Routledge Auto/Biography Studies

WRITING LIFE WRITING

NARRATIVE, HISTORY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Paul John Eakin

Foreword by Craig Howes

Writing Life Writing

Why do we endlessly tell the stories of our lives? And why do others pay attention when we do? The essays collected here address these questions, focusing on three different but interrelated dimensions of life writing. The first section, "Narrative," argues that narrative is not only a literary form but also a social and cultural practice, and finally a mode of cognition and an expression of our most basic physiology. The next section, "Life Writing: Historical Forms," makes the case for the historical value of the subjectivity recorded in ego-documents. The essays in the final section, "Autobiography Now," identify primary motives for engaging in self-narration in an age characterized by digital media and quantum cosmology.

"*Writing Life Writing: Narrative, History, Autobiography* shows how autobiographical narrative works as an essential aspect of humanity. In fresh, exciting ways, it melds literature with psychology, neurobiology, ethics and cultural anthropology, to argue that telling stories about ourselves is psychically and even biologically motivated. Eakin guides us through the fact-fiction tease of the form, its relevance to historians and its future in an age of social media. Eakin's own experiment with writing autobiographically, which closes this beautifully written collection, will intrigue those who wonder what it is to find a vocation in writing about life writing, distilling with it a life time of thinking about this ever-interesting form and practice."

—Margaretta Jolly, Professor of Cultural Studies,
University of Sussex

Paul John Eakin is Ruth N. Halls Professor Emeritus of English at Indiana University. He is the author of *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985); *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (1992); *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999); and *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008). He is the editor of *On Autobiography*, by Philippe Lejeune (1989); *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect* (1991); and *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004).

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Contents

Foreword

Since Paul John Eakin has provided succinct and informative introductions for each of the four thematic sections in this collection, a Foreword offering summaries of the individual essays would not only be redundant but suffer by comparison. And since at several points Eakin identifies and reflects upon the major shifts in his thinking about autobiography and life writing, and upon his personal and professional life course, a career retrospective hardly seems appropriate either—and especially because, to quote Eakin, what distinguishes biography from autobiography would confine me to the task of describing "the envelope of the body" that contains his subjectivity ("Writing Biography" 42).

I will therefore begin with an anecdote. I became coeditor of *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* in 1994. We had never published Paul John Eakin, but we had reviewed three of his books, and we would go on to review two more and publish three of his essays, including the tribute to James Olney appearing in this collection. I believe I met John at the Modern Language Association Convention in 1995, at the *a/b: Autobiography Studies* cash bar. He was affable and welcoming, but the encounter was brief. In 1999, we both attended the First International Conference on Auto/Biography in Beijing, where we got to talk at somewhat greater length. It was in July of 2000, however, at the "Autobiography and Changing Identities" conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, that I came down to breakfast and asked John if I could join him. He kindly said yes—and then with genuine curiosity, he asked "Who are you?"

This has, of course, been the quintessential Eakin question—in his early work, with regard to what motivates the reader of any autobiographical text, and in his later work, with regard to what stimulates our interest in everyone we encounter and what blazes the paths we clear for ourselves as we live autobiographically. In this brief foreword, I will return the favor by reporting on who I have found Paul John Eakin to be, both in his profoundly influential contributions to autobiography studies and in the essays comprising this new collection.

*

I will start with the obvious. This volume contains the latest work by one of the most important life writing critics and theorists of the past half-century. Anyone working in the field recognizes him as a central figure. As the coeditor of *Biography* for over twenty-five years, I know that Eakin has inspired, directed, and focused the research of autobiography scholars from North America, Australia, Europe, China, Brazil, Argentina, Central America, and many other regions. He is one of that cluster of figures—James Olney, Philippe Lejeune, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, William Andrews, G. Thomas Couser, Marlene Kadar, Liz Stanley, and others—who created the field of life writng. But as this collection also demonstrates, his work is interdisciplinary—an ongoing conversation with theorists in narrative studies, the history of rhetoric, ethical philosophy, history and historiography, psychology, and even neurology.

He does not and cannot concern himself with everything. A regular attendee of recent International Auto/Biography Association conferences might ask, "What about gender? Race? Class? Language? Idiosyncratic characteristics of life representation within specific cultures? Relational identity (a topic that he helped move to the center of life-writing debates, but not in the sense of collective sensibilities found in specific geographical or cultural contexts)?" The brevity of the essays included here also makes them more suggestive than exhaustive. But then, given the subjects addressed—the relationship between history and biography, the rhetorical aspects of narrative as a fundamental component of being, the impact of the Internet on life representation, and, with the cosmogram, the characteristcs of an epistemology, or even an ontology, of autobiography—what else could be expected? As in his other books and articles, then, these essays point the way. Eakin's talent for inspiring other researchers to examine in detail the texts he mentions, topics he raises, or conclusions he draws, often in passing, has been the source for some of his greatest contributions to life writing.

Style and Substance

The lucidity, grace, and at times sheer fun of his prose have contributed greatly to his influence. Thanks to his training as a critic of American literature, he has an easy familiarity and facility with all of its linguistic registers. But thanks to his early encounters with French theory, so vividly described in the essay "Travelling with Narrative," logic and precision are hallmarks of his writing. The result is an efficient and effective modulation between formal and informal phrasing, personal anecdote and sharp analysis, and conversational and schematic exposition. Of the hundreds of examples I could cite in this collection, one that strikes me as especially representative occurs in "Autobiography and the Big Picture." In this ambitious essay, Eakin explores such heady intellectual territory as "*Cosmograms and Quantum Cosmology*," but accounts for his interest by declaring "I am a sucker for symmetry" (122).

A close look at a passage reveals just how versatile Eakin's writing can be—for instance, this rhetorical bricolage from "Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism":

> It's time to lay my own cards on the table. Most mornings I wake, breathless and relieved, from some heavily emplotted world of agitated dreams, only to resume, as William James suggests we do, the unfolding of my own stream of consciousness which, despite astonishing jolts and cuts as memory jumps from one time frame to another, pulls to a steadily invented storyline of present and future plans. (26)

The contraction, personal reference, and gambling allusion in the first sentence prepare us for a blunt no-nonsense account of what's what. But what follows is a long sentence offering at least three allusions in the course of a cascading series of abstractions modified by vivid, even violent metaphors and verbs. By describing himself as awakening from "agitated dreams," he invokes the famous opening of Kafka's "Metamorphosis," and while I resist the impulse of imagining Paul John Eakin as a large bug, the allusion itself is apt. I do find myself pondering to what degree poor Gregor Samsa's ensuing reflections exemplify the actual workings of consciousness, as opposed to the "heavily emplotted world" Eakin ascribes to dreams. A literary and psychological allusion to stream of consciousness follows, complete with its own theoretical genealogy, originating as a "suggestion" of William James. But Eakin's ensuing account of what presiding over such a stream entails suggests that at least emotionally, the stakes are as high as in poker. He begins his daily self-construction "breathless and relieved," and the act itself is similarly calm yet fervid—the "unfolding" of a "steadily invented storyline" that pulls to order in the face of the "astonishing jolts and cuts" of memory jumping "from one time frame to another." And finally there's the question of style. While the subject *matter* of this passage points to William James, its heavily periodic *manner* is more in keeping with his brother Henry—though a Henry with a wider, and dare I say it, more American tonal range.

At other moments, Eakin's prose is lean, schematic, and precise, clearing the ground and getting to the point. Take for example this passage, which opens a section of the essay "History and Life Writing: The Value of Subjectivity":

> Let me start by spelling out what history and life writing have in common, three points of likeness that are intrinsic to them both:
>
> - their commitment to fact;
> - their gravitation to narrative form;
> - their employment of the strategies of fiction. (76)

At times, such clarity of vision makes Eakin impatient, and even annoyed, with the imprecision of other theorists. In the opening cluster of

essays in which he jousts with a series of narratologists, his responses can be witty but preemptive. For instance, "While Phelan and Strawson like to speak of *the* self, I prefer to stay away from the definite article" ("Narrative Identity" 22). His impatience is especially marked in his response to Galen Strawson's essay, "Against Narrativity." Because Strawson "grossly undervalues the power of narrative not only as a form of self-representation but as an instrument of self-understanding" (26), Eakin finds it hard to take him seriously. But Eakin also deplores a fatal combination of ignorance, arrogance, and sloppiness. He facetiously notes that Strawson's "striking statements" affirm "what is a commonplace in the literature of autobiography" (23). Eakin labels a claim Strawson makes about what people think as "correct," but also irrelevant—"that is, if they ever gave much thought to such identity questions, and they probably don't" (25). Most bothersome, however, is Strawson's dismissal of Eakin's argument for the importance of narrative identity as "intellectual fashion," as opposed to Strawson's own "truly happy-go-lucky, see-what-comes-along" episodic understanding of life that Eakin calls "breezy and untested," and ultimately not worthy of further notice: "But enough of Galen Strawson's Episodics and Diachronics.". The concluding assessment is a dissection. Strawson has written a "self-congratulatory essay" marked by "feel-good iconoclasm" whose argument, if true, "would have the power to change the present social arrangements in which narrative features so prominently" (27). But it isn't, and it won't.

Reading Lives

Close readings have always been a forté of Eakin's work. Though his interests have developed and changed, as a self-declared product of the New Criticism, his books and essays are customarily sequences of incisive and perceptive responses to life writing narratives, criticism, and theory. Always in the service of his argument—a mark of his apostasy from New Criticism—his readings introduce an intriguing text, then offer focused remarks—sometimes two or three paragraphs, sometimes several pages—that advance his thesis while convincing readers that they must instantly get a copy of the book under scrutiny. Eakin has an unsurpassed ability to convey what is most thought-provoking in a narrative or a theoretical position, regularly spurring me to reconsider my take on an autobiography or an argument. Or put more bluntly, I often find Eakin's reading more interesting than the text itself—one reason why Eakin is one of those rare theorists who without simplifying content can engage those unaccustomed to reading academic criticism.

Among the striking examples in this collection are his readings of Oliver Sacks, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club: A Memoir*, Martha Gelhorn's and Samuel McCracken's accounts of Lillian Hellman, Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*, Sean Carroll's

The Big Picture, and the trio of texts about the death of parents by Atul Gawande, Lydia Flem, and Roz Chast. A close reading can also serve as a litmus test for considering his own life narrative. Although Eakin has always supplied his readers with more personal details than most theorists do, this collection offers the most extensive account of his own experience of living autobiographically. Take for example his response to that "gem of a book," Calvin Trillin's *Messages from my Father*, which begins the essay "'My Father . . . '." The similarity between Trillin's story and Eakin's "set me to thinking about my own father (134–5)," which leads to the personal narrative that follows. In other instances, his intense personal interest in a subject produces extended readings that move beyond exegesis toward what is almost a form of meditation. Ostensibly driven by a desire to determine what autobiography can offer biographers about their subjects' sense of place, his remarks on John Updike's *Self-Consciousness* are haunted by his concern with what place means to himself and his readers as individuals. In "Eye and I," he makes the personal stakes of his readings explicit. "I want to know what I can about the utmost limits of experience," he writes, and he turns to eyewitness narratives as "bridge-building" enterprises that can grant such insight. And yet, while his readings of *Passage to Ararat* and *Maus* are deft analyses about Michael J. Arlen's and Art Spiegelman's struggles with their proximity to such limits as secondary witnesses, his response to Ruth Kluger's *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* is an intense and even moving appreciation of a text that lies closest to that edge. His conclusion is emphatic and heartfelt: "Eyewitness narrative can take us no further" (63). In this collection, Eakin also extends his gift for evocative and stimulating readings to narratives and events lying beyond the literary. His account of the *New York Times* "Portraits of Grief" in "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?" communicates the appeal of commemorated ordinary lives lost on 9/11, but also the emotional impact of repetition that characterizes the entire project. And his exposition, analysis, and evaluation of the horrific results of the Clementi-Ravi roommate narrative are compelling components of his discussion of "Self and Self-Representation Online and Off."

Anyone familiar with Eakin's work also knows that certain critics and theorists have at various points in his life profoundly and permanently influenced his thought. His accounts of these encounters often seem to echo the epiphanic moment in *Confessions*, when the book of books commands the young Augustine to "'Take up and read,' with the result that a serenity filled his heart, and all doubt vanished."[1] I have actually witnessed such a moment, when an idea exploded for Eakin. At the seminar at Indiana University held to prepare the way for his edited collection *The Ethics of Life Writing*, discussion gravitated to the inevitability of memoirs creating misunderstandings, damaging relationships, and blackening the reputations of others. In what resembled a Eureka

moment, John proclaimed that "Autobiography causes harm!" then demanded that the seminar members comment on this revelation. The current collection frequently invokes his literary, critical, and theoretical touchstones, but also offers detailed accounts of why they were crucial to his development. These texts can be placed on a continuum. During his early training in American literary and cultural studies, Frank Kermode, William James, and Henry Adams were formative. Later touchstones include Philippe Lejeune for autobiography, and Oliver Sacks and Matti Hyvärinen for narrative identity. I was also surprised when reading this collection at how important an interlocutor John Updike proved to be.

Over the past twenty-five years, however, the work of Antonio Damasio has proved to be the most influential. The opening cluster of essays on "Narrative" all refer to this neurologist, who is also cited extensively in the section on "Autobiography Now." Damasio offered confirmation, scientific support, and compelling metaphors for Eakin's hard-won belief that narrative is fundamental to what makes us human, right down to the level of the cell. "Should *Narrative* stick to narrative narrowly conceived as a literary form or forms," Eakin asks, "or should it entertain a more adventurous approach to narrative as something to do with society, with identity, with the body?" (28). The question is, of course, rhetorical, because attempting to draw such distinctions ultimately misrepresents narrative's capaciousness as a force for shaping "society," "identity," and "the body." He makes this point when discussing the narrative historian Matti Hyvärinen, whose work he admires. Though Eakin acknowledges the "heuristic value" in drawing distinctions between the narratological and the narrative turn, his long experience as a student of autobiography has led him to place far greater emphasis on simultaneity—that narrative is integral to our literary, social, philosophical, and neural registers. Resisting any "either/or choice" when it comes to narrative, he opts "instead for a unified field theory" ("Travelling with Narrative" 37). This compulsion to understand the shifting, unfolding, replacing, and restoring of narrative over the life course accounts for his own research, and for autobiography itself, whose truth does not reside in its "allegiance to a factual record," but "to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states, an allegiance to the history of one's self" ("What Are We Reading" 7).

Buttressed by his reading of Sacks and above all Damasio, this conviction informs the essays in the third section, "Autobiography Now." As an editor who has published many scholars working on online lives, I can confidently report that most are not as skeptical or cautionary as Eakin about the impact of social media and Internet modes of self-representation; in fact, they frequently celebrate precisely those qualities that concern him most. Drawing on Philippe Lejeune, in "Self and Self-Representation Online and Off" he adopts a historically grounded approach to counter the euphoria and claims of total transformation. For Lejeune, whether it be paper resulting in the diary or printing resulting in autobiography, "new developments in technologies of communication have promoted new

forms of self-expression," and further, that technology determines what human identity itself shall be: "it is the tool that shapes the craftsman" (108).[2] Eakin's own "hunch" is that "performing identity work online is not radically different from doing so offline" (108), and in his account of the Clementi-Ravi disaster at Rutgers University, when a student used the Internet to out his roommate as gay, with suicide the result, Eakin argues that while Internet access and exploitation figure prominently, the actual recorded content "comes across as normal teen talk" (110). But to test Lejeune's claim, Eakin asks what new forms of self-expression or selves have the Internet and social media produced. In keeping with his unified field approach, he rejects Helen Kennedy's claim that a "postmodern view of identity as fragmented and fluid" succeeds an earlier notion that "implies stability and stasis." For Eakin, either view is "inadequate to address the complexity of identity experience," which "can change over time and yet in some way remain recognizably the same" (111). But he strongly supports her contention that online anonymity does not necessarily result in identity innovation, and that online lives are revelatory of "'the real struggles of real people'" (111).[3] Eakin also supports his skepticism by citing Rob Cover, who in the spirit of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler argues that online identity work requires conforming to "'an older, ongoing cultural demand'" that forces us to "'disavow the instability of identity'" (112).[4] Or as Eakin puts it, "the cultural imperative for coherent identity" is actually "calling the shots online and off." This extends to genre. Drawing upon Laurie McNeill's work on the six-word memoir, he concludes that online "narrative forms turn out to be constrained by generic conventions in much the same way as those offline" (113).

But Eakin still worries about online identity construction, a "cause for concern" he finds articulated in Zadie Smith's account of the gap between what she refers to as "Person 1.0"—"a private person, a person who is a mystery to the world and [. . .] to herself"—and "People 2.0"—"the socially networked selves of users online" (113). Smith's distinction makes "a deep impression" upon Eakin because it points to a "large-scale shift" in "the concept of the person" resulting from "a revolution in communication technology" (80)—what Lejeune described as "the tool that shapes the craftsman." For Eakin, the most pressing question is what happens under these conditions to narrative's role in identity construction. Quoting Julie Rak and Anna Poletti's observation that "the idea of narrative may not fit what identity formation looks like in digital media" (114),[5] he responds much in the way he does to the narratologists, claiming that such a position rests on a "narrow understanding of narrative as product." "Much more than text," narrative is "an identity practice," which Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson see at work in "'online personal narrative formats,'"[6] and Aimée Morrison declares to be self-evident: "'Facebook and its users are producing life narratives'" (114).[7] For this reason, Eakin concludes that "writing the self in autobiography continues to matter in the digital age and in new ways" (115),

and not surprisingly, that the desire for "coherent identities" still plays itself out through narrative, "the signature of that coherence" (118).

But in keeping with Lejeune's observation that the conditions of communication online endanger because they enact "a profound change in life itself wrought through its relationship with time" (115),[8] Eakin still worries that what he sees as fundamental might be shifting under our feet. In "History and Life Writing," he takes to heart Sherry Turkle's account of how "the Internet and its attendant devices disrupt the kind of interpersonal exchange in which people have performed their narrative identities for each other up to now." The result is something of a paradox. Even though people "prefer to remain safely behind their screens," they operate "in a 24/7 wired world that promotes a culture of interruption and intrusion, of restless movement, of surfing from link to link" (81). Because Eakin firmly believes that "our sense of ourselves as persons is deeply rooted in our bodies," he joins Damasio in recognizing that living in the wired world places us under "'pressures likely to lead to structural modifications [. . .] of the very brain processes that shape the mind and self'" (82).[9] Eakin therefore enlists other researchers in offering up a warning that the "'robust internal narrative'" necessary to create a "'stable autobiographical past'" is falling victim to an Internet environment that results in People 2.0—"external, fragmented, shallow, lost in a welter of data" (83).

I have spent some time outlining Eakin's concern with online narrative identity not only because it represents the latest focus of his attention regarding living autobiographically but also because it displays the care and self-scrutiny he brings to any project. While reading widely and responsibly in the recent critical and scientific literature, he also grants that much of the general anxiety, including his own, about the effects of Internet technology might be the result of belonging "to an older generation that did not grow up in the online world" (83). For this reason, Eakin deliberately turns to younger scholars for their thoughts on an environment they have occupied for the bulk of their lives. Some—Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, for instance—are less concerned. Others—Eakin cites Laurie McNeill and Jia Tolentino—share his apprehensions about potential damage to—as Tolentino puts it—"'a model of actual selfhood, one that embraces culpability, inconsistency, and insignificance'" (84).[10] In the end, though, Eakin always lays his own cards on the table. While "the model of selfhood that gave its name to 'the Age of Individualism' could be on the wane in our digital age," he remains "convinced that narrative and narrative identities, deeply embedded in our bodies and promoted by social training early and late, will be with us for a very long time" (84).

Narrating the Eakin Selves

To a greater degree than any previous work, this new collection offers a narrative of Eakin's own critical and theoretical trajectory—a

metacommentary on the life's work of a pre-eminent lifewriting theorist, written by himself. His references to *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985), *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (1992), *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008), and a cluster of separately published essays amount to a career retrospective, but the scrutiny directed at his earlier work often focuses upon claims that he later modified or expanded. In short, Eakin takes a historiographic approach to his own intellectual autobiography. This critical gaze transitions to the predominantly personal in "Epilogue: One Man's Story," the collection's concluding section. Here the critic and theorist of autobiography becomes an autobiographer, offering up "complementary stories of vocation" shaped by his relationships with his father and with James Olney, his professional mentor (133).

For Eakin these figures have been agents for his belated recognition that "I finally understood my story, that I had one and that I knew what it was" (133). "'My father . . .'" is a counter-narrative, placing his professional achievements in light of what he felt was his father's vague disappointment in him, further tinged with regret that his father died before he could see what his son had accomplished. As for the concluding essay, the title "James Olney and the Study of Autobiography" accurately represents its contents. A fitting tribute to his mentor's contributions to the founding and development of the field, it also describes Eakin's own career, as he credits Olney with "setting me on a path of study that I have followed for nearly forty years" (142). This path was not a straight and narrow one, nor was it simply a matter of an acolyte following the master. Eakin finds *Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (1998), Olney's last major scholarly contribution to the field, disquieting—an ambitious, but "radically foreshortened" and "progressively darkening account of autobiography's history" that stresses the fragility of whatever order the genre offers to "the mess" that is human experience (147). Even when addressing holocaust narratives or the chaos of the Internet, Eakin's responses tend to be more robust and optimistic. Perhaps partially as a sign of these times, Eakin resonates most with me when his close attention to how people live autobiographically leads to conclusions that affirm our shared humanity in all its variety—a quality he shares with Oliver Sacks and with his friend, Philippe Lejeune.

As is often the case, Eakin signals his passionate attachment to shared values or ethics—what he has elsewhere called "the deep subject of autobiographical discourse"[11]—through a shift in tone. The following brief passage from "Autobiography as Cosmogram" captures his thoughts about the genre and his desire for what he wants it to be, both offered with his characteristic enthusiasm and plain speaking. Pay special attention to what the italicized "I"s in the parenthetical insert and the

word "losers" contribute to what would otherwise be a relatively abstract statement:

> The ethos of individualism that informs autobiography and self-narration—"*I* write my story, *I* say who I am"—can obscure the fact that the identity work they perform is also a social good. When an individual succumbs to memory loss, the rest of us are losers as well. (101)

*

Twenty years after he asked me "Who are you?" at least partly because of Paul John Eakin's work and friendship, I have a better idea myself. He has often reminded me what is central to life narrative and influenced how I write about it. This collection brings together his most recent forays into the realms of narrative identity, history, and new media, all part of his ever-expanding interest in how people live, understand, and represent their lives. It also offers a close, even intimate look into the shifting sensibility responsible for such groundbreaking and influential scholarship. I am honored to be given the opportunity to express my personal appreciation to John, and I am grateful for the riches offered in this, his latest exploration and practice of *Writing Life Writing: Narrative, History, Autobiography.*

–CRAIG HOWES

Notes

1 Augustine, *Confessions*, Chapter 12.
2 Philippe Lejeune. "Autobiography and New Communication Tools." Trans. Katherine Durnin. *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. Ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2014, p. 248.
3 Helen Kennedy. "Beyond Anonymity, or Future Directions for Internet Identity Research." *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. Ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2014, p. 39.
4 Rob Cover. "Becoming and Belonging: Performativity, Subjectivity, and the Cultural Purposes of Social Networking." *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. Ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2014, pp. 56–57.
5 Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. "Introduction: Digital Dialogues." *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. Ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2014, p. 11.
6 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. "Virtually Me: A Toolbox about Online Self-Presentation." *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. Ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2014, p. 72.
7 Aimée Morrison. "Facebook and Coaxed Affordances." *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. Ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2014, p. 127.
8 Lejeune, p. 249.
9 Antonio Damasio. *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*. New York: Pantheon, 2010, p. 182.
10 Jia Tolentino. "The I in the Internet." *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-delusion*. New York: Random, 2019, p. 33.
11 Paul John Eakin, "Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2001), p. 123.

Preface

This collection of essays highlights my work on three different but interrelated dimensions of life writing, with a brief concluding section that features my reasons for devoting most of my career to this subject. Grouping the essays into three separate clusters—"Narrative," "Life Writing: Historical Forms," and "Autobiography Now"—is somewhat arbitrary, for the essays in one section overlap to a degree with those in other sections, and every essay involves autobiography—my home base—one way or another. When I first wrote about the subject in 1976—"Malcolm X and the Limits of Autobiography"—I had no thoughts of further work on life writing. Autobiography, however, turned out to be endlessly interesting, so much so that decades later I am still thinking and writing about it. Starting out in the 1970s, though, it was still largely unknown territory, and I was exploring basic questions about the nature of a literary form that—thanks to Malcolm X and Henry James—had cast a spell. Such map as I had I mostly made up as I went along. New angles of inquiry cropped up year after year. There was excitement in discovering work in other disciplines that seemed pertinent to the questions that autobiographical texts were posing—historiography, developmental psychology, cultural anthropology, the law, neurobiology, quantum cosmology, and on and on. These previously published essays have been reprinted as they originally appeared, without revision. Cumulatively, they represent a continuing attempt to answer two fundamental questions: why do we tell the stories of our lives, and why do other people pay attention when we do. The implicit map of the field that my three topics suggest makes no claim to represent adequately the richness of life writing in its protean forms—there is nothing here about diary, for example, and biography is treated only briefly. There are many mansions in the house of life writing, and I have explored only the ones that drew me.

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I

Narrative

Over the decades I have come to believe that our sense of ourselves as persons—expressed in any autobiography—is rooted in our lives in and as bodies, and that narrative is linked to identity in a deep way. When I began literary studies in the 1950s and 1960s, the heyday of close textual analysis, I would never have guessed that one day later on I would propose the neurobiological approach to autobiography that is reflected in the four essays gathered here. What route led to this view? In the 1990s I read pieces in the *New York Review of Books* by Oliver Sacks and John R. Searle concerning the nature of consciousness, pointing me toward work by Gerald Edelman and others on what Sacks called the "neurology of identity." Then, in 1997, a conference at Harvard University on "Memory and Belief" proved to be an eye-opening meeting weighted toward the hard sciences, with sessions on brain imaging. There I met neurologist Antonio Damasio, and found his ideas fascinating. Damasio makes the case for the emergence of self in the narrative matrix of consciousness; for him narrative is biological before it is linguistic and literary. In the pages of *Narrative* in 2004 I applied his thinking—speculative though it was—to the autobiographical act. The reaction to my move toward embodied selfhood in "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?" was hardly surprising, for I had presented a potentially radical understanding of narrative that extended well beyond the textual boundaries observed by narratologists. George Butte wrote a reply to my essay in 2005, arguing that Eakin and Damasio had stripped self of its agency. It was exciting to be controversial; my work had always struck me as conventional, and now it engaged me in polemics. Moreover, James Phelan charged me with "narrative imperialism," forcing me to defend my expansive view of narrative. Was I overreaching in my account of narrative as the anchor to the identities we claim? Now, years later, and thinking once more about the work narrative performs, not only in texts but in the life experience they articulate, I accept the charge that I entertain imperial views of narrative's function in the world.

1 What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?

In the following statement, Oliver Sacks makes as bold a claim for the function of self-narration in our lives as any I have ever encountered: "It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative,' and that this narrative *is* us, our identities" (*Man* 110).[1] His observation was prompted by the plight of a brain-damaged individual suffering from severe memory loss. Because the patient, "Mr. Thompson," could not remember who he was for more than a minute or two at most, he spent his waking hours in frenetic self-invention, seeking to construct new identities to take the place of old ones that he forgot as soon as he created them. For Sacks, "Mr. Thompson's" condition exposes identity's twin supporting structures, memory and narrative: what is this man without his story? I keep returning to the nagging conundrum that Sacks proposes in his meditation on this disturbing case, a radical equivalence between narrative and identity, and I want to make another pass at its meaning in this essay, armed with insights derived from the recent work of the neurologist Antonio Damasio. Before turning to Damasio and his theories about the place of self and narrative in the structure of consciousness, however, I'd like to suggest the social implications of this Sacksian notion of narrative identity.

"This narrative *is* us, our identities"—surely the notion that what we are is a story of some kind is counterintuitive and even extravagant. Don't we know that we're more than that, that Sacks can't be right? And our instinctive recoil points to an important truth: there are many modes of self and self-experience, more than could possibly be represented in the kind of self-narration Sacks refers to, more than any autobiography could relate. Developmental psychologists convince me, though, that we are trained as children to attach special importance to one kind of selfhood, that of the extended self, so much so that we do in fact regard it as identity's signature. The extended self is the self of memory and anticipation, extending across time. It is this temporal dimension of extended selfhood that lends itself to expression in narrative form of the kind Sacks posits as identity's core. For others, we are indeed versions of the extended self and its identity story; when we perform these stories, we establish ourselves for our interlocutors as normal individuals—something that "Mr. Thompson" tried to do and failed.

If this picture of narrative identity I have sketched is correct, autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living. We don't, though, tend to give much thought to this process of self-narration precisely because, after years of practice, we do it so well. When this identity story system is ruptured, however, we can be jolted into awareness of the central role it plays in organizing our social world. I want to consider two events—one recent and one ten years old—that had this jolting power for me.

First, September 11. Erection of a viewing platform at Ground Zero in lower Manhattan testified to the desire of ordinary citizens to see for themselves what happened on that day. But how to see it? We are by now all too familiar with the devastating images of the towers' collapse, but in addition to this astonishing material event, in the days that followed we have had to reckon with the grievous rent in the social fabric produced by the sudden death of thousands. This social dimension of the catastrophe is harder to see, but I think that when the *New York Times* created "A Nation Challenged," a special section chronicling the aftermath of September 11, the paper helped us to see what cannot be seen from the viewing platform: the network of selves and lives that supported the world of the towers every bit as much as the columns of steel that buckled in the conflagration's immense heat.

Anchoring each edition of "A Nation Challenged" on its final page were the "Portraits of Grief," brief evocations of the lives of those killed at the World Trade Center. Why have so many people acknowledged that they've read these portraits with intense fascination? I know I did. Yet for most readers, the victims were neither known friends or relations, nor were they public figures. When the faceless statistics of the missing are given a face, a name, and a story, we respond, I think, not only to the individualism that is so strong a feature in American culture, but also, I'd urge, to an instinctive reflex to restore the rupture in these lives that we accept as somehow representative of our own. As Howell Raines, then editor-in-chief of the *Times*, observed in an interview on National Public Radio, the portraits are "snapshots" of lives "interrupted": "They give you a sense of the living person," he said. With a huge investment of money and labor involving more than eighty reporters, the paper attempted to recover something of those lives, performing symbolically a work of repair that paralleled the clearing of the rubble at Ground Zero. The magnitude of the project is arresting: more than eighteen hundred portraits had been published by the end of 2001.

What do these "snapshots" of "interrupted" lives look like? There were usually a dozen or more of them on the page, with a banner headline across the top announcing some of the headings of the individual profiles, as, for example, this one from 17 November 2001: "A Taste for

Fine Wine, a Seeker of Good Deals, and Fun on Halloween." The single large photograph that invariably headed the page—usually a picture of some makeshift urban shrine to the missing or else a burial scene—captured the commemorative intention behind the portraits arranged in columns below. Yet the portraits, striking in their informality, are clearly not obituaries in any usual sense, nor are they eulogies. The header for each piece features some leading characteristic, a kind of capsule identity or microstory: "The Gadget Guru," "A Motorcycle for a Ring," "Always Time for Golf." The short paragraphs that follow, touching on personal qualities, habits, favorite activities, and plans, highlight life plots now left incomplete. Ironies and fateful choices abound. The loose narrative fragments are exactly like the ephemeral bits and pieces of the stories we tell about ourselves every day, and this is not surprising, for the portraits were generated in conversations between reporters and those close to the deceased. While I will be focusing on autobiography in the second half of this essay on narrative identity, I feature these biographical pieces here because they display with such immediacy the scraps of identity narrative that make up all forms of self-narration and life writing. The "Portraits of Grief" page offers a kind of viewing platform, as it were, from which we can glimpse in a kind of freeze-frame what our narratively constructed identities might look like in the aggregate. We see, cumulatively, a veritable anthology of the models of identity and life story that are current in our culture; the homeliness, the familiarity, of this identity narrative material is deeply moving precisely because we use it to talk about ourselves every day. If this is what the narrative identity system, rendered in memorable shorthand, looks like when it is functioning normally, what does it look like when it breaks down altogether?

Picture an old man in a wheelchair clutching a teddy bear, an old man who has forgotten who he is, an old man no one else seems to know. This was John Kingery's plight, and I remember that when I read his disturbing story in the *New York Times* some years ago, it conjured up the fate that might await us all if our social identities should become unmoored from their narrative anchor in autobiographical memory. The front-page article reported that this eighty-two-year-old man had been abandoned at a dog racing track in Idaho:

> A typewritten note pinned to his chest identified him as "John King," an Alzheimer's patient in need of care. He was wearing bedroom slippers and a sweatshirt that said "Proud to be an American." The labels on his new clothing had been cut away, and all identifying markers on his wheelchair were removed. (Egan)

Identity theft squared, I thought. As it turned out, one of Kingery's daughters, who had been appropriating his pension and Social Security checks, had dumped him at the track; then a second daughter from an

earlier marriage, reading her father's story in the paper, flew to his rescue. While the *Times* reporter's angle on the Kingery case was "parent-dumping," for me this man's story was his lack of story—for a time no one knew who he was. Are we diminished as persons, I wondered, when we can no longer say who we are? And while we can, what are our ethical responsibilities toward those who can't? The hard lesson of our population's increasing longevity is that more and more of us will live to witness if not to experience for ourselves what it's like to become de-storied individuals.

Pondering these events, then, I see many reasons to believe that what we are could be said to be a narrative of some kind. I continue, nonetheless, to find this proposition surprising, prompting me to ask: what are we reading when we read autobiography? Inspired by Antonio Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, I believe that a neurobiological approach to self and narrative can teach us to read autobiography in a new way.

We all know that whatever else autobiography is, it is almost always a literature of the first person. But what, exactly, does an autobiography's "I" represent? When we say "I," reflexivity is built into the pronoun, which operates as a textual referent for the biographical, historical person who writes or utters it. So far, so good. But can we say more? For example, consider Pokey, the spunky child protagonist of Mary Karr's best-seller, *The Liars' Club: A Memoir*. Here's how her story opens:

> My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark. I was seven, and our family doctor knelt before me where I sat on a mattress on the bare floor. He wore a yellow golf shirt unbuttoned so that sprouts of hair showed in a V shape on his chest. I had never seen him in anything but a white starched shirt and a gray tie. The change unnerved me. He was pulling at the hem of my favorite nightgown—a pattern of Texas bluebonnets bunched into nosegays tied with ribbon against a field of nappy white cotton. I had tucked my knees under it to make a tent. He could easily have yanked the thing over my head with one motion, but something made him gentle. "Show me the marks," he said. "Come on, now. I won't hurt you." . . . He held a piece of hem between thumb and forefinger. I wasn't crying and don't remember any pain, but he talked to me in that begging voice he used when he had a long needle hidden behind his back. I liked him but didn't much trust him. The room I shared with my sister was dark, but I didn't fancy hiking my gown up with strangers milling around in the living room.
>
> It took three decades for that instant to unfreeze. Neighbors and family helped me turn that one bright slide into a panorama . . . (3–4)

The hair on the doctor's chest, the pattern on the child's nightgown, the air of menace—Karr's account of this inaugural, traumatic memory is vivid, circumstantial, and involving, creating a "you-are-there" effect of immediacy that will be the hallmark of the narrative to follow. But where, exactly, are we located? In a text, in the past, in a mind? The shifting nature of the "I" here, speaking in the present even as it personifies itself in the past, makes this question even harder to answer; the seamless rhetoric spans decades with ease. One thing, however, is certain. The passage establishes the narrative as a work of memory, a probing of "one bright slide," long repressed, to yield in "panorama" a terrifying episode that the subsequent chapters will reconstruct, in which the cowering child witnesses her mother, wielding a butcher knife, collapse into madness. Karr presents her narrative, then, as an attempt to recover the truth of the past. Her commitment to fact is signaled not only by the framing page for the first chapter, which presents a photograph of her mother with "I. Texas, 1961" stamped on it in a title box, but also by the "Acknowledgments" section that precedes the narrative, where Karr stresses the years of "research" she invested pursuing her story's "veracity."

Karr's opening moves in *The Liars' Club* are standard and by the book for the start of any autobiography. But despite her assurances of factuality, what—I persist in asking—is the status of the I-character in this identity narrative and of the I-narrator who tells her story? Surely *The Liars' Club* confirms the truth of William Maxwell's shrewd observation that "in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw" (27). Even allowing for traumatic imprinting, how much can anyone remember in detail decades later about life at age seven? We have only to reflect that Karr devotes the first half of the book (some 174 pages) to recounting Pokey's adventures in 1961 to recognize that obviously a special kind of fiction is unfolding here in which memory and imagination conspire to reconstruct the truth of the past. This is only to say that we tolerate a huge amount of fiction these days in works we accept nonetheless as somehow factual accounts of their authors' lives; we don't bat an eye.

So much fiction in this memoir. And yet. And yet. We need to reckon with Karr's insistence on the ostensibly factual: the dates, the photographs, the narrator's continuing struggle with her memory and her constant checking for error with her sister Lecia and her mother. So how should we read Pokey and her story? Is she only a character in a story, or does she stand for something more, a reasonably accurate portrait of young Mary Karr that would have a documentary, biographical value of some kind? Certainly the autobiographer reminds us frequently of her commitment to autobiographical truth, but in the last analysis, what seems to count most for her is her memory's report of what she once thought and felt; *this* is the past she seeks to reconstruct, and only she can be the arbiter of its truth. That is to say that for Karr—and for the

autobiographers who interest me the most—the allegiance to truth that is the central, defining characteristic of memoir is less an allegiance to a factual record that biographers and historians could check than an allegiance to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states, an allegiance to the history of one's self. One way or another, all autobiography is about self, yet it is a measure of the difficulty of defining human consciousness that the place of self in autobiographical discourse remains comparatively unexamined. Advances today in brain studies, however, make it worth our while to revisit self, the deep subject of autobiography's "I."

So let me ask again, what is the relation between Mary Karr and Pokey, the seven-year-old Mary Karr figure in *The Liars' Club*? One answer could be that Pokey—or the protagonist of any autobiography—*and the self for which she stands* are both effects of language, and any relation between them would be perforce arbitrary and unstable. Indeed, developmental psychologists have studied how children learn what we may call the language of selfhood, and they show how children are taught by parents and caregivers what it means to say "I" as they begin to tell stories about themselves.[2] In the rest of this essay, however, drawing on Antonio Damasio's account of consciousness in *The Feeling of What Happens*, I want to consider a different source of self, tracing it to our bodies. Damasio argues that self is not an effect of language but rather an effect of the neurological structure of the brain. He radically expands the meaning of *self*, suggesting its deep implication in the life of the human organism at every level.[3] I should pause here to note that Dr. Damasio is the M. W. Van Allen Distinguished Professor and Head of the Department of Neurology at the University of Iowa College of Medicine in Iowa City. I should also emphasize that I will be speculating about self in autobiography on the basis of neurobiological theory that is itself already necessarily speculative.[4]

The premise of Damasio's theory of self is "the idea that a sense of self [is] an indispensable part of the conscious mind" (7). Self is a feeling, specifically "a feeling of knowing," "a feeling of what happens." And what does happen? The body responds to its encounters with objects in its environment, and it also responds to its own changing internal states. And *self* is Damasio's name for the feeling of awareness or knowing that these events are taking place. To be conscious is to be endowed with this feeling of knowing that is self; the alternative is a pathological condition, which Damasio dramatizes in the striking case of a man undergoing an epileptic absence seizure:

> He was both there and not there, certainly awake, attentive in part, behaving for sure, bodily present but personally unaccounted for, absent without leave. . . . I had witnessed the razor-sharp transition between a fully conscious mind and a mind deprived of the sense of self. (6–7)

For Damasio, the neurobiology of consciousness, of "the movie-in-the-brain," must address two interconnected problems: first, "the problem of understanding how the brain inside the human organism engenders the mental patterns we call . . . the images of an object"; and second, "the problem of how, in parallel with engendering mental patterns for an object, the brain also engenders a sense of self in the act of knowing" (9). Pursuing his movie metaphor for the stream of consciousness, Damasio asks, how does the brain generate "the movie-in-the-brain," and how does it generate "the *appearance* of an owner and observer for the movie *within the movie*" (11)? Underpinning Damasio's bold attempt to answer these questions is his conviction that "consciousness is not a monolith, at least in humans: it can be separated into simple and complex kinds, and the neurological evidence makes the separation transparent" (16). Damasio identifies two distinct kinds of consciousness and self: (1) a simple level of "core consciousness" and "core self," and, developing from it, (2) a more complex level of "extended consciousness" and "autobiographical self."[5]

Underlying these two modes of consciousness, Damasio traces "the deep roots for the self" (22) to a "*proto-self*." Emphasizing that "we are *not* conscious of the proto-self," he defines it as "*a coherent collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the physical structure of the organism in its many dimensions*" (174). This mapping registers the body's *homeostasis*, W. B. Cannon's term for "the automatic regulation of temperature, oxygen concentration, or pH" in the body (39–40). In this homeostatic activity recorded in the proto-self Damasio discerns the biological antecedents of the sense of self that is central to his conception of consciousness, "the sense of a single, bounded, living organism bent on maintaining stability to maintain its life" (136). From an evolutionary perspective, self is not some abstract philosophical concept but rather a name for a feeling embedded in the physiological processes necessary for survival. Self, then, for Damasio, is first and last *of* and *about* the body; to speak of the *embodied* self would be redundant, for there is no other.[6]

With the advent of core consciousness, which Damasio characterizes as an "*unvarnished sense of our individual organism in the act of knowing*" (125), a core self emerges that preexists language and conventional memory. This core self "inheres in the second-order nonverbal account that occurs whenever an object modifies the proto-self" (174). Core consciousness, occurring in a continuous wave of transient pulses, is "the knowledge that materializes when you confront an object, construct a neural pattern for it, and discover automatically that the now-salient image of the object is formed in your perspective, belongs to you, and that you can even act on it" (126). Individual first-person perspective, ownership, agency—these primary attributes of core consciousness are also key features of the literary avatar of self, the "I" of autobiographical discourse.

The final and highest level of Damasio's three-tier model of mental reality is extended consciousness and autobiographical self, enabled by the human organism's vast memory capacity. Autobiographical memory permits a constantly updated and revised "aggregate of dispositional records of who we have been physically and of who we have usually been behaviorally, along with records of who we plan to be in the future" (173). It is this store of memories that constitutes identity and personhood, the familiar materials of life story and memoir. While it's true that our experience of life story is emphatically linguistic, Damasio aligns himself with developmental psychologists such as Jerome Kagan who maintain that the emergence of the autobiographical self does not require language, and he speculates that bonobo chimpanzees and dogs may well possess autobiographical selves.[7]

I have asserted that all autobiography is about self, and Damasio argues that self is a primary constituent of all conscious experience. Is there a link between self in its literary and in its nonverbal, biological manifestations? I believe that there is, especially if we interpret autobiography as in some sense the expression of what Damasio terms the autobiographical self, and I think that this link takes the form of a shared activity of representation. I'd like to explore this linkage in three steps: first, how does the body manifest self? Next, how does Damasio articulate this bodily manifestation of self? And finally, how is self articulated in autobiography?

Damasio's answer to the first question is clear: through feeling. In Damasio's account, the brain is engaged at every level in the mapping and monitoring of the organism's experience, and consciousness allows us to know that this activity is going forward, endowing us with "the feeling of what happens." But how can we put into words this feeling of knowing that is self in a way that captures its nonverbal bodily nature? How does Damasio respond to this challenge? Damasio approaches consciousness, as philosopher John R. Searle suggests one should, as "an ordinary biological phenomenon comparable with growth, digestion, or the secretion of bile" ("Mystery" 60). But the difficulties set in right away, for whether or not this neurobiological self—this feeling of knowing generated in the body's brain—is truly ordinary, humans seem to be constituted to regard it as every bit as mysterious and elusive to their attempts to represent it as the older transcendental self that it replaces. The puzzle of consciousness and self is nowhere more evident than in the attempts of Damasio and others proceeding from the same biological assumptions to grapple with what they term the "binding problem," which poses "the question of how different stimulus inputs to different parts of the brain are bound together so as to produce a single, unified experience, for example, of seeing a cat" (Searle, "Mystery: Part 2" 54). Consciousness seems inevitably to generate a sense of some central, perceiving entity distinct from the experience perceived. Damasio stresses,

however, that there is no neurological evidence to support such a distinction, for, despite the illusion of unified perception that "binding" miraculously creates, multiple centers of activity in the brain produce it. Continuing the long-term attack on Cartesian dualism that he launched in his earlier book, *Descartes' Error*, Damasio urges that his conception of self has absolutely nothing to do with "the infamous homunculus," the notion that there is a distinct space in the brain occupied by the "knower" function ("the little man"), which "possess[es] the knowledge needed to interpret the images formed in that brain" (189).

Damasio's anti-homunculus stance informs the language he uses to express the experience of knowing that is self: his choice of metaphors and his conception of narrative. I have already mentioned the first of his metaphors, the "movie-in-the-brain." He draws the second metaphor from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "you are the music while the music lasts." Both metaphors address perception by refusing any split between perceiver and perceived, and both stress process and duration. Paradoxically, although the feeling of knowing generates a sense of individual perspective, ownership, and agency, the rudiments of what will flower eventually as a sense of bounded identity and personhood, these proto-I-character features of consciousness are to be understood as fused with and not standing free from the life experience of which they are a part. The syntax of autobiographical discourse always posits a subject "I" performing actions: *I* do things, *I* feel and will; *I* remember and plan. By contrast, in the underlying syntax of core consciousness, self resides alike in both subject and predicate. Damasio probes this paradox when he writes of "the *appearance* of an owner and observer for the movie *within the movie*" (11), for "there is no external spectator" (171) for the "movie-in-the-brain." Consciousness *is* the watching, *is* the knowing. Similarly, repeating Eliot's music metaphor, Damasio writes:

> The story contained in the images of core consciousness is not told by some clever homunculus. Nor is the story really told by *you* as a self because the core *you* is only born as the story is told, *within the story itself*. You exist as a mental being when primordial stories are being told, and only then . . . You are the music while the music lasts. (191)[8]

As Damasio's music and movie metaphors suggest, *self inheres in a narrative of some kind*. Narrative identity, then, the Sacksian notion that what we are could be said to be a story of some kind, is not merely the product of social convention; it is rooted in our lives in and as bodies.

Damasio's extensive use of narrative as a concept to express the experience of self at the level of core consciousness is at once both familiar and distinctive. Whether it unfolds in movies, in music, in autobiographies, or in the brain, narrative is a temporal form, which "maps what

happens over time." But for Damasio, narrative is biological before it is linguistic and literary: it denotes a natural process, the "imagetic representation of sequences of brain events" in prelinguistic, "wordless stories about what happens to an organism immersed in an environment" (189). The brain's narrative, moreover, is not only wordless but *untold*, as Damasio's paradoxical movie and music metaphors are designed to illustrate; instead of a teller, there is only—and persistently—what we might call a teller-effect, a self that emerges and lives its life only within the narrative matrix of consciousness. For Damasio, self and narrative are so intimately linked that to speak of the one is reciprocally to speak of the other; I believe that the same holds true for autobiography—hence my growing preference for terms such as *I-narrative*, *self-experience*, and *identity narrative*.

If my hypothesis is correct that there is a link between Damasio's wordless narrative of core consciousness and the expression of self in autobiographical narrative, what are the key points of likeness between these two orders of narrative?

They are both temporal forms: self is not an entity but a state of feeling, an integral part of the process of consciousness unfolding over time.

They both generate the illusion of a teller: although the experience of selfhood inevitably creates a sense that it is being witnessed or narrated, a free-standing observer/teller figure cannot be extrapolated from it.

They both serve a homeostatic goal: the adaptive purpose of self-narrative, whether neurobiological or literary, would be the maintenance of stability in the human individual through the creation of a sense of identity; as self-narration maps and monitors the succession of body or identity states, it engenders "the notion of a bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same" (134).

While I'm deeply attracted to the idea that autobiographical narrative might be tied to the well-being of the human organism, it's the second point, concerning what I have termed the teller-effect, that has more immediate potential to illuminate our reading of autobiography.

We tend instinctively to think of autobiography as a narrative container or envelope of some kind in which we express our sense of identity, as though identity and narrative were somehow separable, whereas Damasio's account of self posits that our sense of identity is itself generated *as* and *in* a narrative dimension of consciousness. Recall Damasio's "movie-in-the-brain" figure, which nicely encapsulates the gulf between experiential and neurological accounts of consciousness. We all can testify that consciousness generates "the *appearance* of an owner and observer for the movie" unfolding in our heads, while neurological

findings oblige Damasio to stress that the owner-observer figure is located—paradoxically—"w*ithin the movie*" it seems to witness and not outside it. Our sense of having selves distinct from our stories is, nevertheless, hugely productive, serving our need for a stable sense of continuous identity stretching over time. When we talk about ourselves, and even more when we fashion an I-character in an autobiography, we give a degree of permanence and narrative solidity—or "body," we might say—to otherwise evanescent states of identity feeling. We get the satisfaction of seeming to see ourselves see, of seeming to see our selves. That is the psychological gratification of autobiography's reflexiveness, of its illusive teller-effect.

To recognize the teller-effect as an illusion, however, to understand selfhood as a kind of "music" that we perform as we live, can prompt us to locate the content of self-experience in an autobiography not merely in the central figures of the I-character and the I-narrator where we are conditioned to look for it but in the identity narrative as a whole. In *The Liars' Club*, then, it would be the I-narrative *about* Pokey and not just the Pokey-character it features that would be the true locus of Mary Karr's reconstruction of her earlier self.[9] If in the counterintuitive syntax of consciousness self inhabits both subject and predicate, narrative as well as character, then autobiography not only delivers metaphors of self, it *is* a metaphor of self. The narrative activity in and of autobiography is an identity activity. Borrowing Damasio's borrowing of T. S. Eliot's metaphor, we might say that *The Liars' Club is* Mary Karr while she writes her story and perhaps even while we read it too: she *is* the music of her narrative while the music lasts. Why does she need to get her story straight? Not just to satisfy the biography police but rather to satisfy a psychological imperative that gravitates to the performance of narrative as integral to the experience of identity. Narrative is the name of the identity game in autobiography just as it is in consciousness and in interpersonal relations, and nowhere more so than in *The Liars' Club* where Karr makes clear that her own practice of self-narration is rooted in her father's tall-tale telling that shaped her childhood and her artistic vocation. If her childhood is filled with stories, so is her adult life, in which, she tells us, the narrative work of psychoanalysis played into the writing of her autobiography. And the autobiography's account of all this making of identity narrative comes to climax and closure with the twin stories-within-stories of her father's final tale and her mother's confessional revelations about her hidden past, a past so wounding that it had driven her to the knife-wielding act of madness that opens the memoir. Nowhere is Karr's belief in narrative as the motor of identity more strikingly displayed than in her response to her father's stroke at the end of the book. Devastated by the blow that silences Pete Karr and his voice for good, she responds to his aphasia by playing for them both a tape of one of his tall-tales—and, we might add, by writing *The Liars' Club*.[10]

When we write autobiography and when we read it, we repeat in our imaginations the rhythms of identity experience that autobiographical narratives describe. I believe that the identity narrative impulse that autobiographies express is the same that we respond to every day in talking about ourselves; both may be grounded in the neurobiological rhythms of consciousness.

Notes

1 This essay appeared in *Narrative* 12 (2004): 121–32 and is reprinted here with permission from Ohio State University.
2 For an account of this research, see Eakin, *How* 106–16.
3 Damasio reasons that self must preexist language: "If self and consciousness were born de novo from language, they would constitute the sole instance of words without an underlying concept" (108). Damasio's formulation here, setting up two clear-cut "before" or "after" positions on the relation between self and language (and indeed on the relation between language and its referents), strikes me as problematic to the extent that it does not allow for the possibility of a dynamic interplay between them. Rodney Needham proposes, for example, that "new inner states" may be created and "distinctively experienced" as "new lexical discriminations are made" (77). See Eakin, *Touching* 97–100.
4 Damasio is careful not to overstate his claims. "I regard the thought of solving *the* consciousness problem with some skepticism. I simply hope," he writes, "that the ideas presented here help with the eventual elucidation of the problem of self from a biological perspective" (12).
5 Damasio compares his "separation of consciousness into at least two levels of phenomena" with Gerald Edelman's twofold distinction between "primary" and "higher-order" consciousness (338 n10).
6 Damasio cites Kant, Nietzsche, Freud, Merleau-Ponty, and others as precedents for his view that "the body is the basis for the self" (347 n4).
7 Damasio usefully summarizes his thinking about kinds of self in two schematic, summary tables (174–75).
8 Neurologist Gerald M. Edelman characterizes perceptual events in the brain in a similar musical metaphor: "Think if you had a hundred thousand wires randomly connecting four string quartet players and that, even though they weren't speaking words, signals were going back and forth in all kinds of hidden ways [as you usually get them by the subtle nonverbal interactions between the players] that make the whole set of sounds a unified ensemble. That's how the maps of the brain work by re-entry." Quoting this comment, Oliver Sacks adds that in Edelman's conception of the brain there is "an orchestra, an ensemble—but without a conductor, an orchestra which makes its own music" ("Making" 44–45).
9 In identifying Pokey as the I-character in *The Liars' Club*, I am simplifying a rhetorical situation of considerable complexity in which the distinction between protagonist and narrator is fluid, for protagonists often assume, as Karr's does, a narrator function, and narrators cumulatively take on the solidity of a character.
10 Karr makes clear that the tape functions simultaneously as the record of a story and the record of an identity: "I started shuffling through a shoebox of cassette tapes on the floor till I laid hold to the one with 'Pete Karr' on the label in red Magic Marker" (303).

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2 Selfhood, Autobiography, and Interdisciplinary Inquiry

A Reply to George Butte

In my essay "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?"[1] I investigate narrative identity, the idea that what we are could be said to be a story of some kind. Attracted by neurologist Antonio Damasio's belief that both self and narrative are deeply rooted in our lives *in* and *as* bodies, I explore the possibilities of a neurobiological approach to self-representation in autobiography. Integral to consciousness is reflexive awareness, the sense we have that we not only participate in but witness our experience. As Walt Whitman puts it in "Song of Myself," we are "both in and out of the game." We embody this doubleness of our first-person perspective in the I-narrators who tell the stories of our I-character selves. Yet neurologically speaking, the free-standing observer/teller figure that is so central a feature of both autobiographical discourse and the life it describes cannot be extrapolated from the general matrix of consciousness. There is no site-specific location for self in the brain, no phrenological bump, no homunculus to house the reality of our phenomenological experience of selfhood.

To express this puzzle, the disjunction between the testimony of experience and the reality of its neurological underpinnings, Damasio likens the play of consciousness to a "movie-in-the-brain." While consciousness inevitably generates "the *appearance* of an owner and observer for the movie" unfolding in our heads, Damasio stresses that the owner-observer figure is located "*within the movie*" it seems to witness and not outside it (11). Damasio's movie metaphor suggests that the distinctions we draw between subject and object to structure our experience simplify an extraordinarily complex and paradoxical reality. I, in turn, attempt to capture this puzzle of reflexive consciousness by speaking of the I-narrator of autobiographical discourse as a "teller-effect." Here's where George Butte enters the picture. He raises two issues about my essay: the first concerns the nature of selfhood, specifically its capacity for agency, and the second concerns interdisciplinary inquiry and how it should be conducted.

First, the teller-effect and agency. Butte claims that Damasio and Eakin have deprived self of its capacity for action. This is clearly not the case. To set the record straight, let me review briefly what Damasio has to say

about self and agency. Damasio writes that "the sense of self" is "the critical component of any notion of consciousness" (89), and he traces its "deep roots" (22) to the most basic level of our physiology. Underlying the reflexive awareness that he characterizes as "the movie-in-the-brain," Damasio posits a level of "core consciousness," which preexists language, conventional memory, and autobiographical identity. A reader concerned with self and agency would pay special attention to Damasio's account of core consciousness, which he defines as "the knowledge that materializes when you confront an object, construct a neural pattern for it, and discover automatically that the now-salient image of the object is formed in your perspective, belongs to you, and that you can even act on it" (126). In my essay I comment as follows: "Individual first-person perspective, ownership, agency—these primary attributes of core consciousness are also key features of the literary avatar of self, the 'I' of autobiographical discourse" (127).

So why would Butte attribute a loss of agency to the model of selfhood proposed by Damasio and Eakin? Butte's error seems to be the result of a confusion of levels of analysis; how could a "teller-effect" be endowed with agency, he seems to ask. Whereas, neurologically speaking, the structures that support selfhood are distributed, from a phenomenological perspective, the experience of selfhood is indeed centered, and certainly the locus of conscious intentions; a neurological "effect" is nonetheless and simultaneously a profound experiential reality. The intensity of Butte's "resistance" to Damasio's—and Eakin's—position on self and agency is worth remarking. The denial of agency that he attributes to Eakin and Damasio quickly becomes a denial of selfhood altogether. Butte associates Eakin and Damasio with loss, with shadows, with absence, with poststructuralism and Paul de Man. Perhaps the conclusion of Butte's recent book, *I Know That You Know That I Know* (2004) provides a clue to his state of mind: "Why do I care so much about the subversions of self and agency, or at least of their conventional forms, in Lacanian film studies and cultural studies in the shadow of Foucault . . . I want to believe in a self with some capacity for continuity and integrity" (239). Neurology, it seems, presents only the latest threat to his faith.

Does neurobiological knowledge have the power to undermine the truth of our experience of selfhood? Butte's recoil might make us think so. If, as I contend, Butte has nothing to fear from Damasio's account of consciousness on the score of agency, he might find psychologist Daniel M. Wegner's *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (2002) a more formidable challenge to his—and my own—belief in our capacity to will our actions. I certainly thought so when I read the column by John Horgan in *The New York Times* that brought Wegner's work to my attention. I was editing a collection of essays on *The Ethics of Life Writing* at the time, so I was primed to wonder what might become of morality, of personal

responsibility, if conscious will proved indeed to be an illusion. When I read Wegner's book, however, in the wake of Horgan's brief discussion of it, I found Wegner's account of the will both persuasive and reassuring—whether Butte would feel the same, I don't know. According to Wegner, the findings of brain studies are at odds with what we think we know about our actions: "*[T]he experience of consciously willing an action is not a direct indication that the conscious thought has caused the action*" (2). Instead, "the experience of conscious will kicks in at some point *after* the brain has already started preparing for the action" (54). Because "we can't possibly know (let alone keep track of) the tremendous number of mechanical influences on our behavior . . . we develop a shorthand, a belief in the causal efficacy of our conscious thoughts. We believe in the magic of our own causal agency" (27–28). What is the relation between our representation of conscious experience—whether of the will or of self—and the totality of mental life both conscious and unconscious that our representations purport to describe? Wegner's notion of a shorthand that we employ to make sense of our experience strikes me as apt, and not disabling when it comes to ethics, for we operate as intending moral human beings on the basis of our apprehension of conscious experience and not from a conceptual knowledge of its neurobiological substrate.

When we visit the interface between disciplines, between levels of reality, each with competing truth claims, how should we respond? This is precisely the issue that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson address in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), when "a scientific truth claim based on knowledge about the neural level is contradicting a truth claim at the phenomenological level" (105). "The phenomenological and neural levels," they remind us, "provide different modes of understanding, the first in terms of everyday experience and the second in scientific terms" (106). And so they ask, "do we want to say that only one of these levels is relevant to explanation?" (108). "Embodied truth," they conclude, "requires us to give up the illusion that there exists a unique correct description of any situation. Because of the multiple levels of our embodiment, there is no one level at which one can express all the truths we can know about a given subject matter" (109). In the present case, the subject matter is selfhood. The self-authorizing certainty of Butte's title for his commentary on my essay, "I Know That I Know That I Know," is telling when it comes to this perplexing issue of competing claims.

For all his misgivings about my use of Damasio's view of embodied selfhood, Butte presents himself as the champion of interdisciplinary inquiry, and he has a quite particular idea about how it should be conducted. The model he advocates is one proposed by David Herman, who seeks to build a bridge between narrative theory and the cognitive sciences. "Cognitive narratologists," Herman writes, "assume that greater familiarity with techniques for analyzing naturally occurring narrative discourse—whether spoken or written, quotidian or literary—can benefit

scholars working within the disciplines traditionally grouped among the cognitive sciences." Herman, and Butte with him, seek to promote "a positive, reciprocal influence, a basic synergy" (20) between cognitive scientific and literary inquiry. Interdisciplinary research, then, ought to be a two-way street, with literary critics functioning as equal players in the advancement of cognitive scientific knowledge. Accordingly, Butte asks "how Eakin's study of self-writing could clarify Damasio's project, his 'ongoing research program' which includes, among other elements, 'designing testable hypotheses regarding the neuroanatomical underpinnings of consciousness informed by theory and reflection'" (Damasio 12). Butte thinks that narratologists are equipped to assist Damasio in this endeavor, and he cites a series of passages in which Damasio, stressing the speculative nature of some of his views, speaks of the need for further research.

But let's consider these citations in context. When Damasio observes, for example, that "the neurobiological account is incomplete," he proceeds to comment in the same sentence, "I believe these qualities will be eventually explained neurobiologically" (9). Again, when Damasio says that "we need to find a more plausible alternative," he is speaking in fact of an alternative to "the language explanation of consciousness" which he terms "improbable" (185). How could narratologists working with texts supply such a nonlanguage alternative? Finally, Butte picks up on Damasio's references to "the hypothesis" as yet another opportunity for the aspiring narratologist to forward Damasio's research. Here is the hypothesis in question, which Damasio describes as "the need for a second-order neural pattern":

> I would say that beyond the many neural structures in which the causative object and the proto-self changes are separately represented, there is at least one other structure which *re-represents* both proto-self and object in their temporal relationship and can thus represent what is actually happening to the organism. . . . The second-order neural pattern which subtends the nonverbal imaged account of the organism-object relationship is probably based on intricate cross-signaling among several "second-order" structures. The likelihood is low that one brain region holds *the* supreme second-order neural pattern. (177)

How, exactly, would narratologists contribute to the advancement of neurological knowledge in this regard? Noting that "Damasio's own work often draws on narrative metaphor," Butte sees this strategy as providing him with an opening: "the door," he writes, "is open for narratologists to enter." The metaphors in question, however, notably the notion of consciousness as a "movie-in-the-brain," are not the tools of scientific inquiry going forward in a laboratory or clinic but heuristic

devices employed by a neurologist who is also a gifted writer to dramatize the implications of a neurobiological perspective for an audience of lay readers. But let's follow George Butte through this "door."

In something of a bait-and-switch, having commenced with neurology, Butte turns to psychology as the other target discipline to realize David Herman's program. As we pursue interdisciplinary inquiry with Butte as our guide, we discover that "what is missing from accounts of the autobiographical self in both Eakin and Damasio" is "deep intersubjectivity," the focal concern of Butte's own book on "narrating subjects" in novel and film. He proceeds to identify an additional "effect" in the play of consciousness, not only a "teller-effect" but a "critic-effect." At bottom, though, the critic-effect, insofar as it is also a dimension of reflexive consciousness, is really only an avatar of the teller-effect; the issue with agency is the same. More to the point, however, a neurobiological perspective is no longer in play, such that the force of Butte's use of "effect" is not the same as that invoked in my own use of this phrase. David Herman claims that the study of fictional mental functioning "can help illuminate the 'real minds' . . . on which specialists in the cognitive sciences have traditionally focused" (23). Does George Butte's work on "deep intersubjectivity" illustrate a successful intervention of this kind? Perhaps cognitive psychologists will step forward to say that it does.

Because autobiography is a referential art, its readers and critics are inevitably led to explore its relation to the world to which it refers in all sorts of ways. Interdisciplinary inquiry seems to come with the territory. I know that I've been drawn to quite a number of fields—historiography, developmental psychology, cultural anthropology, ethics, the law, and most recently neurology—to answer the questions that autobiography seems to pose. As to my investigation of Mary Karr's autobiography in the present instance, cognitive scientists Gerald Edelman and Giulio Tononi capture my aim in this memorable formulation of their own research: "We are trying to connect a description of something out there—the brain—with something in here—an experience, our own individual experience, that is occurring to us as conscious observers" (11). Consider the representation of self, I ask, in a passage from Karr, juxtaposing two different perspectives, one literary and one neurobiological. This modest experiment taught me two things: (1) that "self" content might be distributed throughout an I-narrative and not merely contained in the I-characters and I-narrators where the conventions of autobiographical discourse condition us to look for it; and (2) that "self" is not only reported but performed, certainly by the autobiographer as she writes and perhaps to a surprising degree by the reader as he reads. To put these results in Butte's terms, I saw more self, more agency, than I had before, not less. To put them in Damasio's terms, in writing autobiography Mary Karr was doing self, doing consciousness: "You are the music while the music lasts."

Note

1 This essay appeared in *Narrative* 13 (2005): 310–14 and is reprinted here with permission from Ohio State University.

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3 Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism

A Response to Galen Strawson and James Phelan

What is narrative identity?[1] In an article I published in *Narrative* two years ago, I defined it as "the notion that what we are is a story of some kind."[2] Before investigating its social and somatic sources, I added that I regarded this idea as "counterintuitive and even extravagant." James Phelan liked my characterization of narrative identity enough to quote it twice in an article of his own in *Narrative* last October. In that "Editor's Column," Phelan praises the British philosopher Galen Strawson for "his overall effort to debunk the narrative identity thesis" as "both effective and salutary" (209). As the lead-in to his commentary on Strawson, Phelan casts me as the apostle of narrative identity, and it would seem to follow, accordingly, that my views have been "debunked" by Strawson. As Phelan concludes, I'd be guilty—along with Oliver Sacks, Jerome Bruner, and others—of "reducing the numerous and complex relations between the self and one's narratives about the self to a single [narrative] model" (210).

When I finished reading the "Editor's Column," I didn't recognize myself in Phelan's "Eakin," not surprisingly because Phelan quotes me selectively to suit his own agenda, a protest against what he calls "narrative imperialism," "the impulse by students of narrative to claim . . . more and more power for our object of study and our ways of studying it" (206). So to set the record straight at the outset, permit me to run the entire passage in which Phelan found his cue. In what follows, I reflect on Oliver Sacks's observation that "it might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative,' and that this narrative *is* us, our identities" (110, emphasis original):

> "This narrative *is* us, our identities"—surely the notion that what we are is a story of some kind is counterintuitive and even extravagant. Don't we know that we're more than that, that Sacks can't be right? And our instinctive recoil points to an important truth: there are many modes of self and self-experience, more than could possibly be represented in the kind of self-narration Sacks refers to, more than any autobiography could relate. ("What" 121–22)

Before considering what Phelan and Strawson have to say about narrative identity, I want to make clear that my own view of self and self-experience is quite different from theirs. Self has been conceptualized variously as a transcendental endowment, as a social script, as one of the cultural technologies of power. Whatever it is, I'm convinced that self is not some invariant monolithic entity. While Phelan and Strawson like to speak of *the* self, I prefer to stay away from the definite article. Instead, as the passage from which Phelan quoted is meant to suggest, self is a name I'd give to reflexive awareness of processes unfolding in many registers. Narrative identity, then, is only one, albeit extremely important, mode of self-experience.

In "Against Narrativity," Galen Strawson attacks two "theses": (1) a "*psychological Narrativity thesis*," which holds that "human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort"; and (2) an "*ethical Narrativity thesis*," which holds that "experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative . . . is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood" (428). The problems with Strawson's exposition begin right here with his formulation of his theses: "see or live or experience," "experiencing or conceiving"—the wobble between the conceptual and the experiential provides a shifting foundation for the rest of his argument. Does Strawson manage to refute either of his "theses"? Let me consider the "ethical" thesis first, for the real-life consequences that follow from it are more urgent and compelling than those that follow from the "psychological" thesis. Moreover, I suspect that it was resistance to the "ethical" thesis that motivated Strawson's essay in the first place.

Strawson does not see himself or his life in narrative terms, and he resents the proposition that he should. For an extreme version of the normative ethical narrativity claim, Strawson cites the philosopher Marya Schechtman, who believes that a person "creates his identity [only] by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his life." Further, Schechtman argues that one must be in possession of a full and "explicit narrative [of one's life] to develop fully as a person" (qtd. in Strawson 435–36). Strawson associates Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Paul Ricoeur with this position. While I think that an ethical concern with matters of conduct is likely to involve a narrative of actions and motives, I too bristle at Schechtman's prescriptive view. Strawson would be more convincing, though, in his dissent from the examined life as the sine qua non of the good if he presented what a distinctly nonnarrative model of ethics would look like. In response to Taylor, Ricoeur, and Schechtman and to their view of a narratively inflected accounting of self and life story, Strawson contents himself with asking "why on earth, in the midst of the beauty of being, it should be thought to be important to do this" (436).

I believe that the problems entailed by the "ethical narrativity thesis" are much greater than Strawson suggests. So eager is he to make a claim for himself as a normal person in nonnarrative terms, so convinced is he that the hegemony of "narrative" theses in our culture is merely the result of "intellectual fashion" (439), that he misses the most troubling features of the "ethical narrativity thesis." He targets the lofty norm of the examined life, whereas I'm worried about deep-seated social conventions that govern narrative self-presentation in everyday life. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, identity narratives, delivered piecemeal every day, function as the signature for others of the individual's possession of a normal identity: "The verdict of those for whom we perform is virtually axiomatic: no satisfactory narrative, no self" ("Breaking" 120). Failures of narrative competence, triggered by various forms of memory loss and dementia, may entail institutional confinement. When we prescribe what it takes to count as a person, and we certainly do so tacitly when we follow such behavioral norms, we enter dangerous territory.

If ethics is perhaps the motor for Strawson's inquiry, with psychology we arrive at its heart, his claim that narrative identity does not square with the testimony of his own experience of his "self." Strawson comments, "I have no significant sense that *I*—the I now considering this question—was there in the further past." Distinguishing with an asterisk his present self from those of his past, he can thus say: "So: it's clear to me that events in my remoter past didn't happen to me*" (433). With these striking statements, Strawson affirms what is a commonplace in the literature of autobiography. Henry James (whom he cites by way of illustration), Malcolm X, Christa Wolf—these are only a few of the many autobiographers who insist on their experience of discontinuous identity. Strawson does not disavow his possession of autobiographical memories or their "from-the-inside character" (434), yet he cannot access previous identity states; he cannot reexperience or reinhabit them. There is both psychological and neurological support for this position. Novelist and autobiographer David Malouf makes this penetrating observation about the impossibility of recapturing earlier, *embodied* identity states:

> That body is out of reach. And it isn't simply a matter of its being forgotten in us—of a failure of memory or imagination to summon it up, but of a change in perceiving itself. What moving back into it would demand is an act of *un*-remembering, a dismantling of the body's experience that would be a kind of dying, a casting off, one by one, of all the tissues of perception, conscious and not, through which our very notion of body has been remade. (64, emphasis original)

Consciousness is not a neutral medium in which memories can be replayed and the past repeated intact. While we may have the sensation that

we are capable of reliving the past—Vladimir Nabokov, Marcel Proust, Nathalie Sarraute, and many other autobiographers have claimed they could—received opinion in brain studies offers no support for belief in invariant memory. Nearly twenty years ago, neurologist Israel Rosenfield argued that memories share the constructed nature of all brain events: "Recollection is a kind of perception, . . . *and every context will alter the nature of what is recalled*" (89, my emphasis).[3]

Strawson delineates two "styles of temporal being" (430), which he terms the Episodic and the Diachronic. Episodics, like Strawson, believe that identity states are discontinuous, whereas Diachronics believe that they are continuous. I say "believe" advisedly, because Strawson never makes clear whether he is describing a given of phenomenological experience or an attitude toward it. He asserts that "the fundamentals of temporal temperament are genetically determined" (431); however, although he states that his Episodic and Diachronic categories are "radically opposed" (430), he describes himself as only "relatively Episodic" (433). There are two serious problems with Strawson's Episodic/Diachronic distinction, which he sets up as the basis for his attack on the "psychological Narrativity thesis": (1) he dilutes his otherwise bold claim of discontinuous identity by invoking continuous identity to underwrite it; and (2) he fails to establish that a narrative outlook on experience is exclusively the attribute of the Diachronic "style of temporal being." Contrary to Strawson's claim, narrative is a resource available to anyone, regardless of belief in continuous or discontinuous identity.

As to the first problem, Strawson prefaces his position on discontinuous identity by distinguishing "between one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as a human being taken as a whole, and one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as an inner mental entity or 'self' of some sort" (429). Strawson may well insist that the events of his past didn't happen to "him*," but he doesn't push his insistence on his sense of discontinuous identity in the direction of pathological dissociation. On the contrary, he protests that he's "normal," that he has a past, that he has autobiographical memories, that he has a sense of himself "as a human being taken as a whole." And what is involved "when one is considering oneself principally as a human being taken as a whole"? According to Strawson, "*there's a clear sense in which every human life is a developmental unity—a historical-characteral developmental unity as well as a biological one*" (440, emphasis original). Provided with an endowment like this, Episodics begin to resemble Diachronics after all.

But where does narrative fit into Strawson's typology of modes of temporal being? Strawson claims that a narrative outlook on experience is exclusively the property of Diachronics, who, once they employ it, become for him "Narratives." How do individuals sort out into Strawson's Diachronic and Episodic categories? Strawson believes that Episodics inhabit a minority position—hence his need to champion himself and

them. As I suggested earlier, though, from a neurobiological perspective we are all Episodics in the sense that past consciousness is irrecoverable. I think that Strawson is correct, nonetheless, in his conviction that most people would identify themselves as Diachronics—that is, if they ever gave much thought to such identity questions, and they probably don't. I think most people probably believe in continuous identity at some level, and they probably think of their lives in developmental terms. Do they believe, with Wordsworth, that "the Child Is Father of the Man"? Well, sure. But, as with opinion polls, the answers you get to a question depend on how it is asked. If you ask people whether they believe in continuous identity, most, as Strawson reports, will say they do. If you ask them, though, about the extent to which they can call up the past, about whether they can actually reinhabit earlier periods of their lives, pressing them as to whether they can in the present reexperience earlier states of consciousness, I suspect that many of these previously unreflecting Diachronics would admit to being Episodics too.

Some recognition of this sort seems to have dawned on James Phelan, who describes himself as "an Episodic who is a recovering Diachronic." There's no way to close the gap, he confides, between "the Jim Phelan who is now writing this column" and "the Jim Phelan who went to St. Joseph's grammar school in Kings Park, Long Island" (209). So he's an Episodic for sure, but that doesn't stop him from thinking of his life in narrative terms. "This damn story and that damn story and that other damn story," he reports of his own experience. Confessed Episodic though he may now be, he doesn't escape what he calls "the narrative identity thesis," although he claims to when he writes, "The narrative identity thesis simply doesn't correspond to my experience of my self and the plausible stories I can tell about that self" (209). He's still telling such stories, whereas Strawson claims that only Diachronics go in for narrative. Strawson's categories for modes of temporal experience simply don't connect coherently and predictably with a narrative outlook on experience. Strawson seems to admit as much when he comments, "I've made some distinctions, but none of them cut very sharply" (446). In the last issue of *Narrative*, James Battersby systematically dismantles Strawson's binary thinking and concludes that "we should then reject his whole scheme, eliminating in the process any concern about aligning ourselves on one side or the other of the Diachronic/Episodic divide" (42).

So why would Strawson attempt to assign an attraction to narrative and narrative identity exclusively to Diachronics? Because he himself has "absolutely no sense of [his] life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form" and no "great or special interest in [his] past" (433), he assumes that this must be the case for all Episodics.[4] Many an Episodic turned autobiographer, however, including writers such as Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Stendhal (all of whom Strawson cites as models of the Episodic type), do take a narrative interest in their experience. Take John Updike, for a characteristic example. He definitely

describes himself as an Episodic: "Each day, we wake slightly altered, and the person we were yesterday is dead" (221). Yet he proceeds in *Self-Consciousness* to reconstruct his past in narrative precisely to recover something of those earlier selves. That is to say that Episodics may have a special motive for an interest in narrative precisely *because* they are Episodics, as seems to be the case with Phelan, who writes, "Even though I never reach a single coherent grand narrative, and any small narrative I settle on is provisional, this process enables me to convert my life from one damn thing after another to more manageable clusters of events and their significances" (209). Given that Strawson sees no value in narrative strivings like these, he makes a surprising choice for the editor of *Narrative* to embrace as a model for thinking about narrative.

I can't share Phelan's enthusiasm for Strawson because I believe that Strawson grossly undervalues the power of narrative not only as a form of self-representation but as an instrument of self-understanding. Is it the case that most narrative understandings are false as Strawson claims? He interprets neurophysiological research as supporting his claim that "the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from . . . the truth of your being" (447). Psychologist Daniel L. Schacter, however, reviewing memory research, rejects the idea that the constructedness of memories necessarily yields the distortion that Strawson alleges. Instead, he finds that "when adults retrospectively assess the general character of more extended periods in their pasts, they are usually fairly accurate" (94). Moreover, what about the power of narrative to reveal the failings of particular narrative understandings of one's experience? There is a whole literature of narratives of deconversion, of which Sartre's *The Words* would be only the most striking example, which demonstrates narrative's potential to expose false narrative understandings.[5] When it comes to self-knowledge, narrative is value neutral, available as an identity resource to Episodics and Diachronics alike.

It's time to lay my own cards on the table. Most mornings I wake, breathless and relieved, from some heavily emplotted world of agitated dreams, only to resume, as William James suggests we do, the unfolding of my own stream of consciousness which, despite astonishing jolts and cuts as memory jumps from one time frame to another, pulls to a steadily invented storyline of present and future plans. Strawson, I infer, is radically different from me when it comes to the rhythms of consciousness, which in my case, sleeping and waking, are invariably narrative in cast. Strawson celebrates a fleeting and absolute present—"what I care about . . . is how I am now" (438)—and he invokes the Earl of Shaftesbury as the patron saint of this Episodic mode:

> [But] what matter for memory? . . . If, *whilst I am*, I am as I should be, what do I care more? And thus let me lose *self* every hour, and be twenty successive selfs, or new selfs, 'tis all one to me: so [long as]

> I lose not my opinion [i.e., my overall outlook, my character, my moral identity]. (qtd. in Strawson 438, Shaftesbury's emphasis original)

What would it be like to live without memory? What would it be like to lose one's "self" every hour, indeed every few seconds? Oliver Sacks reports just such a case, that of "Mr. Thompson," a man whose memory has been gravely damaged by Korsakov's syndrome. In "Mr. Thompson," Sacks portrays an Episodic *in extremis*, an individual who "*must literally make himself (and his world) up every moment*." It's this man's desperate condition that prompts Sacks to reflect on the narrative anchor of human identity: "We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative—whose continuity, whose sense, *is* our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative', and that this narrative *is* us, our identities" (110, emphasis original). This is precisely the formulation of narrative identity that Strawson devotes "Against Narrativity" to contesting. The clinical context of Sacks's observation is instructive and sobering. Note that "Mr. Thompson," unlike Strawson, doesn't enjoy the safety net of a sense himself as a "human being taken as a whole," that sense of continuous identity that underwrites Strawson's comfortable claim of discontinuous identity. Strawson's brief for the Episodic life, which he characterizes as "truly happy-go-lucky, see-what-comes-along" (449), strikes me as breezy and untested. To be sure, who is to say that "Mr. Thompson" is not a happy man? Who would judge him to be diminished as a person? Strawson, I take it, would not, for he rightly opposes an ethics that would link narrative capacity and personhood. But would he—or the Earl of Shaftesbury—really want to *be* "Mr. Thompson"? Perhaps, but I've never encountered anyone who didn't hope that his or her memory and the sense of life story it supports would survive intact to the end. In my experience, most people fear memory loss and the death of the extended self that follows from it—witness the widespread anxiety about Alzheimer's disease and aging in the United States today. It is this fear that Sacks captures when he wonders whether loss of memory entails loss of identity: "has [Mr. Thompson] been pithed, scooped-out, de-souled, by disease?" (113).

But enough of Galen Strawson's Episodics and Diachronics. What is more to the point is that Strawson has prompted the editor of *Narrative* to question the nature of the interest in narrative that his journal should pursue in the time to come. James Phelan's worries about "narrative imperialism," about students of narrative making grandiose claims for the importance of their subject, pale beside the very real imperialism of narrative requirements that structure our social encounters and define us as persons. Strawson's error is to attribute the dominance of the idea of narrative identity to "intellectual fashion"—if that were true, then his self-congratulatory essay with its feel-good iconoclasm would have the power to change the present social arrangements in which narrative

features so prominently. It's all very well to attack "narrativity," but it's much harder to escape it in self-presentation. We're part of a narrative identity system whether we like it or not.[6] Should *Narrative* stick to narrative narrowly conceived as a literary form or forms, or should it entertain a more adventurous approach to narrative as something to do with society, with identity, with the body? As examples of this larger view of narrative, I'd point to two books, one old and one new, that deal with the work that narrative performs in us and in the world: Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* and Antonio Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens*. Is narrative only a function of language, I'd ask, or is it rooted more deeply still in the bodies that we are?

Notes

1 This essay appeared in *Narrative* 14 (2006): 180–87 and is reprinted here by permission of Ohio State University.
2 See "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?" in this volume.
3 Yet consider the testimony of persons who have experienced a deep trauma of some kind and who report the sensation of literally repeating past consciousness. Describing his research in the Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, Geoffrey Hartman cites the case of Jolly Z., who was asked what she sees when she is "back there." "Struggling for words, and still not entirely present," Hartman writes, "she answers: 'I'm not here . . . I don't even know about myself now. I'm there . . . somebody else talks out of me . . . You see it's not me. It's that person who experienced it who is talking about those experiences'" (ellipses original). Hartman comments: "An entire phenomenology of traumatic memory is encapsulated in statements like these." Unlike the more usual stance of the individual engaged in recollection who, as Malouf suggests, needs somehow to traverse the gulf that separates the past from the present, Hartman's victim of trauma is already "back there"; so completely is she inhabited by that earlier identity state that she can say, "I'm not here." (The testimony of Jolly Z. quoted by Hartman appears in Kraft 22.)
4 In generalizing from his own experience, Strawson is guilty of precisely the kind of universalizing that he attributes to advocates of the narrative thesis, who "generalize from their own case with that special, fabulously misplaced confidence that people feel when, considering elements of their own experience that are existentially fundamental for them, they take it that they must also be fundamental for everyone else" (439).
5 See Barbour.
6 See Linde's investigation of a particular form of "life story," the vocational accounts offered by white, middle-class professionals in answer to the question, "What do you do?" Linde concludes that the notion of narrative identity is so deeply embedded in our culture that it functions as a criterion for normalcy: "In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, proper, and stable person," she comments, "an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story" (3). Such an expectation is culture-specific: as Linde sees it, we happen to live in a culture that subscribes to "the idea that we 'have' a life story, and that any normally competent adult has one." Following Clifford Geertz, she presents narrative identity as "part of the interpretive equipment furnished to us by our culture" (20).

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4 Travelling with Narrative
From Text to Body

What is narrative?[1] A literary form? A social and cultural practice? A mode of cognition? An expression of our most basic physiology? Can one term cover so broad a range of reference? Some say no, condemning such a stretch as an overweening narrative imperialism.[2] To be sure, the gulf is huge that separates the familiar notion of narrative as stories from the final avatar in my series, narrative as connected to the rhythms of consciousness. Yet all these registers of narrative are simultaneously in play, I argue, in our experience of selfhood and our endless attempts to express it.

Let me start by suggesting my earliest view of narrative. When I read Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* in 1967, the book's six brilliant lectures captured the importance of narrative for me once and for all: its value as a meaning-making structure. "Men, like poets," Kermode observes, "rush 'into the middest,' *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems" (7). Kermode argues that our existential investment in narrative is a function of our mortality and its consequences for our thinking about our place in time: "We project ourselves—a small, humble elect, perhaps—past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (8). We remodel these temporal fictions, though, with ever greater urgency, for, as Kermode comments, "it is much harder now than it was even quite recently to imagine a relation between the time of a life and the time of a world" (166). Harder now because the old narratives of order inevitably decay or become discredited; harder now because our knowledge of the already mind-defying immensity of the universe keeps expanding. Particular narratives may wear out, but narrative remains central in our toolkit for survival. My own concern in what follows is with autobiographical narratives, and when Kermode speaks of "satisfying one's need to know the shape of life in relation to the perspectives of time" (3), he certainly identifies the deep motive for all self-narration and life writing.

In tracing the evolution of my thinking about narrative over a period of roughly fifty years, I have adopted the two-part structure proposed

by Matti Hyvärinen in his history of this concept in recent decades. He identifies two "relatively separate discussions on narrative theory and analysis": a mono-disciplinary strand in the case of "literary narratology" and a multidisciplinary strand in the case of "narrative-turn theory" (20–21). Looking back with Hyvärinen's model in mind, I see that I have traversed both of his narrative fields, one after the other. My early work on nineteenth-century American fiction located me squarely in the literary camp. Later, however, when I became interested in autobiography and life writing, I turned to other disciplines to explore the genre's distinctive narrative issues, including historiography, developmental psychology, ethics, the law, cultural anthropology, and most recently neurobiology. So, in Hyvärinen's terms, when it comes to the concept of narrative, I'm definitely a crossover guy, moving from narratology to embrace the narrative turn.

The first phase of my travels with narrative, running from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, was definitely text-centered. I date, after all, from the days of the New Criticism, a formalist enterprise which trained us to penetrate the closed box of a narrative to get at its meaning through close reading. Through patient endeavor a reader could aspire to a definitive understanding of any text. My early training in New Critical narrative analysis informed my dissertation on Henry James, which featured close readings of his novels. It was only later on, at Indiana University, when my colleague David Bleich introduced me to reader response criticism, that I realized how deeply—and uncritically—I had absorbed New Critical assumptions about interpreting narrative: Texts were somehow self-contained, independent of the readers who read them. I initially resisted Bleich's view—which seems so obvious to me now—that we make the meanings we claim to find in texts.[3]

I recall these simple beginnings to suggest why my first encounter with literary theory, in the form of French structuralism, gave me such a jolt when I spent a year in Paris as a Fulbright lecturer in American literature in 1972–73. My structuralist awakening began with the weekly lectures of Claude Lévi-Strauss at the Collège de France, which my wife and I attended in a dowdy amphitheater in the Latin Quarter. Even though the celebrated anthropologist's pronunciation of the term *potlatch* baffled us for a time, we were attentive as he unveiled latent structures of meaning in the story of a Northwest Coast native named Asdiwal. Eager for more in this vein, I read the work of the leading structuralist critics—Claude Brémond, Algirdas Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, and especially Roland Barthes. I loved the formalist rigor of Barthes's "*L'analyse structurale des récits*" and his *Système de la mode*. As for his *S/Z*, it seemed to carry close reading to an altogether new plane of understanding. I was dazzled and hooked. For the first and only time in my life, I was actually excited by literary criticism, at least in this French semiotic mode, which promised to parse systematically—and exhaustively!—all the disparate

elements of a narrative, revealing its underlying structure in a single authoritative map. If literary criticism could be a science, this was it.

I had definitely caught the theory bug in Paris. The following year, when I returned to Indiana, I became the English Department's first card-carrying structuralist, but not for long. I remember inflicting an elaborate structural analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" on my students in a class on literary interpretation, only to realize that my laborious diagrams and charts confirmed what I thought I already knew about the story to begin with—the game was not worth the candle. The first, narratological phase of my travels with narrative came abruptly to an end.

It was about this time, in the mid-1970s, that I backed by chance into the study of autobiography. I began by trying to figure out autobiography's place in the generic scheme of things, asking familiar literary questions: How to classify autobiography as a literary form? Did it belong to the literature of fact, or was it some special kind of fiction? In the course of answering these questions, however, I found myself asking some new ones about the world beyond the text, for autobiographers routinely claim that their stories have a basis *of some kind* in biographical fact. In assessing such truth claims, I defended chronological narrative against the critique of Philippe Lejeune and John Sturrock, who dismissed its lockstep linearity as a simplistic imitation of biographical conventions, inadequate to the task of representing experience and the workings of memory. Instead, I countered that chronological narrative could offer a potentially appropriate replication of experience; appropriate because, as Paul Ricoeur and others who made the case for the essential narrativity of perception contended, it captures the deep-seated temporality of our lives.[4] This concern with phenomenology, prompted by the referential dimension of autobiographical discourse, marks my shift toward Hyvärinen's narrative-turn camp; I was beginning to move from text to experience.

From this point forward my concern with narrative would be a function of my concern with self, whatever *that* was. In *Fictions in Autobiography* (1985), eschewing any notion that self was a transcendental entity of some kind, I put forward as my best guess that "the origin of the self as the reflexive center of human subjectivity is inextricably bound up with the activity of language" (198), for the child's sense of self seemed to emerge in tandem with learning to talk. Seven years later, though, in *Touching the World* (1992), I had reached a different conclusion about the origin of the self: that it is somehow the product of our lives *in* and *as* bodies. The opening section of the book's final chapter suggests my new orientation: "Starting from the Body: Oliver Sacks and the 'Neurology of Identity'." And if self could be said to be in some sense deeply embodied, could the same be said of narrative? Revisiting the vexed question of the potential narrativity of human experience, this time I focused on the debate among

a group of historiographers, including Hayden White and David Carr, about the nature of historical reality. To White's skeptical query, "Does the world, even the social world, ever really come to us as already narrativized?" (27), Carr, drawing on the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, replied that perception itself is narratively structured.[5] As far as autobiography was concerned, the self and its story, I now believed, were "complementary, mutually constituting aspects of a single process of identity formation" (*Touching* 198). Narrative was not merely a convenient form for the representation of self but indeed a constituent part *of* self.[6] Self and narrative, the twin poles of my thinking about autobiography, were beginning to coalesce into a single identity process.

During the 1990s, while I devoted considerable energy to exploring the embodied nature of selfhood, I did not make the analogous move to investigate the physiological foundation of narrative. I concentrated instead on the social and cultural sources of life story. Developmental psychologists, notably Jerome Bruner, Katherine Nelson, and Robyn Fivush, investigating what they call "memory talk" in the lives of young children, show how children are initiated into narrative culture. They demonstrate in fascinating detail that parents and caregivers train children how to talk about themselves.[7] As a result, by the time we reach adulthood, we have mastered a repertoire of scripts for self-narration; we know how to produce on demand a version of our life stories that is appropriate to the context. In so doing, we operate as players in a rule-governed narrative identity system, establishing for others that we possess normal functioning identities. We do this so often and so well that we rarely give much thought to the conventions that underwrite this self-reporting. Only when others or we ourselves fail to observe them are we reminded what they are, including fidelity to biographical fact, respect for the right to privacy, and display of normal behavior. Narrative, then, in the case of autobiography, turns out to be not only a literary form but a socially sanctioned identity practice.[8]

By the late 1990s, reading in psychology and neurobiology had confirmed my understanding of the self as embodied. I found the psychologist Ulric Neisser's five-part model of the key registers of self-experience both clarifying and comprehensive. In particular, Neisser's *extended self*, "the self of memory and anticipation, the self existing outside the present moment" (47), struck me as the mode of selfhood most in play in autobiographies, and I regarded narrative, the supremely temporal form, as best suited to express it. I now preferred to think of self less as an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process (*How* x). This is where I stood vis-à-vis self and narrative when I read the neurologist Antonio Damasio's book, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, in 1999.[9]

Reading Damasio ushered in the last—or at least the most recent—leg of my travels with narrative, completing my journey from text to body.

This remarkable book did two things for me: (1) it provided an elaborate neurobiological account of the emergence of self from the body; and (2) it used narrative to describe this process. For Damasio, self is integral to consciousness, and he defines it as "a feeling of knowing," "a feeling of what happens." And what does happen? The body responds to its encounters with objects in its environment, and it also responds to its own changing internal states. Self is Damasio's name for the feeling of awareness or knowing that these events are taking place (Eakin, *Living* 68). And narrative? Damasio discerns narrative structure at every level of the human organism, from its most basic physiology to its highest level of reflexive consciousness.

Damasio traces "the deep roots for the self" (*Feeling* 22) to what he terms a "*proto-self*," "*a coherent collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the physical structure of the organism in its many dimensions*" (154, emphasis in original). According to Damasio, this mapping registers the body's *homeostasis*, "the automatic regulation of temperature, oxygen concentration, or pH" in the body (39–40). When Damasio conceives of homeostasis as a kind of story, it becomes clear that narrative denotes a biological process, the "imagetic representation of sequences of brain events" (188) in prelinguistic "wordless stories about what happens to an organism immersed in an environment" (189). "Wordless stories"—for Damasio, narrative is biological before it is linguistic and literary.

When Damasio moves to the highest level of the human organism's awareness, extended consciousness and the autobiographical self, he again invokes narrative to describe what is going on. He likens the stream of consciousness to a "movie-in-the-brain" (*Feeling* 9). The challenge for Damasio and for any student of consciousness is to solve two interconnected problems: first, "the problem of understanding how the brain inside the human organism engenders the mental patterns we call . . . the images of an object" and, second, "the problem of how, in parallel with engendering mental patterns for an object, the brain also engenders a sense of self in the act of knowing" (9). Put narratively, Damasio asks, how does the brain generate "the movie-in-the-brain," and how does it generate "the *appearance* of an owner and observer for the movie *within the movie*" (11)? This paradoxical formulation of consciousness as a teller-less tale drives home the nature of the puzzle he seeks to solve. At the level of phenomenological experience, we can all testify to the sense we have of simultaneously undergoing and witnessing what is happening, yet Damasio insists that at the neural level there is no free-standing observer figure or faculty. When we experience the cinematic tale of consciousness, there is only the deep-seated illusion of a teller, what we might call a "teller-effect," for we are located inside the movie we are watching. Pondering this mind-bending, Escher-like paradox as Damasio presents it, I found myself concluding that "*self inheres*

in a narrative of some kind" (*Living* 74). It would be hard to overstate the extent of the reversal in my thinking about the relation between self and narrative. At the outset, if I thought about it at all, I tended to think of narrative as ancillary to self, a kind of convenient envelope to contain the story of a life. Now, from this neurobiological perspective, Damasio made the case for self as existing inside the narrative matrix of consciousness and only there.

I was now persuaded that there was a link between self in its literary and in its nonverbal, biological manifestations, and I located that link in a shared activity of representation: mapping physiology and tracking identity. At this point one might well ask whether it makes sense to see the body's neurobiological story and the mind's psychological, social, and literary story as two different registers of a single narrative unfolding in the organisms that we are (*Living* 154). Framed in Hyvärinen's terms, can one bridge the gap between narratology and the narrative turn? Well, I found several reasons to apply Damasio's thinking about the body and the brain to the case of life writing. The two orders of narrative, his "movie-in-the-brain" and the autobiographies I studied, have these points of likeness: (1) they are both temporal forms, (2) they both generate the illusion of a teller, and (3) they both share a homeostatic goal.[10] Juxtaposing these two accounts of self-narration, somatic and literary, taught me two things about autobiography:

> (1) that "self" content might be distributed throughout an I-narrative and not merely contained in the I-characters and I-narrators where the conventions of autobiographical discourse condition us to look for it; and (2) that "self" is not only reported but performed, certainly by the autobiographer as she writes and perhaps to a surprising degree by the reader as he reads. (*Living* 84–85)

But it's time for a reality check: Self as a name for the awareness that physiological and environmental events are taking place? Wordless narratives? Teller-less tales? These are certainly radical conceptions of self and story, and, not surprisingly, I encountered plenty of resistance when I began to present them. An older British scholar attacked me as a godless materialist when I gave a lecture on Damasio's work at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2001.[11] When I published this lecture as an essay in *Narrative* in 2004, "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?", it generated a long reply in that journal the following year from the narratologist George Butte, who believed that Damasio's and Eakin's views threatened the individual's capacity for action: the notion of a narrator as only a "teller-effect" was too ghostly for comfort. And in the same issue of *Narrative*, James Phelan, the editor, inspired by Galen Strawson's essay "Against Narrativity," used my own piece as his point of departure to warn against the dangers

of overreaching in narrative theory. Clearly others were not prepared to accept my expansive reading of narrative's manifold registers, but I pressed on, and Phelan generously published my replies not only to Butte's reservations about my views but also to his own.[12] Strawson's dismissal of the idea of narrative identity as an "intellectual fashion" (439) struck me as superficial and unconvincing, and others have demolished his argument.[13] As to editor Phelan's misgivings about "narrative imperialism," I could only reply: "Should *Narrative* [the journal] stick to narrative narrowly conceived as a literary form or forms, or should it entertain a more adventurous approach to narrative as something to do with society, with identity, with the body?" ("Narrative Identity" 186).

In Hyvärinen's terms, the Eakin-Butte-Phelan skirmish in the pages of *Narrative* shows as a kind of narratology-meets-narrative-turn encounter, so I'd like to revisit it by way of conclusion. As I have already suggested, reading Damasio made me think that there might be an organic link between autobiographical narrative and the body's homeostasis. I cannot, though, prove that narrative is somatic as well as literary; at this point it is only a hunch, a speculation based on brain research that Damasio himself describes as speculative. So had I, reading Damasio, succumbed to the narrative imperialism that Strawson and Phelan decry? Is Damasio's use of narrative to describe the rhythms of consciousness merely an attractive metaphor, fashionable but unscientific?

So first a word about what we might call the "mereness" of metaphor. Thirty years ago, in *Metaphors We Live By*, the cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proposed that metaphors are not merely distinctive features of the language we use to express thought; instead, they insisted, "human *thought processes*" themselves are "largely metaphorical" (6). Creating a typology of the metaphors that organize our lives, they locate the origins of metaphor in cultural and especially in physical, bodily experience. In their view, all mental life is deeply somatic. Similarly, in *S/Z*, the critic Roland Barthes, surveying the processes through which we construct meaning, argues that "the symbolic field is occupied by a single object from which it derives its unity" (214), and that "this object is the human body" (215). And Damasio's account of consciousness is equally body-centered as we have seen: "The mind exists for the body," he writes, "is engaged in telling the story of the body's multifarious events, and uses that story to optimize the life of the organism" (*Looking* 206). That is to say that for these commentators on the nature of mental life—cognitive linguists, a literary critic, a neurologist—the body is the primary referent and source of metaphor and meaning.[14] To recognize narrative as a kind of metaphor, then, in no way diminishes claims for its role in our conscious lives.

But how do we get from telling stories to mapping physiology? That, of course, is my motive in rehearsing my own intellectual trajectory with regard to narrative. Returning to the questions I asked at the outset, and

surveying the ground I have traveled in this essay, I ask again, how much of a stretch can narrative as a concept sustain and still remain narrative? Narrative without language? Narrative without a narrator? In moving beyond—or beneath—language, Damasio certainly takes narrative to a new level of abstraction, where it signifies an activity of mapping, a tracking of successive body states, a measuring of change. My own move is to place the writing of autobiography in this somatic field.[15] Assessing the body's story, Damasio observes, "the continuous attempt at achieving a state of positively regulated life is a deep and defining part of our existence" (*Looking* 36). I would extend this view of the human organism's homeostatic regulatory activity to include our endless fashioning of identity narratives, our performance of the autobiographical act (*Living* 154).[16]

Think back to Frank Kermode's concept of narrative: "to make sense of their span [men] need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems." Set against it Damasio's homeostatic model of the human organism's pursuit of equilibrium. Narrative, then, would be the process through which change is registered and regulated at every level of our being. Damasio with his stress on the body's quest for homeostatic equilibrium provides a physiological substrate to Kermode's metaphysical view of our desire for narrative. We just may be programmed, that is, to require narrative in a range of registers including the neural, the social, the literary, and the philosophical. I concede the heuristic value of distinguishing between the narratological and narrative turn strains as Matti Hyvärinen does in his history of narrative as a concept, yet my own engagement with autobiography over the course of thirty-five years has conditioned me to resist some kind of either/or choice between them. I opt instead for a unified field theory.

Notes

1 This essay was originally presented at a symposium on "The Travelling Concept of Narrative" convened by Matti Hyvärinen at the Finnish Institute in London in November 2011. Hyvärinen's aim was to survey the tangled history of narrative as a concept in recent decades. Key to his overview is his identification of two opposing positions: one mono-disciplinary in the case of "literary narratology" and the other multidisciplinary in the case of "narrative-turn theory." I adopted this framework for my essay, which appeared in *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative*, ed. M. Hatavara, et al. (2013), 83–92. It is reprinted here by permission of the John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia. https://benjamins.com/catalog/sin.18

2 For the issue of narrative imperialism, see Phelan.

3 See Bleich.

4 See Lejeune, Sturrock, and Eakin, "Narrative and Chronology."

5 For a discussion of White and Carr on the narrativity of perception, see Eakin, *Touching* 193–96.

6 In *How Our Lives Become Stories*, I qualified this statement by adding, "Of the self, I should be careful to specify, that is expressed in self-narrations, for

narrative is not (and cannot be) coextensive with all of selfhood, given the multiple registers of selfhood" (101).

7 For a review of this research, see Eakin, *How* 110–16.

8 For an account of the narrative identity system and the "rules" for self-reporting, see Eakin, *Living* 22–51.

9 In presenting Damasio's views, I draw chiefly on *The Feeling of What Happens*, supplemented by the companion volume, *Looking for Spinoza*.

10 As to this last point, I was particularly attracted to the idea that from an evolutionary perspective writing autobiography might have an adaptive value. "The adaptive purpose of self-narrative," I wrote, "whether neurobiological or literary, would be the maintenance of stability in the human individual through the creation of a sense of identity; as self-narration maps and monitors the succession of body or identity states, it engenders [what Damasio defines as] 'the notion of a bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same'" (Damasio, *The Feeling* 134, qtd. in Eakin, *Living* 76).

11 The title of my lecture was "Deep Background on Autobiography's 'I': A Neurobiological Perspective on Self and Narrative."

12 See Eakin, "Selfhood" and "Narrative Identity," in this volume.

13 See, for example, Battersby. For an account of the "against narrative" movement in 20th-century criticism, see Meretoja.

14 Hyvärinen's article, "Toward a Conceptual History of Narrative," stresses the importance of "the metaphorical broadening of the range of narrative reference" (25).

15 Focusing on individuals with Alzheimer's disease, Hydén makes the case for "a *grounded* and an embodied theoretical approach to narratives and storytelling" (229).

16 In his book, *Self Comes to Mind*, Damasio extends his view of homeostasis in a parallel fashion. He identifies the "engine" behind major cultural developments in human evolution as "sociocultural homeostasis," and he points to storytelling as the means for implementing the adaptive value of life lessons: "Conscious reflection and planning of action introduce new possibilities in the governance of life over and above automated homeostasis, in a remarkable novelty of physiology" (292).

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II

Life Writing

Historical Forms

A major in American History and Literature in college conditioned me to embrace a historicist approach to literary texts. Following the example of Perry Miller, noted historian of what he called "the New England Mind," I was committed to intellectual history when I wrote my dissertation and my first book, *The New England Girl: Cultural Ideals in Hawthorne, Stowe, Howells and James*. I argued that these novelists used the characterization of young women—Hester Prynne, little Eva St. Clare, Isabel Archer, and the rest—as an opportunity to explore New England history and cultural values. It was then second nature to me to situate texts I studied in the world beyond the text. Life writing has always seemed to me to invite this kind of reading because it is, in my view, a referential art. My first pass at life writing, however, titled *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, did seem to some to be making a case for autobiography as just another fiction, to be bundled into the general class of fictions. To correct that impression, I wrote *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*, making the case that, fiction notwithstanding, life writers want their narratives to be understood as having a basis *of some kind* in biographical fact. In the essays that follow, I explore a range of historical forms—biography, eye-witness narrative, memoir—in order to emphasize the historical value of what historians like to call *ego-documents*.

5 Writing Biography
A Perspective from Autobiography

When I read a biography, I'm less interested in learning what this person did next than in knowing what it was really like to be this person.[1] I really do not care for the huge modern volume that seeks to reconstruct in exhaustive detail the daily movements of the subject. I often find myself treating such a biography as a work of reference, a compendium of documentary fact to be consulted selectively rather than read straight through. Sometimes—and I like this—there's no pretense of offering anything else; in American literary studies, for example, we have Jay Leyda's *The Melville Log*, to which we can turn for an authoritative account of Melville's activities insofar as the surviving biographical record permits. Of course, I'm not suggesting that what we are is divorced from what we do, but I'm especially interested in the kind of question that emerges from the autobiographer's practice of self-biography: what sense of self, what sense of life story, did this person have? And more generally, because I believe that the condition of selfhood is culturally determined, I want to ask: where does the model of self, where do the language and design of life story, come from? How are they disseminated? The sense of self and the sense of life as a story of some kind are the leading sources of form in the life of subjectivity, which will be my concern in the rest of this essay.

What separates biography from autobiography is what separates us from each other, namely, our subjectivity and the envelope of the body that contains it. This fundamental difference in perspective—seeing the subject from the outside—establishes at once the value of biographical inquiry, its presumed objectivity, and also its principal limitation, for the experiential reality of the inner world of someone else is ultimately inaccessible and unknowable. As Gertrude Stein put it, "Nobody enters into the mind of someone else, not even a husband and wife" ("A Transatlantic" 30). Stein's solution in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* to the problem posed by the inaccessibility of the inner life is ingenious: she simply and boldly transgressed the generic and experiential constraints the rest of us have to live with, playing both the biographer-as-autobiographer (Stein as Toklas) and the autobiographer-as-biographer (Stein as Toklas on Stein). I'm not suggesting, however, that we fold

up our tents and retire from the field of biography. Instead, I'd like to consider how this central condition of subjectivity can contribute to our understanding of each member of that related pair, the biographer and the biographer's subject.

Practicing biographers have plenty of firsthand knowledge about the contribution of their own subjectivity to the writing of a biography, so I shall touch on this matter only briefly here. It is, not surprisingly, a sensitive issue. Several years ago I was invited to be on a panel that included a prominent psychobiographer of one of the great romantic composers. We were to discuss problems of biography, and I recall that the distinguished guest bristled at my suggestion that there might be something of interest to be disclosed in an account of his relation to his subject. Hadn't Erik Erikson, I pursued, made precisely such a disclosure in his preface to *Young Man Luther*? There he notes that his choice of subject forced him to deal with "problems of faith and problems of Germany," problems he could otherwise have "avoided" (9). Erikson goes on to imply that somehow in writing *Young Man Luther* he was facing his own problems, and that the biography was in effect a kind of oblique autobiography, a stand-in for *Young Man Erikson*.

Although my fellow panelist didn't take much stock in Erikson, I am persuaded nonetheless that something like Erikson's relation to his subject obtains—in varying degrees, of course—in the writing of any biography. Erikson himself formulates this issue with exemplary care and sensitivity in an essay on the composition of his biography of Gandhi:

> [The psycho-historian's] choice of subject often originates in early ideals or identifications and . . . it may be important for him to accept as well as he can some deeper bias than can be argued out on the level of verifiable fact or faultless methodology. I believe, in fact, that any man projects or comes to project on the men and the times he studies some unlived portions and often the unrealized selves of his own life. ("On the Nature" 713)

Such affective involvement, moreover, may lead to a deeper understanding of the subject than might otherwise be achieved. In a recent review of Boswell, Derek Jarrett observes,

> James Boswell was able to write the greatest biography in the English language not because of his abilities nor because of his failings, but because of his absorbing interest in James Boswell. He could never have held up such a marvelous mirror to Johnson if he had not been so dedicated to holding one up to himself. (11–13)

So much for the subjectivity of the biographer. I want to turn now to the subjectivity of the biographer's subject, taking up the case of the

individual who has written an autobiography: what uses have biographers made of such texts, and what uses might they make? To begin with, the writer of an *auto*-biography may seem to be in competition with eventual biographers, as Henry Adams recognized when he spoke of his autobiography as "a mere shield of protection in the grave." "I advise you to take your own life in the same way," he counseled Henry James, "in order to prevent biographers from taking it in theirs" (512–13). Perhaps this preemptive strategy accounts for the fact that biographers characteristically neglect such an act of self-invention, treating the autobiography instead as merely a source—indispensable if problematical—of biographical fact. Thus, the autobiographer's subjectivity becomes something to be discounted, allowed for as a contaminant of some truth that it would be the work of the biographer to disclose.

By way of illustration, let's take a problem case and ask, what use can a biographer make of the autobiographies of Lillian Hellman, whom Mary McCarthy (herself a confessed problem liar) branded as "a dishonest writer" whose every word, "including 'and' and 'the'," was "a lie" (Witt 1–2). Others have supported McCarthy's charges against Hellman, notably Martha Gellhorn and Samuel McCracken. Conceding Hellman's "authoritative detail about everything except time" (288), Gellhorn zeroes in on the problems of verification that Hellman's dates present, struggling with the historical record to establish when, for example, Hellman arrived in Spain in 1938, and on what nights that fall and where, in that war-torn country, bombardments actually took place. The upshot of Gellhorn's research is to discredit Hellman's dating and her motives as well: Hellman emerges as the unreliable witness who stages in *An Unfinished Woman* (1969), the first of her autobiographies, a self-serving exercise in revisionist history designed to make her come off as "the shining heroine" of the Spanish Civil War (300). Gellhorn dryly concludes, "Miss H. has the *cojones* of a brass monkey" (299). Following Gellhorn's lead, Samuel McCracken has checked out Hellman's factual detail against street indexes and transportation schedules (e.g., "the only early morning train from Paris to Berlin left the Gare du Nord at eight" [38]), and he has matched her account of her political views in the 1930s against the public record. The verdict he reaches about Hellman's ethics and artistic integrity is as negative as Gellhorn's.

Such charges are not to be dismissed lightly, but Gellhorn and McCracken's procedure assumes that the authenticity of an autobiography is determined by strict factual resemblance between the central figure of an autobiographical account and the historical, biographical model on which it is presumably based. Their policing of what they take to be the primary facts of Hellman's story, however, offers a mistaken conception of the nature of reference in autobiography, where the past exists only as a function of the autobiographer's present consciousness. Thus, Philippe Lejeune is prepared to argue that short of proving an

autobiographer to be guilty of wholesale fraud or pathological lying, the errors, lies, forgetfulness, or distortions that readers detect with regard to the biographical record are properly interpreted as characteristically involved in the elaboration of personal myth that is part of every autobiography ("The Autobiographical Pact" 25–26). In this sense these disturbances in the field of reference take on the value of aspects among others of an autobiographical act that itself remains authentic.

To take Gellhorn's charges as an example, I am less concerned as a reader of autobiography to know whether a younger Hellman, the protagonist of *An Unfinished Woman*, really was a "heroine" of the Spanish Civil War, than to recognize that a much older Hellman, author of the autobiography, sees herself in this way. This is to say that of the two orders of biographical fact to which an autobiography may refer, that pertaining to the history of a life evoked in the text as a content and that pertaining to the (usually much briefer) period in which the text was composed, it is to the latter (and later) phase of the autobiographer's biography that the text seems to me to provide more immediate and hence more trustworthy access. Put another way, in terms of the structure of the autobiographical text, the biographical correspondences, such as they are, refer ultimately to the "I who writes" rather than the "I" written about.

Even though I cannot subscribe to the idea that autobiography could, and should, offer a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past, I should emphasize that I am not prepared to disqualify an autobiography as a legitimate source of information about the autobiographer's earlier self and life history. Readers and biographers naturally want to be able to credit the autobiographer's reconstruction of the past, not only because of our Wordsworthian-Freudian view that the child is father of the man but also because the years before the subject emerges as a subject for biography are not often easily documented, and so the autobiography serves as a precious if problematic record of otherwise unrecoverable events. Gellhorn and McCracken teach us that we do need to do some checking, even though the most interesting biographical facts—those pertaining to the inner life—are least subject to corroboration from external sources.

There is, nevertheless, a serious blind spot in the Gellhorn-McCracken approach. As they busily consult their sources looking for facts, aren't they overlooking Hellman's text itself and the writing of it as an extremely interesting fact in its own right? Aren't her lies or inventions or lapses of memory—it isn't easy to know which term to use—an important part of the truth about Lillian Hellman? What was it, I'd like to know, that drew her to represent herself in this way some thirty years after the fact? And did she "heroine-ize" herself in this fashion in Spain in 1938? We do well to remember, moreover, that even "the facts," the events of thirty years ago—could they be definitively ascertained—can't be counted on

to supply the story of a life. You can't just "look up" the stuff of biography. As Julian Barnes so wittily demonstrates in *Flaubert's Parrot*, even a bare-bones chronological list of the leading events in a subject's life is scarcely value-neutral; the biographer willy-nilly intervenes. The story of a life is something that biographers do not merely discover; they make it. This making is sometimes anticipated by the subject-turned-autobiographer, and it is a kind of making, moreover, that we all engage in whether or not we ever turn our own lives into texts.

In the rest of this essay, I'd like to defend the autobiographer's subjectivity as a primary value in its own right rather than as an interference with the truth the biographer seeks to discover. What can we learn about the subject's inner life from an autobiography? Let me begin by urging the importance of conceptualizing the writing of an autobiography—when it occurs—as a major biographical event in the life of the subject. Few biographies reflect this view, although Alice Wexler's recent study, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, which devotes an entire chapter to the writing of Goldman's autobiography, would be a notable exception. More characteristic is the example of Leon Edel, who finds room in his massive five-volume biography of Henry James for only a handful of pages to present his subject's performance as autobiographer. Biographers are understandably uneasy about the reliability of their subjects' testimony, for the psychology of confessional self-display is intimately involved in case after case with a concomitant and opposing desire to conceal. And haven't Gellhorn-McCracken-style detectives turned up ample evidence to convict autobiographers from Rousseau to Hellman as liars? As I have said before, I'm less interested in the lying itself than in the personal myth-making, the self-invention, that it serves.

The making of fictions about the self, indeed the making of a fictive self, is a principal fact of experience, and not merely in the creation of an autobiography. Philippe Lejeune observes that "every man carries within himself a rough draft, perpetually reshaped, of the story of his life" ("The Autobiographical Pact (bis)" 132), and Jerome Bruner's recent investigation of identity formation in early childhood confirms that this process of self-narration "begins with the very onset of language" (31).[2] Bruner's findings are based on a series of monologues of a little two-year-old girl named Emily, whose parents, university professors, collaborated with Bruner and his colleagues by placing a cassette recorder near her crib before she went to bed. The resulting research, published recently as *Narratives from the Crib*, documents the importance of this proto-autobiographical activity in the life of a very young child. The family plays a decisive role in this construction of identity, serving as what Bruner calls the "vicar of the culture," indoctrinating the child in the received "genres of life-accounting" (32).

We could approach an autobiography as merely an anticipation of the life story a biographer eventually reconstructs. We could treat an

autobiography as a problematic source of information about the subject's earlier life and self, or alternatively, and with more confidence, we could treat it as a revelation of the subject's life and self at the time of writing. What Lejeune and Bruner suggest, however, is that the writing of an autobiography is a specialized, literary instance of a process that is central to the living of any life, the growth of selfhood.[3] If Bruner is right, we all participate, from cradle to grave, in the making of selves and lives that autobiographers and biographers perform. The kind of biography I'm interested in—and it is, of course, only one kind—would address itself to this aspect of the subject's experience.

I have been making a case for the biographical significance of the writing of an autobiography, and I have been proposing a model of biography that would feature self-invention and identity formation as central to the living of a life. Lest the points I have been making seem too limited in application—relevant only in the case of biographies devoted to individuals who have written autobiographies—I want to address now the cases where no autobiography exists. If biographers become familiar with the importance of models of self and life story to the subject who *has* written an autobiography, they may become sensitized to the importance of such models in all lives. At this point I would like to direct attention to a branch of contemporary cultural anthropology known as ethnopsychology that studies concepts of the person current in a culture at a given moment of its history.

Contrary to the myth of autonomy fostered by the liberal psychology of many societies in the West and more specifically by the practice of self-invention in autobiography, we do not generate models of identity for ourselves out of whole cloth. According to ethnopsychologists, people are provided by the cultures they inhabit with models of the person in terms of which (or against which) they position their own experience of subjectivity. None of us lives without them. For Clifford Geertz, for example, a model of self is not only a cultural construct, but the person entertaining such a model is culturally constructed as well: not only thought but emotions, he states, are "cultural artefacts in man" (*Interpretation* 81). Geertz posits a semiotic understanding of culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (89). Central among these fundamental structures that organize our experience is the concept of the person. It becomes, then, the anthropologist's task to search out and analyze "the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors—in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another" ("From the Native's" 225).

Ethnopsychology, as practiced by Paul Heelas and others, is that branch of contemporary anthropology which proposes to investigate "indigenous psychologies," common-sense theories of personality, typically

in the form of unconscious assumptions, although formulations at the level of consciously held theories play their part as well. Returning to the writing of biography, we might ask: "Is a theoretical framework necessary, or can a biographer merely describe 'what happened next'?" From the perspective of ethnopsychology, the answer is that we are all endowed with "theoretical frameworks"—concepts of the person, of time, and so forth—that serve to structure our lives. These "theoretical frameworks" are the scales that Bruner's little Emily is practicing in her crib day after day, learning what one says about oneself in the family circle, which in turn is the circle of culture.

Interest in the recovery of these "theoretical frameworks" of the ordinary individual has never been livelier than at the present time, when work on the history of consciousness, on *mentalités*, complements the findings of ethnopsychologists and oral historians working in the field. I think, for example, of the monumental collaborative volumes edited by Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby on *The History of Private Life*, of Witold Rybczynski's *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, and of Don Gifford's *The Farther Shore: A Natural History of Perception 1798–1984*. All of this research into cultural history can aid the biographer who seeks to reconstruct the reality of selfhood: what was it like for this person to be conscious then? What did it mean to be a self, to be a woman, to be a slave, to be a politician, in the United States, or Japan, or Europe, or Australia, in 1830?

The literature of autobiography makes an important contribution to our understanding of the agency of culture and its institutions when it comes to the individual's encounter with models of identity, and I can mention only a couple of instances here. For Malcolm X, the perennial question for American youth, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" receives a repressive answer from his junior high school teacher, who reminds him that the models of identity open to blacks are narrowly controlled by the dominant white culture. Taking this bitter lesson to heart, Malcolm X literally enacts the logical alternative to the white assumption of black inferiority when he attempts to appropriate a white identity through the painful experience of getting his hair "conked." Models of identity permeate the discourse and imagery of a culture, and they frequently crystallize in stories that offer to the nascent self a pattern for selfhood and a shape for a life story. I think of young Alfred Kazin dreaming in the ghetto over *The American Boy's Life of Theodore Roosevelt* or, again, of Jean-Paul Sartre, boy wonder, cribbing the plot for his own career as a literary genius from a piece of didactic trash entitled *The Childhood of Famous Men*.

In this final section of this essay, I want to say a few words about John Updike's recent autobiography, *Self-Consciousness*, in order to illustrate—in an especially rich case—the kind of biographical insight into the nature of subjectivity that an introspective autobiography can

be expected to provide. Some of what this narrative has to teach will be familiar enough to the practicing biographer: the formative influence of place, for example, in the subject's growing up. Updike's account of his relation to Shillington, Pennsylvania, is only one of the latest of the countless instances of this phenomenon that come to mind—I think of Hawthorne brooding on his loveless tie to Salem, of Stendhal drawing little floor plans of the rooms he inhabited in his youth, and of Jill Ker Conway recalling the bush landscape of her parents' sheep station at Coorain. Somewhat more unusual is Updike's stress on the somatic dimension of his identity. I referred at the outset to the envelope of the body as the barrier between one subjectivity and the next, but Updike's several narratives concerning his psoriasis, his stuttering, his teeth, his asthma, and so forth insist on the extent to which the body shapes our experience of selfhood.

For the student of subjectivity, however, Updike's autobiography is particularly interesting for its identification of a kind of primary *ur*-self, which he associates both with place and with the body: "I loved Shillington . . . as one loves one's own body and consciousness, because they are synonymous with being" (30). In "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," the first—and finest—of the six sketches that make up *Self-Consciousness*, Updike walks the streets of his childhood, circling and circling "the tenderest parts of a town that was also somewhat my body" (40), until he stands—both in memory and in his literal reenactment in the remembering present—at the very center of the consciousness of the boy he had been. Significantly, in the twin instances of the child's supreme happiness, his posture is just off-center: in the first he is seated on the curb in front of his house, watching the traffic go by; in the second ("really a variation of the first") he is crouching under the overturned wicker furniture on the side porch, savoring "the sensation of shelter, of being out of the rain, but *just* out" (34). Both memories present the relation of the self to the world of passing things—to traffic, to the rain, to time itself.

Updike reports his mother's story that he resisted being drawn away from the street ("No, I want to be where the people are" [23]), yet the child's hunger for experience, which Updike identifies as the prototype for the writer's expansive self-consciousness, is tempered, curiously, by the autobiographer's recollection that he also drew on imagery of "things going by . . . beyond my control" to put himself to sleep: "logs floating down a river and then over a waterfall, out of sight" (34). The autobiographer associates this "sweetness of riddance" with "mailing letters, flushing a toilet, reading the last set of proofs" (34). As Updike extends his meditation on the posture of what he calls "the essential self" (35), the nature of the pleasure in "riddance" becomes clear: the thrilling happiness of the innocent child is a function of his sense of the safety of his position as witness: "If we keep utterly still, we can suffer

no wear and tear, and will never die" (35). For the child, then, the opening out to experience is balanced by a simultaneous withdrawal from it, and Updike captures the regressive movement of these charmed timeless moments when he writes, "the experiencer is motionless, holding his breath as it were" (35).

In these moments of heightened consciousness, when Updike believes he was most himself—in his watching on the curb, in his crouching on the porch—he inhabits, nevertheless, the place of the other, of his father, and of his mother. Latent in this pair of memories of the boy as witness is Updike's sense of his story, a story of a sensitive only child deeply marked by the unfulfilled lives of his parents that cast a shadow across his quickening consciousness: "Bright life, indeed, lay about me in all directions in Shillington, while there was something of a musty stillness, of balked and abandoned tendencies, in the long white house where I ate and slept and soaked up strength and love" (25). Thus he associates his early desire to be out on the curb with his father's "diffuse and confused hunger to be 'out,' searching for something" (23), while his posture on the porch locates him near his somewhat reclusive, stay-at-home mother, whom he recalls "tapping away in the front bedroom at her unpublished stories" (12), "hiding from the town, in our house and yard" (27).

Coloring the evocation in these pages of the happiness of his childhood in Shillington, where "time had moved slowest, had all but stood still in reference to a child's future that would never come" (40), where he seemed precisely to enjoy living a life free of the burden of having any story at all, is another kind of time, of stillness, which Updike describes as a "waiting," a waiting to leave the town that had been a comfortable extension of his own early self. By the time he was in high school, Updike was made to feel increasingly conscious, especially by his mother, that his destiny lay beyond Shillington, that he was to "avenge all the slights and abasements visited upon [his] father" (33), that he was to "show" the town (30) and vindicate his mother's thwarted artistic aspirations. So intimately bound is his own life to these other lives that his homecoming is inevitably a reworking of their stories as well as his own. Thus, revisiting the haunts of his own early life, the autobiographer has an uncanny sense of repeating his father: "walking the streets of Shillington this misty spring night was his act as much as mine" (23)—and writing about it, we might add, was doubtless his mother's act as much as his own. Is it surprising, then, that Updike should confess at the very end of this sketch that he feels strangely dispossessed of the life that his Shillington self desired to lead? As he returns from his walk to join his mother and daughter, "to resume my life," he concludes: "A fortunate life, of course—college, children, women, enough money, minor fame. But it had all, from the age of thirteen on, felt like not quite my idea. Shillington, its idle alleys and darkened foursquare houses, had been my idea" (41).

In the last section of the sketch, Updike associates the Shillington "idea" with his memories of Nora, his first *real* girlfriend, whose home is the final destination of his journey into the past. Stationed opposite her house, on a porch across the street, Updike imagines a reunion with this maternally comforting girl of his youth. Unlike his mother's idea of "the perfect girl" who "would take [him] away from Shillington" (37), Nora functions as an alternative mother associated with relaxation, with safety, with sexual intimacy, with staying close to home. And as he waits for her to come out to comfort him in his position of shelter, he rejoins once more his primary self, the child "*just* out" of the rain, the child of the porch and curb, "fulfilled," "suspended"; he is, he says, once more "by myself." Calling attention to this suggestive locution, Updike speaks of it as "a phrase whose meaning could not be deduced by a stranger to the language even though he knew the meanings of 'by' and 'myself'" (41). Latent in the autobiographical act, as Updike intimates here, is the wish to be the author of oneself. As if in tacit recognition of the regressive tendency of the Shillington "idea," however, the wish not to have a "life," a "story," the wish to return to the timeless first world of the body before its inevitable separation from the mother, the "intense happiness" of Updike's reenactment of the past is presently interrupted by a slowly passing car with its message of prohibition: "Perhaps by sitting on this porch . . . I was doing something illegal. I, a child of the town, arrested, with my gray head, for trespassing!" (41).

It's certainly true that Updike's conflicted feelings about this necessary passage from childhood to maturity are a familiar story. What is distinctive about it is the way in which place, parents, and the personality itself configure to produce the singularity of this individual's sense of self. What we learn from the autobiography, of course, is what Updike has to say—and only *he* can say it—about the history of his subjectivity—the associations he makes, the patterning of person and event. It is also true that he would say—and has said—different things about himself and his story at different times. Not counting the systematic exploitation of the resources of his experience for his fiction, to which Updike calls attention in the numerous citations from his stories and novels that dot the text, *Self-Consciousness* represents his second venture into autobiography, preceded twenty years earlier by his playful verse self-portrait, "Midpoint." Other autobiographers—Mary McCarthy would be an excellent example—have traced the shifts between one retrospective version of their earlier selves and lives and the next.

And then there is the part of fiction, of personal myth-making, in all this that makes both autobiography and biography such perilous arts of retrospect. Updike recognizes that the self-invention of autobiography is essentially a defensive strategy for coping with the otherwise "unbearable" knowledge "that we age and leave behind this litter of dead, unrecoverable selves" (226). That the self is, finally, unrecoverable

Updike notes at the very outset in the foreword to *Self-Consciousness*, where he emphasizes that "a life-view" is "provisional," distorting, and necessarily incomplete; "a background of dark matter—all that is not said—remains buzzing" (xii).

My original intention was to demonstrate that autobiography is an invaluable resource for the biographer, that it can offer a privileged glimpse of the inner life of the self. I do believe this. My notion of the biography of the inner life, however, is not only countered by the autobiographer's sense of the fundamental impossibility of self-revelation; it has recently been condemned in the courts. I quote here from a recent column by David J. Garrow in *The Chronicle for Higher Education* (18 April 1990):

> In 1987, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit upheld the effort of the reclusive writer J.D. Salinger to prevent the British biographer Ian Hamilton from quoting from, or closely paraphrasing, his letters, even though they had been placed in university archives by their recipients. Then in February, the Supreme Court declined to review or overturn a similar appeals-court decision in 1989.
>
> When the Salinger suit was first heard in federal district court, Judge Pierre N. Leval indicated that Mr. Hamilton would have to reduce substantially the amount of material he quoted from the Salinger letters. The judge stressed, however, that he felt the fair-use doctrine upheld the right of scholars to use quotations from unpublished sources in their work.
>
> The Second Circuit, however, rejected Judge Leval's analysis in language that ought to stun any American scholar. Mr. Hamilton had "no inherent right to copy the 'accuracy' or the 'vividness' of the letter writer's expression," the court found. Indeed, "a biographer . . . may frequently have to content himself with reporting only the facts of what his subject did," the court said. (A48)

Notes

1 This essay appeared in *Shaping Lives: Reflections on Biography,* ed. Ian Donaldson, Peter Read, and James Walter (1992), 195–209. It is reprinted with permission from the Humanities Research Centre, the Australian National University, copyright under the Berne convention.

2 Jerome Bruner delivered a presentation, "The Invention of the Self: Autobiography and Its Forms," at a conference on autobiography titled "Autobiography and Self-Representation" at the University of California, Irvine, in March 1990. The conference proceedings were later published by Stanford University Press in 1993, after the publication of my original essay (1992) and appeared under the title *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*. In the published version, Bruner's essay is titled "The Autobiographical Process" (38–56), and he writes "the act of self-accounting is acquired almost within the acquisition of language itself" (48).

3 In *Fictions in Autobiography* I presented an ontogenetic schema to outline my sense of the place of autobiography in a lifelong process of identity formation:

> the autobiographical act (when it occurs) figures as a third and culminating phase in a history of self-consciousness that begins with the moment of language in early childhood and subsequently deepens in a second-level order of experience in childhood and adolescence in which the individual achieves a distinct and explicit consciousness of himself or herself as a self. In this developmental perspective, the autobiographical act is revealed as a mode of self-invention that is always practiced first in living and only eventually—sometimes—formalized in writing, I view the rhythms of the autobiographical act as recapitulating the fundamental rhythms of identity formation: in this sense the writing of autobiography emerges as a second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self-conscious self-consciousness. (8–9)

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6 Eye and I

Negotiating Distance in Eyewitness Narrative

Who had committed the gratuitously brutal murder of Johannes Lövgren in the middle of a winter night on a lonely farm in southern Sweden?[1] Detective Kurt Wallander's patient investigation stalls until an eyewitness observer provides the missing link between the killers and the victim. Pressed by Wallander to reconstruct her encounter with the victim at the bank on the day of the murder, a young teller with an "excellent" memory recalls that Lövgren had cashed a very big check, and she also recalls the two young men in line behind him. "Then what happened?" Wallander asks her. "Try to picture it in your mind" (Mankell 257). Under the detective's probing, the young woman remembers that one of the two young men had picked up something from the floor, and Wallander surmises—correctly, of course—that it was a withdrawal receipt with the amount and the victim's name and address. Armed with this new information, Wallander easily tracks the killers, they confess, and the case is solved.

Henning Mankell's mystery, *Faceless Killers*, captures the fantasy version of the eyewitness. It is so easy, it seems, to get to the truth. All you need is someone with an "excellent" memory for the event in question. The appeal of the detective story is both obvious and profound. Such stories assume that the truth can be known, and better still, accounts can be settled and justice done. The tangled riddle of human motive is laid bare. But is it so simple? When we consider the "eye" and "I" involved in eyewitness experience more closely, the promise of transparency, of immediacy, erodes.

First, the eye: I *saw* what happened. Students of memory stress the selectiveness of observation. In *Maus*, for example, when Art Spiegelman represents his father's eyewitness account of marching in a work detail in and out of the camp at Auschwitz, he records Vladek's assertion that he does not recall that an orchestra was playing even though the likely presence of an orchestra has been established by other sources. When Spiegelman enhances eyewitness fidelity by supplementing Vladek's memory with an image of an orchestra, he points up the limitations of his father's testimony at the same time (II:54).[2] Memory is not only selective but notoriously fallible—anyone who has tried to report the details of an accident to an insurance company or the police can testify

to that. Neurobiological research into the nature of memory, moreover, demonstrates that the memory of what we may think of as the "same" event is constructed anew and inevitably revised each time we recall it. The notion of invariant memory is a wishful fiction.[3]

Now consider the "I" of eyewitness accounts: *I* saw what happened. We need to keep in mind that the first person may stand for more than one individual. Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú's autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, is a case in point. In order to present a comprehensive picture of the oppression of the Maya people by a brutal government, Menchú incorporated into her first-person narrative events that she had not witnessed herself: her "I" functions accordingly as a collective referent, standing not only for herself but for her people.[4] Compounding the ambiguity of this eyewitness "I" is the fact that Menchú's narrative was produced in collaboration with anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. There is always a second person speaking in collaborative autobiographies, a second person who has fashioned and interpreted the first person's story. When the story involves traumatic experience, moreover, there are additional problems of representation to reckon with, as Cathy Caruth points out: "the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it" (91–92).

To review some of the ways in which "eye" and "I" complicate eyewitness accounts is to suggest that the notions of fact, of truth, of "you-are-there" immediacy that we instinctively associate with the term *eyewitness* tend to mask the constructed, fictive dimension of such narratives. There is a gap, an intractable distance, that even the sharpest eye, the most straightforward "I," cannot finally manage to close. This distance is my subject in this essay, and I want to approach it from the vantage point of autobiography. The question I want to ask is this: how do the limits and possibilities of eyewitness testimony contribute to working through the identity concerns that autobiographies typically engage? I will consider three cases: Michael J. Arlen and Art Spiegelman stand at the remove of a generation or more from the eyewitness accounts that seem to hold the key to the identity problems they face, while Ruth Kluger draws on her own eyewitness experience. In all three cases negotiating distance is central in coming to terms with unresolved tensions clouding the autobiographer's relation to a parent. Revisiting history in their relational autobiographies, Arlen and Spiegelman look to eyewitness narrative to bridge the gap that separates them from their fathers. In her Holocaust memoir, by contrast, Kluger takes a darker view, exposing the manifold registers of distance—linguistic, cultural, psychological, epistemological—that impede her own and any quest to stand at the eyewitness ground zero of biographical and historical knowledge.

The underlying project of the Arlen and Spiegelman autobiographies is for the son to work through his relation to a distant or difficult father.

To do so, both use eyewitness narrative to approach a passage of history that—so they believe—has shaped not only their fathers' identities but their own as well.[5] I begin with Arlen because his posture vis-à-vis eyewitness narrative could be ours—reading about the events of the past in a book. Arlen intuits that the silences that separate him from his father are connected to his father's unspoken Armenian identity: as a young man the father had shed his distinctive Armenian heritage and name—Dikran Kouyoumjian—for a bland if fashionable English one—Michael Arlen. *Passage to Ararat*, published in 1975, relates Arlen's attempt to recover—and eventually embrace—the Armenian background his father had abandoned. Arlen's quest takes the form of a program of reading history that comes to a climax with the eyewitness narratives of the so-called Bryce Report on the Armenian genocide. It is this book, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915–1916*, that brings Arlen closest to the events that seem to have poisoned Armenian identity. The 149 eyewitness reports in this huge volume document the systematic extermination of the Armenians by the Turks during World War I. In province after province the pattern is the same: Armenian men are asked to surrender weapons, are imprisoned, and then "disappear" from prison; Armenian women and children are deported to the desert, most perishing along the way after suffering rape, starvation, and gratuitous humiliations.

How, though, do "the journalistic facts" in these reports "explain the particular condition of the survivors" (*The Treatment* 246) ? This is the historical and personal problem that Arlen proposes to solve. The knowledge Arlen seeks, a knowledge of subjective states, is, in a way, curiously at odds with the studied "neutrality" of the Bryce Report's documentary aim.[6] Because the Report features narratives of eyewitness observers rather than narratives of eyewitness participants, Arlen must read between the lines to make out the psychological impact of the atrocities on those who suffered them. Probing the trauma, Arlen discerns a collective pathology of repression and self-hatred infecting his ancestors, a "virus" destroying healthy relations between fathers and sons down the generations. Because the Turks had never accepted hatred from their victims, Arlen hypothesizes that the victims' rage, deprived of its object, turned inward "toward the self" (248). It was this bitter legacy of a people's damaged self-esteem, then, that lay behind his father's repression of the past and his adoption of an English name.[7] Arlen's inquiry into the historical sources of his Armenian identity culminates in a mystical moment of reconciliation with his dead father that leads to self-acceptance. At the last, Arlen's highly personal relation to history—his own and that of his people—triumphs over the psychological distance that stood between his father and himself. Thus, he can say, "How strange to finally meet one's past: to simply meet it, the way one might finally acknowledge a person who had been in one's company a long while. So, it's you" (253–54).

In Michael Arlen's case, reading eyewitness narrative in a book functions as the catalyst for the healing of family wounds that his autobiography both relates and transacts. In Art Spiegelman's case, it is the autobiographer himself who makes the therapeutic eyewitness book that plays this healing role. In the collaborative endeavor that produces *Maus*, the son is certainly not merely a faithful amanuensis who gathers his father Vladek's experience of the Holocaust in an extended series of taped interviews. Instead, the son emerges as the primary architect of his father's tale, as Spiegelman makes clear in two ways. Any reader of *Maus* will be familiar with the first of these, the prominence given to the book's narrative frame, which features Art in the act of recording and shaping Vladek's story. It is the second of these, a CD-ROM "archive" of the project that Spiegelman published in 1994 with the title *The Complete Maus*, which has special interest for students of eyewitness narrative.[8] I know of no other author who has given a more detailed and illuminating account of the creation of a life story than Spiegelman offers on this fascinating disk. Viewing the CD-ROM, we watch Spiegelman make himself into the equivalent of an eyewitness who would have *seen*—and hence could draw in graphic images—what his father relates. The disk reveals just how closely Spiegelman attempts to stand in his father's shoes. He shows pencil sketches, for example, that record his "rough attempts" to depict his father's arrival at Auschwitz. He comments, "In drawing the scene, [I] had to determine not only at which of the gates Vladek would be arriving, but from which direction" ("Defining the Page" 1–2).[9]

I suggested earlier in my comments on Spiegelman's treatment of the orchestra at Auschwitz that the documentary impulse informing *Maus* is central to the story. The disk bears this out in several ways. We can see films and clips from the two trips that Spiegelman made to Auschwitz in order to visualize accurately the camp that is the narrative's principal setting. On one screen, for example, we read, "This is a movie of Art having the arrest warrant for his father and mother (shown left) translated by an official at the Auschwitz Museum" ("Researching the Page" 8). In the accompanying brief video, we look over Spiegelman's shoulder and we hear his voice. Clicking on the prompt to "enlarge arrest warrant," we can even examine this document in a close-up. Exploiting computer technology to deliver an eyewitness account of himself engaged in historical research, Spiegelman generates a "you-are-there" effect that he will seek to capture in the two published *Maus* volumes. In order to close the gap between Auschwitz as it is now and as it was in Vladek's day, Spiegelman also studied drawings made by victims and survivors of the camps—"I wanted it to be correct," he comments, "I wanted to be as accurate as I could" (video, "Researching the Page" 9). We can view a selection of these materials on the disk, including a drawing showing the orchestra that accompanied the comings and goings of the work details at Auschwitz.

Finally, the disk contains "working transcripts" of Spiegelman's interviews with his father, including a brief extract in which we can hear Vladek's voice. The introductory screen in the section called "Interviewing Vladek" begins with this brief and important cue about Spiegelman's motivation for the entire project: "Art's interviews of his father, Vladek, served not only as the inspiration for *Maus*, but as a way of establishing common ground in a relationship that had become distant and strained." This relationship, as we learn from *Maus*, is loaded for Spiegelman with additional calamities visited on his family: Art suffers from traumatic memories of his mother's suicide when he was twenty (she, too, had been at Auschwitz), and he is haunted as well by family memories of his "ghost-brother" Richieu (II:15) who perished during the war before Spiegelman was born. To his wife Françoise, Spiegelman comments that the "blurry" photograph of Richieu hanging in his parents' bedroom "never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble . . . it was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass" (II:15).

Like Arlen, Spiegelman felt himself to be missing from the history that had shaped his family. He confides to his psychiatrist that he feels dwarfed by his father's life story: "No matter what I accomplish, it doesn't seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz" (II:44). Dwarfed, perhaps, by this story, but also redeemed by it in his retelling. In bringing his father's eyewitness experience to life, in doubling his father's words (which *he*—Spiegelman—draws) with images that are both invented yet as accurate as he can make them, Spiegelman pushes historical imagination to the limit. The upshot of this daring experiment is to place the son within the family precinct of memory and history from which he had felt excluded, as Spiegelman makes clear on the last page (II:136). Here Vladek concludes the performance of his eyewitness story with a telling slip in which he calls Art by the name of his lost brother: "I'm *tired* from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now." And in the final panel Spiegelman buries himself within the family plot: the dates of his creative project are placed in parallel with the life dates on the gravestones of his parents.

Ruth Kluger lived at firsthand the identity-shaping eyewitness experience of history that Michael Arlen and Art Spiegelman can only approach indirectly. In the opening of her memoir, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, she establishes herself as someone who from an early age was committed to knowledge and to talking about what she knew, as opposed to others who preferred silence to the airing of painful memories. Thinking back to the intensely curious, eavesdropping eight-year-old she had been, she writes, "I can't get rid of the prickly sense . . . that I am not supposed to know about death and dying" (17). Perennially pursuing insight into the dark world of her youth, she quizzes her English cousin Hans many years later about his own experience of the concentration camps, adding, "I want to know exactly what it was like" (17).

This deep-seated investigative impulse seems to have been the hallmark of Kluger's growing up. Recalling the moment when a number was tattooed on her arm at Birkenau, she portrays her adolescent self as someone who embraced this mark with "a kind of glee," treating it as the badge of the eyewitness identity she would reenact later on in the pages of *Still Alive*: "I was living through something that was worth witnessing. Perhaps I would write a book with a title like *A Hundred Days in a Concentration Camp*" (98). Her experience of the Holocaust was indeed wide-ranging, for she was interned with her mother at three different camps: Theresienstadt, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Christianstadt. Despite the immediacy of this lived experience, however, Kluger grapples at the same time with a sense of distance that challenges her eyewitness ambitions in two ways: she feels separated from others by the knowledge that she does have, and she feels cut off as well from the knowledge that she does not have. Pushing the limits of history, her narrative questions whether anyone, even an eyewitness, can "know exactly what it was like."

Kluger discovers—first as a survivor and eventually as an autobiographer—that telling her story is no easy proposition. There is, to begin with, the problem of articulating traumatic experience in language: "the familiar words, black ink on dry white paper, interfere with the mute and essentially wordless suffering—the ooze of pain, if I may so call it—they aim to communicate" (18). And then there is the unwillingness of her audience to hear what she has to say. When she and her mother find their way to New York after the war, an American aunt "lectures" her, "You have to erase from your memory everything that happened in Europe." Defending the link between her story and her sense of self, Kluger resists this demand "to get rid of the only thing that I own for sure: my life, that is, the years I have lived" (177). Later on, in the 1950s, her husband, a historian of twentieth-century European history no less, rejects her offer "to talk to his students about the concentrations camps": "A drawbridge in his eyes pulls up," she recalls, and he "flatly" turns her down (182). Countering this pervasive cultural resistance to knowledge of the Holocaust, Kluger proposes in her memoir to "break through the curtain of barbed wire with which postwar sensibility has surrounded the camps, neatly separating us from them" (71).

Operating against her determination to voice her eyewitness experience of the camps, however, is Kluger's uncomfortable awareness that her knowledge carries with it the power to silence her listeners, an awareness that leads her more than once to silence herself. She recalls, for example, that after she had written her harrowing account of being transported to Auschwitz in a freight car, she was talking with friends about claustrophobia, and the various situations mentioned—being stuck in the Chunnel or an elevator or an air-raid shelter—trigger her memory of the transport. But she keeps silent because she feels sure that such a story "would have effectively shut up the rest of the company" (93)—"it

doesn't fit the framework of social discourse" (92).[10] On other occasions, refusing such self-censorship, she does speak out, correcting others' false assertions about what she believes to be the truth of the past, but only to regret doing so immediately afterward: "Now I have silenced them, and that wasn't my intention. There is always a wall between the generations, but here the wall is barbed wire. Old, rusty barbed wire" (65). Eyewitness testimony, it seems, has the power both to enlarge knowledge and to obstruct it, and so Kluger debates endlessly with herself and with a large and various cast of listeners and readers whether it makes sense to pursue the project of her memoir.[11] Thinking about the failed occasion of the claustrophobia discussion, she comments, "But if there is no bridge between my memories and yours and theirs, if we can never say 'our memories,' then what's the good of writing any of this?" (93). For Kluger, the good of eyewitness narrative is that it has the potential to bridge distance, bringing her not only closer to historical truth but closer as well to others and to herself and the life she has lived. The stakes for identity and life story could not be higher: when her bridges collapse, and they do on many occasions as we have seen, she writes, "And so my childhood falls into a black hole" (93).[12] The most striking test of her belief in bridges, casting doubt on her eyewitness enterprise, comes in her treatment of her troubled relation to her father and her father's story. Here other registers of distance—psychological and epistemological—come into play, compounding her struggle to write and transmit her story.

Kluger's childhood relation to her father is abruptly—and permanently—interrupted when he is forced to leave Austria in 1940. Immediately following his release from prison, on the eve of his departure for Italy, eight-year-old Ruth makes a scene at a celebratory family dinner. Her father gives her a "thrashing," and she suffers the "humiliation" of being banished from the table (36). The child's misfortune is that she never has the chance to reconcile with her father before he leaves: "I never saw him again" (37). "Everything to do with him is unfinished," she writes, "nothing was ever resolved" (33). What followed for her father, she learns later on, was deportation to Auschwitz. Kluger's problem is that she cannot make her childhood memories of her father "jibe" with the manner of his death in a gas chamber:

> I see my father as an authority figure in the life of a small girl. That he ended in a cramped room, naked, swallowing poison gas, most likely struggling for an exit, makes all these memories singularly insignificant. Which doesn't solve the problem that I can't replace them or erase them. There is a gap between knowledge and memory, and I can't bridge it. (33)

Even though Kluger suggests later on that her own transport to Auschwitz gave her some "idea what it must have been like in the gas chambers"

(92), and even though she lived to write poems in which she tried to "exorcise" the brutal fact of his death, in *Still Alive* she takes a tough-minded stance about the limits of her knowledge of his fate, refusing any "security blanket" (39) that her desperate imagination might contrive.

But did her father die at Auschwitz, as Kluger had always believed? After she published her account of her father's death in the first, German version of her memoir, a Frenchwoman who read her story wrote her that her father's transport didn't go to Auschwitz but to Lithuania and Estonia. "Who knows how they were murdered" (40), Kluger adds. This belated revelation overturns her lifelong struggle to reach some kind of biographical certainty and closure about her father: "How *did* he die then?" she asks, "I know so little about who he was, and now I don't even know this final, inalterable fact" (40). Kluger's eyewitness experience testifies to the impossibility of achieving definitive historical knowledge.

Kluger offers both a hard landing and a softer one when it comes to negotiating distance in eyewitness narrative. Unlike Arlen and Spiegelman, she can find no resolution to the "unfinished" business of her relation to her father by telling his story. But *Still Alive* is also the story of her relation to her mother, Alma Hirschel, who emerges in these pages as an extremely complex and difficult woman, unpredictable and unbalanced. If she is possibly to blame for missing the chance to send Ruth abroad on a transport for children before the war, it is she, nonetheless, who saves Ruth's life at Auschwitz by daring her to pass through a decisive selection a second time and lie about her age. Kluger's mother is the central figure in her life as she recreates it here. The book is dedicated to her memory, and when Kluger concludes her narrative by recalling the moment years after the war when her mother collapses and is placed in a mental hospital, she signals that *Still Alive* is above all else a mother-daughter story. In what she calls a "hit-and-run" ending, Kluger portrays herself as "Shylock's Jessica, abandoning an unloved parent" (202), breaking free at last from the bonds of this confining relation. What I have called the softer landing comes in the Epilogue, in which Kluger evokes her mother's final years, focusing on the love between her aged mother and her own grandchild, Isabela: "More than ninety years between them, but whenever they were together, chatting and touching, they met in a present that miraculously stood still for them, time frozen in space and space made human. Perhaps redeemed" (214). Kluger herself never managed a reconciliation like this one.

For Michael Arlen, Art Spiegelman, and Ruth Kluger, eyewitness narrative promises access to the past, to a biographical or historical truth that will help them make sense of their lives. How to arrive at such knowledge? To get where they want to go, Arlen and Spiegelman engage in traditional modes of historical research, while Kluger, who stands closest of the three to the history that concerns her, refuses what

she calls the "sentimentality" of "the museum culture of the camp sites" (66) because it fails to capture the felt reality of what they were really like: "The missing ingredients are the odor of fear emanating from human bodies, the concentrated aggression, the reduced minds" (67). Of the three, it is Kluger who speaks most forthrightly about the work of historical imagination in which they are all engaged. For her, the names of places—Auschwitz and the rest—are "like the piers of bridges that were blown up, only we can't be quite sure of what these bridges connected." "Perhaps nothing with nothing," she continues. "But if so, we have our work cut out for us, as we look out from the old piers. Because if we don't find the bridges, we'll either have to invent them or content ourselves with living in the no-man's-land between past and present" (69). She writes these brave words at a point midway on in her narrative when she has already faced the fact that her father is irretrievably lost to history. Less sanguine than Arlen and Spiegelman about the possibility of conjuring up the dead, she remains determined to do so, nonetheless, for the alternative is a displaced and diminished version of humanity that she cannot accept.

As for me, I read eyewitness narratives like these precisely because I believe in the bridge-building enterprise they represent; I want to know what I can about the utmost limits of experience. In his autobiography, Henry James, who never fought in the Civil War, evokes the aura of the young men he knew who died in those years. For him the fallen were transfigured by an "indefinable, shining stigma." James imagines them "looking through us or straight over us at something they partake of together but that we mayn't pretend to know" (383). Kluger, like James before her, acknowledges the unbridgeable distance between herself and final knowledge. "We who escaped," she writes, "do not belong to the community of those victims, my brother among them, whose ghosts are unforgiving. By virtue of survival, we belong with you, who weren't exposed to the genocidal danger, and we know that there is a black river between us and the true victims" (138). Eyewitness narrative can take us no further.

Notes

1 This essay appeared in *Partial Answers* 7 (2009): 201–12 and is reprinted by permission from the Johns Hopkins University Press.

2 Dori Laub relates a parallel episode concerning the fallible memory of a Holocaust survivor, that of a woman who was an "eyewitness of the Auschwitz uprising." She recalled "four chimneys going up in flames" (Felman and Laub 59), whereas other sources confirm that only one chimney, not four, was blown up. Laub reports that although some historians have discounted her testimony as unreliable because of this factual inaccuracy, he himself believes that there was historical truth in it. "It was through my listening to her," he claims, "that I in turn came to understand not merely her subjective

truth, but the very historicity of the event, in an entirely new dimension. She was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination" (62).

3 See Schacter for a useful overview of memory research. For the implications of this research for the study of autobiography, see Eakin "Autobiography."

4 The veracity of Menchú's eyewitness testimony was challenged by anthropologist and historian David Stoll.

5 Marianne Hirsch has explored this intergenerational territory with a special focus on photography. Featuring the children of Holocaust survivors, including Art Spiegelman, she investigates the ways in which the experiences of one generation shape the lives of the succeeding generation through the work of what she calls "postmemory."

6 This passage from the Preface to the Bryce Report is characteristic: "A large, perhaps the largest, part has been drawn from neutral witnesses who were living in or passing through Asiatic Turkey while these events were happening, and had opportunities of observing them" (xxi).

7 For additional discussion of Arlen's autobiography, see Eakin *Touching*, 161–66.

8 The CD-ROM published in 1994 is now obsolete, but its replacement, published in DVD format in *MetaMaus* in 2011, replicates the same information. To find the materials I cite, start with "making" on the opening menu, then choose "mausintro.mp4," a ten-minute video containing the passages I cite.

9 It seems very likely that Binjamin Wilkomirski's fraudulent memoir, *Fragments*, which purports to be a child's eyewitness account of the Holocaust, was the product of a similar process of historical reconstruction—perverted in his case.

10 For additional examples of power to silence others, see (65) and (66).

11 On more than thirty occasions Kluger interrupts her story to address her audience, highlighting her concern with its reception. These interruptions function as pressure-points in the narrative, suggesting that a primary, defining value of eyewitness experience resides precisely in its transmission to others.

12 For additional instances of bridges, see (64) and (69). Kluger plays off this imagery of bridges against a recurring motif of walls and barbed wire.

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7 Living in History

Autobiography, Memoir(s), and *Mémoires*

In a pair of major books—one on André Malraux and the other on twentieth-century French *mémoires*—Jean-Louis Jeannelle has made the case for this distinguished genre of life writing that had seemed to have fallen into untimely neglect.[1] I can readily identify with this initiative, for I, too, found myself in the 1980s making the case for an unjustly neglected genre, in my case autobiography. At that time, fiction, poetry, and drama—in descending order—commanded the critical stage in American literary studies. As far as *mémoires* and memoirs go, however, the situation in France today is quite different from that in the United States: whereas Jeannelle can clearly distinguish *mémoires* from *autobiographie*, in the American case the two terms—*memoir* and *autobiography*—have coalesced to the point where they are currently used interchangeably. To avoid confusion, let me be clear about my own usage. In what follows, when I speak of *memoir* in American cases, I will be invoking the traditional meaning of the term, which is reasonably parallel with French usage. After describing Jeannelle's definition of *mémoires*, I will ask what kind of match exists for this genre in American life writing, citing some characteristic examples. Then, moving beyond traditional models of memoir, I will present a hybrid form in which autobiography and memoir come together to support the individual's negotiation of his or her place in the larger history we call history.

Let me start with the situation in France. In a recent paper, Jeannelle defines *mémoires* as follows:

> The very function of the Memoir is to reveal the social and political archaeology of a national community through the story of one's life . . . [Memoirs] don't aim for self-knowledge (as autobiography does) but for the agreement of the national community and future generations about the historical representativeness or the moral exemplarity of the author's life.

To structure his model of the memoir, Jeannelle proposes two distinctions. First, he posits that "all life-writing texts" can be organized "around two poles: the autobiographical one for personal and introspective

accounts and the egohistorical one for memorable accounts (whether they present directly as Memoirs or as testimonies, chronicles, diaries, etc.)." To this first distinction, between the autobiographical and the egohistorical, Jeannelle adds a second one, between "major lives" and "ordinary lives," between lives that "work as landmarks in our collective memory" on the one hand and on the other lives that reflect the "humble existence of anonymous people."[2] This is the distinction, we might say, between Charles de Gaulle and the peasant woman Mémé Santerre, between history and ethnography.[3] In fact, for Jeannelle, de Gaulle's *Mémoires de guerre* offers the paradigmatic case of the "major life" in which the central player on the French historical stage has the power—in a climactic moment on the Champs Elysées at the end of the war—to "give his nation back to herself" ("Twentieth-Century"). In identifying with him, his compatriots affirm their tie to the nation.[4]

The moment is moving, and even mystical. Do we have anything quite like it in American memoirs? I don't think so, for the structure of the American state organizes power less centrally and hierarchically. As a consequence, except for two rather special cases of wartime presidents Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt (neither of whom wrote memoirs), and maybe George Washington (who also wrote no memoirs)—American history rarely seems to offer instances where a single individual is recognized by citizens at large as incarnating the nation's soul. The notion of the major life plays differently in the United States as well, for it is part of the national mythology that any American can make the move from a log cabin ("ordinary life") to the White House ("major life")—the case of Lincoln again.[5]

It's possible, moreover, that the aspiration to suppress private identity in the interest of giving oneself to history may prove in practice to be problematic. Thirty years ago, in one of the rare American treatments of traditional memoir, Francis Russell Hart suggests that memoir's ambition to participate in history, performed so dramatically in the example of de Gaulle, is based in illusion. To set up his discussion, he opens with André Malraux's "repudiation of the private" (194) in his *Anti-Memoirs*: "My past, my biographical life, was of no importance" (155–56), Malraux writes; like de Gaulle and Nehru, he aspired to "belong to history" (223). Hart proceeds to examine a series of American memoirs premised on similar assumptions, seeing in them all a search for "an intimacy with history that will give public meaning to personal identity." They are "driven," he concludes,

> to express a collective identity, but unable to straighten out "'all this talk about we and us'" that such expression demands. [They are] . . . ostensibly conversing . . . with historic or cultural Otherness, yet ultimately talking to themselves, and wishing that talk to be history talking to itself. (209)

Despite Hart's skepticism about the possibility of any private individual to speak history in memoir, we do have memoirs in the French sense in American letters. Recognition of this fact, however, is not helped by the potentially confusing use of the term *memoir* in English today.

In the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, Helen Buss notes that despite major shifts in usage, *memoir* retains a fundamental orientation toward history. "As a general rule," Buss writes, "traditional autobiography makes the individual life central, while memoir tends to focus on the times in which the life is lived and the significant others of the memoirist's world" (595). Looking back to the 1970s, when I first began to pay attention to life writing, I certainly agree that memoir was defined then by distinguishing it from autobiography more or less as Buss suggests: memoirs (in the plural) were concerned with history (generals wrote memoirs about the wars they fought, politicians wrote memoirs about their diplomatic careers, and so forth), while memoir (in the singular) was concerned with biography (a memoir of one's father, for example). By the 1990s, however, the apparently stable distinction between memoir and autobiography collapsed. With the sudden wave of popularity for autobiographical narrative, epitomized by the huge success of Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club: A Memoir* (1995) and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* (1996), the so-called age of memoir had arrived, and both authors and reviewers were using *memoir* as a synonym for *autobiography*. And literary critics have followed suit: G. Thomas Couser, a leading expert on autobiography, has published an introduction to the genre with the title *Memoir: An Introduction*. This shift has taken hold so deeply that I believe there is no going back. Once upon a time, though, things were different, and I want to make a brief pass at the history of memoir both as generic term and as practice in American letters.

Let's start with an eighteenth-century case, a famous book now known as *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, which Franklin composed over a period of 20 years, beginning in 1771. Franklin referred to his narrative as "memoirs"—the term *autobiography* did not make its first appearance in English until after his death in 1790. The publication history of his autobiography is complicated, and I will only note here that it begins with a French translation of Part One in Paris in 1791 under the title, *Mémoires de la vie privée de Benjamin Franklin, écrits par lui-même*.[6] Is Franklin's autobiography a memoir in Jeannelle's sense? I'd say yes. While it certainly contains "autobiographical" features, it leans to the "egohistorical" side of Jeannelle's spectrum. It is definitely a "major life" as well: in Part Two, Franklin explicitly and self-consciously presents his story as exemplary, as representative of the opportunities afforded to every American to rise from humble circumstances to national prominence.[7]

Moving ahead, let's consider two nineteenth-century texts that claim to be memoirs:

- *The Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, edited by W. H. Channing, R. W. Emerson, and J. F. Clarke (1852). While the book contains a brief autobiography in the opening section ("Youth"), in the rest of this two-volume work the three editors of Margaret Fuller's papers include extensive commentary on Fuller's life and work, offering a composite biographical portrait of this celebrated intellectual, feminist, and journalist.
- *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (1885). James M. Cox comments that Grant's *Memoirs* is both an autobiography (in that it traces his life's trajectory) and a memoir (in that it offers no account of his inner life) (104). This work, more than any other American example I can think of, exemplifies Jeannelle's conception of *mémoires*. This is what memoir in the traditional sense should look like: by page 18 in this 600-page work, General Grant has covered the "autobiographical" part of his story ("Ancestry—Birth—Boyhood" and "West Point—Graduation"). The rest of the narrative is almost exclusively "egohistorical," focused on Grant's public life as soldier in the Mexican campaign and as general in the Civil War. As Edmund Wilson observed, Grant's *Memoirs* "may well rank . . . as the most remarkable work of its kind since the *Commentaries* of Julius Caesar. It is also in its way . . . a unique expression of the national character" (132–33).

Finally, consider two twentieth-century examples:

- *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), by Henry Adams. Most people regard this book as an autobiography, but it could just as easily be classed as a memoir in Jeannelle's sense. Adams deliberately reduces the autobiographical dimension of his story not only by relating it in the third person but also by excising twenty years of his adult life during which he became one of the greatest historians the United States has ever produced. Despite his notorious self-accounting as an exemplary failure, this grandson and great-grandson of American presidents led, nonetheless, a remarkable "major life." Few have ever fashioned themselves so self-consciously and persuasively as representative men of their times.
- *My Life* (2004), by Bill Clinton. This huge personal narrative—almost 1,000 pages in length—obviously qualifies as a "major life," but it's notable how much "autobiographical" material has been mixed in with the "egohistorical" matter we expect in a presidential memoir. How did this come about? During the course of the twentieth century, the traditional notion of memoir, both in the narrower

biographical application (singular) and in the broader historical application (plural), has been deeply inflected by autobiography. Interestingly, Jeannelle notes a parallel development in French letters in the case of Simone de Beauvoir.[8] Looking at Clinton and Beauvoir together, I'd ask, isn't the mingling of the "autobiographical" and the "egohistorical" overdetermined? That is, do we still believe that history is exclusively "outward"? Or do we believe that our inner lives are not separate from history, that selfhood, for example, is in part socially and culturally produced? Maybe hundred years after Freud it's no longer possible to bracket interiority in telling an "egohistorical" story.[9] In any case, when Jeannelle accepts Beauvoir's narratives as *mémoires*, he moves the French model closer to current American practice as illustrated by Clinton's autobiography.

Benjamin Franklin, Margaret Fuller, Ulysses S. Grant, Henry Adams, Bill Clinton—surely all of these famous Americans are historical figures who led "major" lives, but what about the rest of us? What is the relation between our "ordinary" lives and history? Let me return to Jeannelle's revealing pages about General de Gaulle. In making de Gaulle the defining case of *mémoires*, Jeannelle embraces a conception of the genre in which personal and national history are identical. Thus, of de Gaulle, he writes, "his family story is a national story" (*Ecrire* 186, my trans.).[10] And again, "In blending his personal story with the sphere of public events, de Gaulle writes the story of a calling where autobiography has conditioned us to expect the story of an education" (*Ecrire* 186–87, my trans).[11] While the program for *mémoires* as Jeannelle outlines it is specific to the circumstances of French culture and history, it provides an occasion to reflect more generally on the relation between the individual life—any life—and history. I think it's fair to say that the authors of the *mémoires* whom Jeannelle includes in his corpus are already *in* history, whereas I'm drawn to something rather different, the intersection between the personal and the history we call history, that is to say the borderland where autobiography (in Jeannelle's sense) and memoir (again in Jeannelle's sense) meet. In the cases that interest me the relation between the individual and history is not a foregone conclusion but something to be worked out, not only in the course of a lifetime but in the story of that life course. "The relation between the individual and history"—before I go any further with this line of thinking, I should point out that this formulation is potentially misleading. Following Dilthey, and drawing on Husserl and Heidegger, the philosopher David Carr reminds us that "we are *in* history as we are *in* the world: it serves as the horizon and background for our everyday experience" (4).[12] This view obviously complicates any notion of a spectrum running from the autobiographical at one pole to the egohistorical at the other, for the notion of separate public and private spheres and of a point of intersection

between them is at bottom a fiction, though a deep-seated one that is heuristically productive. I believe that most of us have a sense of being spectators rather than participants in the history of our time; that's why we gravitate to "major lives."

How, we might ask, do you get into history if you are not already "in" it? I've already mentioned the case of Lincoln and his trajectory from a log cabin to the White House, and Franklin's story is also that of a rise from obscurity (a printer's assistant in colonial Boston) to international celebrity (including his conquest of eighteenth-century Parisian *salons* and the French court). Alternatively, history can "get" you—think, for example, of the literature of the Holocaust in which individuals leading ordinary lives—an Elie Wiesel, an Ann Frank, a Vladek Spiegelman—are swept up in the currents of their times. And if you don't end up "in" history? I see two possibilities: you can read memoirs of those who *are* "in" history, or, alternatively, you can write an autobiography in which you meditate on the relation between your own story and history. It's this last possibility that I want to examine in the case of Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (2006). My point in doing so is to suggest that while Jean-Louis Jeannelle's criteria clearly define memoir as a genre, the key structuring elements risk limiting our sense of the possibilities of life writing vis-à-vis history. Mendelsohn adopts an autobiographical approach to an egohistorical end, reclaiming for history the otherwise anonymous lives of six of his relatives who died in World War II. As *The Lost* demonstrates, autobiography can forward the aims of traditional memoir.

Mendelsohn begins his story by recalling that when he was a boy, in the early 1960s, his appearance brought tears to the eyes of his elderly relatives: he resembled his great-uncle Schmiel, lost in the Holocaust. Decades later, Mendelsohn decides to recover the history of Schmiel Jäger, his wife, and his four daughters. At the beginning of his quest, Mendelsohn knows comparatively little about Schmiel: that he was a butcher living in Bolechow, a small town in the Ukraine; that he wrote desperate letters to his American relatives pleading for money to help him and his family escape the country; and finally, that he and his family were killed by the Nazis. Forty years later, in 2001, Mendelsohn decides to travel to Bolechow in the hope of learning more. And he does learn more: after many false leads, he locates and stands on the very spot where Schmiel and one of his children were shot.

"How much can we know about the past, and those who disappeared from it?" (204). This is the question that haunts Mendelsohn's quest. "It had been to rescue my relatives from generalities, symbols, abbreviations, to restore to them their particularity and distinctiveness, that I had come on this strange and arduous trip. *Killed by the Nazis*—yes, but by whom, exactly?" (112). Gradually, during travels to many countries

over a period of several years, stretching in this big book over hundreds of pages, Mendelsohn *does* manage to piece together some of their stories, to fill in some details—"*She was so good, she had such pretty legs. He died for her*"—but again and again he finds himself saying, "What can you really say about someone?" (345). Nonetheless, Mendelsohn believes in the redemptive power of story, and his many interviews with Holocaust survivors confirm his instinct to link story with survival: "*If you didn't have an amazing story, you didn't survive*. My problem . . . is that I want to write the story of people who didn't survive. People who had no story, anymore" (315). And when Mendelsohn observes, "To be alive is to have a story to tell" (434), he gets at what I take to be the deep motive of life writing, which we might put this way, using—and reversing—Mendelsohn's terms: to have had a story to tell is to have been alive. So there is a huge, existential premium on autobiographical telling in this memoir, which Mendelsohn stresses by highlighting the story of the story throughout, stressing his own investment in this investigation of family history. By counterpointing his story against the opening chapters of *Genesis*, he imparts an epic dimension to his narrative. But the ultimate burden of his quest is his chastened recognition of the limits of biographical and historical knowledge: "For everything, in time, gets lost" (486). The epigraph for *The Lost*, Virgil's "*sunt lacrimae rerum*," could stand as well for any work of life writing.

By way of conclusion, I invite you to place Mendelsohn's project in the context of Jean-Louis Jeannelle's definition of *mémoires*. Recall the key distinctions Jeannelle invokes to establish his model, between the autobiographical and the egohistorical, and between "major lives" and "ordinary lives." As to the first, Mendelsohn's stress on the autobiographical dimension of his narrative opens a space for thought-provoking epistemological questions concerning the possibilities and limitations of biographical and historical knowledge that lurk at the heart of any memoir. As to the second, whereas the historicity of "major lives" is self-evident, Mendelsohn pushes memoir to the limit when he places the otherwise unstoried, anonymous lives of Schmiel and his family within the purview of history. Finally, Mendelsohn's narrative illustrates the work we all perform (at least to some degree) of trying to figure out the relation between our own lives and the history of our times. In these ways the hybrid form of *The Lost* enriches the reading of memoir and *mémoires*.

Notes

1 This essay appeared in French as "Vivre dans l'histoire: autobiographie, *memoir(s)*, et mémoires," *Le sens du passé: pour une nouvelle approche des Mémoires*, ed. Marc Hersant, Jean-Louis Jeannelle, and Damien Zanone (2013), 351–61. It is reprinted here with permission from Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes: Editions de la Licorne.

2 Jeannelle's terms for "major lives" and "ordinary lives" are "*vies majuscules*" and "*vies minuscules*," literally "capital-letter lives" and "lower-case lives."

3 For the ethnographic portrait of Mémé Santerre, see Grafteaux. In *Ecrire ses Mémoires au XXe siècle* Jeannelle invokes a similar opposition between history and ethnography to describe the large-scale shift in the status of "*mémoires*" vis-à-vis "*récits de vies*" and "*récits personnels*" ["life stories" and "personal narratives"]: he explains, "the representation of the individual narrated is no longer of public import, it is rather of ethno-sociological interest" (232, my trans.). ["*la représentativité de l'individu raconté n'est plus d'ordre publique, elle est d'ordre ethnosociologique.*"] There is a certain tension between the two distinctions Jeannelle uses to structure his model of "*mémoires*," the "ego-historical" / "autobiographical" spectrum and the opposition "major life" / "ordinary life" ["*vie majuscule*" / "*vie minuscule*"]. The difficulty, I think, arises from Jeannelle's characterization of "ordinary lives" ["*vies minuscules*"] as "the humble existence of anonymous people." In a letter to the author Jeannelle comments that he meant to suggest a contrast between "de Gaulle's memoir on the one hand and any other autobiography on the other (rather than an ethnographic account which is a very particular kind of self narrative, somewhat artificially elaborated by an academic" (my trans.). ["*de Gaulle d'un côté et n'importe quelle autobiographie de l'autre (plutôt qu'un récit ethnographique qui est une forme de récit de soi très particulière, un peu artificiellement élaboré par un savant*)."]

4 For heuristic purposes I draw on Jeannelle's recent paper, "Twentieth-Century Memoirs" to present his model for the genre. For a more nuanced, complex, and comprehensive treatment, see his *Ecrire ses Mémoires au XXe siècle*.

5 Edmund Wilson's characterization of Lincoln suggests a parallel with de Gaulle. Wilson writes:

> Lincoln himself now stood out as a formidable public figure. He had indeed his heroic role, in which he was eventually to seem to tower—a role that was political through his leadership of his party; soldierly through his rank of commander-in-chief of the armies of the United States; spiritual . . . as the prophet of the cause of righteousness. And he seems to have known that he was born for this. (115)

Jeannelle quotes de Gaulle in a similar vein: "All my life, I formed a certain idea of France" (*Ecrire* 185, my trans.). ["*Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France.*"]

6 "Memoirs of the private life of Benjamin Franklin, written by himself."

7 At the beginning of Part Two, Franklin quotes the observation of a friend who had read Part One that "all that has happened to you is also connected with the detail of the manners and situation of a *rising* people; and in this respect I do not think that the writings of Caesar and Tacitus can be more interesting to a true judge of human nature and society" (135).

8 For Jeannelle's account of Simone de Beauvoir, see *Ecrire* 170–80; for the emergence of autobiography as an "archigenre," see especially *Ecrire* 229–48. Jeannelle summarizes the shifting fortunes of *mémoires* from Chateaubriand to Sartre as follows: "from here on the requirement of singularity, of authenticity, or of autonomy established as an ideal for the individual to avoid the social sphere and concentrate on the inner world" (*Ecrire* 235). ["*dorénavant, l'exigence de singularité, d'authenticité ou d'autonomie fixe pour idéal à l'individu contemporain de se soustraire au social et de se tenir de l'intérieur.*"] Jeannelle suggests that a likelier comparison than Clinton / Beauvoir would be Clinton / Valérie Giscard d'Estaing. According

to Jeannelle, Giscard d'Estaing "was the first president to insist, in the introduction to his memoir, on the importance of featuring his personal life" (personal letter to the author). [Giscard d'Estaing "*a été le premier président à insister, dès l'introduction, sur l'importance de mettre en avant sa vie personnelle*."] In making the comparison between Clinton and Beauvoir, I was thinking rather of "the mingling of autobiography and ego-history" that Jeannelle identifies as Beauvoir's contribution to bridging the gap between memoir and autobiography. I did not mean to suggest any likeness between Clinton and Beauvoir as persons.

9 Why after all do historians write biographies if not to supply a motivational background behind historical events?

10 ["*son roman familial est un roman national*."]

11 ["*En amalgamant son histoire personnelle à la sphère des évènements publics, de Gaulle écrit le récit d'une élection là où l'autobiographie nous a habitués à attendre le récit d'une formation*."]

12 See Eakin, *Touching* 141–45, for additional discussion of the issues raised by Carr's position.

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8 History and Life Writing
The Value of Subjectivity

An invitation to address a gathering of Early Modern historians devoted to "re-historicizing" life writing prompted me to revisit the historical dimension of first-person literature, which historians like to refer to as *ego-documents*.[1] I responded to this initiative with a certain sense of irony, for in the 1970s when I became interested in autobiography—*my* target ego-document—the situation was very different. Although its literary status was marginal, an autobiography was regarded, if anything, as *merely* historical, useful as a source for biography perhaps, but otherwise mostly beneath literary notice, so I needed to champion its value as imaginative art. Now, decades later, it seemed, some historians felt a need to reassert life writing's uses for history. Why, though, should this assignment fall to historians? Because literary scholars working on life writing have often neglected the historical interest of their material, with the notable exception, I'd add, of Holocaust memoir and *testimonio*, where the evidentiary authority of ego-documents is recognized and stressed. Standing in the way of a disciplinary realignment of this kind, however, is historians' long-standing and persistent unease about the subjectivity of ego-documents. It's my aim to argue that this apparently troublesome subjectivity, properly considered, is not a disabling flaw but central to their historical value. To open up that value, I want first to identify three characteristic kinds of egos in ego-documents, and then I want to consider the structures of meaning that support them, notably the concept of the person. Finally, using autobiography as a test case, I want to ask whether changes in such structures point to the kinds of large-scale cultural shifts that historians invoke in conceptualizing historical periods.

History and Life Writing: Referential Arts

Let me start by spelling out what history and life writing have in common, three points of likeness that are intrinsic to them both:

- their commitment to fact;
- their gravitation to narrative form;
- their employment of the strategies of fiction.

The first of these, and foundational, is the commitment of both genres to fact. This point is obvious in the case of history, perhaps less so in the case of autobiography, where fact and fiction coexist in a potentially uneasy relation, which I investigated in my early work on fictions in autobiography. While I claimed that autobiography was certainly a fiction, I also believed that it was a fiction of a very special kind, a fiction constrained by fact. For me, autobiography is nothing if not a referential art. Confirming this view, readers routinely assume that autobiographies are based on biographical fact *of some kind*. Moreover, autobiographers violating the genre's commitment to documentary truth risk being called to account, especially when their narratives address contested passages of history—witness the case of discredited Holocaust impostor Binjamin Wilkomirski.[2]

My second likeness between history and life writing is the gravitation of both genres to narrative form in order to track human activity over time. Hayden White is doubtless the best-known student of history as narrative, and I take the controversy over his views as a sign of the discomfort some historians have felt about the narrative dimension of their practice.[3] Complicating any understanding of narrative form, moreover, is the problematic nature of narrative itself: is narrative only a form imposed retrospectively on experience when we seek to report it, or is narrative already a constituent of experience in the first place, an inescapable dimension of human consciousness?[4]

In any case, when we organize a narrative account of experience—as historians, biographers, or autobiographers—we inevitably employ the strategies of fiction: emplotment, point of view, treatment of time, characterization, and so forth. This is my third point of likeness between history and life writing. Can historians use the resources of fiction, fiction in the sense of making narrative, without compromising their commitment to historical truth? Sure they can, say I, and they have to. Short of leaving data untouched, even the comparatively simple form of annals, a list of historical events, requires willy-nilly some principle of selection. That is to say that history can never be a found object standing free of the hands of the historians who make it. Isn't it instead, like autobiography, in a deep way a referential art?[5]

Three Egos

Referential art—the tension between fact and fiction lurking in the practice of both history and life writing has its parallel in the term *ego-document*, which yokes subjective and objective realms in a revealing manner: in an ego-document the self—that slipperiest part of human experience—takes on textual flesh. In the exploration of ego-documents that follows, I will track a series of egos: the eyewitness, the biographical subject, and finally the individual as cultural artifact. This trio of

egos reflects three different approaches to the experiences recorded in ego-documents, three different conceptions of ego interiority, three different kinds of historical fact. I should note that I distinguish among these egos for heuristic purposes, recognizing, of course, that the ego in any ego-document could display the features of all three of my egos simultaneously.

First, *the eyewitness ego*. Seeking answers to "what really happened," journalists and historians turn to eyewitness sources. Ego-documents can deliver two kinds of eyewitness fact: what I saw and what I felt. As to the first kind, *what I saw*, a caveat is in order concerning the authority of eyewitness testimony: anyone who has ever been called on to describe an accident for an insurance claim will be familiar with the selective nature of perception and the fallibility of memory. As to the second kind of fact, *what I felt*, it is a leading feature of contemporary journalism, for example, to interrogate survivors of a catastrophe about their feelings. In such instances, the ego's interiority functions not as unique but as representative: this is what it would have been like to experience this event had we been there to do so—the mass shooting, the volcano's eruption, the hurricane's force. Emotion in contexts such as these is granted a documentary value, allowing the rest of us to participate vicariously in historical actuality, creating a "you-are-there" effect.[6]

In the case of *the biographical ego*, however, the second ego in my series, the interiority recorded in an ego-document functions differently from its role in the eyewitness case: it is read not as a stand-in for the rest of us but rather as an expression of a particular individual's psyche—not same, but different. Notably, personal records—diaries, letters, sometimes even an autobiography—may provide the only available information about the biographical ego in the years before that person emerges as a subject of biography, an emergence that typically generates other kinds of sources.

The culture of individualism persuades us that this sense of self is unique. I believe this, yet I also believe that anyone's sense of self is also characteristic in no small part of the culture in which it emerges.[7] Jean Strouse's biography of Alice James, the brilliant invalid sister of the novelist Henry James, illustrates this link between self and culture. Describing a period in which women, especially, were thought to suffer from "nerves," "neurasthenia," and hysteria, Strouse captures the ways in which the medical profession of James's time shaped James's understanding of herself and her life of illness. As Strouse demonstrates, biographical singularity cannot be easily disentangled from cultural commonality. That is to say that the biographical ego is intimately related to the final ego in my series, *the individual as cultural artifact*.

Whereas a biographer may pursue a subject's sense of self, a social historian may investigate instead the self-making resources that that subject had to work with. How do we know what we feel? Where does

the language to express our feelings come from? Historians of emotions recognize the extent to which the content of an individual's interiority is not unique but scripted. Cultures abound in models of feeling, ranging from devotional manuals guiding religious experience to greeting cards coaching us what to say on personal occasions. It's no surprise, then, that anthropologist Clifford Geertz can speak of emotions as "cultural artifacts" (*Interpretation* 81). "The ethnographer," he writes, "does not, and . . . largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive 'with'—or 'by means of,' or 'through'" (*Point of View* 224). Cultural anthropologists term this endowment for processing experience an *indigenous psychology*. This meta-concept seems particularly well suited to conceptualize the group of assumptions—the identity equipment, we might say—that individuals employ, largely unconsciously, in fashioning the egos we encounter in ego-documents.[8] Shifts in the makeup of an indigenous psychology, moreover, can provide the basis for large-scale conceptions of historical periods, such as "The Age of Individualism." Pursuing my inquiry in this vein, I want to work backward from egos in texts to the structures of meaning that support them.[9]

Tracking Indigenous Psychologies

Accounts of the rise of autobiography during the eighteenth century illustrate the kind of broad cultural analysis I am targeting with this notion of indigenous psychology. Several literary historians, including Karl J. Weintraub and Georges Gusdorf, trace the genre's rise in this period in the West to the convergence of a new model of the person and a new model of time: in Weintraub's formulation, "the modern mode of self-conception as an individuality" (827) and "the recognition of a strong historical dimension of all human reality" (838).[10] Corroborating Weintraub's thesis, historians have linked the flowering of a culture of individualism to a broad range of developments, including Protestant introspection, Copernican cosmology, post-Gutenberg print communication, a bourgeois economy, private property, and private rooms.[11] What seems clear is that in the Early Modern period individuals increasingly found the time, the place, the resources, and especially the motive to create autobiography and other kinds of ego-documents.

If autobiography is indeed the product of a particular period, as Weintraub and others contend, then the conditions that fostered its emergence, namely, an indigenous psychology invested in history and individuality, could eventually alter, leading to its decline. As Elizabeth Bruss speculated, writing in 1976 at the dawn of contemporary autobiography studies, "autobiography could simply become obsolete if its defining features, such as individual identity, cease to be important for a particular culture" (15). Are we now reaching such a turning point?

Motivating my attraction to this macro level of analysis is the advent of the Internet, which may be generating a new model of the person in a "post-textual" era. The *New York Times* tech columnist Farhad Manjoo claims that "the defining narrative of our online moment concerns the decline of text." Manjoo describes an emergent "post-text" culture, "ruled by pictures and sounds" that is not only "going to alter much about how we understand the world around us," but also, at a more basic level, "how we think" (2). In this view, the Internet may change not only our ideas but even the neurological equipment we use to form them—more on this later.

Compounding this challenge to autobiography and other ego-documents as texts has been the Internet's erosion of individual identity as a value—not only *document* but also *ego* may be radically changing. Contemplating the reductive model of the person promoted by social media platforms, novelist Zadie Smith, writing in 2010, presciently observes, "We have different ideas about what a person is, or should be." In her view, "Generation Facebook" has moved on to "People 2.0," whereas she is "stuck at Person 1.0" (57). "When a human being becomes a set of data, on a website like Facebook," she continues, "he or she is reduced. Everything shrinks." "I am dreaming," she continues, "of a Web that caters to a kind of person who no longer exists, . . . a private person, a person who is a mystery, to the world and—which is more important—to herself."[12] "Person 1.0," "People 2.0"—Smith uses these impressionistic categories to support huge generalizations, yet they made a deep impression on me for two reasons: she attempts to formulate a large-scale shift in cultural history in terms of the concept of the person, and she identifies a revolution in communication technology as responsible for the change she seeks to measure. I see Smith's speculations as pointing toward the kind of period-defining cultural inquiry that I am proposing to the historian of ego-documents. If Bruss was correct in positing individual identity—Smith's Person 1.0—as a defining feature of autobiography, does it follow that its digital mutation into People 2.0 portends the genre's demise and the Age of Individualism along with it? What do ego-documents have to say? Are there signs now of a cultural shift of this magnitude?

From Person 1.0 to People 2.0: Technology's Identity Consequences

I'm beginning to think that there are such signs. In an article I published only five years ago I confidently identified the reasons why self-narration, autobiography's bedrock, continues to play so large a part in our lives. Chief among them was this one: we are trained by parents and caregivers to talk about ourselves from early childhood, and this skill enables our participation in the narrative identity system that governs our social

lives as adults.[13] It strikes me now, however, that this primary motive for self-narration may now be in question. Can it be true, I wonder, that the act of talking about ourselves with others is undergoing a radical transformation as people shift away from face-to-face encounters in favor of Internet communication at one remove?

Let me backtrack to describe how my interest in a particular kind of ego-document led me to investigate the act of self-narration that supports it. My point of departure for the study of autobiography's origins was literary, but eventually, coached by developmental psychologists, I recognized autobiography as a subset of a much larger class of narratives that we tell about ourselves every day. Through endless self-narration we equip ourselves with the narrative identities that make up a very large part of our sense of ourselves as persons. By the time we reach adulthood we know instinctively how to display them as a given social occasion may warrant, and others, moreover, expect us to be able to do so. This identity practice establishes our place in a rule-governed narrative identity system that organizes the interpersonal relations of our adult lives, confirming to others that we possess normally functioning identities.[14]

These operative assumptions about narrative identity and the narrative identity system, however, have been challenged by research investigating our digital behavior. Recall Elizabeth Bruss's speculation that "autobiography could simply become obsolete if its defining features, such as individual identity, cease to be important for a particular culture" (15). What does the undoing of the link between a kind of ego-document and its supporting structure of meaning look like? How, we might ask, does Zadie Smith's Person 1.0 become People 2.0? For insight into this cultural process, consider the work of sociologist and clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle. In *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age* she documents how the Internet and its attendant devices disrupt the kind of interpersonal exchange in which people have performed their narrative identities for each other up to now. Investigating relations between humans and machines in a broad range of settings, Turkle discovers a disturbing reluctance in her informants to engage others directly; they say that they prefer to remain safely behind their screens. This reluctance represents only half of the Internet's identity impact; the other half is the short-changing of solitude in a 24/7 wired world that promotes a culture of interruption and intrusion, of restless movement, of surfing from link to link.

By contrast, Turkle's model of identity formation unfolds in a "virtuous circle" which moves between states of solitude that "reinforce a secure sense of self" and conversations with others that provide "rich material for self-reflection" (10). But if we are never truly alone, what becomes of the opportunity for self-reflection, the kind of self-reflection, I'd add, that enriches autobiographical narrative? And what becomes of the zone of privacy surrounding Zadie Smith's Person 1.0, "a private person, a

person who is a mystery, to the world and—which is more important—to herself"?[15] Confirming Turkle's and Smith's misgivings about the Internet, the daily drumbeat of online security breaches suggests that privacy, central to individualism's emergence in the Early Modern period as a dominant value, may be radically changing in the digital age.[16]

So what are the consequences of Internet technology for egos and ego-documents? That there *are* consequences is not in question—the changes in social behavior that Turkle studies are wide spread and obvious. What is less apparent, but more momentous because deeper, are the changes that digital technology is producing in our brains. If one believes, as I do, that our sense of ourselves as persons is deeply rooted in our bodies, then changes in the fundamental dynamics of our mental processing of experience are likely to generate changes in our operative sense of self. Neurologist Antonio Damasio evokes technology's bodily impact on mental processing and selfhood this way:

> the ongoing digital revolution, the globalization of cultural information, and the coming of the age of empathy are pressures likely to lead to structural modifications of mind and self, by which I mean modifications of the very brain processes that shape the mind and self. (182)[17]

The brain's *neuroplasticity*, its responsiveness to the environment, is the underlying premise of several recent commentaries that size up our digital lives and selves.[18] In *Mind Change: How Digital Technologies Are Leaving Their Mark on Our Brains*, for example, neuroscientist Susan Greenfield argues that an offline mode of mental processing characterized by linearity, attentiveness, and depth is being supplanted by the more scattered form of online processing demanded by posting, surfing, and the like.[19] As a result, paralleling Turkle, Greenfield believes that a traditional mode of identity formation relying on a dialogue between environment and self, which allowed for a "slow but sure development of a robust internal narrative," is being displaced by one that is "externally constructed and driven" (128). Note, though, that the internal/external formulation here is loaded, assigning a positive valence to "inner" and a negative one to "outer." One may well ask where the agency driving identity formation resides, where "self" ends and "environment" begins. Greenfield implies that engagement with the Internet involves a kind of passive surrender to an occupying force, that suitable identity formation ("slow," "sure," "robust") is only transacted apart from the Internet. What seems more likely is that the process of identity formation goes forward online as well as off; whether it does so in a distinctly different fashion is another story.[20]

In *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, journalist Nicholas Carr characterizes our current digital environment in terms

similar to Greenfield's: "Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts" (10). Carr embraces Marshall McLuhan's historical vision of this profound cognitive and cultural shift as a period-defining struggle between two modes of mental processing, each generated by a new technology of communication, with a centuries' old "Gutenberg" model losing out to today's "electric" model (2).[21] Especially striking in Carr's account of reading in the post-Gutenberg—or Early Modern—era is the link he posits between the mental processing required by reading a book and the concept of the person and the kind of ego-document it fostered:

> Because every person was free to chart his own course of reading, . . . individual memory became less of a socially determined construct and more the foundation of a distinctive perspective and personality. Inspired by the book, people began to see themselves as the authors of their own memories. (178)

By contrast, Carr claims that "the Net diminishes . . . the ability . . . to construct within our own minds the rich and idiosyncratic set of connections that give rise to a singular intelligence" (143).

The findings of Turkle, Greenfield, and Carr give Zadie Smith's Person 1.0 a bio-neurological footing, linking it to an individualist concept of the person and pointing to self-narration as an expression of that distinctively singular—and otherwise unknowable—"person as mystery." To illustrate this connection, consider Sherry Turkle's ideal of solitude: "It is only when we are alone with our thoughts," she writes, "—not reacting to external stimuli—that we engage that part of the brain's basic infrastructure devoted to building up a sense of our stable autobiographical past" (61).[22] "Stable autobiographical past," "robust internal narrative" (Greenfield), "people . . . as authors of their own memories" (Carr)—autobiographical narrative consistently emerges as a key anchor of Person 1.0. And People 2.0? So far this successor model of the person has yet to come into focus, defined sketchily by these observers as the inverse of Person 1.0—external, fragmented, shallow, lost in a welter of data.[23] When it comes to the concept of the person, clearly these forecasters don't like what they see.

Could it be, though, that Carr, Greenfield, and Turkle are wary of the Internet and its potential for identity disruption because they belong to an older generation that did not grow up in the online world? Consider the bleak assessment of someone who has, Jia Tolentino, a staff writer for the *New Yorker* in her early thirties. In "The I in the Internet" Tolentino reports that most of her life "is inextricable from the internet, and its mazes of incessant forced connection—this feverish, electric,

unlivable hell" (7). Guiding her analysis of her online experience is sociologist Erving Goffman's view of identity as something we perform: "the self," she writes, "is not a fixed, organic thing, but a dramatic effect that emerges from a performance" (14). Initially, the Internet had seemed to her to promise "the dream of a better, truer self" (8), offering "a potentially unlimited audience [that] began to seem like the natural home of self-expression" (7). But she found herself instead inside "an ecosystem that runs on exploiting attention and monetizing the self" (11). "The internet," she concludes, "is governed by incentives that make it impossible to be a full person while interacting with it" (32). Chastened by the commodification of identity online, she proposes a defensive stance: "We've got nothing except our small attempts to retain our humanity, to act on a model of actual selfhood, one that embraces culpability, inconsistency, and insignificance" (33). How to be "a full person"? Where to locate "a model of actual selfhood"? At the very least, though, the ease and speed of Internet communication is providing opportunities for self-narration on a scale without parallel in previous historical periods. Given the daily traffic online, the possibility that new kinds of egos and new forms of ego-documents will emerge seems likely.

Have we reached the edge of a Kuhnian paradigm shift in our culture's concept of the person? Zadie Smith and Nicholas Carr believe that indeed this shift is already under way. As for me, when I see narrative disappear from daily discourse about our lives, I'll believe it too. I set out to make a case for the historical value of the subjectivity recorded in ego-documents, and I've ended up considering the possibility that the model of selfhood that gave its name to "the Age of Individualism" could be on the wane in our digital age. Yet for now I remain convinced that narrative and narrative identities, deeply embedded in our bodies and promoted by social training early and late, will be with us for a very long time.

Notes

1 This essay was presented to a gathering of Early Modern historians at a symposium on "Life Writing Historicized: The Individual in Social and Cultural Context in Europe from 1300 to 1800," University of Miami, February 2019. For an introduction to the term *ego-documents*, see Dekker.
2 See Maechler for a thorough investigation of the Wilkomirski case.
3 See White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality."
4 For a discussion of the place of narrative in experience and consciousness, see Eakin, *Touching* 190–98.
5 For an extended discussion of history as a referential art, see Eakin, *Touching* 138–80.
6 For more on eyewitness narrative, see Eakin, "Eye and I," in this volume.
7 For a fine example, see Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther*.

8 Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby's multivolume *History of Private Life* offers ample illustration of the use of ego-documents as a resource of this kind.
9 For more on indigenous psychologies, see Eakin, *Touching* 94–98, and Heelas and Lock.
10 See Lejeune, "Autobiography" 249–50, for the link between shifts in models of time and models of identity; see Geertz, *Interpretation* 389, on the link between concepts of person and concepts of history.
11 See, for example, Rybczynski.
12 Smith was reviewing David Fincher's film about Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, *The Social Network*, and Jaron Lanier's *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*. Like Smith, Lanier is troubled by the mismatch between what we are as persons and what information technology is capable of saying we are.
13 See Eakin, "Autobiography as Cosmogram," in this volume.
14 For a discussion of childhood training in self-narration and the rule-governed narrative identity system, see Eakin, *Living* 22–31. "Narrative identity" and "narrative identity system," by the way, are useful examples of the structures of meaning that support egos in the ego-documents I study. They are manifestations that sustain our contemporary indigenous psychology.
15 In the conclusion of *Reclaiming*, Turkle writes, "I have felt for a long time, as a mother and as a citizen, that in a democracy, we all need to begin with the assumption that every one has something to 'hide,' a zone of private action and reflection, a zone that needs to be protected despite our techno-enthusiasm" (316).
16 Turkle notes Mark Zuckerberg's observation that "privacy is no longer a relevant social norm" (301). A recent front-page story under the headline "Facebook Offered Users Privacy Wall, Then Let Tech Giants Around It" confirms the debasement of privacy as a value: " . . . personal data has become the most prized commodity of the digital age, traded on a vast scale by some of the most powerful companies in Silicon Valley and beyond" (Dance A: 1+).
17 See also neuroscientist Michael Merzenich, "When culture drives changes in the ways that we engage our brains, it creates DIFFERENT brains" (quoted in Carr 120).
18 See Carr 48, for example, on neuroplasticity.
19 On attentiveness and memory consolidation, see Carr 193; on depth and attentiveness, see Turkle 221.
20 For more discussion of identity formation online and off, see "Self and Self-Representation" in this volume.
21 For a parallel discussion to Carr's, see Lejeune, "Autobiography."
22 Supporting her understanding of the neurological grounding of such solitary moments, Turkle cites research on "the default mode network" that "is active when individuals are engaged in internally focused tasks including autobiographical memory retrieval, envisioning the future, and conceiving the perspectives of others" (378–79).
23 For insight into what data-driven life writing might look like, see Alec Wilkinson's report on "lifelogging," a project undertaken at Microsoft Research by Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmel. Using Sensecams and scanners, Bell and Gemmell propose the creation of a digital archive of personal life activities. They dream of "auto-storytelling," of "a function by which a computer assembles a person's autobiography" (41–42).

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III

Autobiography Now

The three essays gathered here approach autobiography in two registers, personal and cultural. The essays are inflected by my own current circumstances—aging, waning powers—and by those of the culture I live in, where the meaning of selves and lives in the day of the Internet and quantum cosmology is negotiated against a backdrop of globalization and climate change. The final essay in this section, "Autobiography and the Big Picture," investigates the nature of my long interest in life writing: why, given all of the subjects I could have pursued, I chose autobiography as central to my intellectual life.

9 Autobiography as Cosmogram

When we speak of autobiography, what exactly do we think the object of study is?[1] What is self—its primary referent? And what is narrative—its primary mode of expression? I begin by offering a three-phase account of my evolving conception of autobiography over a period of many years. Autobiography, I discovered, is not only a literary text but much more: a daily identity practice, and even an expression of the rhythms of consciousness. Next, embracing this expansive view of autobiography, I focus on the autobiographical act, the nature of memory involved, and the kind of work that self-narration performs. In the third part of this essay, I identify three motives for our endless engagement with self-narration: we are trained to do it as children, we use it to explore our deepest existential questions, and it just may confer an adaptive value for the organisms that we are. I conclude by suggesting my sense of autobiography's place in the larger scheme of things: life writing as cosmogram.

Autobiography and the Autobiographical Act

My initial approach to autobiography was literary—I was, after all, a literary guy, trained to work with texts. I soon found, though, that autobiography resisted my formalist attempts to classify it as a genre. Autobiographers often insist that they are telling the truth about their lives, yet the fictions in their stories struck me as obvious and ubiquitous. Dealing with such truth claims led me to the work of historiographers such as Hayden White and to phenomenologist philosophers such as David Carr, who probe the tensions inherent in a referential aesthetic—in history, or in biography and autobiography (the so-called literatures of fact). The concept of narrative was central to the debate between White and Carr about the representation of historical reality: was narrative an arbitrary imposition of a culturally sanctioned literary form on an otherwise unstructured world of experience, or was it one of the deep structures of that world? Carr boldly argued for the essential narrative structure of perception itself. "Before we dismember them analytically, and even before we revise them retrospectively, our experiences and our actions constitute narratives for us" (69), he urged;

narrative was not merely about experience but central to experience itself.[2] Phenomenology focused my attention on the world of experience, and I began to recognize autobiography's work in that world, its place in a lifelong process of identity formation: writing autobiography was not only a literary activity but also an identity practice.

This new mindset about autobiography suggested social and cultural answers to literary questions. Where, for example, do models of life story come from? Literary historians, not surprisingly, argued that autobiographies derive from other autobiographies. But surely, I thought, we don't need to have read autobiographies in order to write them. Literary autobiography, I now realized, was a rather small part of a much larger cultural practice, the daily self-narration that occupies so much of our social lives. Sooner or later, some of us may actually write our autobiographies, but we all live autobiographically. Despite the illusions of autonomy and self-determination fostered by our culture of individualism, we operate in the United States—and probably in much of the West—as players in a rule-governed narrative identity system.

Because the rules we follow are tacit, we are rarely conscious of them; our constant performance of identity story is instinctive and automatic. We can, of course, say what we like about ourselves, but when we break the rules, there may be consequences; others may call us to account, and we operate accordingly. I'll just mention three of the basic rules of the game: telling the truth, respecting privacy, and—most interesting of all—displaying a normally functioning identity. Infractions of the first two rules are familiar; these are the cases we read about in the news, fabricated memoirs, scandalous invasions of privacy. The third "rule" is different from the first two, for it involves an infraction that is involuntary, the inability to tell one's story at all. Because we attach so much importance to narrative identity, because identity story functions socially as identity's signature, we may conclude that individuals whose narrative competence has been compromised are diminished as persons. Moreover, such individuals may come to believe this of themselves. The ethical implications of such judgments are troubling.

Consider Thomas DeBaggio's *Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look at Life with Alzheimer's*, from 2002, a bleak report sent back from this last frontier of human self-experience. In mid-life, in his late 50s, DeBaggio was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's, and he determined to record his descent into this memory- and identity-destroying condition. DeBaggio's engagement with life writing sensitized him to the links between body, self-narration, and identity, vital links relentlessly ravaged by the disease: "Although my body may still be sputtering along, the day will come when I can no longer write a clear sentence and tell a coherent story. That day will be the actual time of death" (117). This grim forecast reveals DeBaggio's instinctive recognition of his place in the narrative identity system and the risk he runs in losing it. In his extremity he

has internalized the implicit conclusion of the system's logic: no story, no self; the game is over. There is, in fact, more to self than narrative identity can encompass, but that precious remainder may lie beyond our knowing once our primary means of self-expression is gone.[3] If we behold DeBaggio's condition with dismay, it's because it could so easily be our own. From the perspective of Alzheimer's, the apparently spontaneous and easy exchange of personal stories that is the stuff of daily social life acquires an existential urgency. Cases of narrative identity collapse, increasingly frequent in an aging population, remind us of the magnitude of our stake in a smoothly operating narrative identity system.[4]

So, to recap my changing view of autobiography, my earliest, unexamined idea was pretty straightforward: autobiography was a prose narrative, a text, something I read between the covers of a book. My next move was to see autobiography as a subset of a much larger class of narratives that we tell about ourselves every day. I became convinced that the identities we claim in our self-narrations are socially derived, shaped in no small part by cultural models of what a person is and what a life looks like. Then, in the 1990s, neurobiological investigations of human consciousness pushed my thinking about autobiography in a new direction. Reading the work of Gerald Edelman and Antonio Damasio persuaded me that our sense of identity is somehow the product of our lives *in* and *as* bodies. Presenting a detailed neurobiological account of the emergence of self from the body and using narrative to describe this process, Damasio made the case for self as existing *inside* the narrative matrix of consciousness *and only there*. I concluded that "*self inheres in a narrative of some kind*" (*Living* 74). If Damasio is right, then self is not only reported but performed, certainly by any of us as we tell or write the stories of our lives, and perhaps to a surprising degree by the rest of us as we listen to them or read them.[5]

I've said that autobiography is not only a text but also an identity practice, and even an expression of embodied selfhood. When we engage in what I'll call the autobiographical act, whether in casual self-narration or more deliberately and formally with pen in hand or hand on keyboard, what is going on? My original text-centered focus on autobiography as product was increasingly displaced by my concern with its operation as process. As I investigated memory, the linchpin of autobiography's core concern with identity, my understanding shifted over time in two key respects: the nature of memory as a brain function and the orientation of memory—to the past, to the present, and to the future—in autobiographical recall.

We rightly think of autobiography as a project to recover the past—this was my starting point—and we like to believe that what it offers is a largely faithful and unmediated reconstruction of events and one's responses that took place long ago. Autobiographers often push us to read their stories in this way, invoking—consciously or not—the concept

of an invariant memory that can preserve the past intact, allowing the original experience to be repeated in present consciousness. In *Speak, Memory,* for example, Vladimir Nabokov celebrates again and again moments of total and perfect recall, as in this stunning passage:

> I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window . . . The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die. (76–77)

While many autobiographers routinely cultivate a "you-are-there" effect of this kind, others feature not just a story from the past but also—accompanying it—a portrait of themselves performing the autobiographical act. In *Maus*, for example, Art Spiegelman has two stories to tell: his father Vladek's harrowing survival of the Holocaust and his own struggle to get his father to tell his story. The father's story is punctuated periodically by what we might call the story of this story, images of the father and son in the act of getting it told. Such images remind us that any autobiography is always colored by present circumstances and motives; something in the present is urging attention to the past. *Maus* offers a particularly complex example of the pull of the present on the past, for it is a double autobiography, giving us not only the father's story but also, framing it and dominating it, the son's story of their relationship. Consider this revealing exchange between Art Spiegelman and Robert Siegel on National Public Radio:

> *Siegel*: One of the things that makes this story so realistic is that throughout the story of "Maus" you're trying to elicit this information from your father, and the process of getting him to sit down and talk to you is part of the story . . . *how important to you is that dimension of the entire story?*
>
> *Spiegelman*: *Oh, I think it's the actual story.* This book grew out of me wanting to have some kind of relationship with my father. (Interview, emphasis added)

Here Spiegelman supports my claim that the stories we tell about the past are in fact extended metaphors for stories we are living out in the present.

This mediation of the past by the present is further complicated by the nature of memory itself. Despite the attractive illusion that the past, however seemingly remote, can remain intact in our memories, awaiting a Proustian reawakening, a Nabokovian recall, memory doesn't operate that way neurologically. Advances in brain imaging—PET scans and fMRIs—reveal that every time we have the sense of recalling the "same"

event from the past, that memory is constructed anew, and different areas of the brain may be involved in each act of recall.[6] Memory proves to be a revisionist faculty, a maker of fictions, *fictions* not in the sense of untruths or lies, but rather in the sense of that which is formed, fashioned, invented. Autobiographies are not only fictions in this sense, albeit fictions of a special, memory-based kind; they are fictions about what is itself a fiction, the self. The self is properly understood as a metaphor for the subjective reality of consciousness. And it is precisely the opportunity to give a shape—however provisional—to the constantly changing reality of selfhood that accounts, I think, for the huge investment we make in self-narration.

I want to complete my review of memory work in the autobiographical act by stressing memory's orientation to the future, an essential dimension of recall that I was slow to recognize. I have suggested that we remodel our pasts to bring them into sync with our sense of our selves and lives in the present, but we also do so in view of our plans for the time to come. That's the thing: in any present our heads are filled with plans for the future. Interestingly, developmental psychologist Katherine Nelson holds that memory's earliest primary orientation is in fact toward the future. The very young child uses memory to develop scripts for repeated actions: memory retains what serves to predict what is likely to happen—taking a bath, going to the park—the rest is discarded. It's only somewhat later on, following the acquisition of language, that the child will be introduced by parents and caregivers to the social value of remembering past events for their own sake, giving rise to so-called autobiographical memory.[7]

Before turning to consider the primary motives that drive us to rehearse the stories of our lives, I want to conclude this discussion of autobiography and the autobiographical act by retracing the trajectory of my ever-deepening sense of self-narration as an action unfolding in the present. I grappled with this issue for the first time in the 1970s in an essay on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. My point then was that Malcolm's experience with telling his story to Alex Haley overturned the commonplace view of autobiography as a report an autobiographer makes of an already completed life and self. Malcolm embraces instead a vision of his life as a life of changes, coming faster than any autobiographical narrative could possibly keep up with. He lived to see the fictive separation between life and life story—the idea that first the one happens, then the other—dissolve. In keeping with Malcolm's recognition that the present had constantly inflected and displaced his recollection of the past, Haley's "Epilogue" with its account of the making of the autobiography proves to be more revealing about Malcolm and his life story than the narrative proper, cut short by Malcolm's assassination in 1965. Haley reveals how the writing of Malcolm's autobiography was thrown into crisis when two radical, life-changing events—Malcolm's break with Elijah Muhammad

and his subsequent pilgrimage to Mecca—undercut the premise of the conversion story Malcolm had originally set out to tell.[8]

In the 1980s and 1990s, I continued to be drawn to narratives such as Haley's in which the story of the story directs our attention to the act of composition taking place in the present—in addition to Spiegelman's *Maus*, other fine examples include John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* and Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House: A Daughter's Story*. Then, in 1999, as I've already mentioned, reading Damasio's neurobiological account of the emergence of self in the narrative matrix of consciousness pushed my sense of the performative dimension of the autobiographical act even further, such that I could say of the poet Mary Karr writing her life story that she was "doing consciousness" (*Living* 85). I had started out with the idea of *writing autobiography*—the literary act of composition—whereas now I thought in terms of *living autobiographically*, of our *making* the lives we say we are living—to the extent we can, I should add, because economic, political, and cultural forces may well limit our freedom to do so. Mark Johnson's *The Meaning of the Body* triggered the most recent step in my view of autobiography as action. Summarizing the work of William James and John Dewey, Johnson comments, "At the heart of all pragmatist philosophy is the fundamental understanding that thinking is doing, and that cognition is action" (92). I read this sentence with a shock of recognition. If Damasio's neurobiological account of selfhood had prompted me to think of Karr as "doing consciousness," Johnson's parallel case for understanding cognition as embodied seemed to confirm this view. Johnson supplies a neo-pragmatist elaboration to Malcolm X's vision of a life of changes:

> Nietzsche, James, Dewey, and a host of subsequent thinkers have shown us that *life is change existence is an ongoing process* . . . . The logic we humans have is an embodied logic of inquiry, one that arises in experience and must be readjusted as situations change. Dewey correctly defines human inquiry as an embodied, situated, ongoing process that begins with a problematic or indeterminate situation, employs intelligence and symbolic resources of thought to clarify and seek to resolve the tension in the situation, and, when successful, transforms the character and quality of the situation. *Local thinking can thereby actually change experience, because it is in and of that experience*. (105, emphasis in original)

If there is a "logic" of self-narration, then self-narration is not merely about our experience but, because it is "in" and "of" it, it is capable of changing that experience. For a long time I had described my approach to autobiography as experientialist, and Johnson's work now gave it a pragmatist spin.

Autobiography's Rise and Fall?

When autobiography studies emerged in the twentieth century as a field of study, three distinguished literary historians presented autobiography as a culture-specific phenomenon: Georges Gusdorf, Karl J. Weintraub, and Elizabeth Bruss. "The concern," Gusdorf observes, "which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it, is not at all universal." In fact, the "conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life" that motivates autobiographical recall "is the late product of a specific civilization;" it is "a concern peculiar to Western man" (29). Weintraub's approach to the rise of autobiography is equally culture-specific, depending on the two enabling conditions identified by Gusdorf: a particular developmental mode of historical consciousness in the West and an ideal of self as individuality. In Weintraub's view, when these mutually reinforcing views flowered simultaneously in the Enlightenment, after a gradual emergence over centuries, autobiography came into its own as a significant cultural form, notably in Rousseau's *Confessions* and Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.

Drawing on speech act theory, Bruss brought to the culture-specific conception of autobiography embraced by Gusdorf and Weintraub a sophisticated elaboration. We need to "learn more precisely," she writes, "how a genre exists" (1). Because "there is no intrinsically autobiographical form" (10), she sought instead to specify the constitutive rules that guide our recognition of a particular literary work as performing an autobiographical function, stressing the identity between the author and the individual featured in the text as well as the "truth-value" of the text's report (10–11).[9] "As a culture," she comments, spelling out the genre's appeal, "we have not yet lost our appetite for seeing how individuals go about constructing their experiences from the inside, what resources they bring to the task, and what we might appropriate from them or learn by their example to avoid" (163). "*We have not yet lost* . . .", but we could, as Bruss presciently anticipated at the very dawn of autobiography studies in the 1970s: "As one act among all those that human beings might want to undertake through their language and their literature, autobiography could simply become obsolete if its defining features, such as individual identity, cease to be important for a particular culture" (15).

And is autobiography becoming obsolete? In the wake of the digital revolution that is transforming the ways people talk about themselves and the means they use to do so, it just may be that at least one of the twin enabling conditions sustaining the practice of autobiography, a certain idea of the person, may be radically changing. The development of social networking sites on the Internet has given a big push to the everyday practice of self-representation. At some level huge numbers of

people are involved in self-display online—in the case of Facebook as many as a billion. For me, the big question posed by numbers like these is whether new models of identity are emerging from participation in the social media. Some people think so, and that wouldn't be surprising, for a culture's models of identity are constantly evolving.[10] In this regard, novelist Zadie Smith's review of David Fincher's film *The Social Network* in the *New York Review of Books* caught my eye. Here was someone half my age, only nine years older than Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, yet feeling profoundly disaffiliated from "Generation Facebook." "We have different ideas about what a person is, or should be," she writes; they have moved on to "People 2.0," whereas "I am stuck at Person 1.0" (57). The digital equivalence of person and technology in the labels is telling. Smith is asking exactly the kinds of questions about the social media that I have been wondering about, in particular, the possibly seismic shift they may have effected in current models of identity.

When Smith turns to Jaron Lanier's book *You Are Not a Gadget* to explore her discomfort with the Facebook model of identity, the play of generations continues, for Lanier is twice Zuckerberg's age. Lanier may be 50, yet this "master programmer and virtual reality pioneer"—Smith's characterization—is an insider with the expertise to expose the shortcomings of the technology he claims Zuckerberg and his contemporaries have too uncritically embraced. Lanier's title says it all: computer technology is inadequate to the task of self-representation. "In Lanier's view," Smith writes, "there is no perfect computer analogue for what we call a 'person'." Smith concurs: "When a human being becomes a set of data on a website like Facebook, he or she is reduced. Everything shrinks" (58–59). Smith and Lanier are deeply troubled by the erasure of personhood that results from the mismatch between what we are and what information technology is capable of saying we are. Even more disturbing to them—and to me as well—is the thought that "2.0 people [may] feel their socially networked selves genuinely represent them to completion." "Is it possible," Smith asks, "that what is communicated between people online 'eventually becomes their truth'?"[11] Smith may not like what she sees, but she ends up conceding that "2.0 people" are here to stay: "I am dreaming of a Web that caters to a kind of person who no longer exists," she concludes. "A private person, a person who is a mystery, to the world and—which is more important—to herself. Person as mystery: this idea of personhood is certainly changing, perhaps has already changed. Because I find I agree with Zuckerberg: selves evolve" (59–60).

Like Smith and Lanier, Laurie McNeill sees in Facebook the promotion of a "homogenized model of subjectivity" (68). Investigating Facebook's identity protocols, she documents the software's imperatives, the manifold ways in which Facebook "has been *designed* to become part of users' daily lives, and to shape their offline narratives and selves in Facebooked

ways" (67, emphasis in original). The enforcement of identity norms, of course, was always present in the pre-digital world, but McNeill's account suggests that the coercion is more obvious, and possibly more extreme, online: "The close embrace of the corporate, technological, and autobiographical enables the software to play a significant role in directing who users imagine themselves to be" (76). The endless skirmishes between Facebook and its users over privacy issues provide a constant reminder of Facebook's assertion of control. The site may have originated in the milieu of college social life, but its objectives have become more corporate in the wake of its launch as a publicly traded security. Despite the cheerful veneer of fellowship and community that are supposedly the consequence of "friending" and "liking," Facebook nurtures its users' self-display to provide a steady stream of personal data for commercial exploitation. As McNeill puts it, "Facebook turns the collective desire for autobiographical representations into an information harvest" (75).

Smith, Lanier, and McNeill share a concern that digital models of selfhood are reductive; sizing up "People 2.0" on Facebook and the like, they see a fundamental incompleteness or lack. Looking over their shoulders, I read this lack as a consequence of the absence of narrative and the identity work that it performs, for narrative not only represents our identities, it constitutes them. As I suggested earlier, "*self inheres in a narrative of some kind*." Pondering this intimate link between narrative and selfhood makes me wonder whether Smith's bleak forecast for the future of "Person 1.0" points as well toward the end of self-narration and autobiography as we have known them. What is the place of narrative in our time?

In *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, media theorist Douglas Rushkoff provides a sobering answer, contending that we live today in a "postnarrative world" (31). He believes that the narrative collapse he posits has left contemporary culture in a state of panic and trauma as it struggles to deal with digital reality.[12] But do we live in a postnarrative world? In fact, Rushkoff's supporting analysis undercuts his large-scale thesis, for narrative and story continue to supply the terms of his discussion. Take the case of computer games, which Rushkoff claims "may, in fact, be popular culture's first satisfactory answer to the collapse of narrative" (58). He characterizes these games as a theater of "fantasy adventures" that unfold through an "open and participatory approach to story" (60). They may well illustrate "the inability of stories to function as they used to" (66), but that has always been the fate of stories. Sooner or later, they come up short as a measure of the world they presume to describe, and then new stories and new forms of stories take their place. As for computer games, they may be "open" and "participatory," but they function as stories nonetheless. To take another example, Rushkoff points to the advent of the television remote's power to disrupt the flow of linear narrative programs as emblematic of

the breakdown of narrative order (21–22). In fact, narrative order has always contended with disruption. Novelists have been playing with it ever since the days of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

So I remain skeptical about the death of narrative, and as far as autobiography is concerned, there is plenty of evidence that personal narrative flourishes in a variety of media today. Social networking sites may be short on story, but Facebook and the rest are only part of the online picture, where anyone can—and does these days—operate a blog, a new and hugely popular form of life writing. And back in the world of print, the memoir boom launched in the 1990s in the United States continues unabated. Personal narrative remains a force in other traditional media as well. To mention only a couple of obvious, highly visible examples: on the radio, if we tune in to National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* on Fridays, we'll hear the latest installment of "StoryCorps," the long-running national project to record, disseminate, and archive any American's personal narrative; if we follow Oprah Winfrey on television, for example, we'll catch another in her series of confessional interviews—James Frey admitting in 2006 to lying in his memoir which Winfrey had chosen for her Book Club, Lance Armstrong admitting in 2013 to doping for every one of his wins of cycling's Tour de France. And interview shows, a staple of daily radio (Terry Gross) and television (Charlie Rose), offer more extended displays of personal narrative. More to the point, however, if we were scouting for evidence of the narrative collapse that Rushkoff envisions, we would expect to find it in the social encounters that make up our daily lives, the primary site for the performance of self-narration. Here the exchange of identity stories continues as before, structured by the unspoken rules that govern the narrative identity system in which we are all players.

The Autobiographical Impulse

So for now it remains pertinent to ask why self-narration continues to play so large a part in our lives in spite of the radical shifts in communication technology that Zadie Smith believes might well render "Persons 1.0" obsolete. I see at least three answers:

1 We are trained to do it from early childhood.
2 It addresses a metaphysical need to know our place in the larger scheme of things.
3 It promotes the well-being of the organisms that we are—it may even have an adaptive value.

As to the first proposition, I have already suggested that we are trained to engage in self-narration beginning in early childhood. Developmental psychologists have studied this key phase of identity formation in great

detail. They show how what they call "memory talk"—the little stories that parents and caregivers encourage children to tell about themselves—plays out across class and gender and across cultures. Robyn Fivush and Elaine Reese, for example, have traced the process through which the child "internalizes" "the culturally available narrative forms for recounting and for representing past experiences" (115). "In this way," they conclude, "children begin forming a more overarching, narratively organized life story" (117). Through the making of identity narrative, children develop serviceable narrative identities. Psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson formulates the result this way: "By accepting some definition as to who he is, . . . the adult is able to selectively reconstruct his past in such a way that, step for step, it seems to have planned him, or better, he seems to have planned *it*" (112, emphasis in original). Even though it's true that when we say who we are, we don't make up our stories out of whole cloth, the act of making, the performing of self and story, is, nevertheless, a freedom we can exercise in the midst of manifold constraints.

As to the second proposition, reading Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* in 1968 predisposed me to believe that self-narration answers a metaphysical need to know our place in the larger scheme of things. Because we are born and die "*in mediis rebus*" (7), as Kermode puts it, because we know neither our beginnings nor our endings, we turn to fictions to reach beyond the existential boundaries of our place in the middle, to satisfy our hunger for total and final knowledge of our lives: "We project ourselves—a small, humble elect, perhaps—past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (8). "To see the structure whole"—this is, ultimately, the goal of any self-narration.

Some thirty years after reading *The Sense of an Ending*, I read another book that made an equally decisive impact on my thinking about self-narration, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, by Antonio Damasio.[13] I've already mentioned his work, and I return to it now because it prompted me to entertain my third proposition about our motives for self-narration, namely, that it promotes the well-being of the organisms that we are. Damasio has a lot to say about *homeostasis*, a technical term that refers to the body's automatic regulation of its physiology—its temperature, its oxygen concentration, its pH, and so forth. He employs this term as a "convenient shorthand for the ensemble of regulations and the resulting state of regulated life" in the human organism (*Looking* 30). For Damasio, the body emerges as a "homeostasis machine" (31): the adaptive goal of all its manifold activity of homeostatic regulation, a great deal of it unconscious, is the health of the organism as it moves forward into the future. Was the autobiographical act, I wondered, also a homeostatic activity?

I had come to Damasio's account of the origins of consciousness as a literary student of self and narrative in autobiography, in texts, whereas

Damasio was investigating self and narrative as dimensions of consciousness in the body. Does it make sense, I found myself asking, to see the body's neurobiological story and the mind's psychological, social, and literary story as two different registers of a single narrative unfolding in the totality of our existence?[14] Sizing up the link between the neural and the literary, I speculated as follows:

> The adaptive purpose of self-narrative, whether neurobiological or literary, would be the maintenance of stability in the human individual through the creation of a sense of identity. As self-narration maps and monitors the succession of body or identity states, it engenders what Damasio describes as "the notion of a bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same". (Damasio, *The Feeling* 134, quoted in Eakin, *Living* 155)

Put this way, autobiographical narrative, which invariably invokes a psychological binary—an I-narrator in the present in dialogue with an I-character in the past—might be designed precisely to solve the conundrum of continuous identity: how we manage—if we do—to change over time and yet remain in some deep sense the same.

To posit self-narration as a homeostatic identity process is to claim for it an adaptive or "biological" value, which Damasio defines as "managing and safekeeping life" (*Self* 25). For the individual this benefit would be maintaining a kind of "equilibrium" of identity, a binding of our present sense of self in a narrative matrix that links it to our earlier selves insofar as we can recall them. This retrospective facet of self-narration, moreover, as I suggested earlier, contributes to our planning for the time to come. It's also true that the group has a stake in each individual's self-narration, for self-narration is after all social in origin—witness our childhood training in "memory talk"—and the existence of a narrative identity system governing adult interpersonal relations confirms the social importance of self-narration's identity work. Our desire to keep the system going is registered by our concern when it breaks down. So far, there is no cure for Alzheimer's and other forms of senile dementia; at best, some of the recent drugs may slow its progress. And the palliative, coping strategies to jog an individual's failing memory of his or her place in the family story—the scrapbooks, the old photographs, the home movies—can provide at best what Robert Frost described as "a momentary stay against confusion."[15] And who exactly is it, we should ask, who is "coping" with the individual's fading powers? The ethos of individualism that informs autobiography and self-narration—"*I* write my story, *I* say who I am"—can obscure the fact that the identity work they perform is also a social good. When an individual succumbs to memory loss, the rest of us are losers as well.[16]

Is there an evolutionary dimension to the adaptive value of self-narration? In a startling essay, "Hellhole," Dr. Atul Gawande brings home the existential importance of maintaining our identity equipment intact. Investigating solitary confinement in supermax prisons in the United States, and the parallel experience of POWs and hostages, he documents the brain damage and the accompanying erosion of identity that can result from isolation. "Everyone's identity is socially created" (40), he observes. "Without sustained social interaction, the human brain may become as impaired as one that has incurred a traumatic injury" (39). There may be an evolutionary substrate to our need for identity support: Gawande points to research on monkeys suggesting that social deprivation takes—if anything—a more drastic toll on them than on humans. My hunch is that self-narration belongs to the set of behaviors Gawande had in view in his commentary on the social needs of primates. That said, the idea that self-narration might be part of our evolutionary history as a species is to take this line of thinking very far indeed, and Antonio Damasio, for one, is prepared to go that distance. All value, he claims, "relates directly or indirectly to survival," and "in the case of humans in particular, value also relates to the *quality* of that survival in the form of *well-being*" (*Self* 48, emphasis in original). And well-being for humans is achieved through homeostatic process. Damasio traces the deep origins of biological value to the level of the single cell, of gene networks, of the molecule: "We are confronting questions about the very origin of life. We can say with some confidence that the conformation of some molecules lends them a natural 'self' preservation, as close to the first light of homeostasis as one can get at the moment" (*Self* 324, n. 7).[17]

Any inquiry into the origins and purpose of autobiography and self-narration offers a lesson in point of view. Literary historians such as Gusdorf, Weintraub, and Bruss propose a period-specific, text-focused perspective stressing autobiography's link to Enlightenment ideals in the West. If, however, autobiography is indeed more than a literary phenomenon, if the drive to perform it is instilled in us by the cultures we inhabit, and still more, if this drive can be said to be a homeostatic process, rooted in our bodies like the sense of self it attempts to express, then perhaps the autobiographical impulse ultimately belongs as a late moment to a trajectory that can be traced all the way back—or down—to the human cell's most basic drive for survival sketched by Damasio. To place these two approaches to autobiography and self-narration side by side is to highlight the fact that two different yet *not* mutually exclusive understandings of narrative are in play here: one conceiving narrative narrowly as a literary form or forms and the other entertaining a broader view of narrative as something to do with society, with identity, with the body. Taken together, these two approaches remind us that both nature and nurture contribute to the rise and value of talking about ourselves.

Cosmograms

I want to conclude by shifting my focus on self-narration one last time to consider life writing as a kind of small-scale cosmogram. It's doubtless a sign of advancing age when you find yourself attracted to the big picture, to astronomy, to cosmology, to the rise and fall of civilizations. During a recent trip to Yucatán and Chiapas to visit key sites of Maya archeology, I was fascinated by the huge labor the Maya invested to align the temples of their vast ceremonial complexes with the movement of the sun, the moon, and the planets. They used architecture to embody their relation to the world; as my guide kept saying, "They were making cosmograms." The temple of Kukulkan, popularly known as El Castillo, at Chichen-Itza offers a good example of the symbolic spaces or cosmograms they created. At the time of the semi-annual equinoxes, a seven-segment serpent of light brilliantly appears against the northern face of the pyramid when viewed from the west. I haven't seen this, but huge crowds have when they gather each spring and fall to witness this cosmic event. The layout of the so-called Cross group of temples at Palenque displays another characteristic Maya cosmogram. The temple on the left, the northern side of the square, is the so-called Temple of the Cross, associated with the celestial level of the cosmos, representing the mythical place where the patron deity god of the Palenque Triad was born. The Temple of the Foliated Cross, on the eastern side of the square, was linked to the earthly level associated with the god of agriculture. And the Temple of the Sun, on the western side of the square, was associated with the Jaguar Sun God of the Underworld. Three temples, three levels of the cosmos. These briefings come from my little guidebook and my brilliant guide, who kept emphasizing how physical, architectural space was always merging for the Maya with mythic, cosmological space.[18] When he talked about cosmograms, I thought, autobiography descends from this impulse—it's a personal myth-making in which we size up our place in the world. One can easily think of many other architectural cosmograms: the siting of Pueblo Bonito in New Mexico's Chaco Canyon, for example, the axial layout of the Egyptian temples along the Nile, the orientation of cathedrals and mosques, the five-tower mandala-like pattern of Khmer complexes in Southeast Asia, and so forth. All of these monumental building programs express the need to align human existence with some defining principle of order.

Like architecture, life writing can also serve to create cosmograms. Drawing this parallel involves a huge asymmetry in scale as we shift from the collective expression of a people and its civilization to an individual's account of a life course. I do so, nonetheless, to suggest that the autobiographical act is in its way also an act of alignment, a mapping of self and its place in the world, and a personal building program to articulate

the shape of a life. Let's start with belief, for spiritual autobiography is one of the oldest forms of self-narration and the type of narrative with the most obvious claim to constituting a kind of cosmogram. Conversion narratives, from Augustine's *Confessions* all the way forward to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, show individuals struggling to align their lives with orthodox religious patterns. At the same time, the power of this drive to alignment with some principle of order is reflected in the large class of stories of failed alignment, cautionary tales of deconversion, disconfirmation, and disintegration—I'm thinking of *The Education of Henry Adams*, of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Crack-Up," of Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Words*.

In between these poles of belief and unbelief, of making and unmaking in the shaping of lives, there is a large middle ground, occupied—I suspect—by many of us. People usually have a pretty good idea of what their lives are supposed to look like, for cultures tend to be full of life story models, and families and social institutions—schools and churches—play a key role in their transmission. Whether they want to live those lives is another story. In my own small case, I picked up signals from my father about the success story that he had in mind for me, about the importance of going to the right schools, and so forth. Fathers have plans for sons, and the sons know it. To be sure, the success story, or any kind of story about a career, is hardly a cosmogram on the scale of the Maya temples, but the drive to align—or alternatively, to defy—a culturally sanctioned model is hard to escape in the world we inhabit.

I think, though, that as we get older, we want to think that our lives amount to something more; we can reach a point when, with Amy Lowell, we're moved to ask, "Christ! What are patterns for?" And here is where cosmograms come in, and narrative, for narrative is not merely a vehicle to report the link between the individual life and some larger, higher principle of order, as in the case of spiritual autobiographies; narrative is itself an order-making structure. We use narrative, as Frank Kermode suggests, to situate our "span," our threescore years and ten, in relation to origins and endpoints that lie beyond us, to confer order on the scatter of our days. Words allow us to know in life-enhancing fictions something of our otherwise unknowable beginning and end: "I was born," we say, and—with Emily Dickinson—we may also claim, "I heard a fly buzz when I died." I know I'm moving a long way from the casual talking about ourselves that I have argued is autobiography's foundation. But those bits and pieces of daily dialogue that we too hastily dismiss as "small talk" are the building blocks of our lives and life stories, or so I believe. Humans have been makers for a very long time, and when we make our life stories, and in so doing invent our selves, we just may be making something on the order of a cosmogram.

Notes

1 This essay appeared in *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 6, no. 1 (2014): 21–43, and is reprinted with permission from the University of Nebraska Press.
2 For further discussion of narrative as a fundamental structure of human experience, see Eakin, *Touching* 190–97.
3 For a sensitive probing of registers of selfhood that may withstand the assault of Alzheimer's disease on memory and identity, see Franzen. In "My Father's Brain," Franzen struggles to believe that "we are larger than our biologies" (33).
4 For further discussion of the narrative identity system and its rules, see Eakin, *Living* 31–51.
5 For a more detailed account of the implications of Damasio's views for the study of autobiography, see Eakin, *Living* 67–78.
6 I draw here on the work of Schacter and Squire.
7 For an account of the very young child's use of future-oriented memory scripts, see Nelson. See also Klein on the importance of recognizing memory's fundamental orientation toward the future.
8 See Eakin, "Malcolm X."
9 Bruss, *Autobiographical* 10–11. See also Lejeune. Lejeune's early essay remains the most widely discussed attempt to specify the rules governing autobiography as a genre.
10 Damasio believes that "the ongoing digital revolution, the globalization of cultural information, and the coming of the age of empathy are pressures likely to lead to structural modifications of mind and self, by which I mean modifications of the very brain processes that shape the mind and self" (*Self* 182).
11 It is probably too soon to give a substantial answer to this question, but if people are selling themselves short in the way Smith and Lanier fear, then Elizabeth Bruss's speculation that "autobiography could simply become obsolete if its defining features, such as individual identity, cease to be important for a particular culture" may indeed come to pass (15). In this connection, it's worth noting that a study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project supports the idea that for a substantial group of users "Facebook addiction has given way to Facebook fatigue" (Wortham).
12 Rushkoff's language tends to be overheated; *shock*, *trauma*, and *panic* are the words he associates with the cultural landscape he is describing. Kermode wisely comments that "crisis, however facile the conception, is inescapably a central element in our endeavours towards making sense of our world. It seems to be a condition attaching to the exercise of thinking about the future that one should assume one's own time to stand in an extraordinary relation to it" (94).
13 In presenting Damasio's views, I also quote from *Looking for Spinoza*.
14 This is how I formulated the question in *Living Autobiographically* (154). Reading Mark Johnson's account of pragmatism, however, made me revisit my thinking about self-narration as a homeostatic process. The two-part form of the question as I posed it—the "body's neurobiological story" on the one hand and the "mind's psychological, social, and literary story" on the other—suggested a gap between body and mind that I needed to find a way to bridge. On the contrary, Johnson argues that there is no gap because "human thinking is a continuous feeling-thinking process that is forever tied to our body's monitoring of its own states" (98). I see now that my formulation betrays a dualistic hangover in my thinking at odds with my conviction that self and narrative are rooted in the body.

15 In this connection, see Wilkinson for an account of Microsoft engineer Gordon Bell's attempt to harness digital technology to perform the work of autobiographical memory. Others have applied his research to aid individuals suffering from memory loss.

16 In "Speak, Memory," Oliver Sacks celebrates the social dimension of human memory work that, somewhat paradoxically, is enabled precisely by memory's failings, in this case with sources: "Indifference to source allows us to assimilate what we read, what we are told, what others say and think and write and paint, as intensely and richly as if they were primary experiences. It allows us to see and hear with other eyes and ears, to enter into other minds, to assimilate the art and science and religion of the whole culture, to enter into and contribute to the common mind, the general commonwealth of knowledge" (21).

17 See also neurophilosopher Patricia Churchland, who posits the beginning of the human "values story" this way: "That anything has value *at all* and is motivating *at all* ultimately depends on the very ancient neural organization serving survival and well-being" (98, emphasis in original).

18 My guide was the archeologist William Saturno of Boston University. Saturno is celebrated for his discovery of a set of murals in Guatemala that has revolutionized received thinking about the unfolding of Maya civilization.

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10 Self and Self-Representation Online and Off

"Writing the Self," the title of this special issue of *Frame*, has a grand ring to it, but the phrase risks suggesting that self—especially when preceded by the definite article—is something thing-like, whereas I prefer to think of self as an awareness of an unfolding process, a name we give to a special dimension of consciousness[1]. Used in this way, *self* functions as a shorthand for the complicated sense we have of our self-experience. The "writing" part of the phrase—if we take it to denote broadly the act of representation in any mode—is more promising. When we "write self," however we do it—and we do it all the time—we track the elusive and shifting traces of the person who bears our name. The *self* part and the *writing* part are inextricably bound together, for when it comes to self, we cannot help but make what we say we find. This is because, neurologically speaking, memory constructs anew our past experience—whether from a moment ago or years ago—in each and every act of recollection.

Pursuing the link between self and self-representation, Philippe Lejeune asserts that new developments in technologies of communication have promoted new forms of self-expression: diary in the case of paper and autobiography in the case of printing. Moreover, he gives technology the upper hand in this dialogic cultural process: "There is no set 'I' that remains identical throughout the history of humankind and simply expresses itself differently depending on the tools at hand. In this case, it is the tool that shapes the craftsman" (248). If Lejeune is right, it is timely to ask whether the advent of the Internet and the social media enabled by it have in fact produced new forms of self-expression and even new kinds of selves. This is my focus in the first part of this essay. My hunch, however, is that while the Internet has brought ease and speed to the way we talk about ourselves, and some new forms in which to do it, performing identity work online is really not radically different from doing so offline. For this reason, self-representation on the Internet cannot be properly understood in isolation from the offline world, and the key to that understanding is narrative. Because more and more of us inhabit online and offline worlds at the same time, the second part of this essay features the role of narrative in organizing both of them. In order to highlight the contrast between the characteristic brevity of daily

online self-narration and the expansiveness of offline autobiography and memoir, I will consider some end-of-life narratives that probe the larger, existential meaning of a life.

Communication technologies have changed hugely during my lifetime. I date from the days of snail mail and the telephone; television was just coming in when I was in grade school. To compensate for this generational gap, I open this consideration of self in the digital age by looking briefly at the lives of two young men who grew up with the Internet. They used it a lot, and it is also true that it used them.

Betrayal and Suicide at Rutgers

The sad story of two freshmen roommates that ended in disaster for both unfolded swiftly at Rutgers in the early fall of 2010. One of the young men, Tyler Clementi, was gay; the other, Dharun Ravi, was not. On three occasions Clementi asked Ravi for exclusive use of the small dorm room they shared in order to meet privately with a somewhat older man ("M.B."). Ravi had enabled his computer's webcam to operate remotely, and on the second of these occasions (September 19th), he used it briefly from a friend's room across the hall to spy on Clementi and his male companion. Immediately afterward, Ravi tweeted, "Roommate asked for the room till midnight. I went into molly's room and turned on my webcam. I saw him making out with a dude. Yay" (Parker 45). Clementi read Ravi's message the next day. Undeterred, however, by Ravi's behavior, Clementi asked Ravi for the use of the room again a day later (September 21st). This time Ravi planned a more deliberate exposure of his roommate. After rigging his computer to accept any incoming calls automatically, he invited "anyone with iChat . . . to video chat me between the hours of 9:30 and 12" (Parker 48). Clementi read this tweet and disabled Ravi's webcam before receiving M.B. in the room. Later that night Clementi consulted with others online about what to do, and he lodged a formal complaint about Ravi's invasion of his privacy. The next day (September 22nd), Clementi traveled to the George Washington Bridge where he leaped to his death after posting a final message on his Facebook app: "Jumping off the gw bridge sorry" (Parker 49). As for Ravi, in March of 2012 he was tried and convicted of invasion of privacy and bias intimidation for his role in the webcam spying incidents. This, in capsule form, is Clementi's and Ravi's story.

Why had these two young lives taken such a disastrous turn when the formative period of discovery and consolidation of adult identity in college was just beginning? In an article that he wrote for the *New Yorker* in February 2012, a month before Ravi's trial, Ian Parker investigates this painful story of miscommunication online and off. In the three weeks they lived together, they "barely had a conversation" (43). Parker concludes, "In person, [Clementi] and Ravi had maintained a

wary coexistence, and it was built on not discussing what they knew and said of each other online" (47). And they were online a lot—this is what fascinated me in Parker's reconstruction of their story. Both men used the Internet and all its resources constantly, logging in to social media and various forums at any hour of the day or night. Each of them had checked out the other online before they met at Rutgers: Ravi had Googled Clementi's username to see what he could turn up, and Clementi, for his part, knew that Ravi had seen his postings on *Justusboys*, a gay pornography site. When they started college in the fall, online and offline activities were intimately entwined in their awkward encounters. Parker gives this account of their first moments alone together in their Rutgers dorm room once their respective parents had left them to settle in:

> As Ravi unpacked, Clementi was chatting [on instant messenger] with Yang [a female friend]. "I'm reading his twitter page and umm he's sitting right next to me," he wrote. "I still don't kno how to say his name." . . . "You should just start a conversation," Yang wrote. "Like . . . hey, how the heck do I pronounce your name?" . . . [Clementi replies], "That's too funny / your giving me scripted conversations." (42–43)

Where, exactly, is the Clementi-Ravi story unfolding? The instant messaging between Clementi and Yang that fills the silence between Clementi and Ravi in their small room challenges any easy demarcation of boundaries between online and offline worlds—the one is "sitting right next to" the other.

Although Internet communication plays a dark and decisive role in this story, the content of the various messages and posts—the social insecurities about what to say and do, how to be—comes across as normal teen talk. Note the hesitations, the embarrassed pauses, the nervous laughter, the self-consciousness in this characteristic instant messenger exchange between Clementi and Yang after Clementi had read Ravi's "Yay" tweet from the first spying episode:

> Yang: I would feel seriously violated.
> Clementi: When I first read the tweet
> I defs felt violated
> but then
> when I remembered what actually happened . . .
> idk
> Yang: um
> Clementi: doesn't seem soooo bad lol
> Yang: dude
> Clementi: hahaha
> Yang: not only did he peep

he told the entire world about it
Clementi: yah
Yang: you okay with that? (46)

It's striking how skillful this practiced pair are in finding ways to register tone, to capture affect in their instant messages. If the speaking voice is missing, they do a good job of making up for its absence—Yang's "dude" reply to Clementi's "lol" makes me feel I can hear her say it.

There is also nothing novel about the identity issues at play in this story. Online resources, however, did provide Clementi with a chance to talk them through, overcoming an offline shyness that might otherwise have been inhibiting. This benefit was offset, however, by Ravi's blundering, demonstrating the online world's potential for harm. The identity concern Clementi is wrestling with here—an online outing to anyone who might tune in to Ravi's tweet—might well have played out differently were it not for the speed and open-ended nature of the Internet channels of communication that Ravi used. Ravi may have been proud of his tech smarts, but he was in way over his head, setting in motion a series of events that spiraled fatally out of control.

Brave New Digital World?

To lay out some current views of digital identity, I draw on a multidisciplinary collection of essays edited by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. In her survey of postmodern identity theory, Helen Kennedy revisits debates in cultural studies about the concept of identity. She cites the work of theorists such as Stuart Hall and Gilles Deleuze for whom "the problem with identity is that it implies stability and stasis" (31), in contrast with their postmodern view of identity as fragmented and fluid. Such either/or polarities—identity as either fixed and stable or fragmented and fluid—strike me as inadequate to address the complexity of identity experience; they fail to capture how identity can change over time and yet in some way remain recognizably the same.

More pertinent—and revealing—to a consideration of identity in the digital age is Kennedy's discussion of anonymity, which seems to Sherry Turkle and other media commentators to offer users an opportunity for identity experimentation online. Kennedy's own research on ethnic minority women using the Internet in the United Kingdom, however, points up the disconnect between the theories she is reviewing and the identity experience of ordinary people like Clementi, Ravi, and their friends. She found that her subjects "showed no signs of wanting to hide their gender and ethnicity and so 'benefit' from the possibility of anonymity that cyberspace offers them" (33).[2] Kennedy urges academics not to lose sight of "the real struggles of real people" (39). As the Rutgers story reminds

us, "online" and "offline" may be crude markers when it comes to understanding the continuum of self-experience today.

Media theorist Rob Cover offers another forceful corrective to postmodern views of the Internet as a space of untrammeled freedom for identity experimentation.[3] Investigating the representation of subjectivity on Facebook, Cover discerns not freedom but constraint: "the social networking tools of subject performance provide limited scope for playing out an identity in accord with anything but the most simplistic and simplified discourses articulating only the most limited normative choices" (66). Cover's analysis of social media is informed by Judith Butler's theories of performative identity, "based on the idea that identity and subjectivity is an ongoing process of becoming, rather than an ontological state of being, whereby becoming is a sequence of acts that retroactively constitute identity." "Online social networking behavior," Cover argues, "is as performative as 'real life' acts, and just as equally implies a stabilized core inner self behind the profile" (56). Moreover, when we engage in identity work online, we are responding to "an older, ongoing cultural demand that we process our selves and our actions into coherence, intelligibility, and recognizability, and thus disavow the instability of identity" (56–57). For Cover, this online identity work "is, effectively, not dissimilar from the identity work of having a conversation whereby a subject relates narratives of selfhood, desire, experiences, recent actions, and tastes." Embracing Foucault's view of "a disciplinary society of surveillance," Cover reads identity practices both online and off as rule-governed: "we police each other's subjecthood for coherence . . . Conflicting or unrecognizable selves narrated outside the restrictive norm or stereotype demand explanation" (59). For Cover and Butler, it is the cultural imperative for coherent identity, not postmodern theory and its celebration of fragmented identity, that is calling the shots online and off.

If Internet identity is not distinctively different from identity offline, but continuous with it and subject to the same cultural pressures, what can we say of the forms that express it online? To pose the question in this way risks suggesting that one can distinguish between self and self-expression, whereas in fact identity and its representation are mutually interdependent. Because we construct our selves whenever we engage in self-narration online or off, the qualities of identity and the properties of its representation are two different faces of a single phenomenon of self-experience. I pose the question, nevertheless, to highlight the forms of Internet expression, and some of them are novel. In the day of the "selfie," a huge amount of self-expression is pouring out online. While the Facebook profile is doubtless the most characteristic form of identity expression on the Internet today, it is by no means the whole story. How to bring the huge and expanding variety of personal narrative forms on the Internet to heel? To sort them out, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson propose a useful distinction between two kinds of online

sites: "protocol-driven" sites, which "have elaborate formats, driven by algorithms that dictate how users organize what they tell or present themselves," and "user-authored" sites, which "observe some protocols" but are "looser and may be minimal" (89). If Facebook is the archetype of the protocol-driven site, the Six-Word Memoir may stand for the user-authored site. Laurie McNeill's investigation of this popular feature of the online "blog-a-zine" *Smith* parallels the findings of Cover concerning Facebook. Users may be authors of their "mini-memoirs" (144), but McNeill demonstrates that the online space they occupy turns out to be just as rule-governed as the protocol-heavy Facebook page. Online narrative forms turn out to be constrained by generic conventions in much the same way as those offline.

Where do the rules for producing the Six-Word Memoir come from? Some are provided by the site itself. According to McNeill, "the site's design and activities . . . indicate particular norms in place that guide memoirists in what they choose to narrate and how they should engage with other writers" (152). By commenting on particular memoirs, the community of users complements the site's built-in controls on life writing behavior, helping to "groom new members and police violations" (154) of community norms. McNeill shows how the Internet inflects the playing out of genre in a novel fashion, setting up a requirement "to show and tell and read and respond to online lives" (151). In this way Internet life writing becomes a collective act, in comparison with the individualistic aura that typically accompanies memoir offline. McNeill makes a convincing case that new forms of life writing are emerging in response to "the needs of the digital life narrator." "I call these forms 'auto/tweetographies,'" she writes, "short installments of life narrative, which share moments, experiences, and lives in miniature, and which will be updated or replaced regularly . . . with new material" (149). In this view, digital life writing is likely to be brief, collective, and ephemeral.

Narrative and Technologies of the Self

Brief, collective, and ephemeral—McNeill may be right that the "auto/tweetographies" she describes do indeed satisfy the needs of the digital life narrator, but if they do, that may be cause for concern. As novelist Zadie Smith sees it, "When a human being becomes a set of data on a website like Facebook, he or she is reduced." For Smith, a huge gulf separates "People 2.0"—the socially networked selves of users online—and her traditional idea of the "Person 1.0"—"a private person, a person who is a mystery, to the world and . . . to herself." Smith worries that "2.0 people [may] feel their socially networked selves genuinely represent them to completion" (59–60). Are Smith's misgivings about Internet identity justified? A major factor contributing to the impression that social networking identities are flat or reductive may be the diminished

role given to narrative in creating them, in contrast to the offline world where narrative remains the dominant identity technology.

Before addressing the role of narrative in the creation of identity online and off, it makes sense to ask what we mean by *technology* when we speak of technologies of identity. Michel Foucault's expansive conception of "technologies of the self" is instructive. Foucault sought to identify "specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves" ("Technologies" 18), and he focused on Stoic and Christian practices of self-examination by way of illustration. Driving his investigation of the technologies of the self was a large-scale question that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century: "What are we in our actuality?" ("Political" 145). Exploring narrative's role in writing self today may point the way to answering Foucault's bold question.

Julie Rak and Anna Poletti, the editors of *Identity Technologies*, launch their collection with the claim that "the idea of narrative may not fit what identity formation looks like in digital media" (11). To support this view they subscribe to a narrow understanding of narrative as product, specifically a text of some kind. To the contrary, narrative is much more than text; it functions as an identity practice, about which I'll say more presently. Moreover, recent work in neurobiology suggests that narrative may be in fact a mode of perception with the result that self may be said to exist inside the *narrative* matrix of consciousness.[4] Happily, the editors' limited view of narrative is countered by many of their contributors. Smith and Watson, for example, conceive of their "toolbox" for online self-presentation as a series of approaches to "online personal narrative formats" (72). Again, Aimée Morrison asserts that "there is no question—particularly since the introduction of the Timeline interface—that Facebook and its users are producing life narratives" (127). And for Alessandra Micalizzi, the Internet is both an identity technology (219) and a narrative technology (220).

So why do Smith, Watson, and the other contributors bring narrative into play in their consideration of online identity? If online and offline worlds are as intimately connected as the Rutgers story suggests, then this move is predictable and indeed inevitable because of narrative's primary role in constructing identity offline.[5] Shortly after the acquisition of language, children are trained by parents and caregivers to produce brief narratives about their experiences. Through this "memory talk," they are introduced to the narrative practices of their culture; they learn that they are expected by others to be able to talk about themselves following certain basic conventions. By the time we reach adulthood, we know how to produce on demand a version of our life stories that is appropriate to the context. In this way we become players in a narrative identity system: our self-narrations confirm to others that we possess normally functioning identities. When individuals lose their narrative competence, however, as the result of age or injury, we can become aware of the extent to which the apparently spontaneous and easy exchange of personal

stories in our social encounters is organized as a rule-governed system. We monitor the self-narrations of others for lapses, and when autobiographical memory and narrative competence fail, we may judge the self of such an individual to be fundamentally compromised or damaged. In the narrative identity regime, narrative rules function as identity rules.[6]

This brief account of the narrative identity system we inhabit dovetails with Rob Cover's and Judith Butler's views of identity performance that I discussed earlier. They stress the cultural demand for identity coherence, and I would add that the display of narrative identity functions precisely as the signature of that coherence. Summarizing Butler's theory of performance, Cover writes, "the self is performed reiteratively as a process in accord with a discursively given set of norms, stabilizing over time to produce the fiction of a fixed, inner, essential selfhood, which retroactively produces the illusion that there is a core doer behind the deed" (58). It is narrative that enables us to capture these endlessly reiterated moments of identity performance, creating what Ulrich Neisser has called "the extended self" (36), the self existing across time.

Narrative is deeply temporal, and we need to ask what happens to it in digital circumstances. In an Internet environment of posts and updates, Laurie McNeill points to the miniaturization of life writing, as in the case of the Six-Word Memoir. This reduction may be symptomatic of a larger shift.[7] Philippe Lejeune believes that the Internet has created "a profound change in life itself wrought through its relationship with time" (249), eroding our ability to fashion narrative identities. To illustrate the drift of postmodern thinking that would support this view, he cites the work of sociologist Hartmut Rosa, who asserts that the conditions of existence are changing so rapidly that parents no longer have relevant experience to transmit to their children. As to the children who inhabit this fast-changing world, Rosa claims that they can no longer "develop even the outlines of a life project," and so the possibility of forming a narrative identity becomes obsolete (250–51). After flirting with this radical assessment of narrative identity's future, Lejeune concedes that it may be exaggerated. More specifically, in the case of life writing, while the diary and the letter have been transformed by Internet practices, autobiography—life narrative's long form—continues to flourish much as it has in recent decades. Taking up Lejeune's doubts and Rosa's reservations about narrative identity, I want to answer them by examining a series of end-of-life narratives that demonstrate why writing self in autobiography continues to matter in the digital age and in new ways.

Narrative, Time, and the End of the Story

The Internet is not the only force transforming our relationship with time. Advances in medicine are promoting longevity, so it may be challenging to sort out whether our operative sense of time and of the course

of a life is contracting or expanding or both at once. "People 2.0," such as Laurie McNeill's digital life narrators, may be posting what they are doing right now and what they did today, while Zadie Smith's "Person 1.0" may be thinking, "What have I done with my life?" and "What am I going to do with the rest of it?" I suspect that most of us operate in both time frames and play both roles—"People 2.0" and "Person 1.0"—but it is "Person 1.0" who claims my attention now and narrative in its longer forms. In *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, Atul Gawande observes that for most of human history "the natural course was to die before old age" (32). Now, however, we may expect to live long enough to face our endgame at an advanced age, and our adult children may have to face it with us. Hartmut Rosa's notion that parents no longer have relevant experience to transmit to their children misses this existential situation between the generations altogether, and I want to look at some relational autobiographies that precisely target it, illustrating as they do so the ability of narrative to respond to changes in our life circumstances.

Gawande indicts modern medicine's failure to grasp the problems of aging as more than a set of bodily conditions to fix. Chapter by chapter, he traces the inevitable decline as we age from comparative health and independence to dependency. The key to managing this process successfully, he believes, is maintaining a degree of autonomy as our physical and mental powers diminish. "Whatever the limits and travails we face, we want to retain the autonomy—the freedom—to be the authors of our lives. This is the very marrow of being human" (140). Gawande understands autonomy in narrative terms: "For human beings, life is meaningful because it is a story." Unlike the "experiencing self . . . absorbed in the moment," the "remembering self" is invested not just in recalling "the peaks of joy and valleys of misery but also how the story works out as a whole . . . And in stories, endings matter" (238–39). Following from this narrative perspective on aging is Gawande's stress on what he calls the "hard conversation," provoked by the felt sense of an ending looming into view, never more so than when our hand is nearly played out. This is when we should be given the opportunity to express our wishes about dying to our caregivers and to those we love.

Gawande had several of these frank confrontations with his father. The first of them is especially memorable, triggered by an MRI scan that revealed a tumor growing inside his father's spinal cord: "This was the moment when we stepped through the looking glass" (194). Father and son share this recognition, and in the father's remaining years, they navigate together decisions about treatment and eventually about hospice and palliative care. In Gawande's view, the deeper meaning of a life resides in identifying sustaining purposes outside ourselves, and in his father's case, there were several—a college he had founded near his native village in India, his charitable work for the Rotary Club—that contributed to a

sense that his life's value extended beyond himself. The father believed that he was part of a larger story, and the son shares in this belief. In the moving epilogue, Gawande relates the burial of his father's ashes in the Ganges: "I felt that we'd connected him to something far bigger than ourselves, in this place where people had been performing these rituals for so long" (262).

In *The Final Reminder: How I Emptied My Parents' House*, psychoanalyst Lydia Flem shows how the death of parents is intimately linked to our sense of our own mortality: "We knew that it was inevitable, but, like our own death, it seemed far away, in fact unimaginable" (1). For Flem, this loss brings a new, heightened sense of vulnerability, for "there is no longer anyone behind us." Moreover, because our parents are the repositories and guardians of our early lives, their ending can signal our own: in burying our parents, "we are also burying our childhood" (2). This apparent break in the lifeline between parents and children often sets in motion an auto/biographical project of narrative repair.[8] This is the case with Flem. Going through her parents' effects, room by room, closet by closet, drawer by drawer, overwhelmed by feelings of transgression as she invades what had been their privacy, she uncovers papers that document her parents' lives during World War II and the Holocaust, in particular her mother's participation in the Resistance, her capture by the Nazis, and her eventual survival at Auschwitz. This was the untold story (known to Flem only in fragments) that had darkened her childhood. Determined "to assume the history that had preceded my birth," she writes, "I wanted to release myself from a past that had remained trapped in their lungs and had prevented me from breathing freely" (57). Now, in speaking these unspeakable things that her parents had wished her not to know, in writing this book, Flem has the chance to exorcize them. This is her version of the "hard conversation," this one between herself and her readers. The telling of her death-centered story—"death is coiled up in us"—proves to be life-enhancing, "a rite of passage, a metamorphosis" (118), crucial to working through her bereavement.

Not everyone is up for the "hard conversation," the facing of our mortality, that Gawande urges and Flem enacts. For *New Yorker* cartoonist Roz Chast, it is her parents' refusal of the "hard conversation" that provides the title for her family memoir, *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?* Chast's attempts to get her elderly parents to talk about their last wishes are futile—"It was against my parents' principles to talk about death" (4). Chast admits that she had done "a pretty good job at avoiding all of this" (22) herself. She hated Brooklyn and her parents' apartment where she had spent an unhappy childhood. An only child, she had felt excluded from her parents' "tight little unit" (7), and the caption she supplies for a photo of the three of them when she was twelve tells it all: "Just a few more years, and I am *outta* here" (180). Her father

emerges as sweet, weak, and passive, overpowered by her domineering mother, an assistant elementary school principal who was proud of telling other people off with "a blast from Chast" (34). Now, as her parents age into increasing dependency hastened by falls and dementia, Chast is reluctantly drawn back in to cope with their collapsing lives.

The book she writes chronicles step by step their repeated hospital stays, their move into an assisted living complex (leaving behind an apartment crammed with the hoarded accumulations of a lifetime), and their eventual decline and death. Chast spares us nothing, nor does she spare herself, owning up to the difference between what she thinks a devoted daughter should feel and what she really does feel. Her skill as a cartoonist—her ability to compress, to focus, to highlight—makes the entire memoir an unforgettable and surprisingly funny "hard conversation" about contemporary death and dying. Chast had hoped to stage last words with her mother in which they might somehow bridge the lifelong distance between them, but her mother's indifference is devastating. When "the conversations had been reduced to almost nothing" (210), Chast recorded her mother's protracted dying in a remarkable series of ink drawings. There is no color in these sketches, only the date, and sometimes a brief notation. Her mother's mouth, which Chast had feared growing up, the formidable source of the "blasts from Chast," remains the focal point of these images, a dark portal beyond language. This is Chast's unflinching version of the "hard conversation" she had never succeeded in having with her parents while they were alive. In order to tell her story, Chast stretches the cartoon, a very short form, to cover the span of a lifetime: the cartoons, which offer close-ups that distil the essence of a situation or a state of mind, are embedded in a prose matrix, passages written by hand, and supplemented by photographs. The media blend, none of it drawing on the Internet, is at once familiar and startling, making this memoir one of the most original in years.

This essay approaches the Internet and narrative as key identity resources; we are likely to draw on both when we write self in the digital age. I'm skeptical, however, that the Internet offers the brave new world of selfhood promised by some postmodern identity theory. To the contrary, Rob Cover persuades me that identity work is performed in much the same way online and off; both environments are governed by the same cultural demand: that we display coherent identities. Narrative, I argue, is the signature of that coherence. That this should be the case is hardly surprising given the importance we attach to cultivating narrative competence in early childhood. As a result, in most cultures everyone is wired for narrative, so much so that the loss of narrative competence due to injury or dementia is routinely interpreted as a loss of identity.

When we go online, we bring to the keyboard this narrative endowment and our lifelong experience as players in a narrative identity system.

Accordingly, when I speak of the Internet and narrative as identity resources, I do not mean to suggest that they share an equivalent function. The Internet is indeed an instrument of change, shaping the needs of the digital life writer in ways that Laurie McNeill describes, whereas narrative *measures* change. It remains the primary motor of most self-representation because it permits us to track our lives and selves in passing time.

The late Mark Strand captures our existential situation in a remarkable poem, "The Continuous Life":

> Explain that you live between two great darks, the first
> With an ending, the second without one, that the luckiest
> Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
> Of hours and days, months and years, and believe
> It has meaning, despite the occasional fear
> You are slipping away with nothing completed, nothing
> To prove you existed. (21)

For Gawande, Flem, and Chast, it is narrative that measures and honors the space in between those "two great darks." Their stories show narrative's power to give such answers as we can to Foucault's question about what we are in our actuality. Narrative's force as a meaning-making technology shows no signs of flagging in the digital age.

Notes

1 This essay was published in a special issue, "Writing the Self," of *Frame* 28, no. 1 (May 2015), 11–29, and is reprinted with permission from *Frame* (Utrecht, the Netherlands), www.tijdschriftframe.nl/28-1-writing-the-self/1432/. Lines from "The Continuous Life" are quoted from *The Continuous Life* by Mark Strand, copyright 1990 by Mark Strand. They are used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

2 Lisa Nakamura's treatment of race in connection with online identity confirms the limitations of conceiving of the online world as a space where offline identity factors can be set aside.

3 See, for example, Smith and Watson, who note that "for some commentators online identity, as virtual, seems unbounded, purely a matter of choice and invention among avatars, rules, and subject positions" (82–83).

4 See Eakin, "Travelling with Narrative" in this volume.

5 I should note that in presenting narrative identity I am describing the situation that exists in U.S. society. I suspect that this reading applies equally to a large number of societies in the West.

6 For a discussion of "memory talk," see Eakin, *How* 102–6; for a discussion of the narrative identity system, see Eakin, *Living* 22–31.

7 For an extreme reading of this change, see Rushkoff, who contends that we live today in a "postnarrative world" (31).

8 For extended treatment of this literature, see Miller (1996).

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11 Autobiography and the Big Picture

A Cosmogram in California?

As we sped along the interstate just outside Yuma, heading to the Baja for whale watching, I recognized the place right away. This must be Felicity, I thought—I had never expected to see it. Two weeks earlier a double-page aerial view of the site in the *New York Times Magazine* had caught my eye: a series of buildings and paths organized in geometric patterns on a scrubby desert floor. The accompanying article by Jon Mooallem suggested that these 2,600 acres in the southeast corner of California were somehow linked to "A Journey to the Center of the World." I am a sucker for symmetry, for large-scale attempts to impose order on the landscape—in my twenties I loved Versailles, in my seventies I journeyed to Angkor Wat—and so I hoped that we could visit Felicity on our return from the Baja.

Five days later we did. After very good sandwiches and cool drinks at the pleasant café, we signed up for a tour led by Felicia, the wife of Felicity's founder, a wealthy Frenchman named Jacques-André Istel. Whatever else was true about his project, Istel had invested his desert acres with as much significance as he could. The tour's first stop was a small stone and glass pyramid. Once inside, our guide invited us one by one to stand in the pyramid's center, which she claimed was the official center of the world—as attested by a circular metal plate inlaid in the floor, by the little certificates she gave us, and by the pictures she egged us on to take of ourselves at this one-of-a-kind photo-op. Exiting the pyramid, we wandered off to inspect Istel's "Museum of History in Granite," recorded on huge panels arranged in patterned rows, each rose-colored slab beautifully carved with lists, texts, and pictures concerning a vast array of subjects including the class of '49 at Princeton, parachuting, the solar system, and the Big Bang. Was all this just a hodge-podge, or something more? Before we left, I climbed the steep flight of steps leading to the little vacant church of no denomination perched on a small hill Istel had built to overlook the site. On our way out, we passed one of the Eiffel Tower's original spiral staircases erected on a little plot near the parking lot. It seemed to belong there—or not—as much as anything else we had seen that afternoon.

Afterward, as we drove away, I felt sheepish about having obliged the others—my wife, my daughter, her deeply skeptical husband, and my five-year-old grandson—to visit this strange, hokey place. What had I expected to find? Whatever it was, I didn't find it there. When we got back to Tempe that night, I continued to brood about the oddity of Felicity's monuments and my attraction to them. In my travels I had stood at various centers of the world—Delphi, Jerusalem, Luxor, Palenque—and I had read about others, notably Mecca, and somehow this one seemed disturbingly empty. Was it merely a wealthy man's extravagant folly, an elaborate—and expensive—imitation of the sacred places that humans have created since the dawn of architecture and recorded history? Istel, at any rate, had persuaded California's Imperial County Board of Supervisors in 1985 to designate his chosen spot at Felicity as the center of the world (Mooallem 56). I didn't know what to think, and let it rest for a while.

Then, weeks later, I reread Mooallem's profile of Istel, and this time the Frenchman's monumental work in the desert seemed to show as part of an eccentric autobiography, featuring an early skydiver who eventually became a self-appointed curator of human history. In addition to the endorsements Istel has posted on his website for this latest phase of his story, validation seems to have come unconditionally from his long-time assistant Gene Britton, the artist who executes Istel's historical programs, engraving them slab by granite slab. "The fact that he had the vision to put this out here in the middle of nowhere blew my mind," Britton tells Mooallem. "He sold me on the idea. What can I say?" (58). Britton is, in effect, Istel's disciple, and his "theory" of Istel's project, according to Mooallem, was that "there had always been an element of grandeur and surreality to Istel's life, and . . . Istel wanted to leave a gift to humanity—and also a personal legacy—that conveys the same feeling" (59). If feeling was the key, however, why was my own response so clouded, and why had I and my companions proved to be such reluctant validators?

Istel himself provides an answer when he speaks of a key shift in his thinking about Felicity in this exchange with Mooallem: "The early days of Felicity were great fun . . . . The problem was, this was all whimsy. When we started doing serious stuff, nobody took us seriously" (57). Whimsy and serious stuff—there are elements of both in this outsize artifact, which helps to explain not only its draw as a roadside attraction good for lunch and a clever selfie but also its pull for someone like me who has become with advancing age preoccupied with Big Picture formulations of life on earth and our place in the cosmos. Setting aside my initial disappointment with Felicity—the commercial aura of the little pyramid, the emptiness of the little church—I increasingly admired the scale of Istel's vision of humanity's history, and his ambition to realize it by deploying some of the great traditional forms of signifying architecture

and design: a pyramid, a church, and axial symmetries. Istel's reach at Felicity is definitely huge: to ensure the legibility of his desert legacy for "distant descendants," he has supplied a "Rosetta Stone" with texts in English, Ancient Greek, Ancient Egyptian, Latin, and Chinese. The final panel of the series, marked Alpha and Omega, announces, "Unless we destroy ourselves, or succumb to a cosmic accident, our destiny should be set on a path to the stars."[1] The "serious stuff" at Felicity is nothing if not grand: Istel has linked himself to the history and future of the human race on granite panels he hopes may last 4,000 years. Has Istel constructed in the desert a kind of *cosmogram*?

Cosmograms and Quantum Cosmology

I first heard about cosmograms during a trip to visit Maya sites in the Yucatán. Our guide used the term to describe a ceremonial temple complex at Palenque that represented the Maya vision of a three-part universe—the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. For archeologists, cosmograms model the relation between humanity and the cosmos, building programs that are often carefully aligned with the movements of the sun, the moon, and the planets, notably tracking solstices and equinoxes. I liked the idea of a signifying architecture aligned with a principle of order, and, shifting scale from the lives of a people and their belief system to the life of an individual, I wondered whether autobiography—my special subject—could be considered a kind of present-day cosmogram. I explored this idea in an essay titled "Autobiography as Cosmogram," suggesting that life stories are the product of a similar order-seeking act of alignment.[2] Certainly conversion narratives are obvious cosmograms in this sense: whether it be Jonathan Edwards' "Personal Narrative" or *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, they tell the story of an individual's discovery of the true path for a life course and subsequent struggle to adhere to it. I went on to claim that at some level, the creation of any autobiography, not just the religious ones, is prompted by a desire to situate an individual life in what we may call the larger scheme of things. Now I was having second thoughts about the cosmogram idea. Didn't linking autobiography with the cosmos, even in a metaphor, smack of overreaching? Or did it point instead to the embattled state of the meaning of lives in a secular, digital age, with autobiography—or its equivalent—called on to perform the signifying work that cosmograms accomplished in the past? I suspect that these misgivings played into my ambivalent response to Istel's project in the California desert, my attraction to the ambition of his reach for meaning, my nagging feeling of lack, of hollowness at its core. Could contemporary cosmology resolve them?

Pursuing this notion of cosmograms and the meaning of lives, I turned to theoretical physicist Sean Carroll's *The Big Picture: On the Origins of*

Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself (2016). Carroll targets precisely the link between self and cosmos when he opens his ambitious sounding of the universe by asking the question that motivates any autobiography: "Can any one individual existence really *matter*?" (2). For possible answers, he posits two models of Big Picture stories to tell about the world: a religious one in which the universe is God's creation and a secular one in which the universe "simply is, unguided and unsustained, manifesting the patterns of nature with scrupulous regularity" (431). Having abandoned the Episcopalianism of his youth, Carroll embraces the second, scientific account, which disallows any comfortable notion of aligning human lives with some cosmic plan or purpose: "the universe, and the laws of physics," he observes, "aren't embedded in any bigger context, as far as we know" (45). In this view, the very idea of a cosmogram is obsolete.

Reviewing the history of cosmologies, Carroll presents first the ancient, Earth-centered, human-centered ones that were based on "a shared belief that we *mattered* in the greater scheme of things" (48). Then, in the main body of the book, he elaborates a contemporary post-Einsteinian, quantum mechanical cosmology in which we don't. "Cosmically speaking," he concludes, "there's no indication that we matter at all" (49). "Our status as parts of the physical universe implies that there is no overarching purpose to human lives, at least not any inherent in the universe beyond ourselves" (220). It's up to us, then, he urges, "to create meaning and purpose for ourselves" (390). Carroll's existentialist posture is surprisingly upbeat rather than bleak, given his vision of a universe in which "galaxies, planets, organisms, consciousness" (366) are all emergent, and ultimately temporary, phenomena: "Long after the human race has vanished from existence, the universe will still be here, trundling along in placid accord with the underlying laws of nature" (422). Convinced, nonetheless, that "our lives do matter" (2), he proposes an autobiographical "starting place" for our quest to create the meaning of our lives: "who we are" (391). Why? Because we are, he asserts, "the only source of 'mattering' in any cosmic sense" (422).

When we start from self in autobiography, however, it is narrative that takes us toward meaning, and the hard truth of Carroll's quantum cosmology is that the universe is not hospitable to narrative and meaning. To the extent that we are a part of nature, and Carroll constantly reminds us that we are, we are subject to the laws of physics, and "the world, according to classical physics, is not fundamentally teleological" (32)—it's not heading, in other words, to a finite ending or goal. Instead, he suggests, the world is better described as *ekinological* (from the Greek meaning "start" or "departure" [54]), its leading features unfolding from circumstances at its Big Bang beginning. In this account, the universe is motored by entropy, the playing out of the second law of thermodynamics driving the expanding and accelerating universe toward "a somewhat

lonely future": "one by one . . . planets and stars will fall into the black holes," and eventually

> all of the black holes in our observable universe will have evaporated into a thin mist of particles, which will grow more and more dilute as space continues to expand. The end result of this, our most likely scenario for the future of our universe, is nothing but cold, empty space, which will last literally forever. (52–53)

When Carroll's founding question, "Can any one individual existence really *matter*?" is set against this cosmic backdrop, "cold, empty space" seems to be as much of an answer as the laws of physics can supply. If selves and lives matter, and Carroll stresses that they do, it is we who will have to make them so.

Theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli's account of the universe largely confirms the drift of Carroll's; if anything, it is more disorienting, highlighting the abyss between our sense of our everyday experience and a physicist's quantum mechanical view of it. In *Reality Is Not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity* (2017), Rovelli's quantum theory dismantles space and time as conventionally conceived: "There is no longer space that 'contains' the world, and no longer time 'during the course of which' events occur" (183). Time in the quantum world is not the time of our experience: "elementary processes cannot be ordered along a common succession of instants" (178). Interestingly, in *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* (2014), a best-selling primer outlining Rovelli's quantum conception of the universe in capsule form, his closing move parallels Carroll's. The last, seventh lesson, "Ourselves," returns to the individual human being, and "that sense of individual existence and unique selfhood to which we can all testify" (65–66). Like Carroll, Rovelli stresses that we are part of nature and subject to its laws: "We are made of the same stardust of which all things are made" (79). At the same time, the truth of our distinctively human experience—of space, of time, of life—can only be expressed in its own appropriate language: "The world is complex, and we capture it with different languages, each appropriate to the process that we are describing" (75). Reality may well be not what it seems, but we live experientially in the world of seems, and one language appropriate to our human condition, I would add, is narrative, which functions as a primary resource in making sense of selves and lives.

The double sense of *matter* captures our dilemma: as *matter*, we are indeed stardust, made up of particles like all things in the universe, including light and space; as human beings, we hunger for meaning, we seek to *matter*. Undaunted by the immensity of the universe they study, both Carroll and Rovelli conclude by stressing the restless drive, the "caring" (Carroll) and "curiosity" (Rovelli), they take to be central

to our humanity. The key to Carroll's optimism in the face of "a universe without purpose" is his belief that "the universe is so gloriously knowable" (432), and he invokes Albert Camus's Sisyphus to embody the scientist's heroic quest for knowledge. Rovelli's final lesson, citing lines from Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, also affirms humanity's place in the cosmos, but on an edge, no longer at the center: "Here, on the edge of what we know, in contact with the ocean of the unknown, shines the mystery and the beauty of the world. And it's breathtaking" (81). There may well be no place for cosmograms with their promise of alignment with an overarching design in the thinking of these physicists, no reassuring sense that knowledge of the universe and the laws that govern it is equivalent to meaning, and yet, undaunted, they celebrate humanity's striving to know, much in the manner of Tennyson's Ulysses: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Making It Matter

In the wake of my visit to Istel's monuments in the desert and my readings in quantum cosmology, I found myself revisiting my claim that our endless practice of self-narration has the potential to address a metaphysical need to know our place in the larger scheme of things. How had I come to invest autobiography with such an ambition? I think now that the very formulation suggests part of the answer, *a place in a larger scheme*: I have always—ever since I became sufficiently self-aware to have such thoughts—wanted to inhabit a structure of meaning, meaning that would endow my life with purpose, that would justify it. What counted for me as such a structuring scheme?

Cultures abound in schemes for lives, models that propose a plan or plot for a life course, and I embraced one enthusiastically early on without quite recognizing that I was doing so. I was, as they said, "good in school." My young self, eager "Johnny E." as he signed his homework, loved school, although he learned pretty quickly that it was social death to let on just how much. And he had other lessons to learn. He was good at taking tests, and as the result of a citywide competition he was chosen to represent his hometown on a national radio program of the period, "Quiz Kids," that aired on Sunday afternoons. Pitched a softball question, "Who was the founder of the city of Cleveland?" he blurted out "Grover Cleveland," even though he really knew that "Moses" was the correct answer. It seemed to him that the whole world was listening, was watching him fall on his face. So, good in school, but not *that* good. Little did he suspect that he would spend the rest of his life in school, and that he would never quite shake the nagging feeling that he was not quite good enough for his profession.

The British historian Carolyn Steedman wisely observes that "children are always episodes in someone else's narrative" (122), and that was

certainly true in my case. I was programmed for my school story by parents who believed in education, especially my father, who was determined that I would have the kind of education he had wanted for himself and believed he had missed. I certainly got the message: study, do well, and to what end? To choose a career, not just a job but a lifework. Such a choice seemed momentous to me, and I expected it to be confirmed by some life-changing experience of vocation. Was this expectation of a calling, the idea that one's existence should be justified by one's works, something that I had absorbed from my Protestant background—my paternal grandfather was a Presbyterian minister—or possibly from the sober realism of my Depression-era parents? In any case, the hoped-for vocation turning point never came, and I dutifully pursued my literary studies without the depth of conviction that might have reassured me that I was worthy of the work I had chosen. Compounding my doubts, I suspected that my father thought of college teaching as definitely second choice, and a bruising tenure battle revived my misgivings—the Quiz Kid redux.

Then, in the mid-1970s I shifted away from nineteenth-century American fiction, my special field, to a new concern with twentieth-century autobiography. Was this turn to autobiography, for which I had no previous academic training, as accidental as I long thought? Or was I primed to investigate other people's stories because I felt I had no story of my own worth claiming? The study of lives became my vocation, though so deep was my belief that I had missed my calling that I failed to recognize it for what it was. As late as 2002, the year I retired, I could sum up my career in a few paragraphs with the title "Not a Story." Not a story? Or not this autobiography story? Did my anti-story posture reveal that at some level all my endless, crypto-autobiographical watching of others as they figured out the design of their lives had failed to help me figure out my own? Was life writing not good enough, not *big* enough, to do the job? Was that what led to my thinking of autobiography as a kind of cosmogram?

So many questions, and there was something else going on in my choice of metaphor: the cosmogram idea, I eventually realized, was only the latest avatar of my inveterate fascination with a broad range of Big Picture phenomena in art and in the world. In the early 1970s, for example, I was drawn to Edgar Allan Poe's "Lazarus" heroes—such as the survivor of "A Descent into the Maelström"—who sought to transcend the boundaries of mortal life in order to achieve final knowledge and return to tell the tale. And I liked Big-Picture-scale selves—especially Walt Whitman's "Walt Whitman," who identifies himself midway on in "Song of Myself" as "a Kosmos, of mighty Manhattan the son," Whitman who sported a self big enough to be "stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over," Whitman who claimed to be "one of the Supremes."

Later on, lacking the means of a Jacques-André Istel to build a grand-scale cosmogram of my own on the ground, I indulged my Big Picture

leanings vicariously: through travel to cosmogramic sites in many countries and through reading about others at home. I have spent hours gazing online at pictures of colossal Land art projects such as James Turrell's breath-taking structures at Roden Crater and Michael Heizer's monumental "City" in the Nevada desert.[3] In the same vein, I was mesmerized by Edward Burtynsky's huge photographs of quarries and tailings. The spectacular illustrations of Michael Benson's *Cosmigraphics* catered directly to the Big Picture fantasies I am describing: you can open this sumptuous book and behold a picture of the beginning of the universe (or close to it!), whether it's Robert Fludd's "depiction of a black void prior to the light of creation" (19) from 1617 or an "all-sky view of the cosmic microwave background radiation, the oldest discernible echo of the Big Bang in the perceivable universe" (34) captured in 2013 by the European Space Agency's Planck space telescope. I suspect that my taste for Big Pictures such as these, all this looking out, looking beyond the confines of my own existence, is yet one more indication of the undercurrent of restlessness playing out in my search for a settled vocation.

There is certainly an element of Big Picture grandeur in the cosmogram idea, but the key to the metaphor's attraction for me is that it captures my conception of autobiography as a world-building project intended to express the meaning of a life. To begin with, autobiography's cosmos does have a Big Picture scale of its own, the cosmos of consciousness and self dwelling in the human brain. Conjuring the vastness of this interior universe, Carlo Rovelli writes, "We have a hundred billion neurons in our brains, as many as there are stars in a galaxy, with an even more astronomical number of links and potential combinations through which they can interact" (*Seven* 74). Where the metaphor may mislead is that while the cosmograms realized in stone in many cultures over the centuries are by definition aligned with principles of order *beyond themselves*—the movements of the sun and the planets, for example—autobiographical cosmograms are not necessarily so aligned, although they may be, as in the case of conversion narratives and spiritual autobiographies oriented to a divine plan. Any autobiography models an individual world drawing on principles of order that emerge *from within* in the act of creation.

Alignment is the heart of any cosmogram, whether in text or stone, and its purpose is fulfilled in an experience of illumination that may be as profound as it is fleeting. In the case of the Maya temple of Kukulcan at Chichen-Itza—for me a favorite, striking example—the position of the sun at the equinox not only confirms that the stones are correctly oriented, but it permits—so I am told—anyone lucky enough to be there to witness a seven-segment serpent of light on the northern face of the pyramid when viewed from the west. Alignment generates illumination; terrestrial and celestial realms connect. In the case of an autobiography, on the other hand, the fulfillment of an alignment's promise can only be inferred by reading backward from a finished text. We only see the

seeing indirectly, for the work of alignment and its yield in an autobiographer's quest for meaning resides in the act of making.

From product to process: congruent with my evolving sense of self as emergent has been my instinct to speak less of autobiography than of *the autobiographical act*. I used to think that this phrase sounded inflated, but belated recognition of the huge amount of time we all spend talking about ourselves taught me otherwise. What I came to value in autobiographical texts more and more was their testimony to the process that created them—hence my attraction to terms such as *self-invention* and *making selves*. For me, the final stop in this backward transit from text to experience was the notion of *living autobiographically*, the idea that our daily acts of self-reporting are not merely preliminary to representation in autobiography and other forms of life writing; they deserve to be valued as acts of representation in themselves. Talking about ourselves and our lives, after all, is about as much self-representation as most of us get around to doing.

Autobiography as cosmogram: that's a lot of freight for a metaphor to carry. If it's up to us, though, to make our lives matter in an indifferent universe, maybe it's not surprising that I found myself building up autobiography by associating it with temple complexes in order to make it equal to the task. I was a reluctant existentialist for sure, but I have felt the pull toward this world view for a long time: if it drew me a few years ago to Sean Carroll's *The Big Picture*, it's also true that it had drawn me decades earlier to Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Words*, a rigorous and unflinching account of a life that dramatizes the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of the autobiographical endeavor. In a remarkable interview in 1960, generalizing from his own experience working on his autobiography, Sartre has this to say about the drive to self-representation:

> What I mean is that people—everyone—want this lived life of theirs, with all its obscurities (they have their noses in it) to be also a *presented* life, so that it stands free of everything that blots it out and becomes, through expression, essential, by reducing the reasons for its obscurity to the inessential conditions of its appearance. Each one wishes to write because each needs to be *significant*, to *signify* what he *experiences*. Otherwise, everything goes too quickly, one has one's nose to the ground, like the pig that is forced to dig up truffles, there is nothing.[4]

Why do people tell the stories of their lives, and why do other people pay attention when they do? Isn't it because, as Sartre puts it, we have our noses to the ground most of the time, we are immersed in our lives, and "everything goes too quickly"? When we pause to make sense of our experience, to talk, and sometimes even to write about ourselves,

however, countering the speed and obscurity of experience as it rushes toward oblivion, our lives can seem to "stand free" of the muddle of circumstance and become "essential." The "presented life" justifies and validates an existence; otherwise, "there is nothing." This is the promise of life writing's brave, existential fiction.

Notes

1 These words are inscribed on panel 416, the "end panel" of Istel's "History of Humanity." A picture of the panel is provided at Istel's website for his project, Museum of History in Granite, historyingranite.org.
2 "Autobiography as Cosmogram" was published in 2014 and is reprinted in the present volume.
3 For images of Roden Crater, see, for example, Hylton 38–39.
4 Ce que je veux dire, c'est que les gens—tous—voudraient que cette vie vécue, qui est la leur, avec toutes ses obscurités (ils ont le nez dessus), soit aussi vie *présentée*, qu'elle se dégage de tout ce qui l'écrase et qu'elle se fasse, par l'expression, essentielle, en réduisant les raisons de son écrasement aux conditions inessentielles de sa figure. Chacun veut écrire parce que chacun a besoin d'être *signifiant*, de *signifier* ce qu'il *éprouve*. Autrement, tout va trop vite, on a le nez contre terre, comme le cochon qu'on force à déterrer les truffes, il n'y a rien." (*Situations* IX, 133–34, emphases original; my trans.)

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IV

Epilogue

One Man's Story

The two remembrances gathered here tell complementary stories of vocation. The first traces my struggle with vocation to my relationship with my father, and the second relates its resolution through my relationship with my late mentor, James Olney. The one and only time I sought counseling, prompted by a stall in my graduate studies, it all poured out. "It was all about Dad," I wrote, but I didn't fully grasp the import of that brief consultation at the time. I am given to belated recognitions, and so it was only decades later, through life writing—writing about life writing and eventually writing life writing myself—that I finally understood my story, that I had one, and that I knew what it was.

12 "My Father . . ."

A few years ago I happened to read a little gem of a book, *Messages from My Father* by Calvin Trillin. It is a simple, plainspoken story, and in the later chapters, where he writes about his father's failing health, quite moving. The evocation of growing up in the 1950s really hit home. Trillin is only three years older than I am, and his high school yearbook picture on the dustjacket looks like mine: close-cropped hair, face airbrushed and unsmiling, stiff pose in sport coat and tie. I was struck by his account of all that he and his father didn't say to each other. Here is Trillin on riding in the car with his dad: "In fact, the drives often passed in complete silence. I don't think either of us considered that odd. We took it for granted that men were, by nature, stoic." Reticence runs deep, I thought, in the Midwest. So many things come together in Trillin's story: the immigrant experience, the Jewish heritage, the choice of vocation, the setting (Kansas City). Ultimately, too, the book is a portrait of the artist as a young man, and we can see the connections between the father's plain style—blunt, stubborn—and the son's—more elegant; after all, he went to Yale, as his father had hoped. Trillin presents his father as a model of a certain kind of man, whose idea for his own life and for his son's is focused intensely on the American dream of success:

> My father's Grand Plan, I think, began with my going to Yale—not on a shoestring, but in the way the sons of the industrialists went to Yale. I would then be not simply a real American, unencumbered by poverty and Old World views, but a privileged American—an American whose degree could give him a place on some special, reservations-only escalator to success.

Despite his differences, the son embraces that model. "After that," Trillin writes, "it was up to me."

I kept thinking about Trillin's memoirs—*Messages from My Father* and *Remembering Denny*—in the days that followed this reading. How interesting they were, connecting deeply with my own life: the Midwesterner going East in the 1950s—the burden of expectations—the success plot. The books drive home the contrast between Calvin—or "Bud" as

he was called—and his classmate and close friend Denny: family and especially father standing behind "Bud," and the absence of father (or any family) in Denny's sad case. Denny's story reads almost like Dick Diver's in F. Scott Fitzgerald's great novel, *Tender Is the Night*: peaking early as an icon of Ivy League success in a spread in *Life* magazine about his graduation from Yale, Denny ended, midcareer, in suicide. All this set me to thinking about my own father. There were a lot of things I had never really worked out about Dad's dreams of success, for himself and for me. I wondered why the right moment to do so had been so long in coming; I had a sense of switches turning on day and night.

In particular, I started brooding about an event that had occurred three years before at a family wedding. As parents of the groom, my wife and I arrived early for the final event, a reception hosted by the bride's parents. As we entered the reception, the bride's father took me aside and told me that it was a Jewish custom to remember the absent dead on such occasions. He asked me to say something about my father, who had died twenty years earlier, and I agreed. At the appointed moment, I rose to speak to the assembled guests. "My father . . .," I began, and then I could say no more. Somehow unprovided, I stood there gazing at all those upturned faces waiting to hear what I had to say. It was as though two hands were squeezing my heart, leaving me winded and speechless. Eventually I collected myself. I have no memory of what I said. What I do remember is my not being able to speak, to fill the huge gulf of silence. The surge of raw emotion caught me completely by surprise. Dad had been dead for more than twenty years. Surely his story was over, and his story for me as well. What kept me from speaking? What was it that I couldn't say?

Only six months before this event, I thought I had said everything there was to say about me and Dad. One of my life writing students, a brilliant young man who edited an undergraduate literary magazine, had been after me to write the story of my life. "I'll give you a thousand words," he said. Some story! I boasted afterward that I pulled it off in a single page. Here is what I wrote:

Not a Story

> Why not write your story? he asks. You tell him, evasively, you've already written it obliquely by writing about others' lives. But he persists: you told us that everyone has a story. You believe this, you tell him. One makes choices; one shapes one's life. Also, you don't believe this. Isn't it culture calling the shots, displaying its wares, its models of identity, of life story? This is what you can do and be, this and this and this; not that. Time's story-arrow is flying all the while.
>
> My father, self-made man in the American grain, thought he had missed the education he wanted, the one his admired business partner had had. This cultivated gentleman, member of an elegant local

literary society, had gone to Exeter and Harvard. My father's dream: if my brothers and I would go to these schools, he would pay for it. We went.

Once I had completed his story, I needed to start my own. (It had started a long time before, on day one; I didn't know that; I thought my life would start after I got out of school.) So what are you going to do with the rest of your life? they asked. By senior year everyone seemed to know the answer to that one; everyone had reached a turning in the road, the calling to some lifework. One friend claimed he had known what he wanted to do and be since he was eight. Eight! And I at eight who did not know; nor at eighteen; nor at twenty-two. I didn't think my life was a story like that; it wasn't really convincing.

I went to Paris for cover—"studying abroad," I thought, would do. My French friends, though, were puzzled by my unstoried, careerless state; nor could they afford it. There were dusty lectures at the venerable Sorbonne; there were also cafés along the Boulevard Saint Germain and the Rue des Ecoles. Du Bellay, Mallarmé, and wonderful coffee—my hands would shake after so many cups. I begin to drift. (It's true what they say about cafés.) I move from the Cité Universitaire to a small hotel in the Latin Quarter; I drink calvados on cold days. A professor, whose class I have been cutting, confronts me the day I return, bronzed, from skiing in the Alps: "*Ah, M. Eakin, vous êtes là ce matin! Vous étiez souffrant?*" "*Non, pas tellement*," I reply. And then Italy in April, and Greece in May and June—there were so many antiquities, so many days. I was forgetting my French degree.

Embarrassed by the pointlessness of my existence, I headed back to school, back to Harvard; I was going backwards. I didn't really believe in it and suspected I would be found out. Graduate study in English was a new angle—I had never taken any courses in English literature before. The other students, earnest, dutiful and advanced, were checking out the Silver Poets (I never got to them), while I, mere novice, settled for the greats, for Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and so on down the line. I wasn't confident I would pass the doctoral entrance exam at the end of the year; I didn't paint my apartment on the unfashionable back side of Beacon Hill. Why bother, when I would be out of this story come June and into the army and off to Vietnam? Midyear I went into a stall; I couldn't write another paper; my father was slipping into a long and irreversible illness; I knew my teacher-story was not the one he had hoped for; I wept; I wrote another paper, and another; I was going to write papers for the rest of my life.

I passed the exam, and on I went. I was still waiting, though, for that elusive story-confirming experience of vocation to make it right. It never came. Instead, I kept wading on and on; I was in deep now; I started to swim; I am still swimming. Too late for stories now.

When I wrote that version of my relation to Dad, I was concerned with vocation, with his having chosen a story for me—something on the order of Abe Trillin's having fixed on a *Stover at Yale* success plot for son Calvin—and with my failure to complete that story in the way he would have wished. I am convinced that the issue of vocation was central between us, even though we never talked about it—I had the sense that college teaching was not quite "it" for him, second best, not truly one of the Professions. If I didn't have the story appointed for me by my father, did that mean I didn't have a story? *Not a Story*: I see now that Dad was calling the shots more than twenty years after his death. Fathers choose our stories for us, I must have believed this, and if we refuse the choice, we go without.

But there was a lot I didn't say in *Not a Story*. To begin with, there was my shock when I saw Dad in Paris at the end of that year of escape. He'd recently been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease after months of baffling symptoms, and despite his impeccable dress—his polished shoes, his tie and handkerchief just so, not a hair out of place—the progress of the malady was unmistakable. I remember how he hated Versailles, where the graveled paths made the sound of his dragging feet so obvious.

And then there's what I called my "stall." *I wept*—those two words that functioned for me as the climax of my guarded, minimalist autobiography—that's supposed to tell it all. I didn't, for example, talk about my visit to a counselor at the end of my first semester of graduate school. I remember how hard it was to get up my courage to make the appointment, and how annoyed I was that I couldn't be seen immediately. When I went, it all poured out, words and tears. It was all about Dad. I was amazed afterward at how quickly everything seemed to clear up. Later, when I ran into the counselor in the street, I felt a deep dislike for him and turned away.

The obvious point of *Not a Story* is my difficulty in coming to terms with my difference from my father; that's what plays into my "stall," my sense of wanting my father's blessing, my suspicion that he didn't believe in what I was proposing to do with my life. Yet in surprising ways I think I am like Dad. It is not just our shared looks, or even our handwriting (my signature is coming to look more and more like his). Our initials are the same, too, but our middle names are different—he was Paul James and I am Paul John—so I am not "Junior," a source of lifelong confusion; we are and are not alike. My parents never meant to call me Paul, and so my full name, above all my first name, the name I kept out of respect for Dad when I began to publish, has always seemed like a kind of disguise. I wonder whether this is connected—vocation again—to my deep-seated sense of imposture, that I wasn't really good enough—"good enough" to be "Paul"?—that sooner or later I would be found out. When I read reviews of my work, even now, I sometimes have

the odd sense that they might be about someone else, and when they are good, that I would like to meet this guy.

But Dad didn't live to know anything of my work on autobiography and life writing, which became my life work only after he was dead. What he knew dates from an earlier time, when he was relentlessly slipping into the grip of Parkinson's. The malady and the medications he took reduced his voice to a whisper, such that for years our conversations were mainly monologues, me trying to rehearse my doings in the hope of enlivening his increasingly restricted life. It was hard to hear him when he spoke: I see myself leaning close to his face with my ear at his parted lips, failing to catch what he was saying—if he was saying anything. I admit that I sometimes thought he was playing with me—that he would stop breathing entirely rather than speak the words I wanted to hear, whatever they were. "Whatever they were"—I wonder whether at some level I was hoping for words of approval, some sort of blessing.

The more I thought about Dad in the aftermath of reading Trillin, the more I realized how little I knew about him and what he wanted, how little he ever said to me about himself, his history, his feelings. But if the lesson of my difficulty in speaking about him that night at the wedding was how much unfinished business there was between us, how could I finish it now? Dad was above all a very private person: this was initially puzzling to me, given his reputation as outgoing; he was a fine public speaker whom people admired for his way with words and his wonderful stories and jokes (the only jokes I know are the ones he repeated over the years). This storytelling carried over into the tales he served up as memories. If we took him at his word, his had been a childhood out of James Whitcomb Riley, the folksy Hoosier poet—he was Riley's "barefoot boy with cheeks of tan." "When I was a boy," he would say, "I kept a little brush beside my bed up in the attic to brush the snow off my pillow." Of course I loved this fanciful stuff, and yet I came to see it and his polished public-speaking persona as a screen masking the private man who never talked to me about himself, his own story, his memories. There were so many things we never talked about.

To reconstruct the public man, what he had done and how he was known—and he *was* known, he was prominent in civic affairs—I tried to locate my copy of Dad's obituary. At first I couldn't find it, and later, when I did, it didn't tell me what I wanted to know. Pursuing his story, I reread the sections about him in my mother's memoir, an account of family history that I encouraged her to write and that we published privately in 1995. Now, ten years later, I felt as though I was reading these few paragraphs about Dad for the first time—I hung on every word. Strangely, I found my eyes were moist, even though my mother's account is so restrained—she always expressed what she saw and knew rather than what she felt. For example, this: "Paul had happy memories

of summers in Crafton. He talked about a big white bulldog." Crafton? A white bulldog? Dad never that I could remember talked to me about his memories of anything.

My mother writes that Dad grew up "in a very church-oriented household." This is certainly an understatement, for spiritual exercises ran deep in his family. Dad's maternal grandfather, for example, "went every day to pray at a great rock in his orchard, weather permitting." Maybe you learn to keep things to yourself, I thought, when you grow up in a parsonage. "He went off to Muskingum, a small Presbyterian school," my mother continues, "at the age of 16 in his first pair of long pants. He was not invited to join any of the fraternities." Dad was that young! "After he graduated from Muskingum, he taught in a high school in Wauseon, Ohio, for a year to earn money to go to business school . . . On election day he had a hard time concealing from fellow teachers the fact that he was not old enough to vote." In fact, Dad kept his youthful look all his life—even at an advanced age his face was comparatively unlined and rosy, his hair dark and abundant with only traces of gray.

My mother gets to the heart of Dad's story when she reports his idea of his career:

> Paul had clearly defined life goals, to be highly successful in his field of investment counseling and to become a leading citizen in his community. I suppose one could say that he had achieved his goals before his illness brought a tragic end to his career. However, he was denied many years of productivity and enjoyment of the professional and civic prestige that he had earned. The diagnosis of Parkinson's disease was a devastating blow.

It was certainly a blow to me in 1960—I was slow to recognize just how much of a blow to him. "He fought a courageous rear guard battle until unsuccessful surgery in 1963 destroyed all hope. After that his goals were gone." So Dad's goal-oriented story, which my mother tells as both one of success and also of failure, was playing out, had reached its end, just as I was setting out.

Thinking about the surgery now, which my mother presents as the abrupt, untimely conclusion of my father's story, I find it painful to think that I was so wrapped up in my own life or so much in denial about his condition that I never visited him during his extended stay in the hospital in New York—only a few hours away by train or car from Boston where I was in graduate school. A prominent neurosurgeon had developed a startling technique to control the tremor and rigidity that are the hallmark of Parkinson's disease by inserting dry ice directly into the brain. The procedure, daring and experimental, had produced significant benefits for some patients, and Dad must have been sufficiently desperate to take the chance. Why wasn't I there with him for the operation

and afterward, I wonder. But I am not now the young man I was and that young man kept his distance.

I suspect that there were several things playing into my resistance—not just denial but also a kind of warning about what could happen to you if you got what you wanted. Perhaps it was the thrust of Dad's ambition—not only for himself but for me—that made me uneasy. He had become a senior partner in an old-name east coast investment banking firm, and he enjoyed the power and the status that went with it—the swank, exclusive places where his standing was recognized, the clubs where he was greeted by name. He had come a long way from DuBois, Pennsylvania, where he was born, from Steubenville, Ohio, where he grew up. My brother says that Dad was in awe of what he had achieved from such small beginnings—"There's no position I couldn't have in Cleveland," Dad told him once. Did he really say that? It sounds like something out of Dreiser or Balzac. And he wanted me, the son of such a man, to be well dressed at school—I remember him taking me to a tailor he knew, to be fitted out with the sort of topcoat that a boy like me should wear. Was I that kind of boy?

Searching my mother's memoir for clues about Dad, I began to doubt that I could find the answers to my questions in pages like these. Why hadn't I asked Dad about his life while he was still alive? All those unspoken things, that midwestern silence. Perhaps my lack of interest in his story back then had been a self-protective move, making space for myself and my own story. Was I so incurious, so self-involved, though, so oblivious to him and his needs, that I could fault him for failing to support me in my choice of career? At the very time that I was rising and expanding, starting to come into my own, his world was closing in: he had trouble walking, he was in a wheelchair, he struggled endlessly to be comfortable, and, as my mother writes, he was never comfortable, and he was engulfed by his malady, which increasingly kept him from ever speaking much at all. Didn't I owe him everything? Where would I have been without the education he pushed me to get? As it turned out, in the interview that landed me the job that I would keep for the rest of my life, the department chair noted that we were both graduates of the same schools, the ones my father's business partner had attended, the ones my father believed were so important for my future. So Dad's story for me has been my story after all in ways I didn't acknowledge when I wrote *Not a Story*. I was still fighting him off, or fighting free of him.

For years, ever since I began to identify my professional work as concerned with autobiography, why some people write it and why others read it, people would invariably ask me whether I had written my own autobiography. I would put them off by saying that I was a kind of crypto-autobiographer, someone who wrote his own story indirectly, obliquely, by writing about other people's lives. But why didn't I write

my story? And then, too, there's the matter of all I didn't say when I *did* write it, however briefly. *Not a Story* indeed—fantastical, when I think of it, I who believe that what we are is very largely a function of the stories we tell about ourselves, I who claim to be writing a book about narrative identity. What, then, was holding me back from writing about my father? Well, to begin with, there was the illusion that there was nothing to say because Dad seemed to be an unknown quantity. There was also my uncomfortable feeling of inauthenticity, of lack, which my misgivings about vocation seemed to confirm. And then there was Dad's illness, and my anxious thoughts that I might get it too. Hadn't I had a tremor in my hands ever since my café days in Paris? And deeper still, there was Dad's disquieting death, in 1980. It had not been a good death, and I had wanted to put it behind me. All these things enlarged the gulf between us that I couldn't bridge that night at the wedding. The blessing and the tremor: so being like Dad was good and also dangerous.

Here is a sentence that haunts me from my mother's memoir about Dad: "During summers when he was in college, he also sold brushes in little mining towns." Like Crafton and the white bulldog, it stands for all the stories he never told me. I see him alone somewhere, the young man on the road to success.

"Too late for stories now." Or so I said when I wrote *Not a Story*. I know better now. When my mother wrote that the failed brain surgery ended Dad's story in 1963—"after that his goals were gone"—she was only partly right. The success plot had run its course, for sure, but a father is always a father come what may. Fathers have plans for sons, and the sons know it. My mother and I both thought that Dad's story was over—over for him, maybe, but not for us.[1]

Note

1 This reminiscence of my father is reprinted from *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, by Paul John Eakin. Copyright 2008 by Cornell University. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

13 James Olney and the Study of Autobiography

James Olney's death last winter set me to thinking about the past—thirty, thirty-five, forty years ago—back to a time before the creation of all the resources for the study of autobiography that we take for granted today. James did a lot to provide them, and I want to honor his memory by recalling here not only what he did for our field but also what he did for me personally, setting me on a path of study that I have followed for nearly forty years. I want, too, to suggest what autobiography did for him.

Beginnings

In the 1980s James sponsored two key initiatives that helped to coalesce the stirrings of interest in autobiography into something like a coherent field: in 1980 he published the first edited collection in the United States of essays devoted to autobiography, and in 1985 he convened in Baton Rouge what I believe to be the first international conference on autobiography. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* brought together sixteen essays, mostly by Americans and mostly from the late 1970s, on an admirably broad range of topics and employing an instructively various array of approaches. James dedicated his part in the volume to his "mentor and friend" Georges Gusdorf, whose landmark essay from 1956, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," he translated and placed prominently at the beginning of the collection. Moreover, in the introduction, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," James located the start of autobiography studies in our time squarely with Gusdorf: "In the beginning, then, was Georges Gusdorf" (8). Gusdorf's key insight, later confirmed by the work of Elizabeth Bruss and Karl J. Weintraub, was that autobiography was a culture-specific phenomenon. "The concern," Gusdorf wrote, "which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it, is not at all universal." In fact, the "conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life" that motivates autobiographical recall "is the late product of a specific civilization"; it is "a concern peculiar to Western man" ("Conditions" 29).

James identified three reasons for autobiography's belated arrival as a legitimate object of literary study: its apparently other-than-narrowly-literary nature, its necessary incompleteness as a work of art, and its

self-reflexive, self-critical tendencies that made additional criticism seem superfluous. I believe that James pointed to the motive for his own work when he observed, sizing up the critical landscape, that the quickening of interest in autobiography was driven above all by a "fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries" ("Autobiography" 23). Turning to his own beginnings, James recalled that when he began writing *Metaphors of Self* in the 1960s, it never occurred to him to consult autobiography criticism because he didn't think that what he was doing was studying autobiography; instead, he thought of it as "a humanistic study of the ways of men and the forms taken by human consciousness" (10). In fact, located as he was then in West Africa, there simply weren't any available books on autobiography to consult.

There were four keynote speakers at James's "International Symposium on Autobiography and Autobiography Studies" in March of 1985, each associated with a primary subject area: James M. Cox (heading the session on "The Interpretation of Autobiography"), Henry Louis Gates ("Ethnic and Minority Autobiography"), Georges Gusdorf ("Autobiography as Cultural Expression"), and Germaine Brée ("Women's Autobiography"). James was prescient in featuring women's, ethnic, and minority autobiography, for work on women's autobiographies and slave narratives represents the signal achievement of autobiography studies in the United States in the 1980s. The keynote speakers made for an impressive lineup, and I think the conference was very successful in setting the stage for future work in the field.

I regretted, though, that Philippe Lejeune had not been included among the keynotes, for he seemed to me an obvious choice, committed as he was to the promotion of autobiography studies in France in much the same way James was in the United States. I was attracted by the conceptual rigor of Lejeune's early work—formalist, structuralist, in a word, French—that seemed to me missing in the autobiography criticism that was beginning to appear at home. James, however, had gotten off on the wrong foot with Lejeune on the basis of Lejeune's early and best-known essay, "The Autobiographical Pact." I am thinking of James's introduction to *Autobiography: Essays Critical and Theoretical* where he cites Lejeune's piece as a characteristic instance of the limitations of the genre critic, making overly schematic use of "graphs, tables, arrows, pointers" ("Autobiography" 17) to nail down autobiography's elusive boundaries. Different as they certainly were, however, both Olney and Lejeune shared a similar drive to further the study of autobiography. When James eventually met Lejeune at a conference we both attended at SUNY Binghamton in 1989, I was amused by the wary admiration he expressed for his French counterpart in a note he sent me afterward:

> I very much enjoyed the time in Binghamton, especially seeing you and meeting Philippe Lejeune. As I assumed he would be, Philippe was charming and humorous. When he asked me, "You don't

> really like Rousseau, do you?" I could only respond that there are many senses of "liking" and that in some ways I do indeed "like" Rousseau; however, when he refined the question and said, "You wouldn't want him for a friend" I had to concur. I still like to talk about Rousseau however.

The lasting impact of the 1985 symposium in Baton Rouge had less to do with anything the keynotes and the rest of us presented than with the contacts we made. Because autobiography was located then on the periphery of literary study, contacts were everything. That was why I had been eager to get on the program in Baton Rouge, where I met, thanks to James, several others who shared my interests and indeed became my friends for the decades that followed. We were comparatively young, mostly unpublished, and certainly excited by our subject. After the conference was over, a group of us drove to New Orleans, ending up shivering on the levee by the Mississippi in the middle of the night, armed with coffee and *beignets* from the Café du Monde. Autobiography would take us many places and make us many friends in the time to come. The meeting in Baton Rouge was the beginning of many good things, not least the creation of a newsletter that would eventually become *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, which is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary this year.

A Lucky Encounter

My own beginning with James and with autobiography started with a gracious short letter. I had published an essay on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in 1976. James wrote that he wanted to include it in a volume of essays on autobiography that he was preparing for Princeton. I knew neither Olney nor his work, but I was flattered by his notice. Up to that point, I had been exclusively concerned with nineteenth-century American fiction; the essay on Malcolm X was a one-off kind of thing. It had been swiftly accepted and out, unlike my protracted efforts to publish on nineteenth-century American classics—who wants to read the one-hundred-and-first essay on *The Scarlet Letter*? I found myself asking. I was ready for something new and I turned to Henry James's autobiographies. Although studies of James had reached an industrial scale by the 1970s, his autobiographies were mostly neglected. Using James, I determined to figure out just what kind of thing autobiography was, and I seriously proposed to myself to read everything available on the subject, an ambition quite manageable at that point. Autobiography was still, as Stephen Shapiro had called it in 1965, literature's "dark continent." There were various early explorers, and James Olney was prominent among them.

By the time I finished dealing with Henry James I was hooked on autobiography. As my friendship with Olney deepened, we wrote each other regularly, and once I got going on my study of fictions in autobiography,

I sent him chapters for review. His response was always thoughtful and probing and yet withal steadily encouraging—he was the perfect mentor who helped me find my way in a new subject. I remember envying the members of his NEH summer seminar on autobiography who got the chance to work with him up close. James had published two books with Princeton, and he steered my book to that press. He served as the first outside reader, and when the second reader turned in a rather cool report, James enlisted his friend Jim Cox for a third reading to close the deal. His friendship, his generous blurbs and reviews, speeded me on my way.

The accidental push James gave me in 1977 into the study of autobiography changed my life, and for that I owe him more than I can easily say. Autobiography did three things for me: it solved a nagging problem of vocation, it offered me an other-than-literary subject matter, and it provided me with the tools to understand these gifts years later on for what they were. Slow of foot, I am given to belated recognitions, such that I was well into my sixties before I abandoned the idea that I had missed out on a pivotal experience of vocation. I had imagined that I would have some memorable, turning-point epiphany that would confirm my choice of career, but it never came along. In the course of writing a short memoir of my father in 2005, however, I realized I had indeed had it when I turned to autobiography, but I had failed to recognize it for what it was. It took me even longer—I was almost seventy—to recognize that although I was a literary guy by training, I had never cared much for literary criticism. Luckily for me, the study of autobiography opened up endless hours of reading in other fields in search of answers to the questions it posed about the nature of self and consciousness.

Best of all, I could operate as a kind of crypto-autobiographer, writing my own story indirectly, obliquely, by writing about other people's lives. James understood this crucial attraction of autobiography. As he put it in 1980, "the student and reader of autobiographies . . . is a vicarious or a closet autobiographer" who does not need to write an autobiography: "their autobiographies have already half emerged in the act of living and writing about the autobiographies of others" ("Autobiography" 26). Having said what writing about autobiography did for me, I think it's fair to ask what it did for James.

The Metaphorizing Imagination

In an early essay, writing about Tolstoy's great novella, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," James identified the twin linked drivers behind the human quest for the meaning of a life: death and consciousness. "None of us," James wrote, "can imagine that consciousness, as we have always known it, could ever cease, or that the world would go on without our consciousness of it" ("Experience" 103). Yet it is precisely our mortality that pushes us to confront this unimaginable idea: "Death impresses us

with the need to find a meaning, to find an end, in the sense of a goal or a purpose and not in the sense of a mere cessation or annihilation, for life" (104). What James called "the mode of metaphoric art" (104) enables us to engage the tension between these two opposing senses of *end* that define what it means to be human.

In *Metaphors of Self* (1972), James developed this view of the human condition. Like Wallace Stevens's "Snow Man," James had the "mind of winter" to contemplate "the nothing that is": "In the given, whether it be external reality or internal consciousness, there is nothing to be called meaning: the world means nothing; neither does consciousness per se" (30). Faced with chaos, man, for James, was "a great shape-maker impelled forever to find order in himself and to give it to the universe" (17). James's project in his work on autobiography was to study "the metaphorizing imagination," an innate endowment that "connect[s] elements so that they establish a pattern" (31). The yield of autobiography's metaphoric art is knowledge of the otherwise unknowable self: "We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch its metaphors: and thus we 'know' the self, activity or agent, represented in the metaphor and the metaphorizing" (34).

In *The Rhizome and the Flower: The Perennial Philosophy—Yeats and Jung* (1980), his most daring and original book, James elaborated his vision of the metaphorizing imagination, tracing its roots back to Plato and the pre-Socratic philosophers and to "the collective depths of the unconscious" (13). From the perspective of *Rhizome*, James's lifelong concern with autobiography emerges as a subset of his fascination with a much larger class of world-building narratives. What James valued in Yeats, Jung, the Greek philosophers, and the many autobiographers he studied was the expression of an innate human urge to create myths and systems as a path to knowledge—a knowledge, moreover, that was ultimately moral in its tendency, prompting us to ask, with Socrates, "What is the right way to live?" One might well question whether the building of systems—in Heraclitus, in Yeats, in Jung—is merely a wishful projection of the human need for order. James gave his own resounding answer in the conclusion of *Rhizome:*

> All varieties of system—whether philosophical, psychological, theological, cosmological, aesthetic, musical, or poetic—are all, by their structural order, hierarchical imitations of the prevailing harmony that is the creative principle behind and throughout the universe. (368)

Whether this answer holds for his last book, published two decades later on, I'm not so sure. In the literature devoted to autobiography, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (1998) stands out for its ambition: nothing less than to write the history of the genre,

radically foreshortened, from Augustine to Samuel Beckett by way of Rousseau. *Memory and Narrative* offers a distinctly darker vision than *Metaphors* and *Rhizome*, with James characterizing the agency of the metaphorizing imagination this time as "the struggle to give form to the mess" (310). He chose Kafka, Giacometti, and Beckett to represent autobiography's endgame, and the sense of order that emerges from his brilliant analyses of their work is fragile, existing under threat of imminent dissolution. Just how far one may track James's "closet" autobiography in his progressively darkening account of autobiography's history is hard to say. For sure, though, in establishing autobiography studies as a field of inquiry in our time, James built a place where he could celebrate early and late, first and last, the value of life-affirming, meaning-making acts.

There is so much more to James Olney than this autobiography story can capture. To know him was to be impressed by the depth of his culture. He was truly a man of letters in a sense that I think is increasingly rare in our time. He was a delightful companion, and he loved the pleasures of the table—his beloved older brother Richard was a celebrated chef and writer about French food and wine. James himself was an excellent cook. When my wife and I visited him and his wife Laura in Irvine a few years ago, he prepared a lovely meal for us. This was the last time I saw him.

James was also a man of deep feeling, never more so than at Richard's death in 1999. "The grief is never ending," he wrote, "I'm afraid will be lifelong." Once, twenty years before, when I was spending the summer with my family in Provence, James and Richard invited us for a visit at Richard's hillside house near Solliès-Toucas. Richard made us a perfect, simple lunch on the terrace, while our five-year-old son splashed noisily in the *bassin* nearby. As I look back, the ordered world of Richard's home, where the Olney clan gathered every summer, seems to me a fitting emblem of the metaphorizing imagination's redemptive work to which James had devoted a lifetime.[1]

Note

1 This reminiscence first appeared in Volume 38, Number 4 (2015) issue of *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly,* 465–71, and it is reprinted with permission of the University of Hawai'i Press.

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Index

Note: Page numbers followed by "n" denote endnotes.