

**CHAPTER 5**

# Autobiographical Understanding and Narrative Inquiry

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**A**utobiography is the inroad par excellence into exploring the dynamic features—as well as the profound challenges—of narrative inquiry, or at least that portion of it that looks to the comprehensive study of lives as an important vehicle for understanding the human condition. This is so for one quite obvious reason: Autobiography is itself a fundamental form of narrative inquiry, and by examining what Georges Gusdorf has referred to as the “conditions and limits of autobiography” (1956/1980), there exists a valuable opportunity for examining the conditions and limits of narrative inquiry more generally. But there is another, perhaps less obvious, reason for seizing on autobiography and memoir as an inroad into exploring the dynamic features of narrative inquiry as applied to the study of lives. And that is that it can help show how and why narrative inquiry might lessen the distance between *science* and *art* and thereby open the way toward a more integrated, adequate, and humane vision for studying the human realm.

Before developing this line of argumentation, it will be necessary to consider the birth of autobiographical understanding and to chart the contours of its transformation in history. In doing so, I shall draw significantly on the seminal essay by Gusdorf (1956/1980)<sup>1</sup> referring exclusively to this essay in all references to Gusdorf in the pages to follow. It should be emphasized that there are numerous additional works on autobiography that might be drawn on in this context.<sup>2</sup> It should also be emphasized that Gusdorf’s essay is but one account—indeed one kind of account, classically modernist in orientation, focused mainly on the West—of the emergence

of autobiographical understanding and has been the subject of significant critique, especially by those who wish to tell a rather less individualistic, and perhaps less male-oriented, story (Benstock, 1988; Brodski & Schenck, 1988; Smith & Watson, 1992, 1998, 2001). This essay, however, provides a particularly informative, as well as provocative, treatment of the birth of autobiographical understanding as well as that of the elusive being we have come to call the *self*. For all its limits, therefore—some of which will be explored in what follows—it remains a useful takeoff point for exploring the matters at hand.

After considering the birth and development of autobiographical understanding, I will move on to consider in greater detail both the modern and “post-modern” self, focusing especially on the interrelationship of memory and autobiographical narrative. Finally, I will try to articulate some of the challenges attendant on exploring the role of autobiographical understanding in narrative inquiry. Of particular significance in this context is the challenge posed by what I have come to refer to as the *poetic* dimension of autobiographical understanding and writing and the associated question of whether autobiographical narratives may be deemed sufficiently *truthful* to earn a place in the pantheon of (valid, legitimate, important) scientific knowledge (Freeman, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2004). According to some, this poetic dimension, insofar as it entails the artfulness generally ascribed to imaginative literature, cannot help but render suspect the value of autobiographical data for narrative inquiry, particularly if it aspires toward achieving some measure of scientificity. As shall be argued herein, however, it is this very dimension that can open the way toward a fuller conception of narrative inquiry and its promise in understanding the human condition as well as a more capacious, and indeed adequate, conception of science itself.

## From Mythical to Historical Consciousness

Even though it is surely possible to speak (cautiously) of *the* human condition across time and place and even though this condition is, arguably, intimately tied to narrative, there is no question but that the specific form the human condition assumes—and, in turn, the specific form narrative assumes—varies widely (Freeman, 1998; Geertz, 1983; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Taylor, 1989). There are, for instance, cultures where human personhood is framed less in terms of an individual identity, with its unique and unrepeatable story of coming-to-be, than in terms of its social place, its role in a cultural pattern that may be deemed timeless. Narrative remains a relevant category in such cultures but may be considered more a matter of public, rather than private, property. *Uniqueness* and *unrepeatability* may be alien terms of the human condition; sameness and repetition, the placement of lives within an eternal cosmic template, may instead be the order of the day. What's more, *living*, insofar as it entails a *living out* of a mythical story that transcends the boundaries of “my life,” may be virtually inseparable from telling. As for autobiographical understanding—at least insofar as it involves the evaluative

looking back over the terrain of the personal past from the vantage point of the present—it may be virtually nonexistent.

A qualification is in order in this context. The mode of autobiographical understanding just described is itself but one mode, and those (such as Gusdorf) who locate autobiographical understanding mainly in the West and mainly in the “looking-back-over-the-personal-past” form have sometimes been criticized for an overly restrictive, even imperialistic, view. This criticism is a valid one; surely, there are other modes of autobiographical understanding—and of autobiography itself—entirely. For present purposes, however, I will be concentrating my attention on the one at hand, partly for the sake of delimiting the scope of my inquiry and thereby interrogating this mode in greater depth and partly because this mode remains dominant in that sector of narrative inquiry that is oriented toward gathering life histories through interviews and other such “big story” methodological venues (Freeman, 2006). This qualification notwithstanding, what I wish to underscore here is the idea that, over the course of Western history, “my life” gradually becomes a more focal concern for many and marks a significant break with prevailing traditions of understanding. Gusdorf thus emphasizes that

the man who takes delight in thus drawing his own image believes himself worthy of a special interest. . . . I count, my existence is significant to the world, and my death will leave the world incomplete. In narrating my life, I give witness of myself even from beyond my death and so can preserve this precious capital that ought not disappear. (p. 29)

The result is “my story,” worthy in its own right—particularly for those more privileged, generally male, selves whose lives were seen to matter most (Conway, 1998; Heilbrun, 1988)—and in some instances worthy enough for others to learn about as well. In this story, there will be painful moments of decision but also twists and turns, accidents and unanticipated consequences, and, not least, considerations of the difference between life as it had been lived, in all its uncertainty and unknowingness, and life as it appears now, through the eyes of the present. In a distinct sense, the phenomenon of autobiographical understanding, as it is being explored herein, presupposes this very difference. It also presupposes the existence of historical consciousness, which may be understood as that specific form of narrative consciousness that entails an interpretive engagement with the ostensibly unrepeatable past. We want to know not how things *happen*—how they always occur, given the eternal order of things—but how they *happened*, the operative presumption being that we can tell a cogent, believable, perhaps even *true* story of how the present came to be by looking backward and situating the movement of events within a more or less coherent narrative form. Let us explore in greater detail how this quite distinctive view of personal understanding came to be, focusing especially on the transition from mythical to historical consciousness.

In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade (1954) calls attention to “archaic” people’s “revolt against concrete, historical time” (p. ix). In terms of conscious behavior, Eliade writes,

The “primitive,” the archaic man, acknowledges no act which has not previously been posited and lived by someone else, some other being who was not a man. What he does has been done before. His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others. (p. 5)

Archaic man—and woman—thus existed in the order of what Eliade calls “mythical time,” a time “when the foundation of the world occurred” (p. 20), and it was through myth that this world could be made present ever again. The aim of myth, therefore, Kearney (2002) explains, “was not so much to invent something that never happened”—which we have come to associate with the idea of fiction, “or to record something that did happen”—which we have come to associate with the idea of history

but to retell a story that had been told many times before. Primordial narratives were thus essentially recreative. And myth, the most common form of early narrative, was a traditional plot or storyline which could be transmitted from one generation to the next [and] generally had a sacred ritual function, being recited for a community in order to recall their holy origins and ancestors (p. 8).

Gusdorf does well to describe the view of personhood that is generally associated with the mythical worldview:

Throughout most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community. No one is rightful possessor of his life or his death; lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being—or, rather, isolation is impossible in such a scheme of total cohesiveness as this. Community life unfolds like a great drama, with its climactic moments originally fixed by the gods being repeated from age to age. Each man thus appears as the possessor of a role, already performed by the ancestors and to be performed again by descendants. The number of roles is limited, and this is expressed by a limited number of names. Newborn children receive the names of the deceased whose roles, in a sense, they perform again, and so the community maintains a continuous self-identity in spite of the constant renewal of individuals who constitute it. (pp. 29–30)

The world to which Eliade, Kearney, and Gusdorf are referring is thus distinctly *pre*-autobiographical. The reason is straightforward enough, according to Gusdorf: “Autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist” (p. 30). This “unconsciousness of personality,” as he puts it, is characteristic not only of those “primitive” or “archaic” societies that Eliade and others have described but also in those more “advanced” societies that

continue to adhere to an essentially mythical worldview governed by the principle of repetition, eternal recurrence.

Gusdorf opens himself up to a number of possible criticisms in this context. It can be argued, for instance, that the “isolated being” that emerges out of the socially cohesive, interdependent web of human relations itself bespeaks a mode of existence problematically disconnected from others. It can be argued further that his conception of self “properly speaking” is a parochial one. At the same time, the broad picture he wishes to paint is not without foundation. Consider in this context the situation of ancient Greece. Despite often being considered the wellspring of Western culture, the notion of the individual, and individuated, person was not to be found in Greek antiquity. Nor was the genre of autobiography. Rather than fashioning narratives that were personal and private, the primary concern of the person was to become integrated into the community; thinking about one’s existence, therefore, was inseparable from thinking about the communal world (Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001; Vernant, 1995). The Greek sense of self was thus deeply embedded in a cultural whole; only later would there exist the possibility of this self “standing out” from its broader social context of being. And only later would it become appropriate for a person to seize on his or her personal memories, or “life stories,” and communicate them to others.

In Gusdorf’s account, autobiographical understanding, as well as autobiography itself, could only emerge when humanity had moved from the mythical domain, with its fundamentally “sociocentric” conception of personhood (Shweder & Bourne, 1984), into what he refers to as “the perilous domain of history”:

The man who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future; he has become more aware of differences than of similarities; given the constant change, given the uncertainty of events and of men, he believes it a useful and valuable thing to fix his own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear like all things in this world. History would then be the memory of a humanity heading toward unforeseeable goals, struggling against the breakdown of forms and beings. Each man matters to the world, each life and each death; the witnessing of each about himself enriches the common cultural heritage. (pp. 30–31)

By all indications, therefore, there emerges a complete revolution in both self-understanding and self-representation:

At the moment it enters history, humanity . . . finds itself engaged in an autonomous adventure” and “man knows himself as a responsible agent. . . . The historic personage now appears, and biography, taking its place alongside monuments, inscriptions, statues, is one manifestation of his desire to endure in man’s memory. (p. 31)

It is difficult to know how far to take this account. In the opening pages of *The Republic* (Plato, 2003), for instance, there is an exchange between Cephalus

and Socrates in which there is talk of anxieties in the face of death, the process “reckoning up” the personal past, and, by virtue of what the process brings, “terror” and “foreboding” or “cheerfulness” and “hope.” On some level, therefore, it would seem that autobiographical understanding was already on the scene in Plato’s time—if not well before. We can also presume, however, that it was constituted in a manner entirely different from the kind of understanding we have come to know in modern times, being intimately tied to those mythical “stories about another world” through which personal existence was defined. The good life, one might say, was not yet *my* life per se; and self-reckoning had less to do with the vicissitudes of internally generated conscience than it did with transcendent images of virtue. Taylor’s (1989) comments are useful in this context: For Plato, he notes,

the moral sources we accede to by reason are not within us. They can be seen as outside us, in the Good; or perhaps our acceding to a higher condition ought to be seen as something which takes place in the ‘space’ between us and this order of the good. (p. 123)

The form of autobiographical understanding we find in the exchange between Cephalus and Socrates is therefore not to be mistaken for the form we find today for the “inner” and “outer” have yet to be split apart in the modern style.

Along with the transition from the mythical domain into the domain of history, there is the emergence of autobiographical understanding “proper”—or, more subtly put, that particular mode of autobiographical understanding that came to involve a process of looking back over the terrain of the personal past and discerning new meanings, ones that were unavailable in the flux of the immediate. Meaning thus becomes “unhinged,” as it were, mobile, as much a function of “now” as “then.” There has emerged a dimension of difference, of *deferral*, such that henceforth, the project of *knowing*, particularly *self*-knowing, becomes inextricably bound to historical understanding. It also becomes bound to the idea of *accountability* (Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001). It might be noted in this context that accounting for one’s actions in court was one of the few occasions in Greek culture in which an individual might have told a first-person narrative (Most, 1989). This should serve to remind us that such accounts were in fact possible far earlier than is often assumed. By all indications, however, it is not until the time of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (397/1980) that we find accountability assuming the form of autobiographical reflection. Indeed, it is this great work that is generally taken to represent the inauguration of that sort of looking-back process that may be linked to the reflective work of autobiographical understanding (Freeman, 1993). On one level, the Augustinian position is quite continuous with the Platonic one. But there are two significant differences that ought to be recognized. The first is that, for Augustine, Plato’s “Good” is essentially replaced by God. The second difference, more important for present purposes, is that Augustine’s vision, though driven by God, has become more thoroughly internalized. As Taylor (1989) puts the matter,

God is not just what we long to see, but what powers the eye which sees. So the light of God is not just “out there,” illuminating the order of being, as it is for Plato; it is also an “inner” light. (p. 129)

Augustine, therefore,

shifts the focus from the field of objects known to the activity itself of knowing. . . . [I]n contrast to the domain of objects, which is public and common, the activity of knowing is particularized. . . . To look towards this activity is to look to the self, to take up a reflexive stance. (p. 130)

Pursuing this idea still further, Taylor writes of the “radical reflexivity” that bursts on the scene with *Confessions* and “brings to the fore a kind of presence to oneself which is inseparable from one’s being the agent of experience,” that is, “creatures with a first-person standpoint” (p. 131). This first-person standpoint is constituted in and through autobiographical reflection, issuing in what is, arguably, the first instance of autobiographical narrative.

A qualification is in order here as well. Although I have just used the term “autobiographical reflection” to refer to Augustine’s endeavor in *Confessions*, the form it assumes remains a far cry from the forms we find as we move closer to modernity. This is because the process of self-examination and self-reckoning in which he engages is addressed to God, the presumption being that whatever has transpired in this difficult life has, finally, been under God’s ever-vigilant direction. Indeed, “it is in this paradigmatically first-person activity, where I strive to make myself more present to myself, . . . that I come most tellingly and convincingly to the awareness that God stands above me” (Taylor, 1989, p. 135). As pivotal as *Confessions* was in the emergence of autobiographical understanding as well as the autobiographic genre itself, the Augustinian project of self-reflection has therefore been seen by some as a “premature” form of the process. Weintraub (1978), for instance, insists that while the Augustinian project unquestionably represents “a historicizing of human realities which the classical mentality . . . could not have achieved, it is still only a step toward that historicist view of the self-concept on which the notion of individuality depends” (p. 47). “Only a step”—Augustine’s mode of self-understanding, operating via a newfound and indeed revolutionary reliance on memory, is, according to Weintraub, not yet “there.” It remains pre-historicist, pre-individual, pre-*us*. The transition from mythical to historical consciousness thus remains incomplete.

## Autobiographical Understanding and the Modern Self

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Putting aside for the moment the teleologically driven, progressivist thrust of Weintraub’s emancipatory story—the story of Western Man extricating himself, finally, from the primitive morass of his pre-individual days—there is another significant transition being documented.

“In a medieval cosmic play,” Dupré (1993) has noted, “the human person clearly had the lead, but an all-knowing, unchanging God directed the play. The outcome remained predictable and hardly varied from one period to another” (p. 145). Herein lies what is, arguably, the most central mark of distinction between autobiographical understanding in the Augustinian era on up through the Middle Ages and that which emerges in the modern era: The story being told, inward though its gaze may be, remains the story not of the *self* but the *soul*; it is bound up with the idea of the *transcendent*, the idea that the movement of a life is inseparable from God’s watchful gaze and takes place against the backdrop of eternal realities. By all indications, this was so of men’s and women’s autobiographies alike. As Conway (1998) has pointed out, the tradition of Western European women’s autobiography emerged in the context of religious life, in narratives about one’s relationship to God. Indeed, women’s stories of their mystical experiences “set the pattern for describing a woman’s life in a way that shaped women’s subsequent narratives as definitively as the odyssey gave the underlying form to male autobiography” (p. 13). It might also be noted that the idea of *sin* loomed large in many of these accounts as well, the supposition that the process of self-examination was inseparable from the process of reckoning with one’s inevitable moral depravity. Whether one’s attention was directed toward the spirit or the flesh, autobiographical understanding had thus remained inextricably bound to the divine order, the designs of the personal past being more God’s than one’s own.

All this was to change with the modern age, for “Once the temporal actor with limited foresight became director, . . . the outcome ceased to be certain and the passage of time took on a far more dramatic character,” essentially tragic, “insofar as humans must shape their own future, however inadequately equipped and poorly enlightened they may be” (Dupré, 1993, p. 145). The space within which autobiographical understanding might operate thus widens. Enlightenment no longer bears the mark of God’s guarantee; one must look more thoroughly within—or, more specifically, *backward*—to achieve whatever modicum of enlightenment there may be. “Paradoxically,” therefore, “the modern orientation toward the future”—toward the new rather than the old, innovation rather than tradition, difference rather than sameness—“created a more acute awareness of the past” (p. 146). As Dupré is quick to remind us, systematic reflection on the past began well before the advent of the modern age; one only needs to consider the work of Thucydides and Herodotus. Nor, again, did the cyclical view of time prevent Greek and Roman historians from addressing the unique significance of certain events. Only in modernity, however, was the accent laid on the *modo*—the “now” of life—such that “the modern future appeared as the endlessly postponed terminus of a continuing history” (p. 156). And, this “one-directional move toward the future required a constant reinterpretation of the past” (p. 157). Dupré goes on to speak in this context of the loss of necessity, the loss of the operative presumption that there is, in history, an immanent logic and order. The loss of necessity is tantamount to the birth of contingency. And it is exactly this situation of contingency that calls for the retrospective gaze of autobiographical understanding.



There are many significant players in this story, particularly Montaigne, Rousseau, and Goethe, each of whom inaugurates new, and still more internalized, dimensions of autobiographical understanding. “Montaigne,” especially, Gusdorf offers, “discovers in himself a new world, a man of nature, naked and artless, whose confessions he gives us in his *Essays*, but without penitence.” The *Essays* would become “one of the gospels of modern spirituality. Freed of all doctrinal allegiance, in a world well on its way to becoming secularized, the autobiographer assumes the task of bringing out the most hidden aspects of his individual being.” Greater value is placed on personal freedom, individuality, and sincerity, “the heroism of understanding and telling all. . . . Complexities, contradictions, and aberrations do not cause hesitation or repugnance but a kind of wonderment” (p. 34). In the case of Rousseau, there is also emphasis on the need for telling the unvarnished *truth* in the face of such complexities, contradictions, and aberrations, the assumption being that it is, in fact, possible to provide a more or less objective account of one’s past. There are challenges and difficulties in doing so, to be sure, having to do with the distortions of memory, personal biases, and, not least, the coloring of the past through the eyes of the present. But these are not considered to be insurmountable.

In the case of Goethe’s (1994) autobiography, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, the situation is somewhat different. There is the recognition that in trying to understand and write about oneself one cannot attain the same degree—or, perhaps more appropriately, the same *kind*—of objectivity as is possible in history or in biography. Precisely because there cannot be a full disentangling of “I” and “me,” of subject and object, the resultant story is bound to be permeated by one’s own irrevocably personal view. Weintraub’s (1975) comments on definitional issues related to autobiography may be useful in this context:

The essential subject matter of all autobiographic writing is concretely *experienced* reality and not the realm of brute external fact. External reality is embedded in experience, but it is viewed from within the modification of inward life forming our experience; external fact attains a degree of symptomatic value derived from inward absorption and reflection. . . . Autobiography [therefore] presupposes a writer intent upon reflection on this inward realm of experience, someone for whom this inner world of experience is important. (pp. 822–823)

From this perspective, we can perhaps understand more clearly Goethe’s insistence on linking up “truth” and “poetry”: The inner world is a world like no other, and coming to terms with it, through autobiographical reflection and writing, cannot be the sort of more dispassionate process one sometimes has recourse to in encountering the external world.

As an important aside, it should be emphasized that this issue presents quite remarkable challenges for narrative inquiry. What the narrative researcher often deals with, in essence, are *autobiographical* (i.e., first-person) data that he or she must render in *biographical* (i.e., third-person) terms. Even if he or she aspires toward achieving some measure of objectivity vis-à-vis these data, there nevertheless remains the stubborn fact that these same data will be shot through with

subjectivity, interpretation, and imagination. Put in the simplest of terms, in autobiographical understanding there is no object, no “text,” outside the self; even though the autobiographer may draw on certain personal documents and the like during the course of fashioning his or her story, the phenomenon that is ultimately of concern—namely one’s personal past—must itself be fashioned through *poiesis*, that is, through the interpretive and imaginative labor of meaning making (Freeman, 1999a, 1999b). The autobiographer thus interprets what he or she has already constructed through imagination, after which time the narrative researcher must try somehow to turn these rather unwieldy data into the kind of account that others might read and, perhaps, learn from. Subsequently, he or she will engage in another series of poetic processes during the course of interpreting these unwieldy data and then writing about them in a way that will not only be informative but, ideally (from my perspective), *artful*, such that the persons in question can live on the page. As traditionally conceived, all this is to take place in the name of *science*. How is it possible? We will address this set of issues in greater detail later on. For now, suffice it to say that autobiographical understanding, as it moves into the modern era, becomes not only more inward looking but also more epistemologically questionable. Full-blown suspicion will be deferred until (what is sometimes called) the post-modern era, when it becomes less and less clear, to some at any rate, whether in fact there is any sure foundation at all to the entire venture.

Returning to the issue of autobiographical understanding as it relates to the emergence of the modern self, the defining feature involves the fact that, for many, God is no longer seen as the driving force behind the process. In Augustine’s case, it may be recalled, God was at the very center of the process: The path inward was the path upward. In modern times, it is often said, the path upward has largely been closed off or considered a dead end. For better or for worse, the story generally continues, we are left with ourselves, our only hope being that the depths we are thought to possess will suffice to bring us some measure of meaning.

The responses to this ostensible state of affairs vary. For Taylor (1989), there is, in part, a sense of loss: The process of interiorization becomes more self-sufficient but also more self-enclosed. With Descartes, for instance, there emerges “an ideal of self-responsibility, with the new definitions of freedom and reason which accompany it, and the connected sense of dignity” (p. 177). But with this very ideal, there also emerges a shutting off, or shutting out, of those transcendent sources that had earlier been deemed so central to the movement of self-understanding. Weintraub (1978) tells a quite different story. For him, again, there is a sense in which the Augustinian project of self-reflection is seen as a kind of preliminary stage on the way to the actualization of both autobiographical understanding and the autobiographic genre, which “took on its full dimension and richness when Western Man acquired a thoroughly historical understanding of his existence” (p. 821). For Weintraub, therefore, this development, rather than entailing loss, entails significant gain, the “full dimension and richness” that is made possible by the full historicization of human reality. While Taylor’s and Weintraub’s accounts differ, there is nevertheless agreement that something radical happened sometime following the Augustinian revolution: God, or Good, the supposition of a transcendent order

giving form and meaning to personal existence, is seen to have diminished in import, leaving individuals to their own, largely internal, devices. Autobiographical understanding, in turn, becomes a matter of wrestling with one's own inner demons, of discerning how one has fared in relation to one's own personal standards and ideals. Pride, gratitude, and a sense of integrity may emerge when, on looking backward over the landscape of my life, I see what I have done and been, what I have made of my unique attributes. Conversely, there can also be shame, resentment, and despair on viewing my life's wreckage, to think that I have fallen so sorely short of my own potential.

Here, though, we might ask, To what extent have we, modern and post-modern selves, abandoned a reliance on transcendent sources? What does it mean to say that I am "grateful" for my life or that I am "disappointed" in it, that I have realized, or not realized, my own potential? There is unquestionably a reference to an inner landscape. It is also true that, for many, there is no God supporting the process; the ardent atheist can surely wrestle with his or her demons without invoking anything larger than the very self so embroiled. Even in this instance, however, there may remain the felt conviction that there is *some* order, or principle, or value that exists beyond me and that conditions the self-judgments and self-appraisals I make. There is, in any case, no mistaking the marked shift that takes place in the passage to modernity. While many autobiographies are those of public figures and are oriented toward celebrating deeds, "providing a sort of posthumous propaganda for posterity that otherwise is in danger of forgetting them or of failing to esteem them properly" (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 36), there also emerge those autobiographies that look more fully inward, not for the sake of setting the record straight or leaving a tidy, self-aggrandizing myth for posterity but for exploring the inner world. As Gusdorf writes,

Rousseau, Goethe, Mill are not content to offer the reader a sort of *curriculum vitae* retracing the steps of an official career that, for importance, was hardly more than mediocre. In this case it is a question of another truth. The act of memory is carried out for itself, and recalling of the past satisfies a more or less anguished disquiet of the mind anxious to recover and redeem lost time in fixing it forever. . . . Furthermore, autobiography properly speaking assumes the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time. This lived unity of attitude and act is not received from the outside; certainly events influence us; they sometimes determine us, and they always limit us. But the essential themes, the structural designs that impose themselves on the complex material of external facts are the constituent elements of the personality. (p. 37)

We therefore find in this account of the matter the modernist rendition of autobiographical understanding par excellence: In virtue of the "more or less anguished disquiet of the mind, anxious to recover and redeem lost time," there is a search for "unity," the resultant product being an expression of the innermost dimensions of self. The idea and ideal of authenticity loom large, the challenge at hand being nothing less than giving adequate form to the vicissitudes of Being itself. For men, personal agency is emphasized. For women, on the other hand, there emerges a

tradition of writing that “conceals agency, concentrating on inner life,” but leaving them largely “disembodied” (Conway, 1998, p. 43), owing especially to norms relating to sexual propriety. In both cases, nonetheless, the focus on the interior life remains paramount.

## From Modern to Post-Modern

In post-modern conceptions of personhood and autobiographical understanding, all this changes yet again: With the ostensible “death of the author” (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1973, 1977), Gusdorf’s “constituent elements of the personality” are themselves cast radically into question, particularly if they are imagined to be origins. Indeed, there is a certain sense in which the direction of influence becomes reversed: Autobiography, rather than being seen as an *expression* of the self, is more appropriately seen as its source, such that the self becomes a kind of creative *invention*, the possible unity attained essentially being an artifact of writing (Bruner, 1992). But let us return for a moment to the modernist project of autobiographical understanding; by doing so, perhaps the trajectory at hand will be made clearer. At base, there exists the supposition that the human person, “far from being subject to readymade, completed situations given from the outside and without him, is the essential agent in bringing about the situations in which he finds himself placed” (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 37). There also exists the supposition that this “essential agent” is capable of some measure of self-knowledge and that autobiographical understanding is the privileged route toward attaining it. Gusdorf presents a compelling reason for why this is so:

An examination of consciousness limited to the present moment will give me only a fragmentary cutting from my personal being. . . . In the immediate moment, the agitation of things ordinarily surrounds me too much for me to be able to see it in its entirety. Memory gives me a certain remove and allows me to take into consideration all the ins and outs of the matter, its context in time and space. As an aerial view sometimes reveals to an archeologist the direction of a road or a fortification or the map of a city invisible to someone on the ground, so the reconstruction in spirit of my destiny bares the major lines that I have failed to notice, the demands of the deepest values I hold that, without my being clearly aware of it, have determined my most decisive choices. (p. 38)

Gusdorf even goes so far as to say that this autobiographical understanding, as a “second reading of experience,” is to be considered “truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it. . . . The past that is recalled has lost its flesh and bone solidity,” it is true, “but it has won a new and more intimate relationship to the individual life that can thus, after being long dispersed and sought again throughout the course of time, be rediscovered and drawn together again beyond time” (pp. 38–39).

This is a daring, and most significant, move on Gusdorf’s part. As against those who would deem the “aerial view” of memory little more than a vehicle for

distorting the past “as it was,” Gusdorf opens up a positive possibility: It may very well be, he essentially suggests, that the truest rendition of experience comes not from the immediate reality of the moment, flesh-and-bone solid though it may be, but from reflection, memory, *narrative* (Freeman, 2002a, 2003a). As I have suggested in some recent work, human existence may be characterized as involving a delay, or “postponement,” of insight into its affairs (Freeman, 2003b). Realizations, narrative connections, are made after the fact, when the dust has settled. The result is that we are frequently *late* in our own understanding of things. This is particularly so in the moral domain, where there is a tendency to act first and think later. Autobiographical understanding can play a vitally important role in tending to this state of affairs by serving a kind of “rescue” function: By taking up what couldn’t be seen, or known, in the moment, it can rescue us from the “forgetfulness” that so often characterizes the human condition. Autobiographical understanding thus emerges as a fundamental tool for ethical and moral *re-collection*, taken here in the classical sense of gathering together that which would otherwise be irretrievably lost.

Even if God’s role in the project of autobiographical understanding is on the wane as we move toward the modern era, there still remains a prominent place for the idea and ideal of truth as well as for ethical, moral, and spiritual purposes. Undoubtedly, there already exists the recognition that the autobiographer is likely engaged in a process of justifying himself or herself somehow and that the resultant portrait is bound to entail a measure of artifice, but this is not necessarily seen as a liability, much less a danger, for the aim of autobiography is not simply to depict the past as it was but precisely to understand it, to make sense of it, to fashion meanings that were not, and could not be, available in the flux of immediate experience. According to Gusdorf, the “deepest intentions” of autobiography “are directed toward a kind of apologetics or theodicy of the individual being” (p. 39). This is particularly so, it would seem, in the modern era. Interestingly enough, however, it is but a short—albeit decisive—step from the modern to the post-modern era of thinking about autobiographical understanding.

Although Gusdorf himself, writing his essay in 1956, cannot possibly speak of this post-modern era (and although, in addition, it is problematic to link the idea of the post-modern to a discrete era), there is a distinct sense in which he could see, even then, the changes to come. Already aware of the “recent revolution in historical methodology,” whereby “the idol of an objective and critical history worshipped by the positivists of the nineteenth century has crumbled,” the “historian of himself,” as Gusdorf puts it, faces much the same situation: The past cannot be resurrected, only told, from the standpoint of the present; and thus, the very positive possibility of autobiographical understanding referred to above paves the way to a rather more suspicious and doubtful rendition of the dynamics of the process at hand.

The narrative is conscious, and since the narrator’s consciousness directs the narrative, it seems to him incontestable that it has also directed his life. In other words, the act of reflecting that is essential to conscious awareness is transferred, by a kind of unavoidable optical illusion, back to the stage of the

event itself. . . . [A]utobiography is [thus] condemned to substitute endlessly the completely formed for that which is in the process of being formed. (p. 41)

As Gusdorf goes on to suggest—somewhat paradoxically, perhaps, given his earlier comments about the possibility of autobiographical understanding yielding a “truer” reading than immediate experience itself,

the difficulty is insurmountable: no trick of presentation even when assisted by genius can prevent the narrator from always knowing the outcome of the story he tells—he commences, in a manner of speaking, with the problem already solved. Moreover, the illusion begins from the moment that the narrative *confers a meaning* on the event which, when it actually occurred, no doubt had several meanings or perhaps none. This postulating of a meaning dictates the choice of the facts to be retained and of the details to bring out or to dismiss according to the demands of the preconceived intelligibility. It is here that the failures, the gaps, and the deformations of memory find their origin; they are not due to purely physical cause nor to chance, but on the contrary they are the result of an option of the writer who remembers and wants to gain acceptance for this or that revised and corrected version of his past, his private reality. (p. 42)

The account is a strange one: Beginning with the language of truth, Gusdorf has quickly moved to the language of illusion, failures, gaps, and deformations, all of which are tied to exactly that condition of “remove,” of temporal distance, that created the possibility of there emerging a deeper truth in the first place. This language, which clearly bears within it a kind of negativity, is surely a function of Gusdorf’s own modernist commitments.

Those with post-modernist commitments, on the other hand, are likely to use decidedly more positive, even celebratory, language. To speak of illusion, they might argue, is to rely, whether explicitly or implicitly, on a postulate of truth; and once one does away with this postulate, as many post-modernists are inclined to do, illusion drops out of the picture as well. In the end, it might be said, there are simply different modes of telling about the world, including the world of the person. None, from this perspective, are to be regarded as privileged, as truer, than any other for this would require a foundation that is plainly not to be had. “So,” Lauren Slater (2000) says in her “metaphorical memoir” *Lying*,

I suppose you want to know how much is true, how much untrue, and then we can do some sort of statistical analysis and come up with a precise percentage and figure out where the weight is. That, however, would go against my purpose, which is, among a lot of other things, to ponder the blurry line between novels and memoirs. (p. 160)

It is clear enough, Slater goes on to note, that many memoirs make use of fictional elements. It is also clear that many works of fiction make use of autobiographical

elements. “So how do we decide what’s what, and does it even matter?” (p. 160). Perhaps not. Perhaps the aim of the autobiographer or memoirist is simply to write, as interestingly and as artfully as possible. This would not only spare one the (illusory) burden of somehow discovering and disclosing the (real, authentic) self; it would allow for the possibility of creating, through writing, a new self altogether.

## Autobiographical Understanding and the Question of Truth

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Liberating though the perspective just considered may seem, at least to those who are largely unconcerned about foundational matters, it can lead to some significant difficulties for those wishing to see in narrative inquiry a legitimate and defensible alternative to more mainstream social scientific approaches. If in fact autobiographical narratives are seen to bear no relationship whatsoever to such cherished notions as “reality” and “truth,” how can they possibly be of value to students of the human condition? One might therefore ask at this point, Are there other ways of framing the issues at hand so as to open up a more defensible and constructive space for narrative inquiry?

Here, I want to turn to Gusdorf once more, focusing on another move that, on the face of it, is as paradoxical as the one we last explored but that also opens up just this desired space. In view of the aforementioned revolution in both historical and, by extension, autobiographical understanding, there is the need to “give up the pretence of objectivity, abandoning a sort of false scientific attitude that would judge a work by the precision of its detail.” This false scientific attitude, I would suggest, is one that continues to hold sway in much contemporary social scientific methodology—which, in turn, is why narrative inquiry is often deemed to be *unscientific* or, at the least, insufficiently scientific. The argument is simple enough: Insofar as science sees “the real” as that which can be objectified and measured, narratives are bound to seem far removed from the scientific enterprise. And yet, a curious fact remains: Narratives often seem able to give us understandings of people in a way that more “objective” methodologies cannot. This is because they often emerge from a *true*, rather than a false, scientific attitude, one that practices fidelity *not* to that which can be objectified and measured but to the whole person, the whole human life, in all of its ambiguous, messy, beautiful detail (Freeman, 1997, 2005). Narrative inquiry, in its aim of practicing fidelity to the human experience, thus seeks, in a way, to be *more* scientific—more *authentically* scientific—than those more systematic, precise, quantitatively grounded empirical enterprises that have traditionally been enshrined.

The significance of autobiography should therefore be sought beyond truth and falsity, as those are conceived by simple common sense. It is unquestionably a document about a life, and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy. But it is also a work of art, and the literary devotee, for his part, will be aware of its stylistic harmony and the beauty of its images. (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 43)

So far so good: We need to move beyond truth and falsity, *as they are ordinarily understood*, and we need to recognize and appreciate the aesthetic dimension of autobiography. This basic idea holds, I believe, not only for those autobiographies we may wish to study as narrative researchers, whether they are those of our informants or those we find in bookstores, but for our own representations of them, in the research stories we wish to tell. The truth we seek to tell cannot be equated with fidelity to “the facts” alone; and, insofar as our own aim is truly to be faithful to the living, breathing reality of those we study, it will be imperative to summon all the artfulness we possibly can. But Gusdorf goes even farther than this:

It is . . . of little consequence that the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* should be full of errors, omissions, and lies, and of little consequence also that Chateaubriand made up most of his *Voyage en Amérique*: the recollection of landscapes that he never saw and the description of the traveller's moods nevertheless remain excellent. We may call it fiction or fraud, but its artistic value is real: there is a truth affirmed beyond the fraudulent itinerary and chronology, a truth of the man, images of himself and of the world, reveries of a man of genius, who, for his own enchantment and that of his readers, realizes himself in the unreal. (p. 43)

Bearing this in mind, Gusdorf's conclusion is that “the literary, artistic function is thus of greater importance than the historic and objective function in spite of the claims made by positivist criticism both previously and today” (p. 43).

This sort of “voyage,” however, brings us into treacherous waters indeed. If our only evaluative criteria are aesthetic enjoyment or “lifelikeness,” then what Gusdorf has to say in this context is hardly objectionable. But in the case of autobiographies, and of narrative data more generally, can it really be of “little consequence” if the texts before us are full of errors, omissions, and lies? And can it really be irrelevant whether the landscapes being depicted were ones for which there was no firsthand encounter at all? Consider the case of Binjamin Wilkomirski's (1996) *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, a “memoir” of concentration camp life that turned out to be patently, if unintentionally, false: Lifelike and artfully rendered though Wilkomirski's account was, the life depicted turned out not to have been his own but rather one that he had fashioned through his imagination. Does this matter? If, again, the only relevant criteria are aesthetic enjoyment or lifelikeness, then no; and, in fact, there were some critics who, on discovering the falsity of Wilkomirski's story, essentially argued that nothing substantial had changed: The book still remained a great, even informative, read. For others, however, the story had been irreparably tarnished—partly because, even if unwittingly, the “autobiographical pact” (Lejeune, 1989) had been broken but also because the very meaning of what had been read had been altered dramatically. Although Wilkomirski's descriptions could still be considered “excellent” (to use Gusdorf's term), they had suddenly lost a significant portion of their evidential, as well as emotional, value. One could sympathize with the dire childhood that



had apparently provoked Wilkomirski to represent himself as a survivor, but that sympathy would, of necessity, be of a quite different order from that which we might feel in reading the words of an *actual* survivor. The controversy over James Frey's (2003) *A Million Little Pieces* has brought forth similar issues. There is no doubt that Frey's life had been messy and difficult. But the fact that he had shamelessly embellished his own suffering and had gone so far as to concoct horrific scenarios largely for dramatic effect has left readers with decidedly less sympathy than they might otherwise have had.

None of what is being said here should be taken to imply that the "literary, artistic function" of autobiography, along with our own narrative-based accounts, is unimportant or merely ornamental. On the contrary, just as the autobiographer must employ artistic form in a way that truly serves the content of his or her life, the narrative researcher must do much the same thing. In both cases, the challenge at hand is a *poetic* one, the foremost aim being not to reproduce reality but to actualize and explicate it, to bring meaning into being in such a way that the world is made visible. The difficulties we have been considering notwithstanding, Gusdorf gets this portion of his account quite right: "The truth is not a hidden treasure, already there, that one can bring out by simply reproducing it as it is. Confession of the past realizes itself as a work in the present: it effects a true creation of the self by the self" (p. 44). Neither expression (of a "hidden treasure") nor invention (of a wholly new self), neither strictly "found" nor strictly "made," it is an imaginative articulation "of the self by the self." This in turn "suggests a new and more profound sense of truth as an expression of inmost being, a likeness no longer of things"—of "objects," able neatly to be entrapped and encapsulated—"but of the person. . . . [T]his truth, which is too often neglected, nevertheless constitutes one of the necessary references for understanding the human realm" (p. 44). It is also, I suggest, a key vehicle for moving beyond dualistic thinking.

There is a tendency in narrative inquiry to view the truth about which Gusdorf speaks as a "narrative truth" (Gazzaniga, 1998; Ludwig, 1997; Spence, 1982), of the sort found in works of art rather than works of history or science. But this is problematic in its own right. For what it does, in the end, is split truth in two, one being objective, the other being subjective. "Biography," like history, "is fiction," Gazzaniga (1998) has argued. "Autobiography is hopelessly inventive" (p. 2). In the course of "trying to keep our personal story together," in fact, he continues, "we have to learn to lie to ourselves. . . . We need something that expands the actual facts of our experience into an ongoing narrative, the self-image we have been building in our mind for years" (pp. 26–27). Gazzaniga finds no need for lamentation in this context either: "Sure, life is a fiction, but it's our fiction and it feels good and we are in charge of it" (p. 172). Persons, in turn, are those fictions of order and coherence we are provoked to create in the face of what would otherwise be the mere flux of experiential states.

The perspective offered by Gazzaniga (1998) and others—let us call it the "narrative-as-fictive-imposition" perspective—has its attractions, not the least of which includes this last idea, that "we are in charge" of our own autobiographical fictions, able to shape them as we wish. Indeed, by rewriting the past according to

our wishes and designs, we can shore up our ever-sagging selves and thereby bask in the light of our own betterment, illusory though it may be. But, as Gazzaniga himself avows, this perspective sees in the operation of autobiographical understanding little more than *lies*—or, less severely, purely subjective truths—that are likely to fly in the face of the *real* (i.e., objective) truths of our lives. There’s “what really happened,” in other words, the past “as it was,” and then there are the imaginative stories that get told about it, in a way it is hoped that “rings true,” that works, aesthetically or pragmatically. And so, the subject-object split returns, with autobiographical understanding its latest victim.

One of the foremost aims of narrative inquiry, I want to argue, is to think beyond this subject-object split and thereby to move in the direction of that “new and more profound sense of truth” toward which Gusdorf had earlier pointed. More specifically, what I want to suggest is that it may be useful to think about this set of issues in a way that is actually *opposite* to the view just considered. It could be that “what really happened” can only be predicated via autobiographical understanding itself. We often *do not know* what is happening when it is happening. Instead, and again, we are often late, sometimes too late, and all that can be done is to tell the story: Appearances aside, *this* is what happened (Freeman, 2003b). I do not wish to be overly objectivistic in framing the issues this way. “What really happened” is often highly contestable and is inevitably a function of the interpretive prejudices one brings to the task of narrating the past. Nor do I wish to suggest that the story is definitively over when someone has told his or her version of what really happened. There is an essential openness to the historical past, and there always exists the possibility that the story of what happened will be rewritten, again and again. Nor, finally, do I wish to suggest that the truth of narrative can be neatly encapsulated in some specific form. It is perhaps preferable in this context to speak of a *region* of truth (Freeman, 2002a) rather than a discretely bounded one. These qualifications notwithstanding, the challenge of telling what really happened remains. This telling, rather than being a reproduction of the past “as it was,” is more appropriately understood as a “creative redescription” of the past (Hacking, 1995; Kearney, 2002) and is part and parcel of the narrative dimension that is intrinsic to any and all forms of autobiographical understanding. And it is this narrative dimension that can open the way toward not only a more capacious conceptualization of truth but a more adequate and humane framework for exploring the human realm.

## The Narrative Dimension and the Project of Narrative Inquiry

Finally, however, we need to ask, What exactly is this narrative dimension? And how can our consideration of autobiographical understanding inform narrative inquiry? The narrative dimension of autobiographical understanding may be said to entail a quite remarkable series of dialectical relationships. First, as we have already seen, the interpretation and writing of the personal past, far from being a

dispassionate process of reproducing what was, is instead a product of the present and the interests, needs, and wishes that attend it. This present, however—along with the self whose present it is—is itself transformed in and through the process at hand. Indeed, in a distinct sense, a new self is fashioned via this very process; dimensions of being are disclosed that literally would not have existed, would not have reached articulated form, had the autobiographical process not taken place (Bruner, 1992; Freeman, 1993). What this suggests is that there exists a dialectical relationship not only between past and present but between past, present, and future: Even in the midst of my present engagement with the past, I am moving into the future, giving form and meaning to the self-to-be.

Autobiography is therefore never the finished image or the fixing forever of an individual life: the human being is always a making, a doing; memoirs look to an essence beyond existence, and in manifesting it they serve to create it. (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 47)

Or, as Kearney (2002) puts the matter, “the recounted life prises open perspectives inaccessible to ordinary perception,” and in so doing, “marks a poetic extrapolation of possible worlds which supplement and refashion our referential relations to the life-world existing prior to the act of recounting” (p. 132).

There is thus a double *poiesis* at work in this process, such that the heterogeneous elements of a life are synthesized, drawn together via the narrative imagination, and the self in turn is reconstructed, *remade*, in its image (Ricoeur, 1991, 1992). The narrative dimension, it should be reiterated, is tied to the moral dimension as well for this process of remaking one’s past and in turn one’s self inevitably takes place against the backdrop of “strong qualitative distinctions” (Taylor, 1989) regarding how one ought to live. Indeed, if Taylor is right,

in order to make minimal sense of our lives, in order to have an identity, we need an orientation to the good, . . . and this sense of the good has to be woven into my understanding of my life as an unfolding story. (p. 47; see also Freeman, 2003b, and Lambek, 1996)

Exploring the process of autobiographical understanding serves to underscore the idea that both the personal past and the self whose past it is are indeed constructions, issuing from the narrative imagination. This is emphatically not to say, however, that these constructions are fictions or illusions or lies: The imagined is not to be equated with the wholly imaginary, and *poiesis*, the act of making meaning, is not to be understood as one in which something is made *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. What Octavio Paz (1973) calls “the poetic experience” is rather to be understood as “a revelation of our original condition.” This revelation is “always resolved into a creation: the creation of our selves.” Along with Gusdorf, Paz insists that this revelation “does not uncover something external, which was there, alien, but rather the act of uncovering involves the creation of that which is going to be uncovered: our own being” (p. 137). We might therefore think of the self as a kind

of *work*, an unfinished and unfinishable poetic project issuing from the narrative imagination as it is manifested in the process of autobiographical understanding (Freeman, 2001).

If we are to use the language of poetry in reflecting on the nature of autobiographical understanding, it is imperative that we recognize some of the challenges the poet of the personal past faces in seeking to tell the truth about the world. "It is not only that . . . words distort even as they reveal, that what is lived can never be the same as what is told," Hazel Barnes (1997) has written. "Questions of sincerity, the reliability of memory, and concern for others' feelings turn out to be far more complex than I had imagined." Moreover, Barnes adds, "The problem of selectivity, which in other contexts may be purely literary, becomes more urgent; to single out *these* factors as most important in shaping a self is to mold the self presented." And so, she offers, "The most I can claim, and this I do affirm, is that the fictional character portrayed here"—namely, *herself*—"is, at least in my eyes, a true reflection of what I reflectively see" (p. xix).

There are numerous additional challenges as well. As Brockmeier (1997) has pointed out, the "autobiographical agent" is to be understood as involved in a wide variety of "discursive interactions," his or her story thus being very much a function of the specific *situation*, or situations, in which the story is told. In a related vein, there is also the issue of *to whom* the story is told—whether, for instance, it is the interviewer, or the therapist, the research community, or the broader audience of readers of autobiography. In addition, Bruner (1991) has noted, the self disclosed through autobiography

seems also to be intersubjective or "distributed" in the same way that one's "knowledge" is distributed beyond one's head to include the friends and colleagues to whom one has access, the notes one has filed, the books one has on one's shelves. (p. 76)

Just as Brockmeier wishes to think beyond the "monological I," Bruner urges us to recognize that it is a mistake to regard the self "as solo, as locked up inside one person's subjectivity, as hermetically sealed off" (p. 76). Moving still further into this territory, I have referred in some recent work to the idea of the "narrative unconscious" (Freeman, 2002b), which refers broadly to those culturally rooted aspects of one's history—particularly those issuing from such "secondhand" sources as books, movies, and other media—that are at once highly influential in shaping the process of autobiographical understanding but of which one may remain largely unaware. From this perspective, I have suggested, autobiography is not simply a matter of representing one's life from birth until death but rather a matter of discerning the multiple sources—firsthand and secondhand, personal and extrapersonal, near and far—that give rise to the self. As Hampl (1999) has stated in this context,

We embody, if unwittingly and partially, our history, even our prehistory. The past courses through our veins. The self is the instrument which allows us not

only to live this truth but to contemplate it, and thereby to be comforted by meaning—which is simply the awareness of relationship. (p. 97)

In view of this more intersubjective, relational view of autobiographical understanding, the project of narrative inquiry widens considerably.

The act of autobiographical understanding, Hampl (1999) goes on to say, by virtue of it being “the work of the imagination,” is more akin to poetry than to fiction. In both the lyric poem and the memoir, or autobiography, “a self speaks, renders the world, or is recast in its image,” the “real subject” being

consciousness in the light of history. The ability to transmit the impulses of the age, the immediacy of a human life moving through the changing world, is common to both genres. To be personal and impersonal all at once is the goal of both. (p. 224)

According to Hampl, therefore, the “chaotic lyric impulse,” rather than the “smooth drive of plot,” is the “engine” of memory, as it functions in autobiographical understanding. “These are the details of memoir,” she insists, “details that refuse to stay buried, that demand habitation. Their spark of meaning spreads into a wildfire of narrative,” and while they may be “domesticated into a story, . . . the passion that begot them as images belongs to the wild night of poetry” (p. 224).

It is precisely here, in the context of this “wild night,” that we come face to face with what may be considered the foremost challenge inherent in the project of autobiographical understanding and, more generally, of narrative inquiry. Ideally, we, narrative researchers, want people to move beyond telling us schematic stories, of the sort we have heard many times before, and instead tell us fresh and vital ones that somehow carry their own individual imprint and reality. But this is no easy task. “If one looks closely at the average adult’s memory of the periods of his life after childhood,” Schachtel (1959) has written,

Such memory, it is true, usually shows no great temporal gaps. . . . But its formal continuity in time is offset by barrenness in content, by an incapacity to reproduce anything that resembles a really rich, full, rounded, and alive experience. Even the most “exciting” events are remembered as milestones rather than as moments filled with the concrete abundance of life. (p. 287)

As a general rule, therefore, “The processes of memory thus substitute the conventional cliché for the actual experience” (p. 291).

On some level, of course, this “substitution” is inevitable and hardly to be lamented: Autobiographical memory, insofar as it makes use of language, of culturally-available genres of telling, culturally sanctioned plotlines, and so on, is irrevocably bound to convention. What’s more, as we have seen repeatedly throughout the present chapter, there is no question but that such memory does not, and cannot, resurrect the “actual experience”—or, as I would prefer to frame it, the “past present” experience. For the most part, that is not the *purpose* of autobiographical

memory; the purpose is rather to understand, to make sense of the past in the light of the present. Schachtel is nevertheless on to something important here, and it has to do with the fact that it is perilously easy for autobiographers to fall prey to overly schematized renditions of the past—ones that perhaps reveal more about extant ways of remembering and telling than about the particularities of the life in question. “At every step a word beckons, it seems so convenient, so suitable, one has heard or read it so often in a similar context, it sounds so well, it makes the phrase flow so smoothly.” By following this temptation, the writer will perhaps describe something familiar and recognizable to many. In doing so, however, he or she “will have missed the nuance that distinguishes his [or her] experience from others” (p. 259).

The challenge at hand, therefore—and it is one that applies to both the autobiographer or research informant and the narrative researcher himself or herself—is to find a language that moves beyond these highly schematized, conventionalized, even clichéd portraits. The writer thus “has to fight constantly against the easy flow of words that offer themselves.” Indeed, “It is this awareness and the struggle and the ability to narrow the gap between experience and words which make the writer and the poet” (p. 296). This awareness and struggle extend to any and all forms of autobiographical understanding as well as any and all attempts, on the part of narrative researchers, to tell others’ stories. Whether narrative inquiry looks toward actual autobiographies and memoirs or whether it looks instead toward more standard forms of autobiographical data, as are derived from interviews and the like, it would do well to remain cognizant of this challenge along with the quite extraordinary potential that inheres in it, for what it suggests is that autobiographical understanding is at the very heart of the narrative enterprise, lying at the intersection of art and science, blurring their boundaries through its work.

There are numerous ways in which autobiographies and autobiographical data more generally might be employed in narrative inquiry. Most obviously, they might be employed to generate social scientific theory, for instance about memory or gender or identity. In keeping with the blurring-of-boundaries idea, however, what I want to suggest in closing is that these rich and humanly significant forms of data may also be in the service of a somewhat different aim. Insofar as such data are ultimately about what might be termed the “literature of experience” (Freeman, 2004), it follows that a portion of narrative inquiry might itself be more literary in its approach—which is to say more directed toward the poetically resonant and evocative than is often the case in more standard forms of social scientific inquiry. I offer this not in the name of some sort of antiscientific fervor but in the name of literature itself. The fact is, literature, autobiographical and otherwise, often does extremely well to embody that which we colloquially call *life* in its full measure: By being attentive to the concrete particularities of lives, by seeking ways of allowing these lives to live on the page, works of literature often seem to get nearer to the deep human stuff that many readers look for. This doesn’t mean that narrative researchers and scholars ought to be creating works of literature *per se*; most aren’t prepared to do this, and the very idea of narrative *inquiry* entails a conceptual “aboutness,” one might say, that points beyond a purely literary approach. It means instead that a portion of narrative inquiry ought to be directed toward writing

about human lives in such a way that their own inherent poetry can be made more visible.

I have referred in this context to the idea of “poetic science,” a form of critical narrative inquiry that would lie at the intersection of art and science and that would support not only the *epistemological* aim of increasing knowledge and understanding of the human realm but also the *ethical* aim of increasing sympathy and compassion (Freeman, 2005). Perhaps in the name of scientific legitimacy, there remains a tendency in narrative inquiry to minimize the artful dimension and to maximize the dimension of scientificity, thereby leaving the aforementioned “deep human stuff” to poets and philosophers. But the social scientist, broadly conceived and imagined, can and should enter into the endeavor and, when the situation calls for it, do so as imaginatively and artfully as possible through creating work that not only purveys knowledge of this or that area but that uses writing, that uses *form*, in a way that truly serves the content, and the *people*, in question. This is a challenge—a poetic challenge—for autobiography and narrative inquiry alike, and it is well worth pursuing.

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*Consulting Editors:* Jens Brockmeier and Anna Neumann

## Notes

1. The Gusdorf quotes that appear in this chapter are taken from Olney, James, *Autobiography*. Copyright © 1980 Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

2. These include James Olney’s edited volume, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980), which includes the Gusdorf essay, as well as his *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (1972) and, more recently, *Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (1998); Weintraub’s extended treatment of the emergence of historical consciousness via autobiography in *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (1978); and a wide variety of other works, including Brodski and Schenck’s (edited) *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography* (1988); Cavarero’s *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000); Conway’s *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography* (1998); Eakin’s *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985), his *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), and his (edited) *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004); Folkenflik’s (edited) *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation* (1992); Gunn’s *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience* (1982); Hampl’s *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (1999); Lejeune’s *On Autobiography* (1989); Pascal’s *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960); Spengemann’s *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (1980); Smith and Watson’s (edited) *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998) and their *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001); Stanton’s (edited) *The Female Autograph* (1984); Steedman’s *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (1992); and Zinsser’s (edited) *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (1987). Alongside these volumes, readers might also wish to consult Jolly’s (edited) *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* (2001) as well as the journals *Auto/Biography* and *Biography*, all of which are valuable venues for exploring autobiography.

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