

Ethical Bearings in an Inter-generational Auto/biography: writing in my mother's voice

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Beatrice Speaking is an account of three years of my mother's life (from 1945 to 1948). The narrative is written in the first-person voice of Beatrice, my mother (not, of course, her real name), and is framed by a prologue and epilogue in the first-person voice of one of her children (myself) in the present. I have struggled to find a name for the hybrid offspring that I have produced; intergenerational auto/biography is much closer than any of the alternatives.

My writing is based very substantially on four sets of letters that came into my hands in 1994 after both of my parents had died. First, there are hundreds of letters written by my mother, the Beatrice of the story, to my father, Tom, who in 1945 began to work for the United Nations in post-war Italy. Almost every word that my character Beatrice speaks is drawn from these letters. There are also Tom's letters to her. Tom has no speaking voice in my narrative, but his letters are the source of every detail of the (absent) character I draw. Then there are abundant letters between Tom and his lover Heidi (also in Sydney, and a friend of Beatrice). What Heidi says in the book is similarly drawn from her own letters.

How do I have all these letters? Because Tom was the sort of person who could never throw anything away, and because the real Heidi (now aged ninety and living in Paris) has given me permission to use what she wrote. She has, in fact, read the final manuscript with approval, exclaiming to me more than once: 'How could you possibly have known about that?'

I want to explain the reason for my difficult decision to tell this story in the first-person narrating voice of Beatrice. To write in my mother's voice raises ethical problems about appropriation and authenticity; more immediately, for years this was simply an impossibly presumptuous thing for me to do. Using the third-person 'she' was the only way to balance my role as writer and creator of the character Beatrice against my sense of intrusion into my mother's private life. All the writing I did about her earlier life (*Inventing Beatrice*) was done in this third-person voice. But when I came to the 1945–1948 period, I became stuck. I had writer's block. During six months I slowly realised that I had only two choices: I could either use Beatrice's own first-person voice (being honest and faithful to her letters) or else I would fall silent

altogether. I chose the first option, to let Beatrice speak for herself, and started writing again. The biggest leap that this entailed was putting myself into her (Beatrice's/my mother's) moral space, living within it and accepting it at the same time as I profoundly rejected at least some of it for myself.

The creative work has been done. Though as yet I don't have a publisher, I now want to put on my critical analytical hat. In this article I want to scrutinise the ethical bearings of my feminist, poststructuralist theoretical gaze. In particular, I want to interrogate the meanings of 'goodness' in relation to the construction of self in *Beatrice Speaking*.

I want to establish from the outset that as I interrogate the idea of the 'good' in this context, I'm not concerned about who slept with whom or with making judgments about the open marriage that those three were practising. Rather, I want to explore how Beatrice's sense of 'self' is oriented in a particular moral space, one in which cultural discourses about the 'good' woman, the 'good' wife and the 'good' mother are in profound tension. And since Beatrice is at least in part my own invention, I must simultaneously explore my own sense of self in my own moral space. To do this I want to draw on the work of David Parker, in particular his use of the philosophy of Charles Taylor.

In *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (1994) Parker argues:

Poststructuralist theory has been largely unconscious of its ethical bearings, in much the same way as the older humanist criticism was often unaware of its allegiances to the interests of a particular race, social class and gender ... everything is ethical, and our only options are to be conscious or unconscious of the fact. (4)

Parker draws on Charles Taylor's book *The Sources of the Self: the making of the modern identity* (1989), which, he suggests, has useful insights for critical readers of inter-generational autobiography. We only become a self among other selves, Taylor argues. We are first formed within 'webs of interlocution' (36) with people who matter to us, and we continue to be shaped by our 'conversations' with others, including those whose influence comes to us through ideas in the wider culture. A 'self' for Taylor can therefore only be described with reference to other selves. A self

and its moral orientations or positionings is often deeper and more many-sided, he proposes, than any of our attempts to articulate it.

To be a 'self' for Taylor is to be:

oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing or not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary. (28)

Living within moral space is for Taylor constitutive of human agency; it is fundamental to being a normally functioning self.

This concept of a self having an 'orientation in moral space' (both conscious and unconscious) is what Parker finds most useful in his analysis of Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986). Parker explores a range of the 'goods' or values that Steedman articulates and which constitute 'the narrating self's extremely complex orientation in moral space' (21). In particular, he discusses those 'goods' or values that have been shaped by her relationship with her mother.

In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Steedman draws together two recurrent themes of autobiography in Western literature: the life narrative of autonomy and the life narrative of relationality. In the first, the narrating self tells a story about separating from the ties of family (in Steedman's case, her mother) to find her own authentic path. In the second, the narrating self tells a story about connectedness, finding in her forebears the language of self recognition.

Steedman approaches this dual role through a radical examination of the idea of the 'good woman', starting with her mother's often repeated statement about being a good mother. As she takes her reader through the lives of mother and daughter together, Steedman defends her mother rigorously and subtly against any facile judgements we might make based on class, wealth or gender.

But Parker brings into consciousness a further twist, a 'good' that is implicit in Steedman's text but not articulated. Steedman understands that the child whose mother never recognises her children as ends in themselves will have little sense of self-worth. Such a child will not feel that she has a right to be, to exist in the world. Part of Steedman's orientation in moral space, Parker argues, is to value empathy, 'the capacity to put oneself inter-subjectively in another's place' (20). Readers are likely to

acknowledge (if only intuitively) that this is what ‘good’ mothers are ‘supposed’ to be able to do. And here, Steedman’s mother is severely deficient.

This particular ethical value, which can also be described as ‘the unreduced goodness of an ethics of care’ (21), lies implicit in Steedman’s text. For Parker to articulate it is to cut through Steedman’s sociological analysis and to clarify (in my mind at least) the struggle for meaning at the heart of the book.

I want to turn now to *Beatrice Speaking*, and explore how Beatrice’s sense of ‘self’ is oriented in a particular moral space. I want to examine what I see as the danger in Beatrice’s dominant ideal of female goodness and show how it distorts or damages her ability to be a ‘self’ in her own right.

Taylor says, ‘Our identity is what allows us to define what is important to us and what is not’ (30). For Beatrice, being ‘good’ is fundamental to her sense of self. What this means, what is important to Beatrice and what is not, is revealed gradually to the reader through both what she says and what she does not say; through what she does and does not do. In the first chapter, the values that shape her life can be divided into three layers (although of course they are also inseparable): her identity as woman, as wife and as mother. At the beginning of the book, there is little apparent tension between these goods.

This story opens with the narrating self (whom I shall for simplicity’s sake refer to as Beatrice) reflecting on the first night of what is to be a year-long absence of her husband, Tom. From the first, we see Beatrice as a modern ‘good woman’ who values her intelligence, her tertiary education and her competence as a professional. We discover that she has agreed to take on Tom’s job as a teacher to make it possible for him to follow his dream and work in post-war Italy for the United Nations for a year. Her agreement is primarily to please Tom, but it does also meet her own desire for satisfying paid work. She wants to make an economic contribution to the family. She is a thrifty manager of money. She knows herself to be self-disciplined, rational and responsible.

The second layer of Beatrice’s ‘goods’ or values that emerges in the first chapter relates more specifically to her being a certain kind of ‘good wife’. As a ‘good wife’ she copes with the sadness of separation without complaint, accepts Tom’s decision for her not to go to the airport for goodbyes, and is willing to clear up the mess he has left behind and do all the jobs he has left unfinished. We learn that she sleeps in a separate bedroom from Tom and welcomes his lover into the flat with

apparent good humour. She has done so for three years. That arrangement now provides her with Heidi's company and friendship, until Heidi herself goes back to Europe. In spite of some pain, Beatrice values her unconventional role as 'good wife'. She sees herself (and Tom) as avant-garde, a kind of moral elite. Later, she defends Heidi to Tom when she thinks Tom has been cruel.

But there is another economy of values working alongside this, a kind of accounting system of self-sacrifice. In part, Beatrice accommodates Heidi in order to keep Tom attached to herself and the children — what she calls his real family. 'I had to sacrifice myself to get what I wanted', she says. She believes that you can get what you want if you are unselfish. The meaning and implications of this unfold only slowly, as the one year of Tom's absence becomes two years and then three.

The third level of 'goods' or values that circulates in the first chapter of *Beatrice Speaking* concerns being a 'good mother'. There are three very young children to be mothered in this family. (As the story opens, they are one, three and five years old.) Beatrice knows that her arrangements to foster out the children — so that she can work, so that Tom can go to Italy — are unconventional. This does not trouble her; after all, her marriage is unconventional, too. Her sometimes painful isolation from family and friends (all of whom live in Melbourne, while she is in Sydney) is also a protective barrier against criticism. Beatrice believes that children need good physical care, she believes that she as a mother will make the right decisions about her children, and she believes that the arrangements she has made for the children at this time will actually be good for them (certainly will not harm them). She visits the children every second Saturday afternoon, though this is a mixed pleasure, as it involves a long, tiring journey on public transport each way.

Now it will be clear why I chose to let Beatrice speak for herself. As the middle one of those three children, subjected to this prolonged and repeated experience of abandonment over two years (to be followed by another three years in boarding school), it would have been easy for me, and pointless, to judge and condemn Beatrice. If there was any point in writing this story at all, it was to get inside the experience of Beatrice herself and understand how she made the decisions and choices that she did, and what meanings they had for her. For she saw herself as a moral and responsible woman who loved her children. Like Carolyn Steedman's mother, she saw herself as a good mother. Within what moral space was she oriented, to reach such conclusions?

As the story unfolds we begin to understand more about Beatrice. An inevitable tension develops between the three layers of goods or values that shape her life.

Towards the end of his twelve-month absence, Tom decides to stay on for another six months. Beatrice, he says, must continue to do his job. Beatrice agrees without fuss, but makes it clear that that will be the end of it. Then, for reasons to do with Heidi, Tom becomes ill — though he never calls it a nervous breakdown, that's what I imagine it to be. I won't go into details; enough to say that he eventually simply remains away for another two years.

During that time Beatrice is profoundly tested. At times she thinks Tom is shamming his illness; at times she thinks he will get a job in Europe and never come back. At times she thinks there's a plot between Tom and Heidi for them to meet in Europe and eventually marry. Her financial situation is precarious. She gets a part-time secretarial job (as well as taking in boarders) to support herself and the children if the worst should happen. She is sometimes bitter and angry and enraged. And she is trapped. 'You will get what you want if you are unselfish' has led her into this trap.

Beatrice is quite self-aware (with some help from Tom) about her limitations as a person, especially the social inhibitions that make her shy and uncommunicative around Tom's friends. After Tom's first few months away she writes about all the self-improvement classes she is undertaking: voice production, physical education, music. Missing him, she feels 'like an apple without its core', she tells him. She will try at least to become a bright shiny apple. A better person. For Tom's sake. Tom, and her relationship as 'good wife' to him, is at the core of her identity.

In the third year of Tom's absence Beatrice makes what is for her the supreme sacrifice: she offers him a divorce. This is no small offer in 1945, long before the time of 'no fault' divorce laws. Divorce has to be contested, and it carries a huge social stigma. Beatrice does not want it for herself; she does not see it solving her problems. She offers it for Tom's sake, reasoning that if she lets Tom go, then only one person will be unhappy (herself), while two (Tom and Heidi) will have a chance to be happy together.

Is this a cynical ploy? Another example of Beatrice knowingly acting from an ethics of manipulative self-sacrifice? ('I had to sacrifice myself to get what I wanted.' 'You will get what you want if you are unselfish.') I don't think so, though she does indeed get what she wants; that is, Tom's return to the marriage. (At another level she

never gets what she wants; that is, for Tom to love her as she loves him.)

Beatrice believes in love, trust and forgiveness (with or without the conventions of marriage). She believes in freedom, and that men and women are equal. All of these values are consciously articulated. But there is another ethical orientation that underpins them and which is only slowly made evident. Though she has rejected the Christianity of her Methodist parents and the pattern of their married relationship, Beatrice's actions show that she believes that Tom is more important than she is; that men are essentially more important than women. She would scorn the line that Milton put into the mouth of Eve: God is thy law, thou mine (1667, line 637). But still, in any relationship, for her the man is naturally central. Obviously so. Though Beatrice consciously believes that men and women are equal and should make joint decisions, she also believes that she must accept Tom's decisions, once made, however unreasonable.

When Tom, rejected by Heidi, eventually decides to come back to Sydney, Beatrice does not demur.

By this time the reader has experienced many sides of Beatrice's life and personality: her successes as teacher and colleague, her sometimes irritating habits, her patience and toughness and adaptability. She has given voice to pleasure, fatigue, happiness, envy, grief and rage.

During these three years, what does Beatrice say about the children? In many letters she describes her visits to them. There are vivid little accounts of what they have said or done. (Heidi similarly writes about them, with affection.) Only once, when one child becomes ill for several weeks with bronchial asthma, does Beatrice consider that there might be emotional or psychological problems for the children. Apart from that, she sees their semi-rural foster home as 'paradise'. She gives no indication that she has any insight into their possible feelings at being separated from their mother over and over again. As she awaits Tom's long-delayed return, she is able to say confidently, 'their unconventional childhood is not hurting them at all'.

What Beatrice does not see, I hope that the reader does see: that these children have in fact been damaged. Beatrice's orientation in moral space is so focused on her ideal of goodness as a 'good wife' (however fallible or even exploitative the man in question might be) that she has, I would argue, harmed her own 'self'. She has also harmed her ability to be a good mother. Caring for herself, mothering her children, run a poor second to 'wife-ing' Tom. To return to Taylor, 'following one good to the

end may be catastrophic, not because it isn't a good, but because there are others which can't be sacrificed without evil' (503). Beatrice sacrifices her self and her children for Tom. The result, both for herself and for her children, is (evil); that is, intense and prolonged suffering.

The point at which Beatrice makes that crucial sacrifice is not after Tom has gone but when she chooses to make it possible for him to go. However trapped she eventually becomes, at that point she does indeed have a choice.

By writing this story in Beatrice's voice I have tried to keep my own 'moral space' or 'ethical consciousness' outside of the main text. But I have also tried to make it available to the reader in two ways, without being heavy-handed. Firstly, the prologue and particularly the epilogue, written in the first-person narrative voice of the now adult middle child, frame the story not only with information but also with explicit statements about the suffering experienced by the children. Secondly, Beatrice's own narrative has, I would argue, an 'ethical unconscious' that runs as a kind of sub-text or counterpoint throughout her story. Beatrice can reject dominant cultural attitudes about mothers and children, but neither she nor the reader can be oblivious to them. The reader is aware of things about the children that Beatrice herself refuses to allow to trouble her.

These two strategies bring readers to an understanding of two of my core beliefs, which are not explicitly stated in the text: that a good woman will make her own decisions about things that are centrally important to her own life (an ethics of care for the self); and that good mothering (an ethics of care for one's children) must be based on an empathetic recognition of children as persons with needs and rights of their own.

David Parker, as I said at the beginning of this article, has argued that poststructuralist theory has been largely unconscious of its ethical bearings; that everything is ethical, and our only options are to be conscious or unconscious of the fact. My own reading of Foucault's later work — in particular, the essay 'The Genealogy of Ethics' (1984) and volume three of *The History of Sexuality* (1988), subtitled *The care of the self* — has helped to make me conscious of my own ethical grounding as I use poststructuralist theory. It has deepened my awareness of the ethical or moral space in which I have created this inter-generational auto/biography, with its complex modulation of fact and fiction, past and present, self and other.

In *Beatrice Speaking* I have tried to understand the particular orientation in moral space that gave Beatrice's identity its continuity of being, even when that 'good' involved the distortion of other 'goods'. Using her first-person voice to give expression to her perceptions (or my imagined perceptions of her), I find myself portraying a mother who has failed the implicit good of the ethics of care towards herself and her small children. But the judgment of her mother by this daughter/reader of her life is suspended by a recognition of her suffering. Judgment is placed *sous rature* — not erased, but under erasure, in Derrida's use of the term (Sampson, 1989) — by new knowledge gained in the process of writing.

Holding contradictory meanings in mind at the same time, part of the attempt to deconstruct the dualism of Western thinking, paradoxically becomes a tool for an active empowerment to discern that moves beyond blame to explore ethical dimensions of agency and personhood.

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