup>27</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 163.
- <sup>28</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 129.
- <sup>29</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 21-22.
- <sup>30</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 149.
- <sup>31</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 149-150.
- <sup>32</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 166.
- <sup>33</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 167.
- <sup>34</sup> Paul Ricœur, “Multiple étrangeté”, in *Anthropologie philosophique* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2013), 393-413.
- <sup>35</sup> Paul Ricœur, “La souffrance n’est pas la douleur”, in C. Marin ed., *Souffrance et douleur. Autour de Paul Ricœur* (Paris: Puf, 2013), 23.
- <sup>36</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 3, 249.
- <sup>37</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 167.
- <sup>38</sup> See Sophie-Jan Arrien, “De la narration à la morale : le passage par la promesse”, in *Cités*, 2008/1, 33, 97-108.
- <sup>39</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 22.
- <sup>40</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 91.
- <sup>41</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 22. See Johann Michel, *Paul Ricœur. Une philosophie de l’agir humain* (Paris: Cerf, 2006).
- <sup>42</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 104.
- <sup>43</sup> Ricœur, “La souffrance n’est pas la douleur”, 21-22, my translation.
- <sup>44</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 65.
- <sup>45</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 9.
- <sup>46</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 14. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. K. Ansell-Pearson, trans. C. Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), II, 16, 56-58.
- <sup>47</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 12.
- <sup>48</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 7-8.
- <sup>49</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 51-52. See Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 3, 247, where Ricœur presents narration as the very purpose of psychoanalytic practice.
- <sup>50</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 39.
- <sup>51</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37.
- <sup>52</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 36.
- <sup>53</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37.
- <sup>54</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 4: “the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures”.
- <sup>55</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 173.
- <sup>56</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.
- <sup>57</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.

- <sup>58</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 64.
- <sup>59</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 59.
- <sup>60</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 18.
- <sup>61</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 40, 79.
- <sup>62</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 64.
- <sup>63</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 121.
- <sup>64</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 64.
- <sup>65</sup> Michaël Foessel, « Les mots pour se dire », in *Études*, vol. 411, 2009/9, 210.
- <sup>66</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 68-69.
- <sup>67</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 64, 131.
- <sup>68</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 23-24.
- <sup>69</sup> Chiara Pavan, “Come ci raccontiamo oggi? Rappresentazione e vita nella nostra identità *online*”, in *Discipline filosofiche*, XXX, 2, 2020, 205-224.
- <sup>70</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 3, 246.
- <sup>71</sup> John Langshaw Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), IX, 108-119.
- <sup>72</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 17.
- <sup>73</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 22. Ricœur uses this formulation in *Time and Narrative* as well, but without referring to attestation: « Subjects recognize themselves in the stories they tell about themselves » (Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 3, 247).
- <sup>74</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 140.
- <sup>75</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 3, 158.
- <sup>76</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 161-162.
- <sup>77</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 3, 248.
- <sup>78</sup> We will leave aside, here, the question of the legitimacy of this attempt to apply the narrative thesis to a community.
- <sup>79</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 68; see Marcel Proust, *Le temps retrouvé* (Paris: Pléiade, 1988), III, 911, my translation.
- <sup>80</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 162.
- <sup>81</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 165-168.
- <sup>82</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 152-153.
- <sup>83</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 10.
- <sup>84</sup> Ricœur, “La souffrance n’est pas la douleur”, 21.
- <sup>85</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 22.

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