**Brian Richardson:** [00:00:00] old woman money for gin. Once you have given her the money, she keeps her mouth shut with both hands. She is quite sober from gin, the old woman. She does not dream of the unborn children, the innocent children do not dare to complain to the saints about her, nor do the guilty ones.

But you do. "Bring my child back to life again."

**Jim Phelan:** This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me or another host. Today, I'll be talking with Brian Richardson, who has selected Ilse Aichinger's *Spiegelgeschichte*, originally published in German in Austria in 1949.

Brian will be reading the English [00:01:00] translation, which has the title *Mirror Story*. Brian Richardson is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Maryland. Brian has long been a stalwart member of the International Society for the Study of Narrative, and served as the Society's President in 2011.

Brian has done extensive and influential work on modernism, post modernism, drama, and narrative theory. Brian's 2006 book, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, published in the Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series at OSU Press, that book won the Narrative Society's 2008 Perkins Prize for the Best Book in Narrative Studies.

Just as significantly, *Unnatural Voices* launched one of the most influential approaches in the narrative theory over the last 20 years, which goes under the title "unnatural narratology", and Brian has continued to be a leader in [00:02:00] that sub-field. I also want to mention that Brian was the prime mover behind the publication of the widely adopted collaborative book entitled, *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, co-authored by Brian, David Herman, Robyn Warhol, Peter J. Rabinowitz, and me. Brian's most recent books include *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-first Century: Theorizing Unruly Narratives*, published in 2019, *Essays on Narrative and Fictionality: Reassessing Nine Central Concepts*, published in 2021, and *Unnatural Narratology: Extensions, Revisions, and Challenges*, co-edited with Jan Alber.

Brian's latest book, *The Reader in Modernist Fiction*, a study of the disparate faiths of characters who are readers in works of modernist fiction, will be published this July. So Brian, it's great to have [00:03:00] you, and before we launch into your reading of the story, is there anything you'd like to tell our listeners?

**Brian Richardson:** Sure. Ilse Aichinger was born in Vienna in 1921. Her mother was Jewish, and after the German Anschluss occurred, Aichinger was unable to continue her studies and was forced to work in a button factory. She hid her mother in her apartment until the end of the war. Her first works of fiction used an almost surrealistic style to depict this period and its cruelties. Her subsequent work in poetry, short fiction, dialogues, short prose pieces, and radio dramas was insistently non realist and often extremely oniric and dreamlike. She has been highly regarded in the German speaking world since her first publications, though she remains little known in the United States. Do pay close attention as I read; the story is quite different from [00:04:00] almost anything you have encountered before.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay, now here's Brian Richardson reading *Mirror Story* by Ilse Aichinger.

**Brian Richardson:** When someone pushes your bed out of the ward, when you see the sky is growing green, and when you want to save the priest the trouble of holding a funeral service, then it is time for you to get up, softly, as children do, when in the mornings the light shines through the shutters, secretly, so that the nurse doesn't see, and quickly.

But the priest has already begun, you can hear his voice, young and eager and undeterred, you can already hear him speaking. Let it be. Let his kind words be submerged in the pouring rain. Your grave is open. Let his easy confidence first become helpless, so that it may receive help. If you let him go on, he will in the end no longer know whether has even begun.[00:05:00]

And because he doesn't know, he makes the usual sign to the pallbearers. And the pallbearers don't ask many questions, they just bring your coffin up again, and they take the wreath off the lid and give it back to the young man who stands at the side of the grave with bowed head. The young man takes his wreath, and in his embarrassment smooths the ribbons on it.

For a moment he raises his head, and the rain blows a few tears down his cheeks. Then the procession starts off back again, along by the wall. The candles in the ugly little chapel are lit again, and the priest reads the committal service, so that you can live. He shakes the young man's hand warmly and out of sheer embarrassment wishes him luck. It is the first time he has ever conducted a funeral service and he blushes to the roots of his hair. And before he can correct himself, the young man has disappeared. What still remains to be done? [00:06:00] When someone has wished a mourner luck, there is nothing else to be done but to send the dead back home again. Immediately afterwards, the vehicle with your coffin drives slowly up the street again, to right and left are houses, and there are yellow narcissi in all the windows, the same ones that are woven into all the wreaths, and there is nothing to be done about it.

Children press their faces to the closed windows. It is raining, but one of them is certain to run out of the house. He clambers onto the back of the hearse, but is pushed off and drops back. The child shields his eyes with both hands and gazes sullenly at you. What else is one to swing up on if you live on the road that leads to the cemetery?

Your hearse waits at the crossroads for the green light. The rain has slackened. Raindrops dance on the roof of the car. One can smell the hay from the distance. The streets have been freshly christened, [00:07:00] and the sky lays its hand on all the roofs. Out of sheer politeness, your horse drives for a little alongside the tram.

Two little boys at the side of the road lay bets, but the one who bets on the tram will lose. You could have warned him, but no one has ever won a bet about a body rising from a coffin. Be patient, for it is early summer. Mornings still reach far back into the night. You'll be all right. Before it is dark, and all the children have gone from the side of the road, the car is already turning into the hospital yard, and a ray of moonlight falls at this moment across the entrance. The men come at once and lift your coffin from the hearse, which now drives off back home happily. They carry your coffin through the second doorway, across the yard into the morgue. There, the empty pedestal stands waiting, black, sloping and high up, [00:08:00] and they place the coffin on it and open it again.

One of them swears because the nails have been knocked in too hard. Such damned efficiency. Immediately afterwards, the young man comes back, bringing the wreath, and none too soon. The men arrange the ribbons on it and lay the wreath at the front. You can rest assured that the wreath is in a good position.

By tomorrow, the faded flowers will have revived and will close up as if in bud. All night long, you will be alone, the cross between your hands. And even in the daytime, you will be at peace. Later, you will never be able to manage to lie so still. The next day, the young man comes again, and because the rain drives no tears into his face, he stares blankly ahead, twiddling his cap in his hands.

Only just before they lift the coffin onto the boards, again, does he cover his face with his hands, weeping. [00:09:00] You are to stay no longer in the morgue. Why is he weeping? The lid of the coffin is just left on loosely, and it is bright daylight. The sparrows chirrup happily. They do not know that it is forbidden to wake the dead.

The young man walks ahead of your coffin as if there were glasses between his steps. The wind is cool and wayward, a petulant child. They carry you into the house and up the stairs. You are lifted out of the coffin. Your bed has been freshly made. The young man stares through the window down into the yard where two cooing pigeons are copulating.

Disgusted, he turns away. And by now they have put you back into bed. They have bound the cloth under your chin again, the cloth that makes you look so strange. The man begins to wail, throwing himself across you. They lead him gently away. Quiet, please notices are on all the walls. The hospitals are [00:10:00] at this time overcrowded.

The dead must not awake too soon. Over in the harbor, the ships are hooting. Does it mean arrival or departure? Who can know that? Silence. Quiet, please. Do not awake the dead before it is time, for they sleep lightly. But the ships go on hooting, and a little later, they will have to take the cloth from your chin again, whether they want to or not, and they will wash you and change your linen, and one of them will lean over your heart quickly while you are still dead.

There is not much more time, and it is the ship's fault. It is getting darker outside. They open your eyes, which shine white. They no longer talk about how peaceful you look. Thank heavens for that. The words die away in their mouths. But wait, they will soon have gone. No one wants to be a witness, for people are still burned for that.

They leave you [00:11:00] alone. They leave you alone so that you open your eyes and see the green sky. They leave you so alone that you begin to breathe heavily, gaspingly, and deeply. Rattling like an anchor chain running out, you rear up and cry out for your mother. How green the sky is. The feverishness is passing off and the death agony is beginning, says a voice behind you.

Oh they, what do they know? Go now. Now is the moment. They've been called away. Go before they come back and before their loud whispering starts again. Go down the stairs, past the porter, out through the morning which turns to night. The birds cry in the darkness as if your pains have begun to rejoice. Go home.

Go and lie down in your own bed again, even if the frame does creak, and even if it is unmade still. You will get better quicker there. There you will rage and storm against your [00:12:00] own self for three days only. You will drink your fill of the green sky, and for three days only you will push aside the soup, which the woman from upstairs brings you, and on the fourth you will eat it.

And on the seventh, which is the day of rest, on the 7th you will go away. You are pursued by pain, but you will find the way. To the left first, and right, and then to the left again. Across the streets near the harbor, which are so wretched that they can do nothing else than lead to the sea. If only the young man were near you.

But the young man is not with you. You were much more beautiful in your coffin. But now your face is distorted with pain, the pain which has ceased to rejoice. And now the sweat has broken out on your forehead again, all the way along. No, in your coffin, you were much more beautiful. The children are playing ball in the roadway.

You run into [00:13:00] them. You run as if going backwards, and none of them is your child. How could one of them be your child if you go to the old woman who lives near the pub? The whole harbor knows how she pays for all the gin she drinks. She is already waiting at the door. The door is open as she stretches out her dirty hand toward you.

Everything there is dirty. On the chimney piece stand the yellow flowers. They are the same ones which they weave into wreaths. And they are the same ones. And the old woman is far too friendly, and here too the stairs creak, and the steamers hoot, it does not matter where you go, they are always hooting, and you are shaken by pain, but you must not cry out; the steamers hoot, but you must not cry out. Give the old woman money for gin. Once you have given her the money, she keeps her mouth shut with both hands. She is quite sober from gin, [00:14:00] the old woman. She does not dream of the unborn children, the innocent children do not dare to complain to the saints about her, nor do the guilty ones.

But you do. "Bring my child back to life again." No one has ever made a request like that to the old woman. But you do. The mirror gives you strength. The blank, fly blown mirror makes you demand what no one else has ever demanded. "Bring it back to life, or I will knock your yellow flowers over, or I will scratch your eyes out, or I will throw open the windows of your place and shout across the street, so that they will all be able to hear what they already know. I will shout." At that, the old woman becomes frightened, and in her great fear, in the blank mirror, she grants your request. She does not know what she is doing, but in the blank mirror, she manages it. Fear becomes intense, and the pain becomes [00:15:00] raging again. And before you cry out, you know the lullaby, sleep, baby, sleep.

And before you cry out, the mirror curls you down the dark stairs again, and lets you go, lets you get away. Do not run too fast. It is better to look up from the ground. Otherwise, it could happen that you run into a young man down there amongst the planks, lying around at the empty building site, into a young man twiddling his cap in his hands.

That is how you recognize him. He is the same one who stood beside your coffin, twiddling his cap. There he is again, standing here as though he had never been away, leaning there against the planks. You fall into his arms. He has no tears anymore, so give him some of yours, and say goodbye before you link arms with him.

Say goodbye. You will never forget, even if he does, when says [00:16:00] farewell right at the beginning. Before you go off together, you must part forever by the planks around the empty building site. And then you both go on further. There is a road which leads past the coal dumps to the sea. You are both silent.

You are waiting for the first word and leaving it to him so that it is not you who will have to end the matter. What will he say, quickly before you both reach the sea, which brings such uncertainty? What is he saying? What is his first word? Can it really be so difficult that it makes him stutter and forces him to look down at the ground?

Or is it the heaps of coal looming up behind the planks, casting shadows under his eyes and dazzling him with their blackness? The first word, now he has said it, it is the name of a back street. It is the one in which the old woman lives. Is it really possible? [00:17:00] Even before he knows that you're expecting the child, he already tells you the name of the old woman.

Even before he says he loves you, he tells you about the old woman. Say nothing yet. He does not know that you already were at the old woman's. He can't know. He knows nothing about the mirror. But he has hardly spoken the words when he has forgotten them. In the mirror one says everything in order that it may be forgotten.

And you have hardly said that you were expecting the child when you concealed the fact. The mirror tells you everything. The coal heaps fade away behind you. You have both reached the sea, and you can see the white boats like questions at the limit of your view. Be silent, both of you. The sea takes the answer from your mouth.

The sea swallows up what you were about to say. From then on, you both walked many times along the beach, [00:18:00] as though you were going down along it homewards, as though you were running away, as though you were going home. What is it there are whispering in their light colored bonnets? This is the death agony.

Oh, let them talk. One day the sky will be pale enough, so pale that its paleness will shine. On this day the blank mirror reflects the condemned house. People say a house is condemned when it is going to be pulled down. Condemned, they say. They don't know any better. Neither of you need be afraid. The sky is now pale enough.

And, like the sky in its paleness, the house too, at the end of its condemnation, awaits ecstasy. Tears come easily from much laughter. You have cried enough. Take back your wreath. Soon you will now be able to loosen your plates. It is all in the mirror. [00:19:00] And behind all that you do, the sea lies green. It lies before you when you leave the house.

When you climb out again through the caving windows, you have already forgotten. In the mirror, everything is done that it might be forgiven. And from then on, he urges you to go in with him. But in your eagerness, you both withdraw from it and turn away from the beach. You do not turn round, and the condemned house stands there behind you.

You go up the river, and your own feverishness flows up and past you both. Soon his insistence slackens, and at the same moment, you are no more willing. And you both become shyer. That is the tide flowing out, drawing the sea away from all coasts. Even river levels are lowered at tide. And over there on the other side, the tree crowns finally emerge beyond the tops of the lesser trees.

[00:20:00] Below them, the shingle roofs slumber. Take care. We will soon begin to talk about the future, of many children and a long life, his cheeks burning with eagerness as he does so. Even yours are lit by it. You will both argue about whether you want sons and daughters. And you would rather have sons. And he would prefer a tiled roof.

And you want... but by now you've already gone far, too far, up the river. You are seized with fear. The shingle roofs on the other side are out of sight. Ah, and there are now only fields and damp meadows. And here, you should watch out, both for the road. It is growing dusk, as soberly as it does only in the mornings.

The future is all over. The future is a pathway beside the river, which flows into the meadows. Go back, both of you. And now, what is to [00:21:00] happen? Three days later, he no longer dares put his arm round your shoulder. And three days after that, he asks you what your name is, and you ask him his. And now, neither of you even knows the other's name, and you don't even ask anymore.

It's better like that. And now at last, you both walk silently side by side once more. And if he asks you anything new, it is only to ask if it's going to rain. Who can tell? You become more and more estranged from each other. You have long ago given up talking to each other about the future. You no longer meet very often, but you are still not estranged enough.

Wait a while. Be patient. One day this stage too will have been reached. One day he will be so strange to you that you will begin to love him in an open doorway in some back street. [00:22:00] All in its own good time. Now it has come. It won't last much longer, they are saying behind you. It's nearly over. What do they know?

Isn't it just the beginning? A day will come when you will see him for the first time, and he you. For the first time means never again. But don't be afraid. There is no need for you to say farewell to each other. You did that so long ago. How good that you have already done so. It will be an autumn day, a day full of expectation, that all the fruits around us will one day become flowers.

An autumn day like this, with this light colored smoke, and the windows which lie like splinters between one's steps, ones you could cut your feet on, the sort you could stumble over when you're sent for apples in the market. You could fall over, through sheer hope and happiness. A young man comes to your aid, [00:23:00] his jacket is thrown only lightly over his shoulders, and he smiles, twiddling his cap in his hands, and his tongue tied. But you are both happy in this light. You thank him, throwing your head back a little. Your plates loosen and fall down. "Oh!" he says, "Aren't you still going to school?" He turns and goes off whistling. And you part like this, without looking at each other again, even once, entirely without any grief, and without even knowing that you are parting.

Now you can play with your little brothers again. And you can go along by the river with them, the pathway by the river under the alders. And over there are the white shingle roofs, as usual, amongst the treetops. What will the future bring? Certainly no sons. But it has brought you brothers, plates, making them dance and blush and laugh behind their [00:24:00] hands.

But wait only a year, and you will be able to jump over the rope and snatch the branches hanging over the walls. You have already learned foreign languages, but it is not so easy. Your own language is much harder. It is even harder to learn to read and write. But it is hardest to forget everything. And if you had to know everything at the first examination, then you may at the end be allowed to know nothing.

Will you pass? Will you sit still enough? If you are afraid enough not to open your mouth, all will be well. You hang again, forever on its hook, the blue cap which all schoolchildren wear, and you leave school. It is autumn again. The flowers have long since budded again. The buds have withered away, again into fruit.

Everywhere the little children are going home, they have [00:25:00] passed their examination, like you. But none of you know anything anymore. You are on your way home. Your father is waiting for you, and your little brothers are crying as loud as they can, and pull your hair. You quiet them and comfort your father.

Soon the summer comes, with its long days. Soon your mother dies. You and your father, you both fetch her from the cemetery. For three days she lies surrounded by crackling candles, as you did that time. Blow out the candles before she wakes up. But she already smells the wax and raises herself up on her arms and complains softly about the waste.

Then she gets up and changes her clothes. It is as well that your mother dies, for you could not have managed alone with your little brothers much longer. But now she is here. Now she attends to everything and teaches you to play much better, one [00:26:00] can never learn to do it well enough. And it is not an easy thing to do,

but it is still not the most difficult thing. The most difficult thing is to forget how to speak and how to walk and instead to stammer and to crawl on the floor, only in the end to be wrapped in nappies. The most difficult thing is to endure tenderness and affectionate attention and just to gaze in front of one. Be patient.

Soon all will be well. God will know the day on which you will be weak enough. And that day is the day of your birth. You come into the world and open your eyes and shut them again in the strong light. The light warms your limbs. You move in the sun. You have arrived. You are alive. Your father bends down over you.

Behind you they are saying, it is all over. She is dead. Hush. Let [00:27:00] them talk.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay. Thank you, Brian. So you, you introduced it by saying, it'll be a story that's very unusual, has various, you know, elaborate a little bit and has techniques that we're not all that familiar with. And I think, you know, going back to your introduction, this is a post World War II story, 1949, we think about, you know, modernist technique and so on, right?

There are ways in which this stands out for its kind of innovations with narrative technique, and the two obvious ones are the inverted chronology and the second person narration, right? And I think we should talk about both of those things, and maybe start with the inverted chronology and see where that leads us.

What are your initial thoughts about that?

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah, certainly. I mean, on the one hand, you know, this is very innovative. Recently we've seen a few narratives, pick up this technique and develop it, Mark [00:28:00] Namus, quite famously, in his novel *Time's Arrow*.

**Jim Phelan:** Which is a 90, 90s... sometime in the 90s, right? Early 90s, 92' or so, I think.

**Brian Richardson:** Exactly. Exactly, yes. And typically, these are about moving forward into the past to undo horrific or catastrophic events.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Brian Richardson:** And so, yeah, I don't think it's reading too much into it to see, you know, all, you know, the destruction of World War II, and specifically the genocide of the Holocaust, lying behind this work and many others.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, so I mean, I think, obviously there's no explicit reference to the Holocaust, but as you say, we're thinking 1949, the biographical information that you gave, invites us to think about that. I suppose in some way, the abortion might be the place where we would start to say, okay, you know, there's an invitation to make connections.

Does that make sense to you? What, what would you say about that? [00:29:00]

**Brian Richardson:** Sure. Yeah, absolutely, you know, in insofar as it is this destruction of a possible life. Again, we can read this allegorically and thematically. It is a moment of both death and life for the embryo as well as the death of the primary figure, of the woman.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** So again, we see the fusion of ends, births and ends, of births that become ends.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay.

**Brian Richardson:** Or possible births.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah, maybe we should just pause a little bit over sort of the kind of cognitive work that the inverted chronology sort of requires for us as readers, right? So, you know, we get a sentence like when we talk about the abortionist, " She is quite sober from gin, the old woman," right? So, if we're thinking about time, right, how's it going? I mean, what's... can you just unpack that?

**Brian Richardson:** Sure, sure. So, you know, in a straightforward linear chronology, [00:30:00] drinking a lot of gin makes you drunk.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Brian Richardson:** When you go in an inverted chronology, it makes you sober.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. So the more you drink, the more you're sobering up.

**Brian Richardson:** Exactly.

**Jim Phelan:** Because you're witnessing the drinking, but you're seeing this different kind of effect.

**Brian Richardson:** Well, and we can talk about, you know, the narrative audience, then, is going along with this, whereas the authorial audience, to use Peter Rabinowitz's terms, has to reconstruct it and invert the causal progression to get, in fact, the actual causal sequence.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And so the narrative audience is aligned, pretty easily and fully, I guess we would say, the narrative audience is aligned with the protagonist, right, that her perspectives are those of the narrative audience. But then, the authorial audience has to do all this work to sort of undo or, you know, turn around the time's arrow, and so on.

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah. I can also mention that this is one of the very first instances of this.

**Jim Phelan:** [00:31:00] Yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** Again, a number of authors have, and some rather, you know, rather well known instances have subsequently appeared. This is one of the first, and also it is one of the very first stories written in the second person.

So again, I just want to underscore the innovativeness of this technique, and also, sadly, the fact that it's not nearly as well known or widely discussed as it deserves

to be.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah. No, I... well, hopefully the podcast will help make it more, more well known. Yeah, I think there's just one other thing about, you know, sort of the perspective and the narrative audience alignment with the protagonist that's maybe just worth drawing out a little bit. So we get one thing, you know, it's like this one thing, one kind of effect when we have narration, you know, it's like with she's becoming sober from the gin, but then we get something else when we're seeing her perspective, right, where the narration is tied to the protagonist's perspective, like, your [00:32:00] narration goes, you will stay no longer in the morgue, why is he weeping, right? And then the authorial audience has to sort of do the reversal and say, okay, we're seeing these two things, right? So from the protagonist perspective, her perception is, okay, she's getting out of the morgue, but the authorial audience has to do the... and then as to why is he weeping, right? But, the authorial audience recognizing, no, times hour is going the other direction. He's weeping because you've entered the morgue, right?

And so we have that kind of, you know, doubling throughout, really.

**Brian Richardson:** Yes, yes. And it's also narrated into the text since you have those other voices that interrupted at about four points in the text that are actually moving in what we consider a chronological sequence, moving towards our future, whereas [00:33:00] the rest of the narrative is moving in a linear fashion directly into the past.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Brian Richardson:** It's an interesting counterpoint.

**Jim Phelan:** It is. And it also raises the question, and I think you're, you know, it's good that you point out that we have these four interruptions in a way. And it kind of raises the question of, you know, if we're going to try to naturalize this to some degree, like, is this the protagonist's thoughts as she's on the deathbed?

 And because we get those voices, right, and then after the voices we get commentary from the " you" narrator, right, like the "you" narrator seems to be aware of those voices and the protagonist seems to be aware that, you know, she can hear them too, right? So it's not like they're totally separate, right, and kind of a juxtaposition of a whole different kind of segment of the [00:34:00] narrative.

 It's interwoven, it's integrated in terms of the unfolding of the action and of the perceptions of the, of the protagonist and the commentary of the narrator.

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah, I'd suggest that it's integrated halfway.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay, yeah. Say more.

**Brian Richardson:** The protagonists can hear and comment on their voices, but they have no idea what's going on in her mind. And in fact, of course, it starts off with her dead.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, exactly. Right, right.

**Brian Richardson:** On the one hand, we may be invited to, you know, to play with the trope of, you know, seeing your life pass before you as, you know, in the moment that you die. And usually, I presume... I haven't died, recently, so I can't speak from personal experience, but...

**Jim Phelan:** You haven't had that unnatural experience yet.

**Brian Richardson:** Not yet, not yet. Not even when I drink gin. But my understanding is that this is usually in a chronological sequence.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Brian Richardson:** It's almost like she's [00:35:00] taking that trope and inverting it, but she also extends it because it's, it starts after she's literally been buried.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

**Brian Richardson:** Dead and buried. It goes back to the moment of her birth before she was alive.

**Jim Phelan:** Right. And so, in a way, that point also, I think, highlights the way which she's enhancing the unnaturalness because even though she's dead, she can feel and think and experience things, right? She's... we have the narration of, you know, sort of interior consciousness when she's in the grave, right?

**Brian Richardson:** Yes, exactly.

**Jim Phelan:** And it's not like we're thinking she's buried alive, no, it's like this unnatural thing. She is dead and she can do this, she can have this perception. It's sort of like unnatural on top of unnatural, it's not just the chronological, it's also the... what she can perceive and so on.

**Brian Richardson:** And both tempting us to naturalize it and make it impossible for us to.

**Jim Phelan:** Yes, good. [00:36:00] Okay, right. Yeah. It's sort of challenging in that way. Yeah, so I think another feature of the temporality that's maybe worth talking about a little bit is the, is the duration, right?

So if we're going to have from death to birth, all right, well, there's a question about how, how much story time are we going to give to different parts of the life, right? So what, what stands out to you in that way; what gets emphasized and why do you think?

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah, well, the most compelling aspect is no doubt, you know, coming back from the dead.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Brian Richardson:** So that makes sense for it to, have its prominence. But then, the other thing we notice as we, go back into time or forward into the past, the distances get greater and greater. Now maybe this is simply part of the, you know, the rhetoric of narration that she's pulling off this magnificent trick, but she doesn't want to do it too long, maybe afraid that certain readers are, you know, not [00:37:00] going to say, okay, you know, enough. She keeps the narrative momentum going by expanding its reach, that would be my, my way of thinking about it. And then it, it also draws attention to another of her narrative innovations, and that is, you know, using the present tense narration that starts off almost unnoticeable, but I think as we get further and further in these leaps into time, then that foregrounds the present tense narration.

**Jim Phelan:** Right. Yeah, so, like, we can think about options with the present tense, uh, you know, sort of standard options would be, you know, historical present versus actual present. Is this clearly one or the other, would you say?

**Brian Richardson:** I want to take this, uh, narrator at her word and I want to read it as, I mean, this is her narrative and, and so I, I'm happy to accept it without trying to, you know, psychologize it.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** For me it is a good, solid, unnatural narrative [00:38:00] all the way through.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. There is this issue, for me anyway, that I'd be interested to hear you comment on, about the sort of duration of the life relative to the duration of the telling and, you know, how, how we might be thinking about that in relation to the present tense, right?

That is, the telling takes, what, twenty five minutes, right? You just read it, right? And that, the telling of that twenty five minutes in the present tense covers a life. So, is there a bigger disjunction there or is it, is it sort of, okay, it's, but it's still summary in the way that, you know, past tense narration often gives a summary?

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah, I guess for, for me, the most interesting feature is, is the disjuncture or, or rather the transformation from a rather slow paced present tense to this vast present. [00:39:00]

**Jim Phelan:** Where she's covering so much time in, in a few sentences, and...

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah. And that, I believe, is pretty unprecedented, although you've written on that subject, isn't there usually more of an equivalence?

**Jim Phelan:** Yes. Yes, that's why the present tense makes it, right, yeah, it's sort of... if it's an actual present, right, we typically, I mean, we can allow for summary and skipping and ellipses and stuff like that, but the idea of, okay, the telling and the acting are happening at the same time, is unnatural typically. But it then, I think it makes the action and the telling sort of more in concert with each other.

And here, here I think I'm at least aware of that big gap between the duration of the telling and the duration of the, of the life. Okay, well, you know, I think there's a couple other things related to the time before we get to the second person, and [00:40:00] that has to do with maybe the way in which temporal inversion gets linked with other kinds of inversions, so like the narration at the cemetery, we have narrator saying, the young man takes his wreath and in his embarrassment smooths the ribbons on it.

Why would embarrassment be appropriate, you know, appropriate at all?

**Brian Richardson:** It would be wildly inappropriate, and so I would look for the mirror image of embarrassment. And so I would try to read that as something like, you know, despondency. And especially at some of the other scenes at that very beginning, you know, strike me as having a number of different mirror effects besides the temporal ones. "He shakes the young man's hand warmly and out of sheer embarrassment, wishes him luck"; so, I read that instead of wishing him luck, what he's really doing is wishing him, you know, condolences.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, [00:41:00] exactly. Yeah.. Yeah. Right. So the two embarrassments are... we're invited to do some kind of reversal with them.

Yeah, and then that, also, that I think brings in the idea of the mirror, you know, which is in the title, *Mirror Story*. So, the mirror is not just applied to the temporality, but some of these other things,

**Brian Richardson:** Yes, yes.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** And the causal mirroring is especially interesting, as the effects produce their causes.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah, and then we have the mirror plays a big role in the abortion scene or the scene with the abortionist, right?

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah.

**Jim Phelan:** Which leads to her going down the stairs and all that, so.

**Brian Richardson:** And produces a number of tremendous ironies.

I mean, you have small ironies, such as, you know, when she hears the, the hooting of the boats in the harbor, and you can't tell if they're coming or going.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** And so there is a, you know, a mirror like symmetry there between arrival and departure. But you also [00:42:00] get unexpected correspondences, especially at the beginning when, with that loaded word here, when she meets the boy, it says, now neither of you knows the other's name and you don't even ask anymore. It is better like that.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** So, yeah, again, since we, you know, know what is going to happen from our perspective...

**Jim Phelan:** We have that irony, yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** And then you get the other, again, maybe even more powerful one, where she thinks, is it really possible? Even before he knows you were expecting the child, he tells you the name of the old woman.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. That one's really poignant, I think.

**Brian Richardson:** Yes.

**Jim Phelan:** I mean, because, yeah, right, he's already planning it and she's not even aware.

I mean, she's really taking advantage of the difference in what he knows and what she knows at the same point of time, because he's going in one direction, in temporal direction, and he's going in the other temporal direction. [00:43:00] And that creates that really, I think, for me, very poignant thing.

**Brian Richardson:** And the first time means, never again.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Right.

**Brian Richardson:** And for me, the most moving one was when she approaches the time where her mother dies, and so it is, well, your mother died since you could not have managed alone with your little brother as much as you wanted.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah. That's, that's so sad.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. But let's just, let's stay with that a little bit. So in the, in that sentence, what's happening with the word die?

**Brian Richardson:** Well, just like her, she comes back to life, from the dead, and she makes the transition from one state to the other, which interestingly is what's happening throughout the entire story, is we have death at either end, either way you run the chronology, you have non existence I should say rather than.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, right.

Okay. Yeah, and I think we should come back to the end, but maybe the ending of the story, [00:44:00] but let's talk a little bit more about the second person.

**Brian Richardson:** Sure.

**Jim Phelan:** So, you know, you've written well about this, and we can talk about, you know, different kinds of a second person, whether it's a disguised eye or whether there is a clear distinction between the narrator and the narratee.

 We also... Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik has proposed the idea that sometimes we get a, a kind of dyad between the narrator and narratee in which they're attuned to each other, and so there's a distinction, but the attunement sort of limits the, the gaps between them. What do you think is going on here, or do you think we can tell, or sort it out?

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah, I think the difficulty of applying that kind of a schema on is precisely the fact that the narrator is a little slippery.

**Jim Phelan:** Mm hmm.

**Brian Richardson:** And this is true of almost all second person narration and [00:45:00] different theorists, like Stanzel and Genette, have denied that it's an independent kind of narration.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** And they said it is one form.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, we agree they're wrong though, right? I mean...

**Brian Richardson:** Well, and yeah, Genette says, it's the, the third person, the heterodiegetic.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, Yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** And Brian McHale agrees with that, whereas Stanzel says, no, it's the first person, and Mieke Bal agrees with that, so.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, smart people, but you know.

**Brian Richardson:** Brilliant people. But half of those... and we, we can add additional figures on either side there, and this points out to the, as Monika Fludernik says, it is irreducible to either side. And that is one of the fascinating things about it.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** Now, so this also means that the same applies to the narratee. So again, it's more slippery and problematic, I think.

**Jim Phelan:** Right. So, I mean, one thing about the narratee that we can agree, I think, is that what's, you know, one of the reasons why it's irreducible is that the [00:46:00] narratee is also the protagonist. And one of the, you know, tricky parts about that is we can sometimes feel that the direct address includes not only the protagonist, but also us in the audience. And that's part of the, you know, the pull of the technique, but is there more you wanna say about the narratee and the narratees being slippery?

**Brian Richardson:** Well, again, you know, I would say if we look at it, I find it a little more slippery than that, and certainly, yeah, it's entirely correct to have that identification, you know, for passages like, go now, now is the moment.

**Jim Phelan:** Mm-Hmm.

**Brian Richardson:** Okay, this is being spoken to the character.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Brian Richardson:** Who is the narratee of this, but it is as if she is speaking this to herself.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, so we can have a narrator, narratee protagonist, convergence.

**Brian Richardson:** Yes.

**Jim Phelan:** All three are the same.

**Brian Richardson:** Yes.

**Jim Phelan:** Right. And we can also have narratee protagonist, different from the narrator.

**Brian Richardson:** Yes, well, [00:47:00] when she describes the color of her eyes, then that clearly this is, has to be addressed to someone else, and it has to be an external narrator mentioning it.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

**Brian Richardson:** So, again, you know, I just revel in this vacillation, you know, an impossible vacillation, but you know, which is very, very bracing in its own way.

**Jim Phelan:** Right. Okay. Okay. Yeah. I mean, to say in this case, anyway, we're getting the shifting between the, convergence and the, and the divergence. Alright. I think, you know, maybe we should start to talk about some of the larger takeaways from these, you know, I mean, obviously, one of the things that we're getting from the attention to the inverted chronology and the second person is the kind of engagement that the story sort of is inviting its readers to have, but then we can also maybe spend a little time on what that [00:48:00] engagement might be in the service of, right?

We talked a little bit at the beginning about, you know, Holocaust, but, you know, what else? What else might be going on here?

**Brian Richardson:** Well, certainly the transitoriness of life or, and certainly the unpredictability, how death can be so close, without one ever expecting it. And of course, you know, many of her aunts and other relatives, I think her brother, were killed by the Nazis.

So, again, one can't imagine that would ever be very, very far from one's consciousness and all... but again, you know, she did write a Holocaust novel, a novel set in Nazi occupied Austria. But almost all of her subsequent work is much more generalized and much less identifiable, spatially or temporally.

So again, she's, you know, looking out towards a more obviously universal kind of perspective.

**Jim Phelan:** Mm-Hmm.

**Brian Richardson:** They can't be, you know, reduced to a particular moment in space or time, [00:49:00] however, grotesque that is.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

I was just gonna say in that connection, you know, we could talk about the defamiliarization, right?

**Brian Richardson:** Oh yeah.

**Jim Phelan:** Sort of the, you know, making time "time-y", right? And Shklovsky talks about this, "making the stone stony", Aichinger makes time "time-y" and very aware, makes us aware of what we take for granted and, you know, cause and effect and things like that and how, you know, if we lean on them, then maybe not so.

And we think about perception, then they become more complex kinds of things.

**Brian Richardson:** Sure, yeah, and she defamiliarizes at almost every level, at the level of the word, especially in her, in her later works, she's, yeah, fascinated with language, its powers, in particular, and also its limitations.

And here, you know, we see her defamiliarizing all kinds of standard narrative techniques and conventional thoughts and thinking as well, and conventional [00:50:00] associations.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah, and then I think also, you know, at the general level, it's also a life, right? What is a life?

We're going to, we have a life course here, we have it in first order, we have some significant events, but there's also things that are kind of, we think about as standard, right? Births, siblings, parents, falling in love, complications, you know, et cetera. I mean, obviously, the abortion is big and I think, you know, that sort of stands out in the story, but it's not only an abortion story, it's all this other stuff, you know?

**Brian Richardson:** Yes. And maybe we'd say illegal abortion.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, right. Absolutely. Right, that's crucial, yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** That is what causes the death, yeah.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, right. All right, well, maybe we could just look at the ending as a way towards our own ending, right? So, do you want to read the last couple of paragraphs again?

**Brian Richardson:** Sure. And that is the day of your birth. You come into the world and open your eyes and shut them again. The [00:51:00] light warms your limbs, you move in the sun, you have arrived. You are. Father bends down over you, behind you, they are saying. It is all over, she is dead. Hush, let them talk.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, so, here I think, you know, it's worth asking, right, is there... there's time reverse again, right, the time's arrow reverse again.

That is the day of your birth, you come into the world and open your eyes and shut them again in the strong light, right? So one way to read that is, okay, it's, you know, you're born, you open your eyes, you shut them, you know, you feel the light on your limbs, you move in the sun, you have arrived, you're alive.

That all sounds like kind of standard summary of, first moments, uh, out of the womb. What do you think is, is that what's happening or something else?

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah, well, there are different ways to read it. That is [00:52:00] one way, and it could be that she is going back to a standard future oriented chronology to indicate the ending of her narration.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** On the other hand, a lot of these are actually reversible. When the father bends down over you could be her way of saying your father stands up after looking at you.

**Jim Phelan:** Right.

**Brian Richardson:** You open your eyes and shut them again in a strong light. Well, you close your eyes and open them again and it's (unintelligible)

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Brian Richardson:** The light warms your limbs, you move in the sun, you have arrived. Now, what's interesting, and this is why this isn't an anti abortion story, I think, is that she doesn't, you know, go back to the point of fertilization in the womb, perhaps.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, right, right.

**Brian Richardson:** And there is a story that does that, or at least the ending of the narrative by Angela Carter, *The New Eve*, wonderful narration.

At the end, you have this reversed temporal sequence that actually goes back into the womb.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay. So that's good, I mean, I like the way you're [00:53:00] complicating the reading there. But then we get our voices again, right? Behind you there saying it's all over, she's dead, and then we get the final hush, let them talk, by the narrator.

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah, well, again, yeah, we can treat this as, as exactly the two different movements that are going on within this. You know, one, the, realistic and the other, the anti realistic because it's... she gets the last word, you know even though she's really dead and even though she's really not even born now.

Hush, let them talk; she's still, she still is speaking, she remains alive. And so, it's also a potential story of rebirth.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, right.

**Brian Richardson:** Or at least of defeat of death.

**Jim Phelan:** Yes, great.

**Brian Richardson:** And denial of all the people who are saying that you are dead.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. No, I like that a lot. And so then, you know, go back to the beginning when we were talking about, well, you know, she can perceive and feel and so on in the grave, right? [00:54:00] And we put this together, you come to the end, and she's like, hush, let them talk, they're wrong.

**Brian Richardson:** Yes.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. So in that sense, it sort of ends on this kind of affirmation of life, even though we start with that, what seems to be death, and then we have this other, in the realistic mode, the language, it's all over, she's dead.

And, and there's the, that denial of that, right?

**Brian Richardson:** Yeah. Yeah. So, I'd like to introduce a quotation from one of Eichinger's other works.

**Jim Phelan:** Sure.

**Brian Richardson:** Where she said, " The only possible narration was from the end and towards the end."

**Jim Phelan:** Okay.

**Brian Richardson:** So, yeah, a little vatic, but definitely suggestive and, and I think appropriate.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah. All right. That might be a good way to end, but is there anything further, anything you hoped we get to that we didn't really touch on?

**Brian Richardson:** Uh, no, I think we covered most of the bases there.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. All right. Well, great. Well, thanks very much, Brian. This was a lot of fun, and it's a great story, and I hope it brings [00:55:00] Aichinger to the attention of more readers.

So, thank you again, and thank you to our listeners, and I'll just say, I'm always happy to get your feedback, which you can send to me at the email address projectnarrative@osu.edu, or, to our Twitter account or X if we're gonna call it that, which is @PNOhioState. And I'll add that you can find more than 25 additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts.