The divisions that are claimed to characterize the split between analytic and Continental philosophy are generally located along standard fault lines. In ontology, analytic philosophers study beings while Continental philosophers concern themselves with Being. In political philosophy, the former focus on abstract conceptions of justice and right while the latter are more topically oriented. Analytic philosophers take science to be their closest methodological ally and conversational partner, while for Continental philosophers the reference is said to be art. Because of these differences, it is said, there is little those working in each tradition have to say to each other. They can only stare across the chasm that divides them, when they bother to look at all.

I have argued elsewhere that this account, or any account, that places members of the two traditions at odds with each other is not only unfortunate but theoretically mistaken (May 2002). It fails to account for the many ways in which work in one tradition is relevant to concerns in the other. This does not mean that the two can be mapped directly onto each other. In fact, it precisely because they cannot that each offers resources to the other, both methodological and substantive. In this paper I would like to do something different. Rather than take the large view or try to construct a bridge across what are said to be the standard fault lines, I will instead work in an area that is smaller and more marginal. I will seek to show, through a particular set of confrontations, how it is that analytic and Continental philosophy can be put in confrontation. Rather than looking from above at the lay of the land, as I did previously, I will dip my hands in the soil of both traditions in order to engage in a particular inquiry in an area where the distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy has never been invoked.

Recently there have arisen in both traditions a concern with narrative, and in particular with narrative conceptions of the self. This concern dates at least back to Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. He writes, in an Aristotelean vein, “The unity of an individual life is the unity of a
narrative embodied in a single life. To ask, ‘What is the good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion.” (MacIntyre 1981, 203)

Narrative conceptions of the self are attractive in many ways. They offer us a way to think of ourselves diachronically. They are in language, and thus incorporate a sociality rather than an isolated and individualized view of the self in ways that have become anathema to many in contemporary philosophy. And, as stories, they lend a shape to people’s lives that they might otherwise seem to lack.

The task taken up by this paper is to investigate particular engagements with narrative conceptions of the self coming from both analytic and Continental thinkers. In the end, I will argue for something thinner than a full-blown narrative conception of the self, something more like a diachronic and dialectical conception that involves narrative elements without necessarily implying an encompassing narrative structure. I will arrive at this conclusion, not by pitting the two traditions against each other to see what they may yield, but instead by looking at particular thinkers aligned with each tradition in order to advance the discussion step by step.

It is perhaps worth beginning this itinerary with the work of two thinkers that offer narrative conceptions of the self at least in part as a response to Derek Parfit’s work on personal identity. For Parfit, personal identity, inasmuch as it gives us a sense of diachronic integrity, is founded on a mistaken self-conception. It presupposes an ongoing relation of identity between earlier and later selves, one that various thought experiments, such as split-brain and teletransportation experiments, serves to undermine or at least weaken. (Parfit 1984, esp. part 3)

For two philosophers, Marya Schechtman and Paul Ricoeur, Parfit’s view is mistaken, and its mistake can be seen when one contrasts a narrative conception of the self to his view of personal identity. “What Parfit recommends,” according to Schechtman, “having discovered the superficiality of psychological continuation, is that we take seriously the Buddhist idea that the self is a fiction, and that enlightenment is to be achieved by coming to experience it as such.” (Schechtman 1996, 100) (We must take the term “Buddhist” loosely here, since, as other essays in this volume demonstrate, there are nuances to the Buddhist conception of the self that do not appear in either Schechtman’s or Parfit’s treatments.) This recommendation, in her view, rather than loosening us from the grip of an illusion, lands us in the grip of another one: that there is nothing that ties together the moments of our lives. In order to see this bond, we need