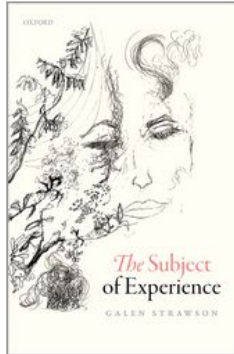


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The Subject of Experience

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The Unstoried Life

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Abstract and Keywords

Should ethically serious people seek for unity in their lives, for harmony, for coherence? Is this a requirement on living a good life, a requirement on flourishing or eudaimonia? Should we aim for some kind of self-authorship or narrative self-constitution, as Marya Schechtman and Dan McAdams have suggested? Many think we should. This chapter argues for the opposite view, assembling and reflecting on a dossier of contrary quotations from many sources, including Proust, Montaigne, Alice Munro, Georges Perec, and Keats.

Keywords: life-writing, flourishing, narrative, narrative self-constitution, Schechtman, McAdams, Montaigne, Proust, Munro

I want Death to find me planting my cabbages, neither worrying about it nor the unfinished gardening.

Michel de Montaigne (1563–92: 99)

7.1 Proem

'Each of us constructs and lives a "narrative"...this narrative is us, our identities.' 'Self is a perpetually rewritten story.' 'In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives.' 'We are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell.' 'We invent ourselves, but we really are the characters we invent.' A person 'creates his identity by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his life'. We're 'virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behaviour, and we always try to put the best "faces" on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. The chief fictional character at the centre of that autobiography is one's self.' 'The story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told.'¹

According to these theorists—I'll call them the *narrativists*—life is life-writing. It's a narrative—autobiographical—activity. We story ourselves and we are our stories. There's a remarkably robust consensus about this claim, not only in the humanities but also in psychotherapy. It's standardly conjoined with the claim that such self-narration is a good thing, necessary for a full human life.² I think it's false—false that everyone stories themselves, false that it's always a good thing. These are not universal human truths, even when we confine our attention to human beings who count as psychologically normal, as I will here. They're not universal human truths even if they're true of some people, or even many, or most. Their proponents, the narrativists, are—at best—generalizing from their own case, in an all-too-human way.³
(p.124)

7.2 'Narrativity'

What exactly do the narrativists have in mind, when they say things of the sort just quoted? I haven't yet been able to find out. But it does seem that there are deeply *narrative* types among us, where to be narrative (here I offer a definition) is to be

naturally disposed to experience or conceive of one's life, one's existence in time, oneself, in a narrative way, as

having the form of a story, or perhaps a collection of stories, and—in some manner—to live in and through this conception.

The popularity of the narrativist view is *prima facie* evidence that there are such people. But it's not decisive evidence, because human beings hold many views about themselves that have very little to do with reality; and many of us aren't narrative in this sense. 'Time travels in divers paces with divers persons',⁴ and it also travels in divers guises. This paper offers dissenting testimony from many sources. Some of us are not just not naturally narrative. We're naturally—deeply—non-narrative. We're anti-narrative by fundamental constitution. It's not just that the deliverances of memory are, for us, hopelessly piecemeal and disordered, even when we're trying to remember a temporally extended sequence of events. The point is much more general. It concerns all parts of life, the 'great shambles of life', in Henry James's expression (1899: 198). This seems a much better characterization of the large-scale structure (\approx structurelessness) of human existence as we find it.

Non-narratives are fully aware of life's biological temporal order (birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, prime of life, maturity, decline, old age, and death),⁵ and its associated cultural temporal order and rites of passage (including, in these parts, acquisition of the right to drive, marry, drink, vote, adopt, retire, get a free bus pass). Even with all this knowledge of life structure they find themselves 'weltering through eternity' (Shelley 1818a: 198), even on the most ordinary mornings or under clear temporal duress (late for work), and not just (as in Shelley's lines) when thickly dreaming.

It makes no difference to non-narratives whether something has 'burst the spirit's sleep', i.e. caused them to wake up to life in a way that makes their past seem like sleepwalking (Bellow 1959: 312, echoing Shelley 1818b: 138). This Shelleyan experience is orthogonal (as philosophers say) to any experience of narrative coherence or narrative self-determination or 'self-authorship'. The two forms of experience appear to be 'doubly dissociable', in the terminology of experimental psychology: one can experience

either in the absence of the other (or both together, or neither). (p.125)

7.3 'Self-authorship'

The experience of 'self-authorship'—the sense that one is engaging in self-determination in and through some process of 'life-writing' or narrative self-constitution—is one thing, mysterious to my kind. The existence of such a thing is another. Perhaps some people have the experience, or aspire to it; some seem to believe in the possibility of self-creation. 'The tendency to attribute control to self is a personality trait', as the psychologist Dan Wegner says, possessed by some and not others (2002: 202, citing Rotter 1966). There's an experimentally well-attested distinction between human beings who have what he calls the 'emotion of authorship' with respect to their thoughts, and those who, like myself, have no such emotion, and feel that their thoughts are things that just happen (Wegner 2002: 318, 325–6). This difference may run very deep, and it may track the difference between those who experience themselves as self-constituting and those who don't.

Whether it does or not, the *experience* of self-constituting self-authorship seems real enough. When it comes to the actual *existence* of self-authorship, however—the reality of some process of self-determination in or through life as life-writing—I'm sceptical. Mary McCarthy appears to speak for many when she says

I suppose everyone continues to be interested in the quest for the self, but what you feel when you're older, I think, is that you really must make the self. It is absolutely useless to look for it, you won't find it, but it's possible in some sense to make it. I don't mean in the sense of making a mask, a Yeatsian mask. But you finally begin in some sense to make and choose the self you want. (1962: 313)

And this, I take it, is how she experiences things, and how—with an attractive degree of caution—she believes them to be. Germaine Greer is less nuanced. She thinks 'human beings have an inalienable right to invent themselves', and she presumably has experiences to match (*The Times*, 1 February 1986). I go with Emerson in 1837: 'we are carried by destiny along our life's course looking as grave and knowing as little

as the infant who is carried in his wicker coach thro' the street' (1835–8: 392). We may be busy all day, intensely engaged in our work, but 'sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glimmer. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again.'⁶ This is the price we pay for our mental complexity, a great difficulty in our condition, unknown to other animals, but a price that may be worth paying.

Emerson can be overpowering and for that reason unhelpful, even when he's right. And he uses the ever-tempting general 'we'—like the narrativists. Deep down, he says, we're all equally unknowing; he proposes a universal human truth. So it's not clear that one can use his words to try to distinguish one group of people from another—non-narratives from narratives, or (a different distinction) people who believe in life as life-writing from people who don't. And some naturally narrative types probably experience the pull of Emerson's remarks, even if others feel their lives **(p.126)** to be glimmer-free. So I'll put Emerson aside. The issue remains, the claim that all human life is life-writing, and that life-writing is not only a necessary task for any self-respecting human being, but also, at least in the best case, an exercise of autonomy—self-determination.

This view seems extraordinarily unappreciative of fate, but above all comic, like Einstein's moon—

If the moon, in the act of completing its eternal way around the earth, were gifted with self-consciousness, it would feel thoroughly convinced that it was traveling its way of its own accord on the strength of a resolution taken once and for all....So would a Being, endowed with higher insight and more perfect intelligence, watching man and his doings, smile about man's illusion that he was acting according to his own free will (1931)

—or the all-too-human monkey in *Journey to the West*, in which the Buddha challenges Monkey, aka The Great Sage, to get out of his (the Buddha's) right hand with a single somersault. Monkey, who knows he can cover thirty-six thousand miles in one somersault, accepts the challenge, jumps onto the Buddha's palm, performs a maximal somersault, and marks

the distant place of his arrival by writing ‘The Great Sage Equaling Heaven Was Here’ and urinating—before returning to the Buddha’s palm to claim his prize.

‘I’ve got you, you piss-spirit of a monkey’, roared the Buddha at him. ‘You never left the palm of my hand.’ ‘You’re wrong there’, the Great Sage replied. ‘I went to the farthest point of Heaven, where I saw five flesh-pink pillars topped by dark vapours. I left my mark there: do you dare come and see it with me?’ ‘There’s no need to go. Just look down.’ The Great Sage looked down with his fire eyes with golden pupils to see the words ‘The Great Sage Equaling Heaven Was Here’ written on the middle finger of the Buddha’s right hand. The stink of monkey-piss rose from the fold at the bottom of the finger. (Wu Cheng-en 1592: vol. 1. ch. 7)

If there is any defensible sense in which life is life-writing, I think it is—at best—‘automatic writing’. One’s life isn’t ‘a cloth woven of stories told’, in Ricoeur’s words, threaded with varying degrees of fiction. Never mind the fact that claims of this kind seem to insult those who have suffered greatly. Never mind the adamant fact that one’s life is simply one’s life, something whose actual course is part of the history of the universe and 100 per cent non-fictional. For now it’s enough to hold on to the point that Alasdair MacIntyre made right at the start of the current narrativist movement: ‘we are never more (and sometimes much less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please’ (1981: 199).

Every life comes with a thrilling stack of counterfactuals. You might so very easily never have met the person you love, or believe you love. And what are the chances of your coming into existence? There’s a sense in which they’re vanishingly small. Your parents might so very easily never have met, and their parents in turn, and their parents in turn. And if you hadn’t gone to X because Y fell ill, you’d never have discovered Z. The irony is that these counterfactuals are great material for good stories, and easily give rise to a sense of wonder or providence. But the wonder has no justification, if only because spectacular counterfactuals hold true of one’s life whatever happens. Consider X, amazed at his astonishing good fortune in meeting Y: **(p.127)** it might so easily never have

happened. But if he hadn't met Y he might now be weeping with happiness at his good fortune in meeting Z.

7.4 'Life is not literature'

So I'm with Bill Blattner in his criticism of Alexander Nehamas's influential book *Life as Literature*: 'We are not texts. Our histories are not narratives. Life is not literature' (2000: 187). Somebody had to say it. You might think that Proust disagrees, and not only shows himself to be of a narrative disposition, but also sides theoretically with the narrativists, when he states that

real life, life at last uncovered and illuminated, the only life really lived, therefore, is literature—that life which, in a sense, lives at each moment in every person as much as in an artist. (1913–27: 4.474)

But this would be a mistake, a perfect mistake, given the way in which Proust is using the word 'literature'. Proust's conception of how we can enter into our real life is complex, but one thing that is clear is that narrativity—a tendency to self-narration—constitutes one of the greatest obstacles to doing so. Literature as *la vraie vie*, literature in Proust's special sense of the word, is a matter of a certain rare state of self-awareness which is not generally much in one's control, and has absolutely nothing to do with narrativity. Roughly speaking, it's a state of absorbed, illuminated consciousness of what one most deeply loves. It's an awareness of an aspect of one's essence (a term one shouldn't hesitate to use) which is itself a participation in one's essence—something from which one is generally alienated. And this awareness is emphatically not a matter of narrative. It is, on the contrary, out of time. The unhappy truth of the human condition, according to Proust, is that we run a great risk of dying without ever knowing our real or true life in his sense ('cette réalité que nous risquerions fort de mourir sans avoir connue'). Our narrative tendencies are one of the principal reasons why this is so.

Keats says that 'A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory' (1819: 2.102). Suppose we allow this. Does it follow that he or she should know this, or try to work out what it is? I don't think so. The search might occlude—distort, destroy—its object. Suppose we further allow that allegories are narratives, so that (if Keats is right) lives of worth are always

narratives. It certainly doesn't follow that anyone should be a narrative type, or that all worthy people are narrative types. 'Very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life', Keats continues, and I think he knows that this includes the worthy person in question.

7.5 'La vraie vie'

If Proust is right about life, 'real life' in his special normative sense of the term,⁷ then it may be that non-narratives have a certain advantage—however small, and however **(p.128)** easily nullified by other encumbrances (it's a merely negative advantage—absence of a hindrance—not in itself a positive one). The narrativists, however, may refuse to admit the reality of non-narratives. 'Look, we're sure that you're sincere when you claim to be non-narrative, but really you're as narrative as the rest of us.'⁸ In the last twenty years the philosopher Marya Schechtman has given increasingly sophisticated accounts of what it is to be narrative and to 'constitute one's identity' through self-narration. She now stresses the point that one's self-narration may be very largely implicit and unconscious, and that's an important concession, relative to the strong version of her original 'Narrative Self-Constitution View', according to which one must be in possession of a full and 'explicit narrative [of one's life] to develop fully as a person' (1996: 119). It's certainly an improvement on her original view, and it puts her in a position to say that people like myself may be narrative and just not know it or admit it.

In her most recent book, *Staying Alive*, she modifies her original thesis still further, but she still thinks that 'persons experience their lives as unified wholes' (2014: 100) in some way that goes far beyond their basic awareness of themselves as single finite biological individuals with a certain curriculum vitae. She still thinks that 'we constitute ourselves as persons...by developing and operating with a (mostly implicit) *autobiographical narrative* which acts as the lens through which we experience the world' (p. 101), and I still doubt that this is true. I doubt that it's a universal human condition—universal among people who count as normal. I doubt this even after she writes that "'having an autobiographical narrative" doesn't amount to consciously retelling one's life story always (or ever) to oneself or to anyone else' (p. 101). I don't think an 'autobiographical narrative' plays any significant role in how I experience the world, although I know that my present overall outlook and behaviour is deeply conditioned by my genetic inheritance and sociocultural place and time, including in particular my early upbringing, and also know, on a smaller scale, that my experience of this bus journey is affected both by the talk I've been having with A in

Notting Hill and the fact that I'm on my way to meet B in Kentish Town.

I am, like Schechtman, a creature who can 'consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places', in Locke's famous definition of a person (1694: 2.27.9). I know what it's like when 'anticipated trouble already tempers present joy' (Schechtman 2014: 101). In spite of my poor memory, I have a perfectly respectable degree of knowledge of many of the events of my life. I don't live ecstatically in the present moment in any pathological or enlightened manner. But I do, with Updike and many others, 'have the persistent sensation, in my life..., that I am just beginning'.⁹ Pessoa's 'heteronym' Alberto Caeiro is a strange man, but he captures an experience common to many (in some perhaps milder form) when he writes that 'I always feel as if I've just been born / Into an endlessly new world.'¹⁰ **(p.129)** Some will immediately understand this, others will be puzzled—and perhaps sceptical. The general lesson is the lesson of human difference.

In a rare interview Alice Munro speaks about her work:

there is this kind of exhaustion and bewilderment when you look at your work..... it's all in a way quite foreign—I mean, it's quite gone from you....And all you really have left is the thing you're working on now. And so you're much more thinly clothed. You're like somebody out in a little shirt or something, which is just the work you're doing now and the strange identification with everything you've done before. And this probably is why I don't take any public role as a writer. Because I can't see myself doing that except as a gigantic fraud. (*New Yorker*, 19 February 2001)

Here Munro is speaking specifically about writing, and (as I understand her) about her bewilderment at being identified with her previous work, but one's general relation to one's past can have a similar form. It can in any case be radically non-narrative and find its ideal representation in list form, as in Joe Brainard's *I Remember*, which contains over 1,000 'I remembers':

I remember when my father would say 'Keep your hands out from under the covers' as he said goodnight. But he said it in a nice way.
I remember when I thought that if you did anything bad, policemen would put you in jail.
I remember one very cold and black night on the beach with Frank O'Hara. He ran into the ocean naked and it scared me to death.
I remember lightning.
I remember wild red poppies in Italy.
I remember selling blood every three months on Second Avenue.

Or in Georges Perec's *Je me souviens*:

Je me souviens des photos de Brigitte Bardot nue dans *l'Express*.
Je me souviens de Ringo Starr et de Babara Bach dans un épouvantable film de Science-Fiction.
Je me souviens du Solarium au Val-André.
Je me souviens de la finale de la coupe du Monde de football à Munich en 1974, j'ai pleuré parce que les Pays-Bas de Johan Cryuiff avaient perdu...
11

There's an echo of Munro's experience in Updike's complaint about biography:

the trouble with literary biographies, perhaps, is that they mainly testify to the long worldly corruption of a life, as documented deeds and days and disappointments pile up, and cannot convey the unearthly innocence that attends, in the perpetual present tense of living, the self that seems the real one.¹²

(p.130) One may be suspicious of Updike, but one shouldn't think that those who feel that their pasts fall away are motivated by a desire to escape responsibility.¹³

According to Schechtman, 'the sense in which we have autobiographical narratives...is cashed out mostly in terms of the way in which an implicit understanding of the ongoing course of our lives influences our experience and deliberation' (2014: 101). And there's one natural reading of this claim given which it's obviously true. One is, say, in the second year of one's apprenticeship, and one knows this; one is coming up for promotion, or two years from retirement, or engaged to X, or about to move to Y, or four months pregnant

or terminally ill, and one's knowledge of these facts is of course influencing one's experience and practical deliberation. One knows how old one is, one knows how long people usually live, and one knows how their powers decline after a certain age. But the obvious truth of Schechtman's claim understood in this basic way doesn't support the idea that it's also true in some—any—further sense. I don't think that it can be asserted in any stronger sense without flipping from true to false—false of many people, even if still true of some.

7.6 'A diachronically structured unit'

Schechtman concludes her discussion of narrativity in *Staying Alive* with a further concession:

it seems more accurate and less liable to generate misunderstanding to give up the locution of 'narrative' in this context and to describe the type of unity that defines a person's identity not as a *narrative* unity but simply as the structural unity of a person's life. (2014: 108)

It's the idea of a life as 'a diachronically structured unit' that 'is doing the real work' for her view (p. 108), and many things which form diachronically structured units are not narratives at all.

I think she's right to drop the word 'narrative', but what now comes to mind, given this reformulation, is the degree to which any sense of specifically diachronic structural unity seems to be lacking, for at least some human beings, in their experience of existence from moment to moment, day to day, month to month, year to year.

The lack may seem remarkable—hard to credit—given the profound diachronic/structural unity that does actually exist in any human life. A human being is a single-bodied creature whose constancies and continuities of character through adult life tend to be as powerful as his or her bodily constancies and continuities.¹⁴ Many things conspire to underwrite a person's experience of the diachronic unity of their life; for we are, again, creatures who can and do explicitly 'consider [themselves] as [themselves], in different times and places', in Locke's phrase. We're capable of 'mental time-travel', in Tulving's abbreviation of Locke (Tulving 1985: 5), and some of us do a lot of it (some biased to the future, others to the past). As far as the future is concerned, we all know that we will die. This is not a small matter. But none of these things support the narrativist thesis as usually expounded, the thesis **(p.131)** that all human life is, in some sense, life-writing, and also ought to be. We can reduce the thesis to the thin claim that we have some sense of the unity of our life, and ought to. But I don't think it looks any better. The unity is there, no doubt, but it's not something one needs to be aware of. To think about it, to try to nurture it, is to risk fantasy and self-deception.

'No', you say. 'It's a necessary part of self-possession.' But what is it to be self-possessed? Does it involve 'self-authorship'? And does self-authorship involve self-editing? The claim that someone is very self-possessed can carry the suggestion that they're self-alienated, out of touch with their reality. Self-possession as self-alienation; it's a paradox of a familiar sort, but it captures a truth. 'It is all very well', as the great Lewis Thomas said, 'to be aware of your awareness, even proud of it, but do not try to operate it. You are not up to the job' (1983: 141). It's a familiar point in sports that self-control can depend on a kind of thoughtlessness.

7.7 'My name is Legion'

According to Dan McAdams, a leading narrativist among social psychologists:

beginning in late adolescence and young adulthood, we construct integrative narratives of the self that selectively recall the past and wishfully anticipate the future to provide our lives with some semblance of unity, purpose, and identity. Personal identity is the internalized and evolving life story that each of us is working on as we move through our adult lives.... I...do not really know who I am until I have a good understanding of my narrative identity. (2005: 287-8)

If this is true, we must worry not only about the non-Narratives—unless they are happy to lack personal identity—but also about the people described by Mary Midgley and Erik Erikson:

various selves....make up our composite Self. There are constant and often shocklike transitions between these selves....It takes, indeed, a healthy personality for the 'I' to be able to speak out of all these conditions in such a way that at any moment it can testify to a reasonably coherent Self. (Erikson 1968: 217)

[Doctor Jekyll] was partly right: we are each not only one but also many....Some of us have to hold a meeting every time we want to do something only slightly difficult, in order to find the self who is capable of undertaking it.... We spend a lot of time and ingenuity on developing ways of organizing the inner crowd, securing consent among

it, and arranging for it to act as a whole. Literature shows that the condition is not rare. (Midgley 1984: 123)

Erikson and Midgley suggest, astonishingly, that we're all like this, and many agree—presumably those who fit the pattern. This makes me grateful to Midgley when she adds that 'others, of course, obviously do not feel like this at all, hear such descriptions with amazement, and are inclined to regard those who give them as dotty'. At the same time, we shouldn't adopt a theory that puts these people's claim to be genuine persons in question. We don't want to shut out Paul Klee:

my self...is a dramatic ensemble. Here a prophetic ancestor makes his appearance. Here a brutal hero shouts. Here an alcoholic *bon vivant* argues with a learned professor. Here a lyric **(p.132)** muse, chronically love-struck, raises her eyes to heaven. Her papa steps forward, uttering pedantic protests. Here the indulgent uncle intercedes. Here the aunt babbles gossip. Here the maid giggles lasciviously. And I look upon it all with amazement, the sharpened pen in my hand. A pregnant mother wants to join the fun. 'Pshtt!' I cry, 'You don't belong here. You are divisible.' And she fades out... (1965: 177)

Or W. Somerset Maugham:

I recognize that I am made up of several persons and that the person that at the moment has the upper hand will inevitably give place to another. But which is the real one? All of them or none? (1949: 21)

Or Philip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman, who is more or less intimately related to his author:

All I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self, and that I am unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self...What I have instead is a variety of impersonations I can do, and not only of myself—a troupe of players that I have internalised, a permanent company of actors that I can call upon when a self is required....I am a theater and nothing more than a theater. (1986: 324)

What are these people to do, if the advocates of narrative unity are right? I think they should continue as they are. Their inner crowds can perhaps share some kind of rollicking self-narrative. But there seems to be no clear provision for them in the leading philosophies of personal unity of our time as propounded by (among others) Marya Schechtman, Harry Frankfurt, and Christine Korsgaard. I think F. Scott Fitzgerald is wrong when he says in his *Notebooks* that ‘There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn’t be. He is too many people if he’s any good’ (1945: 159). But one can see what he has in mind.

7.8 ‘What little I remember’

There is, furthermore, a vast difference between people who regularly and actively remember their past, and people who almost never do. In his autobiography *What Little I Remember*, Otto Frisch writes ‘I have always lived very much in the present, remembering only what seemed to be worth retelling’ ... ‘I have always, as I already said, lived in the here and now, and seen little of the wider views’ (1979: ix, xi). I’m in the Frisch camp, on the whole, although I don’t remember things in order to retell them. More generally, and putting aside pathological memory loss, I’m in the Montaigne camp, when it comes to specifically autobiographical memory: ‘I can find hardly a trace of [memory] in myself; I doubt if there is any other memory in the world as grotesquely faulty as mine is!’ Montaigne knows this can lead to misunderstanding. He is, for example, ‘better at friendship than at anything else, yet the very words used to acknowledge that I have this affliction [poor memory] are taken to signify ingratitude; they judge my affection by my memory’—quite wrongly. ‘However, I derive comfort from my infirmity.’ Poor memory protects him from a disagreeable form of ambition, stops him babbling, and forces him to think through things for himself because he can’t remember what others have said. **(p.133)** Another advantage, he says in his *Essays*, ‘is that...I remember less any insults received’.¹⁵

To this we can add the point that poor memory and a non-Narrative disposition aren’t hindrances when it comes to autobiography in the literal sense—actually writing things down about one’s own life. Montaigne is the proof of this, for

he is perhaps the greatest autobiographer, the greatest human self-recorder, in spite of the fact that

nothing is so foreign to my mode of writing than extended narration [*narration estendue*]. I have to break off so often from shortness of wind that neither the structure of my works nor their development is worth anything at all. (1563-92: 120)

Montaigne writes the unstoried life—the only life that matters, I'm inclined to think. He has no 'side', in the colloquial English sense of this term. His honesty, although extreme, is devoid of exhibitionism or sentimentality (St Augustine and Rousseau compare unfavourably). He seeks self-knowledge in radically unpremeditated life-writing: 'I speak to my writing-paper exactly as I do the first person I meet' (1563-92: 891). He knows his memory is hopelessly untrustworthy, and he concludes that the fundamental lesson of self-knowledge is knowledge of self-ignorance.

7.9 'An ordinary mind'

Once one is on the lookout for comments on memory, one finds them everywhere. There is a constant discord of opinion. I think James Meek is accurate when he comments on Salter's novel *Light Years*:

Salter strips out the narrative transitions and explanations and contextualisations, the novelistic linkages that don't exist in our actual memories, to leave us with a set of remembered fragments, some bright, some ugly, some bafflingly trivial, that don't easily connect and can't be put together as a whole, except in the sense of chronology, and in the sense that they are all that remains. (2013: 4)

Meek takes it that this is true of everyone, and it is perhaps the most common case. Salter in *Light Years* finds a matching disconnection in life itself: 'There is no complete life. There are only fragments. We are born to have nothing, to have it pour through our hands' (1975: 35). And this, again, is a common experience:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own **(p. 134)** feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.... (Woolf 1925: 160)

It's hard to work out the full consequences of this passage from Virginia Woolf. What is certain is that there are rehearsers and composers among us, people who not only naturally story their recollections, but also their lives as they are happening. But when Sir Henry Taylor observes that 'an imaginative man is apt to see, in his life, the story of his life; and is thereby led to conduct himself in such a manner as to make a good story of it rather than a good life' (1836: 35) he's identifying a fault, a moral danger, a recipe for inauthenticity.¹⁶ We should therefore worry if the narrativists are right, and such self-storying impulses are in fact universal.

Fortunately, they're not right. There are people who are wonderfully and movingly plodding and factual in their grasp of their pasts. It's an ancient view that people always remember their own pasts in a way that puts them in a good light, but there is solid evidence that it's far from universally true.¹⁷

7.10 The True Self?

In his poem 'Continuing to Live', Philip Larkin claims that 'in time, / We half-identify the blind impress / All our behavings bear' (2003: 94). The narrativists think that this is an essentially narrative matter, an essentially narrative construal of the form of our lives. But many of us don't get even as far as Larkinian half-identification, and we have at best bits and pieces, rather than a story. We're startled by Larkin's further claim that 'once you have walked the length of your mind, what / You command is clear as a lading-list', for we find, even in advanced age, that we still have no clear idea of what we command. I for one have no clear sense of who or what I am. This is not because I want to be like Montaigne, or because I've read Socrates on ignorance, or Nietzsche on skins—

How can man know himself? He is a dark and veiled thing; and whereas the hare has seven skins, the human being can shed seven times seventy skins and still not be able to say: 'This is really you, this is no longer outer shell'. (1874a: 340, 1874b: 174; translation modified)

I think of Simon Gray in his *Coda*, written when he knew himself to be dying of cancer:

the truth is that I don't really know even quite elementary things about myself, my wants and needs, until I've written them down or spoken them. (2008: 114)

(p.135) Gray is perhaps wise, given the continuation of the above passage from Nietzsche:

Besides, it is an agonizing, dangerous undertaking to dig down into yourself in this way, to force your way by the shortest route down the shaft of your own being. How easy it is to do damage to yourself that no doctor can heal. And moreover, why should it be necessary, since everything—our friendships and hatreds, the way we look, our handshakes, the things we remember and forget, our books, our handwriting—bears witness to our being? (ibid. p. 340)

I can't, however, cut off this quotation here, because it continues in a way that raises a doubt about my position:

But there is a means by which this absolutely crucial enquiry can be carried out. Let the young soul look back upon its life and ask itself: what until now have you truly loved, what has drawn out your soul, what has commanded it and at the same time made it happy? Line up these objects of reverence before you, and perhaps by what they are and by their sequence, they will yield you a law, the fundamental law of your true self. (ibid. p. 340)

‘Perhaps by what they are...they will yield the fundamental law of your true self.’ This claim is easy to endorse. It’s Proust’s greatest insight. Camus sees it too. But Nietzsche is more specific: ‘perhaps by what they are *and by their sequence*, they will yield....the fundamental law of your true self’. Here it seems I must either disagree with Nietzsche or concede something to the narrativists: the possible importance of grasping the sequence in progressing towards self-understanding.

I concede it. Consideration of the sequence—the ‘narrative’, if you like—may be important for some people in some cases. For most of us, however, I think self-knowledge comes best in bits and pieces. Nor does this concession yield anything to the sweeping view with which I began, the view—in Oliver Sacks’s words—that all human life is life-writing, that ‘each of us constructs and lives a “narrative”, and that ‘this narrative is us, our identities’.

Notes:

⁽¹⁾ Sacks 1985: 110, Bruner 1994: 53, Bruner 1987: 15, McAdams et al. 2006, Velleman 2005: 206, Schechtman 1996: 93, Dennett 1988: 1029, Ricoeur 1985: 246.

⁽²⁾ Sartre, at least, disagrees on the second point, arguing in *La nausée* that self-storying, although inevitable, condemns us to inauthenticity—in effect, to absence from our own lives. Proust agrees, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*; see §7.4 below.

⁽³⁾ I doubt that what they say is an accurate description even of themselves.

⁽⁴⁾ *As You Like It* 3.2. Rosalind considers variations in the experienced pace of time that arise from temporary circumstances, but individual differences in temporal phenomenology run much deeper. In their book *The Time Paradox* (2008) Zimbardo and Boyd sort human beings into 'Pasts', 'Presents', and 'Futures' on the basis of their different temporal proclivities, and classify us further as 'past-negative' or 'past-positive', 'present-hedonistic' or 'present-fatalistic'. It's a familiar point that different cultures experience time very differently (see e.g. Levine 1998).

⁽⁵⁾ A recent medical classification distinguishes between 'young-old' (65–74), 'old' (74–84), 'old-old' (85+).

⁽⁶⁾ 1844: 471; the last phrase echoes Psalm 103.

⁽⁷⁾ One's real life in Proust's normative sense is not one's actual life as this is ordinarily understood. It's a matter of one's essence.

⁽⁸⁾ 'That's precisely why Proust is so pessimistic', they may add.

⁽⁹⁾ 1989: 239. Updike's testimony shows that this experience of life has nothing essentially to do with poor memory.

⁽¹⁰⁾ 1914: 48. Pessoa's heteronyms are not noms de plume; see e.g. Zenith 2002.

⁽¹¹⁾ Brainard 1970–3: 20; Perec 1978.

⁽¹²⁾ *New Yorker*, 26 June 1995. Martin Amis (2015) has a more hopeful perspective in a review of a biography of Saul Bellow by Zachary Leader (who also wrote a biography of Kingsley Amis): 'You lose, let us say, a parent or a beloved mentor. Once the primary reactions, both universal and personal, begin to fade, you no longer see the reduced and simplified figure, compromised by time—and in Bellow's case encrusted with secondhand "narratives", platitudes, and approximations. You begin to see the whole being, in all its freshness and quiddity. That is what happens here.'

⁽¹³⁾ See e.g. Strawson 2007.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Putting aside genuine trauma (being 'born again' is a superficial change relative to one's deep structure).

(¹⁵) 1563–92: 32–3. ‘Since my memory is very short’, he wrote to his father in 1563 after the death of Etienne de la Boétie, ‘and was further disturbed by the confusion that my mind was to suffer from so heavy and important a loss, it is impossible that I have not forgotten many things that I would like to be known’ (1562–92: 1276–7).

(¹⁶) Cases in which the storying is done with perfect self-consciousness—‘I was telling myself the story of our visit to the Hardys, & I began to compose it’ (Woolf 1926: 102)—are not at issue.

(¹⁷) See e.g. Waggenaar 1994. See also the end of Tolstoy’s story ‘The Death of Ivan Illich’.



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