
Ever since the publication of *Fictions in Autobiography* in 1985, Paul John Eakin has been a major presence in the field of autobiography studies. As with his other monographs, Eakin’s latest work, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, brings together elegance and range, as well as clarity and conceptual complexity. Like his other works, too, *Living Autobiographically* covers a wide range of theoretical and autobiographical texts. While not indifferent to literary theory per se, Eakin (as has been apparent for some time) is profoundly stimulated by theory that goes beyond not only the literary but also the humanities. Most notable in this monograph is Eakin’s use of recent research in neurobiology. With regard to his choice of autobiographical texts for discussion, most are American, though Eakin does discuss the Australian writer David Malouf (a long-time favorite of Eakin’s), as well as the Norwegian autobiographical narratives analyzed in Marianne Gullestad’s *Everyday Life Philosophers: Modernity, Morality, and Autobiography in Norway* (1996). Eakin’s interest in Gullestad’s work, which is based on a project that elicited autobiographical narratives from “ordinary” individuals, shows that he is not solely concerned with so-called “literary” texts, something also seen in his discussion of the “Portraits of Grief” series that appeared in the *New York Times* in the wake of 9/11.

Bringing together such disparate texts, auto/biographical procedures, and theoretical concerns is an ambitious enterprise. Most ambitious of all is that *Living Autobiographically* brings “culturalist” and biological frameworks together as a way of answering the question “Why do people tell and sometimes write their life stories?” (151). Eakin begins his study into “how we create identity in narrative” by reiterating and developing some of the insights of his previous work, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999). Eakin argues that narrative and identity are essentially continuous, pointing to the role that narrative plays in identity formation in children, as well as to the effect that pathological inability to effectively self-narrate (caused by conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease) has on identity. It should be said that Eakin’s interest in the narrative basis of identity is neither novel nor especially original. David Carr’s *Time, Narrative, and History* (1986), which uncovers “the narrative features of everyday experience” (16), has clear implications for any...
study into the link between narrative and identity. Eakin’s use of the term “narrative identity” is strikingly similar to my use of the term “narrative self” in *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography* (1996), which similarly proposed that narrative was not merely a medium for the description of identity, but constitutive of identity itself. There are numerous other examples of scholars who have taken this line of thinking.

Where *Living Autobiographically* is strikingly original is in its attempt to trace not only the cultural determinants of narrative identity but also the biological ones. The book is made up of four parts. The first two are theoretical chapters. Chapter one deals with the cultural influences on narrative models of identity (with particular emphasis on the ethical ramifications of determining when a human subject does and does not have an “identity”), while chapter two deals with the relationship between biology and selfhood. The third and fourth chapters offer practical discussions of these two areas of concern, focusing on a handful of texts to illustrate the theoretical positions outlined in the first two chapters. The first half of the book, then, “identifies the raw materials of the pervasive self-modeling that structures our living,” while the second half “shows this identity work in action” (xi).

While this split may be simple enough, it hides a major complication that Eakin does not sufficiently address. Eakin repeatedly speculates that autobiography is not simply “something we read in a book,” but is also “a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit, in the stories we tell ourselves day in and day out . . .” (4). As he puts it elsewhere, “I am approaching autobiography not only as a literary genre but also as an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation” (34). Clearly there is a link between autobiography as a literary act and autobiographical thinking, but the two are not, I believe, wholly continuous. They have different occasions, forms, and modes of regulation. Simply put, social rules are not necessarily the same as literary ones. In addition, autobiographical self-narration is more continuous, dynamic, and open to revision than autobiography.

The ramifications of eliding the distinction between autobiography and “the autobiographical” is seen clearly in the first chapter on the social and cultural “rules” that govern narrative self-modeling. Eakin notes that these rules often pertain to the subject’s ability to “structure a narratively coherent life story” (30). As Eakin points out, there are considerable legal, social, and medical ramifications for those who will not or cannot construct a narrative that is considered sufficiently coherent. But while Eakin’s case is clear with regard to social contexts, the link between social rule-breaking and literary rule-breaking (whereby the literary is usually inherently concerned with breaking rules) is less clear. Eakin points to the ramifications of “rule-breakers” such as
Rigoberta Menchú (whose ground-breaking testimonio, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* [1983], was accused by the anthropologist David Stoll of being inaccurate) and Kathryn Harrison (whose memoir of incest, *The Kiss* [1997], “triggered a flood of condemnation” [32] in the US media, primarily for the supposed effect that her confessions would have on her children). Certainly we self-narrate under “constraints,” as Eakin points out, but are examples such as Menchú’s and Harrison’s really paradigmatic of such constraints? If we claim to Social Security that we are someone we are not, the ramifications will be different from claiming to be someone we are not in an autobiography. And as Eakin shows, the “inaccuracies” in a work such as Menchú’s (a work that led to her receiving the Nobel Prize) have received different critical and social responses from the imposture found in Binjamin Wilkomirski’s holocaust “memoir” *Fragments* (1995).

The irony of Eakin’s approach to autobiography as “a lifelong process of identity formation” is that he fails to take fully into account the different and complex “rules” that apply to the literary sphere. The clearest example of this failure is in Eakin’s discussion of Harrison’s *The Kiss*, a work that violated no laws or social “rules” concerning truthfulness or coherence. Despite this, the local response to the publication of the work suggests that some unspoken “rule” had indeed been broken. Harrison (who was at college when the sexual liaison with her father began) was largely presented by the US media as not a victim of abuse, but a victimizer of her own young children for making her story public. How Harrison’s act precisely is abusive of her children is never made clear. Eakin’s claim that “Harrison has been judged more harshly for violating privacy—both others’ and her own—than for breaking the incest taboo” (42) illustrates the incoherence regarding Harrison’s putative “rule-breaking,” since it is not clear how one can “violate” one’s own privacy, nor is it clear that the response to Harrison’s “violation” of privacy is not, in fact, a covert judgment for her breaking of the incest taboo. This latter point is implied by Eakin’s own reference to a “glossy full-page photo” of Harrison in *Vogue* as “portraying the former incest victim as a disturbingly glamorous fashion plate” (42). Clearly Harrison has deployed profound anxieties about incest and female sexuality that cannot be openly engaged in the American context, but which have nevertheless been raised in this case of a woman speaking the unspeakable in ways that do not conform to the available “genres” of victimization that would have made Harrison’s self-narration publicly acceptable. That such a woman is also a mother makes her actions all the more volatile. Had the events of *The Kiss* been narrated as part of a “lifelong process of identity formation” in prescribed medical, legal, or educational contexts, Harrison would have been unlikely to have achieved
notoriety. Rather, it is the difference between autobiography (as literature) and ongoing identity formation (a difference that, as Eakin points out, can also be financial) that causes such social anxiety in this case.

If the gap between autobiography and autobiographical thinking is problematic in Eakin’s discussion of autobiography as a social act, then what of his project to find the “somatic sources” of autobiography (59)? How “biological” is autobiography? The question is an exciting, if daunting, one. Relying largely on Antonio R. Damasio’s neurological research into consciousness, Eakin posits a link between the literary presentation of self and its “nonverbal, biological manifestations” (71). He does this by finding links between Damasio’s “wordless narrative of core consciousness” and “the expression of self in autobiographical narrative” (75). These links are that both are “temporal forms,” both “generate the illusion of a teller” (75), and both “serve a homeostatic goal” (76).

This last example strikes me as the most interesting and also the most problematic. Eakin argues that biological homeostasis (the maintenance of equilibrium or a stable bodily state) is equivalent to the homeostatic purpose of self narration which aims to create a sense of stable identity. This is an interesting and potentially productive metaphor. It is also one that hides behind it much argument about whether identity is indeed stable. Let’s say there is something homeostatic about identity. Does that necessarily mean that identity is part of homeostasis (that it is, in effect, “biological”)? If identity is indeed “part of” homeostasis, and therefore biological, then presumably it would make sense to consider those events and literary forms that mark and narrate a loss of stability. If identity is homeostatic, then bodily and psychological crises, conversions, and traumas would be the main challenges that a homeostatic model of identity would face. Unfortunately, Eakin shows no sustained interest in the large literature (both “primary” and “secondary”) on crisis and conversion. It is perhaps telling that Eakin’s “practical” criticism on the biological sources of autobiography comprises the shortest chapter in *Living Autobiographically*.

Eakin, understandably perhaps, has most to say about the social and cultural determinants of autobiography. His emphasis within this area is most often on class, and the highlight of the book is a self-reflexive moment when Eakin reflects on (and includes) his own attempt to write autobiographically. This is literary criticism that is both emotionally charged and intellectually challenging. It shows how Eakin is often at his most insightful when talking about men and fathers (something also seen in his discussion of Jonathan Franzen’s “My Father’s Brain,” from *How to Be Alone* [2003]). As his discussion of André Aciman’s *New Yorker* essay “Arbitrage” (2003) also shows, however, Eakin is not always especially sensitive to the sexual politics of gender and its tropes.
Living Autobiographically is a major work by a major critic in the field of autobiography studies. While it may raise as many questions as it answers, it represents an ambitious attempt to broaden an already broad field of study. Its attempt to integrate the literary and the non-literary, the humanities and the sciences, is a major project that will no doubt be furthered by future scholars.

David McCooey


The Self in Moral Space is a response to recent work in the ethics of life writing. However, it is not simply a contribution to this emergent field. Rather, it attempts a much more ambitious task: that of providing a theoretical justification and basis for studying life writing through the lens of the ethical.

In pursuing this project, Parker draws heavily on the work of philosopher Charles Taylor, who claims that a human life is not well understood if it is analyzed from a purely external perspective—in terms of sociological explanation, for instance. For Taylor, the first-person perspective, which reveals what is of moral or spiritual significance in shaping a life, is essential for understanding what it is to be a “self.” This implies that philosophers who wish to understand the self would do well to draw upon life writing and the wealth of detail it offers in providing concrete examples of how ethical values shape self-development and self-understanding. Conversely, it also suggests that scholars of life writing have a vital role to play in contributing to the historical, cultural, and philosophical understanding of the Western self. However, they will fulfill this role only if they read their textual sources with an eye for what Bernard Williams calls the “thick ethical concepts” that make up “languages of the good”: the languages by which individuals orient themselves in “moral space.”

The value Parker sees in this role for the life writing critic leads him into polemical combat with those who favor “thin” theoretical languages, which encourage the analysis of life writing in terms of discursive systems or power relations. Such readings are driven by what he dubs “post-Saussurian” or “neo-Nietzschean” theories in which the self is regarded as a fiction, or something to be overcome (19). Very few actual examples of such allegedly misguided readings are given in Parker’s book, however. Rather than engaging in any sustained or substantial attack on his rhetorical opponent, he chooses instead to fortify his own position with a series of engaging examples of the mode of philosophical literary criticism he advocates, including a few provocative forays into what might be considered enemy territory.