

THE ART OF TELLING ABOUT THE SELF. MEMOIRS IN LITERATURE AND FILM

By

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Abstract

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Autobiography, or to use a term that has become more fashionable, memoir is one of the leading literary phenomena in contemporary culture. The proliferation and popularity of this genre is easily explainable: everyone has a life and every life is worth telling or, as Dostoevsky sardonically claims at the beginning of *Notes from Underground*:

But what can a decent man speak of with most pleasure?

Answer: Of himself.

Well, so I will talk about myself.

Yet, despite its present popularity, autobiography is not a recent phenomenon, but a genre that has been tracing its own boundaries for almost 2000 years. Starting with Augustine's *Confessions*, the history of memoir is characterized by a constellation of literary and philosophical questions on the nature of the self, and, more specifically, on what is meant and implied by narrating the self. One of the leading questions surrounding memoir is related to whether the eventual inconsistencies in the narration of events can assimilate it to fictional narration, or whether we should instead still regard it as nonfictional expression.

I defend the claim according to which autobiography as a form of “unweaving” the self stems from the cognitive construction of personhood, and from the notion of the narrative self.

Memoirs, in other words, are not exclusively cultural products; they are active responses to the question of personal identity. It is in virtue of a cognitive and scientific analysis of autobiography that I reject the assimilation of memoir to fiction, and instead frame it as the narrative expression of what I will define as the authentic self. Seeing memoir as a form, or branch of fiction is not only mistaken, it misinterprets the intention and cognitive origin of this genre.

My conclusions, from the defense of memoir as nonfiction, to its cognitive origin are at basis of the construction of a narrative theory of autobiography.

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“...brighter than all light, but more veiled than all mysteries”

Augustine, Confessions

Introduction

The attention, both commercial and academic, toward memoir, and more generally toward the practice of autobiography seems to have acquired the status of a literary phenomenon. What in bookstores used to be a small section, a section frequently and quite vaguely labeled “biography and non-fiction” is now a large area more aptly addressed as “memoirs”, a term that today appears to have replaced the more generic “autobiography” in literary circles. Some of the most important voices of contemporary literature – Joan Didion, José Saramago, Günter Grass, Rick Moody, and Oscar Hijuelos, just to mention some – have written incredibly crafted works out of their lives, works that take distance from both the more pedantic recurrence to a biographer, or to a ghost writer, and that at the same time are tinted in somewhat different colors from the ones they have chosen for their fictional works. The recent rediscovery of a genre seems also to be recognized in the panorama of literary criticism and in some of its most prominent magazines. The appearance of memoirs as forms of high quality literature has been endorsed by publications such as *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The Believer*, *McSweeney's*, and others that are not only beginning to review more and more memoirs, but that are at the same time raising questions concerning the literary value of memoir as a genre. Simply put, memoir is at the center of a multifaceted intellectual debate aiming at clarifying its narrative status and features, and at investigating its theoretical import.

The scintillating side of high quality literature and criticism is matched by the not always exciting proliferation of websites offering courses on autobiographical writing, samples, and online tutorial sessions foreshadowing the possibility of a literary career, (www.writeagreatbio.com, www.teacher.scholastic.com/writeit/memoir, among others). After all, to quote the famous ending of the first section of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*:¹

But what can a decent man speak of with most pleasure?

Answer: Of himself.

Well, so I will talk about myself.

The inherently dark humor of Dostoevsky's lines points to a fact: there seems to be no better and no easier story to tell than our own, and every life, or so advertising dictates, is worth telling.

However interesting these remarks can be, my purpose in the analysis of memoir can only tangentially dwell on the sociological and commercial impact of this genre; such an endeavor would lead to a separate project, one that would drift off from the main scope of this thesis which instead locates itself in the narrative theory debate.

In particular, my thesis will follow two distinct, but related threads. On the one hand, I want to provide a structural analysis of memoir by isolating a number of conditions identifying memoir as a narrative. On the other hand, I will be focusing on the philosophical import of memoir with specific attention to its connection to what is known in philosophy as the problem of personal identity, and to what is today referred to as the debate on the nature of the self. I will reflect on

¹ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. (2003). *Notes From Underground. The Double, and Other Stories*. Garnett, C, (trans.). New York: Barnes and Noble Classics: 211.

the notion of the narrative self, and on the connection between the definition of the self and the creation of autobiographical narratives.

Before briefly summarizing the content of each chapter, it is important to notice how I will refrain from providing any evaluative analysis of memoir. In other words, my approach toward memoir, especially in the first three chapters of this thesis, takes distance from what could instead be an aesthetic evaluation of memoirs – what counts as a good memoir? How are we to recognize its artistic value? – Or a moral analysis of memoir concerned with gauging the moral claims and moral content of autobiographical works. These questions, albeit interesting, should, I believe, be asked only after what is instead an analysis of what memoir is and of its overall significance as a genre.

Each chapter of this dissertation is meant to provide a contribution to the problem of what are the structural conditions of memoir as a genre; in addition, each chapter will also introduce a new philosophical issue, from the definition of a genre, to the problems derived from its nonfictional connotation, to, finally, the relation between memoir and the notion of the narrative self.

I will begin by briefly considering whether it is worth distinguishing the term “autobiography” from the term “memoir”. This distinction has in fact been made in the past, yet, in my research, I found no stable conditions establishing an actual distinction. Most definitions are overlapping; what is here taken as “autobiography” is there addressed as “memoir”, etc. One conclusion that can be drawn from this confusion is that definitions tend to change over time; not

a surprising factor, given the rapid and many-sided emergence of autobiography. I would thus use the terms interchangeably.

What is instead a central problem in the first chapter is the question, amply discussed in the literature, of the origin of autobiography, and, consequently, of its historical development. I will present different and discordant solutions, to then conclude that what is today intended as autobiography can only begin with the emergence of spiritual autobiography, and specifically with the work of Saint Augustine. It is from this work, I believe, that we can start analyzing the multiple developments and routes taken by this genre.

Leaving aside the history of memoir, the two following chapters will investigate the structural conditions of autobiographical narration. After defending the claim that memoir is a form of narrative, and after sketching some of the narrative conditions followed by memoir, I will tackle the issue of whether memoir, as the postmodern tradition has suggested, could be considered, if not entirely a form of fiction, at least a “borderline” genre at the intersection between fiction and nonfiction. There is a certain attractiveness to this hypothesis, and several authors and publications have flirted with it; yet, I do not take the view of memoir as a hybrid genre to be tenable. Establishing memoir as a nonfictional genre is not only important from a structural standpoint, it is also an opening to further problems having to deal with the content of memoir, and with how what is narrated bears on the identity of the author, and main character of memoir.

It is in the fourth chapter that the problem of identity will more visibly emerge. An analysis of autobiography cannot be completed without the addition of familiar philosophical

problems; the very insistence on the individual relates to the debate on personal identity, a debate that, starting with Locke, will blossom in the more contemporary question “What is the self?” I will dwell on this latter question combining an analysis of the self in memoir with several theories in cognitive science and neuroscience on the nature of the self, and on what is referred to as the “narrative self”.

In the last, concluding chapter of this thesis I will briefly reflect on the resemblance between the creation of autobiographical narratives and philosophical practice *per se*. I am, in other words, willing to endorse the assumption according to which not only does autobiography require the presence of several philosophical elements, but the practice of autobiography is in itself akin to philosophical practice, and, more specifically, to a reflection on identity and the self.

The importance of this assumption can be traced back to the beginning of autobiography, to the groundbreaking work of Augustine in the *Confessions*, where, famously, he claimed: “I became a great question for myself”.

Much more has been said after this, and because of this sentence, but suffice to say that the struggle of narrating the self is in itself a philosophical form of investigation, a term not randomly picked given that the father of philosophical investigation, Wittgenstein, will undoubtedly rely on the power of autobiography, and on the philosophical difficulties raised by the simple utterance of the pronoun “I”.

Before beginning, I nonetheless want to digress on two specifications, and limits, prescribed by the works I will be considering.

Two Caveats

A first limitation in my thesis is imposed by the exclusive use of literary and filmic examples. Considering only these two media of artistic expression cuts off from my analysis any reference to other artistic forms. Photography, painting, music, dance, etc., have dealt with the issue of autobiography; despite the presence of overlapping features, each art has its own peculiarities and each art deserves the same critical analysis I am instead only providing for literature and film. The reason behind my decision has to do with my interest in art forms that are closely related to a narrative style, and to the more canonical debates in narrative theory. This is in part a gross generalization given that we can obviously refer to, for instance, narrative paintings or narrative photography; yet, the conditions of such narratives require a different analysis from the ones that can be found in literature and film. Film and literature are more closely related to the telling of a story, which unfolds overtime, where the connections among different episodes often follow an erotetic scheme, and that achieves a sense of closure. There are, in film and literature, more easily identifiable structural components and conditions, and it is on these that the first part of this work will be dedicated.

Limiting my analysis to film and literature also implies selecting a restricted number of works to use as examples. I already mentioned how the variety of memoirs ranges from high quality works to rather pathetic attempts. Despite my insistence on narrative structure, on what can be labeled as the conditions of autobiographical writing, and the lack of an immediate interest in the aesthetic evaluation of such works, I nonetheless selected works of a certain

literary and filmic ambition. The reason for this choice is that I am using examples that not only follow the structure of autobiographical writing, but that also cast a light on the critical and philosophical value of memoirs. Better memoirs are often more vivid examples of the difficulties, but also of the specificities of a genre, a characteristic that can be extended to the philosophical analysis of other art forms.

More relevantly, accepting an analysis focusing exclusively on high quality examples of film and literature raises a different, and more compelling problem. The problem derives from what I take to be a somewhat forced analogy, namely an analogy between filmic and literary memoirs. By saying this, I by no means want to claim that the analogy always works; on the contrary, it often does not work at all. Despite the strong similarities between literary and filmic memoirs, there are also profound differences that I will, for the sake of this thesis, partially overlook. I am, for instance, bypassing the difference between propositional language and audiovisual expression, the technical differences between making a film and writing a book, and finally the differences in the reception of the two art forms. And yet, hardly any other art, when compared to film and literature, has flirted so closely with autobiography. Autobiography often provides the authors with a fertile source to reflect on their own artistic endeavors; the combination of daily life and the affirmation of a creative instance run parallel in both filmic and literary narratives.

It should also be noted how, in both cases of autobiographical narration, the emphasis on the person, and the investigation of the inner nature of the author have worked as the building blocks for the development, in the course of history, of these two arts. For instance, it is all but

uncommon to see in autobiography the beginning of modern novel together with the development of features such as internal narration, stream of consciousness, free indirect speech, etc. In film, debates such as the one related to the *auteur* theory insist on the active presence of a director and his trademarks. In Sarris' "Americanization" of *auteur* theory, the two conditions following technical expertise are the director's particular vision of the world and what Sarris refers to as the inevitable inner meaning behind a director's style; the capacity of bringing not only a first person point of view, but a point of view which reflects on the conditions a director imposes on his own narration. As Jean Renoir used to say, a director always makes the same movie, and this "movie" is, in the end, the discovery and affirmation of a person, and of the world this person is capable of constructing. Autobiography in literature and film is, more vividly than in other arts, a way of tracing the evolutionary history of these genres, and their following, emerging theoretical "conquests".

A further similarity between the two genres resides in their relation to the audience. Literature and film translate more easily into the audience's perception, and the recurrence to a narrative style mimics the way we deal with our own memories. The degree of interpretation required by other art forms is sublimated by the use of a more straightforward way of analyzing events built according to the causal connections and questions we tend to associate to the telling of our own lives. The audience reading a memoir or watching an autobiographical movie is immediately captured by a practice we use, and often abuse, in telling our life experiences. The level of involvement triggered by autobiographical narratives, together with the somewhat intimidating feeling of "seeing ourselves" in them are effects as common to be observed as they are "natural" for us. As it will become clearer in the course of this thesis, our attachment to

autobiographical facts is easily carried on by our capacity, and evolutionary tendency, toward building a presumably coherent story out of our memories and experiences. We want ourselves to understand, epitomize, and also judge events of our lives according to the meaning these events had in the unfolding of our lives and decisions. We like stories to have a beginning and an end, to include arguments and solutions; some problems need to be solved, others don't, but it is this mechanism as a whole that we are urged to unfold. Stories are a tool, and part of the audience's appreciation of filmic and literary autobiographies is motivated by the realization that this "tool" has been properly used. Narrative construction is easier to understand and closer to us mainly because it bears on the way in which we infer, from the events of our lives, some kind of formative message. Learning to know ourselves through narratives fosters an educational process of expression, analysis, and introspection.

I am thus relying on three main similarities between film and literature in autobiographical narrative. First, film and literature are the leading arts in the adoption of a narrative format. Secondly, autobiography is often regarded as the theoretical and structural background for the evolution of both arts. Finally, because of the presence of first person narration, and because of the use of narrative construction, (mainly erotetic narrative), literature and film tend to affect and resonate with the audience to a higher degree. I am aware that these elements by themselves might not be enough, but I consider them as sufficiently strong for an analysis that, as already specified, does not aim at pondering on fine-grained aesthetic and evaluative differences, but is instead closer to the structural and theoretical pillars holding the polymorphous edifice of autobiographical narration.

Chapter I

Memoir: The History of a Genre. The History of a Definition

In 1986, New York Public Library hosted a series of talks entitled “The Art and Craft of Memoir” sponsored by “The Book of the Month”. The prestigious line up of writers involved Frank McCourt, the celebrated author of *Angela’s Ashes*, one of the leading books in the “re-discovery” of autobiographical writing, Toni Morrison, Ian Frazier, and, among others, William Zinsser who in 1998 will edit and publish a rendition of the talks called *Inventing the Truth. The Art and Craft of Memoir*². All that happened almost forty years after he had participated in a collective anthology, *Five Boyhoods*, including five stories narrating the adolescent years of Howard Lindsay, Harry Golden, Walt Kelly, John Updike, and, of course, Zinsser. In 1960, when the book came out, the interest in autobiography was just beginning to rise, or to rise again. Mainly, it seemed as if a new genre had been found, one hardly possessing an appropriate definition or a set of rules capable of identifying its boundaries.

What does it mean to write a memoir? The question did not, and does not have an easy answer. It is also, by itself, slightly ambiguous in terms of its possible interpretations. By asking what it means to write a memoir we might be asking a technical question regarding the exercise, fatigue, and technique involved in resuscitating personal memories in what will become a personal and intimate rendition of the author. But the question can also be interpreted as an

² Zinsser, William K. (ed.). (1998). *Inventing the Truth. The Art and Craft of Memoir*. New York: Mariner Books.

inquiry into the very definition of a term: memoir. In what will become *Inventing the Truth*, the questions run parallel only to occasionally merge in the words of the writers interviewed, in their combined attention to the process of remembering, writing, and finally becoming the persons they have been. Zinsser recognizes in memoir a necessary combination of *art* – the integrity needed to make sense of who we are – and *craft* – the carpentry and cement that needs to be employed to make a personal story not only true, but sharable. There is more: in his introduction to the collection, Zinsser proposes an actual definition of memoir that aims at a distinction between memoir and autobiography – a distinction that, as I mentioned in my introduction, I prefer to avoid. He writes:

Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, memoir narrows the lens, focusing on a time in the writer’s life that was unusually vivid, such as childhood or adolescence, or that was framed by war or travel or public service or some other special circumstance.³

There is, I believe, a lot to add to this definition. Yet it undeniably points to a crucial element in memoir, namely the ability necessary to select the memories that will ultimately compose an autobiographical work. The authors do not have to follow a chronological order, they are not bound to the description of daily activities, and they are instead asked to choose according to what is the self they want to describe, the self that has become the person they are. Not every moment will serve this purpose; even a selection of the “right episodes” will not by itself suffice to the construction of a memoir. Memoir implies a form of reflection on the nature of the self, an investigation and often a moral, or at least educational message that will resonate not only with the author, and main protagonist, but also with the reader. Memoirs aim at the discovery of identity, something that does not only emerge in the accurate selections of

³ Ibidem: 15.

moments, life fragments, social settings, etc., but also in the capacity of connecting these instances in a cohesive whole, one capable of becoming, if we want, the definition not of a genre, but of a person.

In my initial understanding of the distinction between memoir and autobiography, I have been biased by what seems to be the actual status of the discussion. The majority of writers and theorists today seem to favor Zinsser's rejection of the use of the term "autobiography" and opt instead for memoir. This, however, is nothing but the last step in a debate that has endorsed different, if not radically opposite interpretations.

Among the reasons for this confusion, the most prominent one is concerned with the establishment of historical boundaries of autobiography (or memoir). When does it emerge? Why? What are the twists that need to be considered in order to approach the current status of things, and so to the affirmation of memoir as an independent genre?

The modern novel is born with Flaubert, stream of consciousness with Joyce and Woolf, perspective with Giotto and then Leonardo, Impressionism at Nadar's atelier, and so on.

Identifying these moments and personalities as beginnings might be a theoretical imposition, but their relevancy can hardly be doubted. Can memoir join the list and find its own beginning?

Despite a certain agreement on the pioneer role of Augustine, others see autobiography as an older product.

To summarize, there are essentially two problems I will deal with in this section. First, I want to analyze whether the term "memoir" should be preferred to the term "autobiography". Secondly, I will discuss different possibilities in establishing an "origin" to the practice of

memoir (or autobiography). I will, on this respect, present two accounts; the first, provided by Georg Misch in *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*⁴, and a second, the more recent *The Development of Greek Biography* written by Arnaldo Momigliano⁵ which, despite differences in their views on autobiography, defend the less popular thesis according to which autobiography begins not with Augustine, but in antiquity. I will then present a joint response to both questions; not only I do not think a distinction between memoir and autobiography to be apt or useful for our purposes, I also discard the possibility of seeing a beginning in antiquity.

1. Autobiography in the Ancient World? Two Visions on Autobiography in Antiquity

Misch's work is impressive in both size and variety of sources. Starting with the Ancient civilizations of the Middle East and ending with Augustine and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, he states his purpose as the exposition of "the limitless variety of autobiographical writing to the history of the human mind, and to present it in a historical perspective". The historical stance is further enhanced by a second strand of analysis, concerned instead with the status of autobiography and its beginnings. For Misch, Augustine's work is not a "beginning but a completion"⁶ of multiple tendencies that were already present in the Ancient world.

This form of historical research also builds the ground for what is a possible definition of autobiography. It is here that we find a sign of disagreement between the use of "autobiography" and the use of "memoir". For Misch, opposite to what is held by more contemporary theorists, memoir has no personal connotation and it is derivative of the rather monotonous tradition of

⁴ Misch, Georg. (1951). *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity. Vol. I-II*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁵ Momigliano, Arnaldo. (1993). *The Development of Greek Biography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁶ *Ibidem*: 17.

hypomnemata, (memory notes to the self), and *commentarii*, forms that were interested solely in the report of significant facts where the author had no intention of being perceived as a literary author, but only as a reporter. On the contrary, autobiography has at its center the description of the author written by the author himself. This interpretation stems from the literal understanding of autobiography being composed by “graphia”, “bios”, and “auto”, hence the description of an individual human life by the individual himself. Interestingly, Misch adds how only autobiography, as a term and as the aforementioned definition shows, can claim a degree of philosophical dignity. Misch is here looking at Dilthey and at the use of autobiography as the privileged way of understanding a life or, more specifically, at the claim according to which in autobiography “the subject inquiring is also the object inquired into” – “the historian who tells the story is the same who has already lived it and knows it from within in a quite peculiar way”⁷. There is, in Dilthey, and in Misch’s understanding of the philosopher, a combination of experience and our being enmeshed in it, and the realization of consciousness through a mechanism of self-revelation. It is the discovery of awareness that becomes the philosophical center of autobiography, the only way leading to the discovery of the person.

Misch also acutely points to a fact that only later, as we shall see, will become a major concern in the analysis of autobiography, namely, the problem of whether autobiographies can or cannot be considered reliable. Such difficulty is already outlined in the etymology of the term “person” coming from the Latin *persona*, the name given to the masks used by actors during their performances. But the mask that is supposed to be hiding the identity of the author might instead be product of remembrance. In Misch’s words:

⁷ Ibidem: 8.

...their truth is to be sought not so much in their elements as in the whole works, each of which is more than the sum of its parts. As regards the various parts of the works, the most honest autobiographer who is writing a “confession” and not an apologia, (...) will be silent on various characteristics, details, because probably everybody has a sore spot in his self-awareness which he will not want to touch. On the other hand even the cleverest liar, in his fabricated or embroidered stories of himself, will be unable to deceive us as to his character. He will reveal it through the spirit of his lies. Thus, in general, the spirit brooding over the recollected material is the truest and most real element in an autobiography.⁸

Despite the lack of objective historical accuracy, autobiographies are objective in the presentation of the author’s mind, and in the analysis of the “formative power” which led to the creation of something that is an authentic depiction of the intentions of the author, character, and protagonist. It is in autobiography, and not in memoir, according to Misch, that we observe an active effort of the mind, and the desire for its philosophical understanding and for the guidance role philosophy plays for the author and for the epoch in which the author happens to live.

Misch does not linger on a further philosophical analysis of this issue; his exploration of autobiography is of historical nature and moves through examples following a chronological order. The interest raised by this analysis is based, once again, on the two abovementioned questions: one is whether Misch’s preference and description of the word autobiography can be employed today, the second is rather concerned with Misch’s identification of evolutionary “patterns” of autobiography: what led to the *Confessions*? Can the ancient world be regarded as the origin of what is today a genre?

⁸ Ibidem: 10-11.

Before outlining Misch's conclusions, it is worth noticing how a similar endeavor, the research of an origin, and with it a definition of autobiography, can be carried on in a radically different way.

I am here referring to the work, equally erudite and prolific, of Arnaldo Momigliano, to his position on the origin and status of autobiography, and to his criticism of Misch's analysis.

The Development of Greek Biography, which comprises his four Carl Newell Jackson Classical Lectures delivered at Harvard in 1968, aims, as the title shows, at investigating not only autobiography, as in Misch's case, but autobiography *and* biography. Autobiography and biography are taken at once, analyzed together, and, most importantly, they are considered to be overlapping genres. This assumption, the lack of a distinction between the two genres, is based on the fact that such distinction, easily recognizable today, was not felt or acknowledged in antiquity. The similarity between autobiography and biography was based, according to Momigliano, on the fact that there was no trace of what we today take as being the value of self-expression. In both cases we have the account of a life, but in no way is this comparable to the expression of the mind of a person⁹.

⁹ It is of some interest to notice how Momigliano, despite the argument made in the case of antiquity, was also reluctant to acknowledge a role for the self that could not be entirely satisfied by a biographical description of the person. Bowersock in his article entitled *Momigliano's Quest for the Person*, (Bowersock, G.W. "Momigliano's Quest for the Person", *History and Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Beiheft 30: The Presence of the Historian: Essays in Memory of Arnaldo Momigliano (Dec. 1991): p. 27-36), reports a passage in which Momigliano, after pointing to the fact that Italian, his mother language, does not have a correspondent for "self", states: "For me, as a good Piedmontese, the word "person" signifies nothing. I know expressions like "good person" and *persona grata* –I have met men, women, old people and children". (Momigliano, "Marcel Mauss", 255, Ottavo Contributo, 181). Bowersock, correctly, I believe, interprets this claim as a lack of interest in the inner life of a person, or for self-expression, and as the assumption that a person is fully understandable in the combinations of the happenings of a life; in what surrounds a person, from the cities inhabited, to religion, to marriages, etc.

The lack of interest in the expression of the mind of a person marks the first, and probably most important difference between Misch and Momigliano, a difference based on what is taken to be an autobiographical work. Misch's mistake, in the eyes of Momigliano, is based on the fact that what he was searching for simply did not exist in antiquity, and will not emerge until spiritual autobiographies – a position, as mentioned, that I also endorse. In the words of Momigliano:

Misch was the pupil and son-in-law of W. Dilthey and his definition of autobiography as a "history of human self-awareness" is clearly influenced by Dilthey. Consequently Misch did not confine himself to what we would call autobiographical works: he tried even less to decide whether we are entitled to draw a line between true autobiographies, memoirs of one's own times, diaries, etc. (...) The first work which combines autobiographical information and self-awareness perfectly is of course St. Augustine's *Confessions*. But this means that *Misch's History of Ancient Autobiography*, as a history of self-awareness, ends where it should begin.¹⁰

Momigliano's refutation of Misch is thus the proof that, despite a similarity in their interest in the origin of autobiography, and despite their agreement in seeing autobiography as emerging in antiquity, and not with Augustine, the two authors are in fact talking about different matters. It follows that an affinity in their conclusions should not be regarded as an affinity at all. If, on the one hand, Misch seems to be closer to what today we consider to be autobiographical works, on the other hand, if we follow Momigliano, we are bound to deny that autobiography, thus conceived, ever existed in antiquity. It is with this important remark in mind that we should then consider their opinions on the origin and development of autobiography.

1.1 The Origin of Autobiography in the Works of Misch and Momigliano

¹⁰ Momigliano, A. (1993). *The Development of Greek Biography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 18.

Misch's analysis begins with the appearance of first person narration in the Egyptian and Babylonian-Assyrian civilizations just to quickly move to post-Homeric Greece, and to the first developments of a form of philosophy that will later, in the Socratic tradition, make of self-knowledge its point of departure. The use of first person in ancient civilizations was stereotyped, lacking any element of psychological analysis. The first person pronoun was employed as a parallel style of narration to the one attributed to the Gods, or, in other cases, it was adopted as to narrate impossible adventures, the recounting of which did not dramatically differ from imaginative poetry, or from tales of fictional marvel. The use of the first person is here barely more than a guarantor of direct testimony, as if the actual presence of an "I" could justify what is, instead of a personal and intimate narration, the narration of a superhuman and divine character.

A striking example of these features can be found in the *Annals of Assurnasipal* (885-860 B.C.); here is the incipit:

I am the king, I am the lord, I am the exalted, the great, the strong, I am famous, I am prince, I am the noble, the powerful in war; I am a lion, I am a hero of youthful strength; Assurnasipal, the mighty king, the king of Assur, the chosen of Sin (God of growth) the favorite of Anu, the beloved of Ramman, who is the mightiest of the Gods [...].¹¹

The beginning of Greek civilization did not fully change this conception of autobiography. The first strands of Greek philosophy did not immediately value the daily routines and trivialities of the life of a single individual – elements that in autobiography are often far more revealing than others – nor did they focus on a deeper investigation of the self; what we have at this point is instead a theoretical and abstract reflection on the concept of "bios" conceived uniquely under what was the ideal model of the wise, and still semi-heroic, man. This

¹¹ Idem: 38.

tradition was brought about by Homeric poetry, with a special focus on the *Hyliad*, and by Homer's portrayal of heroic figures that are often recognized not thanks to a description of their personality and character, but through the epitome that accompanies them. Heroes are καλὸς κἀγαθός, beautiful and good, and this is considered sufficient to judge their lives without any particular interest in how such virtues developed.

The first work to counter this trend, and one of the few that has become close to be considered an actual autobiography, is Plato's *Seventh Letter*, the narration of his disastrous journey and permanence in Sicily. Misch avoids the discussion related to the authenticity of the document, and focuses instead on those elements that might guarantee to the work the status of autobiography. Plato's *Seventh Letter* is a complex work made of several elements; Plato wanted to defend his reputation, to show the high intentions that guided his role as the mentor of Dion, the young dictator, but, more interestingly, his letter is also a personal examination of his own doctrines, together with his desire to reconcile philosophy and politics, an issue that had led to the death of his teacher and model, Socrates.

Plato begins by quoting himself in the notorious "king-philosopher" passage, he exposes his theories and analyzes them in relation to his own upbringing, and yet, despite letting his personal life work as a defense of his intellectual life, there are few, if any elements revealing of the actual personality of Plato. As Misch admits:

What we are given is only disconnected fragments of a picture of the philosopher and no means of grasping the whole; nowhere, except where he speaks as a teacher or quotes from famous sayings of his own, do we feel the breath of the great man, still less the secret foundation of human greatness. Instead he measures himself—or the author of the epistle measures him—mainly by the common measure that yields ordinary morality. Everything goes to show that the self-portrayal here has a different function from that familiar to us: it has in it nothing of the

autobiographical intention that gives philosophic dignity in our eyes to self portrayal –the intention of making life intelligible through life itself.¹²

Nonetheless, Plato’s philosophical contribution plays an important part in what will be the beginning of spiritual autobiography. The spirituality of Christian thought is in several ways dependent on Platonic idealism, and on its continuation in Neoplatonism, the latter being the movement through which autobiography will finally flourish. Yet, what creates the link between Platonic philosophy and the development of spiritual autobiography is not this latter, but, according to Misch, Hellenism and its evolution in the Roman world. We have here two new significant strands of autobiographical narration, one related to the political life of the aristocracy, the other to the first intellectual and artistic autobiographies.

Misch pays close attention to the historical changes that had occurred in this long and dense period, from the rise of city-states to the presence of different rival philosophical schools, among which, the Stoa. Only under the influence of the Stoic school, Misch is again quoting Dilthey, is personality finally regarded as autonomous; it finally gains a certain freedom together with the capacity of mingling daily occurrences with an investigation of knowledge and self-knowledge. Despite the still strong influence of the “ideal man” or of a pre-constituted conception of morality, personal lives are, in Hellenism, taken as evolving mechanisms; their morality unfolds with the unfolding of the concept of *bios* in what is, at this point, a tradition deeply influenced by Aristotle’s morality, and by the importance given by the philosopher to the active life. Moral virtues are the product of habit, and virtues are not just theoretical concepts to be understood intellectually; they are concepts that can only follow from an active understanding

¹² Ibidem: 154.

of our lives and experiences; Aristotle's morality abandons the Platonic world of Ideas and places itself in the practical and daily dimension of the city/*polis*.

However, the idea that autobiography could find its beginnings in the Stoa, and should thus be considered dependent on the teaching of Aristotle, has encountered criticism, and, specifically for our purposes, Momigliano's criticism.

We have so far seen how Momigliano differs from Misch in his treatment of autobiography and biography as almost collapsing genres, and, most importantly, in what they take autobiography to be. This latter point is important in understanding why Momigliano, as his lectures meant to show, disagreed with the belief according to which autobiographical narration fully develops with the Stoa.

According to Momigliano little, in terms of the origin of autobiography and biography can be attributed to later Greek traditions.

Differently from Misch, Momigliano believed that traces, albeit sparse, of autobiography and biography can be found already in the V century B.C., in the "Asian" contribution to autobiography.

Momigliano recognizes that these works often included magical, or tale-like elements, but he insisted on how they were nonetheless centered on the individual, and being centered on the individual does not require for Momigliano, as seen in the previous section, self-awareness, or a complex analysis of the self.

According to Momigliano Greece in the IV century presents new problems, and a new scenario. The Greeks, he explains, could not fully discuss individual figures because there was no interest in the individual; the collective was instead at the center of attention, and, with the collective, an interest in political practices, philosophy, and its various schools.

If there is an interest in the individual, it has to be confined to certain “types”, and to the defense, explanation, and clarification of their positions. Momigliano is thus going against what Misch believed to be a movement in philosophy aiming at a better understanding of the practical, daily, and also moral life of a person. What in Misch is a movement toward the personalization of autobiographies is, in Momigliano, almost a step back; personal elements are at best driven by curiosity, they are likely fictional, and they do not quite describe a specific individual.

The Roman period, inheriting and fostering the power of Hellenism, is perhaps the one in which autobiography becomes more common, or at least common in the highest spheres of society. It is in regard to this period that Misch and Momigliano, despite their differences in what counts as autobiographical narration, seem to share closer opinions.

The leading exponent of political autobiography is Cicero. There are multiple ways in which Cicero deals with his self portrait; in the *Vita Ciceronis*, it is possible to identify several strands starting from the erudite conversational setting through which philosophy is divulged – an element clearly drawn from Cicero’s beloved Greek tradition – to the exposition, marked by an astonishing use of rhetoric, of his own philosophy. But Cicero is not just the intellectual and the politician; in his letters to Pomponius Atticus, his great friend and contemporary, Cicero manages to add a side of his life that strikes the reader as more personally felt. The acme of this process is the *Consolatio*, a literary novelty at that time, in which Cicero mourns the death of his

daughter in a poignant and radically new way from the pompous “praise of the dead” characterizing earlier periods. Cicero represents one of the few instances in which we find a man facing his own inner self.

Misch sees in Cicero a movement toward autobiography; for Momigliano the work is instead closer to depicting an evolution of philosophical ideas – from knowledge as a model for wise man, to self-knowledge and private investigation. Cicero is not trying to understand who he is, he is telling us who he has become and what steps he had to make, thus abandoning the description of autobiography as a discovery of the self; a notion Misch thought, probably incorrectly, to exist at that stage.

Two other examples from the political sphere seem, at first, to be able to bridge this gap: one is Seneca, the other Marcus Aurelius. Seneca moves more gradually than Cicero; he addresses his *Moral Epistles* to his friend Lucilius, a contemporary that he presents as one of his pupils. Written from exile, the *Epistles* are reminiscent of the years spent as Nero’s tutor, and the figure of the teacher is indeed the character under whose semblance Seneca presents himself. Together with the Stoic formation of personality, we once again have a description of Seneca’s daily life, but, most importantly, we have what Misch describes as a hint into the spiritual dimension that was soon to be manifested.

Moral experience also becomes for Seneca a source of religion. The Stoic view of the world had based the conviction of man’s kinship with God on the doctrine of natural philosophy that the reason in us is of the same nature as the divine Reason permeating the universe. (...) The conception of God was determined by this moral

idealism; the attribute “divine” became the highest moral attribute, and so could be employed in the description of the greatness of soul, extending beyond the normal human sphere, of the sage.¹³

And yet, here too we find what Momigliano implied by the description of a “type”. Seneca’s autobiographic style is still modeled on the figure of the teacher, and the development of the soul he describes is still supposed to work as a model for later generations; it is somewhat objectified in a form of philosophy that, albeit being more personal, is supposed to have universal and sharable value.

Less beautifully written, and not so drenched in philosophy, is Marcus Aurelius’ *To Myself*. This autobiography is written in the style of *hypomnemata*, simply notes to himself, without a pretense of literary value, and without the use of rhetorical techniques. Marcus Aurelius is at dialogue with his own reason. Some of the observations are pedantic, and not always built on strong connections. In more contemporary terms, he seems to be writing a diary; his recollections help him understand his own self better but, once again, they tell us nothing about the discovery of the self that is present in less embryonic stages of autobiography. The more natural and relaxed attitude adopted is still distant from a narrative supposed to reveal the self to the audience, and mainly, to the very author.

One last note should be dedicated to the more creative strand of Roman autobiographies. While political autobiography maintains a strong connection with philosophical ideas – mainly Plato and the Stoa – this latter group of autobiographies is far more concerned with the relationship between the author and his capacity to engage in narrative, a relationship that will

¹³ Ibidem: 432.

become fundamental in the future developments of autobiography. Lucian and Petronius, to mention two of the most relevant figures, recur to the *satira*, the form of satiric theater that the Romans had so skillfully developed. Their works combine prose and poetry, together with a stunning imaginative ability. The famous *Trimalchion Feast* in Petronius, and Lucian's *The Dream* are literally soaked in brilliantly creative elements; they are surreal journeys bound to influence authors such as Rabelais, Swift, Sterne, and Cervantes.

Momigliano does not mention these works as candidates to autobiography, and it is possible to suppose that he regarded them as predominantly fictional works. The same point could not have been shared by Misch, who instead saw in the presence of creative and fictional elements a beginning for a more complex analysis of what can be regarded, in autobiography, as an authentic narration. The presence of elements flirting with the fictional sphere in contemporary autobiography should, according to him, be connected to the attempts of Roman satiric poets. And yet, this conclusion seems to apply more to novels than to actual autobiographies. What Petronius and Lucian show is mastery in prose and poetry, but even though their stories are told from a first person perspective, they are not for this reason aimed at an accurate presentation of the self. Implying that their work can be used as a privileged insight into their personality strikes me as a bold statement; their work can surely tell us more about their art, the Roman culture and its cosmopolitanism, the adoption and criticism of values, but, once again, their fictional elements are not there to reveal to the reader, (or to the author), who is the person behind the pages. I thus think that the origin of, so to speak, lies and inventions in autobiography, cannot date back to the Latin authors, but instead finds its beginning in a later stage of autobiography, one beginning only *after* spiritual autobiography, and not before.

As mentioned, I will return to this issue in the second and third chapters of this thesis, the one dedicated to an analysis of narrative theories, and to the problem of whether autobiography can find its location in nonfiction or whether it would instead make sense to see in it as a hybrid of fiction and nonfiction.

2. Memoir Today. New Parameters of Definition

It is time to go back to what I take to be the most relevant questions stemming from the above analysis of ancient autobiography.

On the one hand, Misch's work advocates the possibility of seeing in Augustine a completion of autobiography more than a beginning; in addition, he defines autobiography, a term he prefers to memoir, as the "recognition of human self-awareness". On the other hand, Momigliano, despite seeing a beginning of autobiography in the ancient world, discards the possibility of defining autobiography in Misch's terms, and treats it instead on a par with biography, the only difference being the usage of the first person pronoun.

I am more inclined, in my analysis of contemporary memoir, to discard the possibility of an origin in antiquity. My reasons for this conclusion is that, with Momigliano, I do not see in ancient autobiographies the "self-awareness", or discovery of the mind that Misch is instead trying to detect. Misch pays close attention to the relation between philosophy and autobiography, a relation framed in the Stoic idea according to which the personality of a man can only stem from an active moral reflection on the experiences composing a life. Yet,

philosophical knowledge does not necessarily lead to the discovery of self-consciousness, and Misch bridges this gap far too quickly.

The identities of the autobiographers working in the ancient world, and I am here in agreement with Momigliano, are stereotypical; they follow what a “Stoic” or “Platonic” sense of what the self should be. This is very far from the moment in which, as in Augustine, investigating and writing about the self will be equated to engaging in actual philosophical research. There are no specific philosophical schools to be followed and no pre-established philosophical accounts of “what a life and person should be”. Autobiography is not an application of philosophical ideas, it is instead a philosophical question in itself, a question on the nature of the self that can only find specific, individualized responses.

A further reason to doubt Misch’s account is that it is often unclear whether the authors of ancient autobiographies *intentionally* adopted this genre as a privileged way of discovering their own selves. Truth to be told, there is little evidence to claim that autobiography was considered to be revealing at all, and the works we have today are so sparse as to make it difficult to identify a common, evolving thread. At best, first person narration seems to be a rhetorical and technical device, something clearly not sufficient to make of these examples, to quote Zinsser again, an art requiring craft.

Autobiography becomes an immersion in the self only, and fully, with Augustine where the exposition of his inner self is made possible by the very mechanism of confession. Without exposing himself in the *Confessions* Augustine would have never reached the state of

conversion, and the significance that conversion had on his life and identity. In other words, Augustine had to make sense of himself to really claim possession over his own self, life, and credo. This is not the case of Plato, or Cicero, or Seneca, etc.; these authors had already established their political, social, and artistic status in their writings and theories, and if there is a discovery to be made, it is simply that their writing and theories are by themselves sufficient to describe their lives and careers. Ancient authors “objectify” themselves through their work, they do not question their identity, they are not autobiographers; somewhat paradoxically, they at times resemble their own biographers.

It is on this point, namely, on the convergence and similarities, in antiquity, between biography and autobiography that I turn back to Momigliano. One should remember how despite not seeing in ancient autobiography a discovery of self-awareness, Momigliano still thought that the origin of biography and autobiography is to be found in antiquity. In other words, Momigliano’s point is that self-awareness and the discovery of the self are neither part of biography, nor are they, much more surprisingly, a crucial element in autobiographies. Ancient autobiographies, as he clearly recognizes, do not include an analysis of the self, do not investigate the self, and yet, they are autobiographies nonetheless.

This observation poses a problem for my analysis of autobiographies given the attention that will be paid, in the next chapters, to the notion of the self. And yet, one should keep in mind how difficult it is to see a convergence, particularly today, of autobiography, a form of first person narration, and biography, a form of third person narration. What immediately distinguishes the two is the fact that their access to facts is radically different. Both deal with

happenings, but what is told from an external standpoint does not have to be identical to what is felt from the first person standpoint. This distinction is, I believe, at the core of a contemporary analysis of memoir. The question is to analyze not only what happened to a person, but the standpoint of that specific person, and, with it, the person who is narrating.

What we have today is a fully developed genre, and a genre that relies on the intention of an author to reconstruct a life in the form of a narrative with the purpose of fully understanding the conscious self lying behind a coat of memories, experiences, memory gaps, emotions, accomplished, and even unaccomplished desires. There is, in this, an element of struggle. The struggle is animated by the difficulties that such a task requires. Part of the contemporary interest in autobiography is to see whether the author managed to provide the audience and himself with the person he wanted to narrate. This is the purpose that the series of talks at New York Public Library wanted to achieve. By asking the authors how they managed to write a memoir, and what difficulties they encountered, the purpose of the series was to ask the authors how they managed to narrate their own intimate self as the only inhabitant of a story that only one person can tell. Autobiographies cannot be replicated, and there are not two autobiographies of the same person at the same time; only one is right, and this is a problem that antiquity fails to address. What we gain from antiquity is an exposition of the relevant thoughts and ideas of the time, and of how those ideas were applied, fostered, and endorsed by the life of significant personalities. This is a precious historical testimony, but it is not characterized by the question of how our own lives become subjectively problematic. Autobiography not only raises this problem, it also provides individual, unique replies. These replies are subjective and intimate, they are specific and

tailored to the person who has directly experienced, remembered, and interpreted the course of a life.

The second question is, as anticipated, whether we should prefer the term autobiography to the term memoir or vice-versa.

For Misch memoirs are derivative of the tradition of hypomnemata, aids to memory, notes to the self, and not much else, and yet, this definition changes if we consider, for instance, the importance of the role of memory in autobiographical writing –an issue on which Misch barely touches on. What is left behind is the complexity that the process of recollection implies. Some memories can be vivid and easy to recall, others are buried in time, hard or impossible to accept. The contemporary interest in memoir is based on the ability, and inability, to recollect, and on the multiple ways in which memories can be selected and held together as a cohesive whole. It is a selection based not on mere preference, cheerful episodes rather than morose ones, but a selection that is supposed to lead to a better discovery of the self. The connection between memory and the self cannot be ignored, and there is no mention, in either Misch or Momigliano, of how the very fact of dealing with memories can become a consuming process for the author.

Memoirists are aware of this process, and they are aware of how remembering is a subjective, and not an objective activity. Two examples of this stance, and of the difficulties in remembering and expressing memories through autobiography, can be found in the works of Saramago and Aciman. I picked these two examples because their approach to memory is characterized by two different, and yet particularly common problems in recollecting and narrating memories. In Saramago, the obstacle is represented by trying to remember something

buried in childhood; in Aciman, memories are instead both emotionally and geographically distant: his problem is exile, and the physical and psychological difficulties of going back to a place where he *cannot* go back. In *Small Memories*¹⁴, Saramago presents an account of his childhood, from the very first years of his life, to his years in high school. There is a passage I particularly like in which Saramago talks about his older brother who died of pneumonia at four when the author was not even two years old, an age that, in itself, prohibits the possibility of remembering: and yet, in what Saramago writes there is the tactful recognition that his memory of his brother is a living, reliable memory. Most importantly, it is a memory that shapes Saramago himself, even though the way events unfolded, their exact recollection, the precision of details, cannot be objectively stated or verified:

My mother arrived in Lisbon with us children in the spring of 1924. In December of that same year, Francisco died. He was four years old when bronchial pneumonia carried him off. He was buried on Christmas Eve. I do not really believe in so called false memories. I think the difference between those and the memories we consider certain and solid is merely a question of confidence, the confidence that we place in the incorrigible vagueness we call certainty. Is the memory I have of Francisco false? Perhaps, but I have spent the last eighty-three years believing it to be true.¹⁵

Saramago goes on with the description of that last fleeting moment, just to conclude with another declaration, this time addressed to his readers:

I must have been sitting on the floor, pacifier in my mouth, little more than eighteen months old, concerned, without even realizing that I was, with recording what I was seeing in some part of my small brain so that, a whole lifetime later, I could describe it to you, dear reader. That, then, is my earliest memory, and it may well be false.¹⁶

¹⁴ Saramago, J. (2011). *Small Memories. A Memoir*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

¹⁵ Ibidem: 109.

¹⁶ Ibidem: 110-111.

Saramago's sentences are perfectly crafted. In just one page he manages to tell a story, to tell it to himself, and to confess to the reader what it means to recollect. This passage is able to show both the mechanism of remembering and to reassure the reader of its legitimacy (even if "it may well be false"). This episode, Saramago's earliest memory, does not open the book, it instead comes close to the end thus providing another departure, the one that fully achieves the scope of memoir. Saramago's childhood is composed by a series of snapshots that recall each other at a distance of little more than ten pages. The thread is something to be found, and to be found in the mesmerizing realization that the beginning may be false, but somewhat it is not. What is not false, what cannot be false, is the moment of finding something that can only be recalled in its future manifestations, in a life still to become. Saramago admits how he felt that his life was a continuation of that truncated life. Even if he cannot remember seeing the death of his brother, he can clearly remember all the pages in which the authenticity of that moment had become the beginning of Saramago, the writer, the person who is now asking the reader to believe in a memory chain whose beginning may be, from an *objective* standpoint, an invention – who can remember anything at eighteen months? – but that is also a *subjective* step into the disclosure of his true self.

Memoirists have been hesitating over their memories, and they often warn the reader when it comes to something they might simply wish to remember, or a memory which has been told to them by others, as is frequently the case in memoirs of childhood; sometimes their omissions are so obvious that we are left pondering over that missing paragraph, in the same way in which they probably pondered over it before eliminating it from their narrative. But why are

they guarding us? A first response, and a somewhat naive one, might simply be concerned with the fear of being fooled – the haunting ghost of falseness; another hypothesis, and one I find more revealing, is that they are now calling the reader to the actual narrative, they are pointing to the apparition of the self, a self in need of a moment that might have never existed, but that exists in the definition of the person.

Another example adds credit to the use of the term memoir; as with Saramago, also this example pays an incredibly stylized, as well as authentic reverence to the association between remembering and being. André Aciman belongs to the long tradition of writers facing the unstable geography, physical and psychological, of exile. All the essays in *False Papers* seem to be built on one concept: going back to a place that never existed but that has, at the same time, a name as defined as Alexandria, Paris, Rome, or New York. Aciman rescues these places from memory; what he rescues is an image stuck in memory, an image that is impossible to see again; every essay is like a postcard of something in need of being remembered but never corresponding to the actual place. There is a way in which, as in *In Search of Blue*, the Mediterranean sea of Alexandria can only manifest itself when its view is obscured or when, an ocean away, in New York, the very presence of the sea becomes doubtful. Distance can lead to oblivion, to forgetting the very presence of something we have, at some point in our lives, experienced directly; Aciman fights this possibility by finding in the present, a park in New York, the traces of what he cannot anymore directly perceive.

It is when I am almost blinded by light in New York City that I remember the sea on glary sunny days. It is not by looking, which is what one did in Alexandria, that I can give myself the surest impression that the sea might just as easily be waiting across the street. I do not look because I do not want to find that I am wrong. I do not look because I am trying to bring about what I am cautious not to claim I want.

That, in the end, is how I love the sea. I love it from across the street. I need distance, obstacles between me and what I want. I like bits and pieces of the beach –even symbols, signs, tokens, totems, fetishes of the beach- the way I like the promise of Paris more than Paris itself, a staggered view more than a huge vista.¹⁷

Almost all of Aciman’s memories are staggered views, views that compose the landscape of, as he will later confess, “...a pluperfect life, a conditional life, a life made, like Paris, for the mind. Or for paper”. There is an insistence, and a very Proustian one, on the search for memories, a search that can only take place in the mind of the author. As an exile Aciman could only live in “narrated”, “written” places. When he was able to visit these places again, he found out how not everything coincided to his pages and memories; he once again understood how reality is, once again, an objective universe in need of subjective organization. Memory locates things better than reality does, and it does it in a narrative form.

Saramago and Aciman differ radically from the conception of autobiography present in the Ancient World. Their cases exemplify the complexity of autobiography in displaying the struggle, as well as the need, of engaging in autobiographical narrative. Memoirs are forms of narrative; they represent a specific narrative that can be achieved only when the two problems of memory and identity have been questioned from a subjective point of view, that of the author. Asking “Who am I?” and exploring our lives through the lacunae of memory are two parallel activities meant to reveal, in a narrative form, a sense of the self that cannot be revealed by merely listing the vicissitudes of a life, whether mundane or related to political and intellectual achievements. In the remaining part of this chapter, I will explore some of the difficulties that

¹⁷ Aciman, André. (2000). *False Papers. Essays on Exile and Memory*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 31-32.

these two questions imply by proposing two separate historical analyses of memoir. I will begin with Ben Yagoda, and end with James Olney and his conception of memoir as “life weaving”. Before getting to this point, however, I want to present one more account trying to defend the use of the word “autobiography” as the most appropriate definition of this genre.

3. Autobiography in Film? The Case of P. Adams Sitney

Even though contemporary tendencies seem to require a shift of definition toward “memoir”, there are still examples of the use of “autobiography” with approximately the same meaning commonly, at least today, attributed to memoir.

It is worth mentioning at least one case of this overlapping of meaning between memoir and autobiography. We find it, for instance, in the work of P. Adams Sitney. In his analysis of American *avant garde* films, he uses the word “autobiography” as a description of different tendencies emerging in the decades of avant garde films from 1968 to 1979. The reflection related to the combination of images and sound led to a period in which autobiography was the privileged source to identify the emergence of artistic endeavors. In Sitney’s words, this period is characterized by the presence of “autobiographies of artistic incarnation”, where the main theme is precisely the artistic and filmic development of the filmmaker. The directors analyzed, including Michael Snow, Yvonne Rainer, James Broughton, and Stan Brakhage, all show interesting elements reflecting on the active presence of filmmakers in their work, together with the conflicts emerging from the combination of what is seen and what is told; at the intersection between words and images rests the presence of the filmmakers.

It is especially in Brakhage that Sitney sees “the purest form of autobiography”. Brakhage concluded his major autobiographical work, *The Book of the Film*, divided in four parts, as a form of Proustian autobiography, which is concerned, in Sitney’s words, more with the structure according to which experiences are remembered, than with the facts composing his actual life¹⁸. It is in this way that Brakhage changes the interpretation of autobiography by adding a distinction between classical autobiography and the autobiographical novel:

A more useful distinction that can be drawn within the strict autobiographical tradition: Augustine in his *Confessions* presents himself as a typical man, in all else but the very fact that he writes. Rousseau, in his *Confessions*, portrays the extraordinary individual, an absolutely unique case. Brakhage has operated in both autobiographical modes. *Scenes from Under Childhood* and the *Weir-Falcon Saga* participate in the Augustinian manner. Their fictional principle is that the film maker allows his observation of the events of his children’s lives to stand for his own life. But in so far as this substitution is overtly declared as such, and the distance between the filmmaker and the children is inscribed in the structure of the films, the fiction dissolves. In its place there emerges the suggestion that the activities of children can reveal a universal model of psycho-history. Brakhage’s Rousseauistic confession, *Sincerity (reel one)* describes the events leading from his own childhood to the making of his first film.¹⁹

Similarly to previous examples of autobiographies from childhood, Brakhage heavily relies on the use of a scrapbook as an object for the interpretation of memory; more than in the moments depicted, he finds the structure of his memory in the way in which the scrapbook has been “structured” and organized. More than a beginning reaching an end, there is a sense in which what needs to be found is a filmic re-enactment and organization of memories. Only in *The Animals of Eden and After* (1970) a does singular perspective emerge in what seems to be the child’s viewpoint of Brakhage’s house; it is a first attempt to reveal consciousness, a mind being born in the famous sequence depicting the birth of a goat. The incarnation of a human, a child’s body into an animal seals a process of metamorphosis that keeps presenting itself in the constant

¹⁸ Adams Sitney, P. (2002). *Visionary Film. The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*. New York: Oxford University Press: 389.

¹⁹ Ibidem: 389.

references to the animal world. Seeing the goat, witnessing birth, symbolize the possibility of seeing the very life of the artist from its beginning. Another metaphorical reference to the animal world is found in the moment in which the crying child images are intercut with the image of a caged bird, thus leading to the first recognition of the conflicts inevitably inhabiting the life, and social life, of an individual.

The animals represented are, in Sitney's reading, the representation of Brakhage himself, but they are also a stellar example of how reality is metaphorically interpreted from our first person point of view. Sitney observes how:

Brakhage's point is that we are always surrounded by a world of metaphors, overlaid like a palimpsest, conventionalized traces of once powerful perceptions, which induce us to see the world as reflections of ourselves.²⁰

It is only after this metamorphic and metaphorical phase that Brakhage, in *Sincerity (reel one)* (1973), approaches the encounter between the artist and cinema. Brakhage stares into the camera, and it is his way of staring that reveals a connection with the photographic images, stored in a photo album, that appeared in *Scenes from Under Childhood* (1970). The structure of film, and so the camera, are now open to the image of the director's mother, presumably the mind behind the structuring of the album. This is not going back to the objectivity of a reality finally organized; this moment is not a solution but the intervention, in the succession of facts composing autobiography, of a new defining thread, one that becomes a reflection on film itself. What is of main interest is that Brakhage seems only to be able to record his own autobiography once he has provided himself and the audience with something akin to the autobiography of film

²⁰ Ibidem: 393.

itself, where film is not an object or a technique, but a subject that needs to tell a story – a mechanical memoirist.

Several elements in Brakhage's production recall a subjectivization of film. At least two elements are already in place: first, film, as a subject, relies on visual communication thus enhancing elements of cognition that are principally present in the first years of life. Brakhage has often emphasized how language can impair vision and visual abilities, (as in *Metaphors on Vision*), and how particulars are lost after childhood precisely because the emergence of subjectivity is somewhat a result of a deprivation of the visual. However, film is a different subject, and a subject capable of rescuing a sense of vision that would otherwise disappear with the disappearance of childhood. Secondly, and consequently, the idea according to which film stimulates and expresses visual instead of mainly verbal communication, is empowered by a reflection on the combination of technology, the mechanics of film, and its adherence to everyday life, to its objects and scenarios. Our reality, the organized reality in which we live, is fulfilled in its mechanical, filmic representation.

It is in this latter sense, I believe, that Sitney's definition of "autobiographies of artistic incarnation" should be understood. The development of the autobiographer is, in these autobiographies, presented together with the development of the art practiced. The very beginning of life, childhood, shares boundaries with the way in which film begins; both feature an emphasis on vision, both a peculiar, intense look on the particulars of everyday reality.

Perhaps, this statement could encompass a large portion of *avant garde* filmic production; the filmmaker behind the camera is a filmic self unfolding what is likely to be the narrative of an innovative and deeply self-conscious strand of the history of film.

I will not further digress on an analysis of other films or on Sitney's reading of them, I want instead to go back, one more time, to the theme of this section and to the question of whether the term *autobiography*, so skillfully adopted by Sitney, should be preferred to the one of *memoir*. In this specific case, I believe, the definitions seem to overlap; their differences are simply terminological, and not conceptual. The analysis of *avant garde* films proposed by Sitney has common elements with the one proposed by Zinsser and with the approach several contemporary memoirists seem to have in regard to their own work.

In both cases, the analysis of the self passes through a moment of recognition and adjustment. The recognition is twofold: if, on the one hand, the authors recognize themselves as authors, or in this case as directors, on the other hand, they learn how to recognize and adjust themselves to the contours of autobiographical narration. Once again, we have a specification of an art and a craft with a final point in which the two blend in the unfolding of a life. There is, in both definitions, a degree of sophistication that tends toward the recognition of artistic efforts together with an investigation of the person.

It is because of these overlapping definitions that I prefer to use the terms interchangeably, where my understanding encompasses the contemporary interpretation given to memoir, together with the elements that Sitney labels instead as parts of "autobiography".

In this initial section of my thesis, I worked essentially on two intertwined problems surrounding autobiographical expression. The first, the problem of finding a historical beginning, is in part answered by what I instead considered to be a problem of definition. If memoir is to be understood as the art and craft of finding the self and discovering its development in a narrative

composed by selected memories, then it is more advisable to begin a philosophical analysis of this genre with Augustine's *Confessions*, and not with what is instead a scattered collection of elements that will appear in later stages. I am now concerned with showing how memoirs, so construed, developed since the intentional desire of questioning the self, together with the desire of finding, in the course of a life, a revelatory narrative.

4. The Evolutionary History of Memoir

In the previous section, I discarded the possibility of seeing a beginning of memoir in ancient literature and decided instead to follow what today seems the preferred option, and to begin with Augustine and his *Confessions*. Differently from his predecessors, Augustine is not trying to establish his own political or social status, nor is he simply recording happenings from his life; he instead intentionally accepts memoir as a form of expression, the most apt expression to depict the importance of his conversion from pagan to religious life. He narrates his life as a story, having as its resolution the establishment of his faith and the following discovery of himself as a person. It is only in the framework of a research of the self²¹ that the history of memoir can begin, and it is only from this initial standpoint that the numerous twists and turns of autobiographical expression can clearly be analyzed.

It is in order to follow these movements, and to trace the evolutionary threads of this genre that several accounts of the history of memoir have been developed.

²¹ This chapter is not immediately concerned with the notion of the self; this notion, together with the problem of personal identity, will instead be at the center of Chapter Four.

Recently, Ben Yagoda has published a history of memoir, *Memoir, a History*²², that despite addressing a more commercial audience has the advantage of having, to my knowledge, one of the most comprehensive lists of literary memoirs published. When looking at memoirs today, it is hard to believe that what has become a commercial editorial success, started instead from the seeds of spiritual struggle. In the midst of being a literary phenomenon, memoir is not exempt from the inevitable gossip-based chitchats that invest first person narrations.

Aggrandizing autobiographies such as the one published by former President George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, scandalous confessions of former and present sports' champions, "behind the scenes" accounts of show business, etc., are nothing but the last appendix of something that had as its basis the need, brought by the advent of Christianity, and by so-called religious philosophy, to dedicate our lives to God by redeeming our past and sins through confession. If, again, it has now become typical to doubt the authenticity of memoirs, the very fact of engaging in the writing of memoirs used instead to be a proof of the truth. The difference, clearly, is that memoirs were mainly an exercise in self-meditation and self-discovery, a discovery that only God could have triggered. Augustine's *Confessions*, his memoir, is to be considered reliable in being "caused" by God, in being, in this sense, a means of redemption.

Despite the privileged role of spirituality, the beginning of autobiography also has a not so silent secular side. It should be kept in mind how the life of a person is a segment of history; it is to history and historiography that we should then turn to identify new influences in the production of autobiography. Historical narratives, since their beginning with Herodotus, and

²² Yagoda, B. (2009). *Memoir, A History*. Riverhead Books, New York.

arguably until today, are supposed to provide their readers not just with a description of facts, but also with what is an authentic rendition of facts. In antiquity, as Herodotus explains, this was achieved through the specification that what was narrated was in fact the product of first-hand testimony²³. This is clearly not always the case, but what has remained valid is the fact that when we recall historical facts it is not simply for the sake of recording the past, it is also because of the relevancy that the past has to our understanding of the present and foreshadowing of the future. This notion of history is related to a secular conception of time that does not appear in an almost exclusively spiritual account such as the one given us by Augustine. For Augustine there is no temporal time, but only what he calls “the present of things past, the present of things present, and the present of things future”; there is no measuring or quantification of time, but the realization of an extended continuum in the eternal presence of God. History adds something to this, it adds a rediscovery of time where time acquires significance in the very possibility of seeing it passing, in grasping and acknowledging the importance of a moment, be it a memory, an actual event, or the expectation of an approaching future. This is of crucial importance in memoirs because it allows memoirists to “personalize” time, to treat it as a belonging that, in a way, needs to be taken care of.

Moreover, the rediscovery of a temporal and personal account of time provided by the strong influence of historiography on autobiographical writing, contributed to the problem of how to guarantee the authenticity of the narration. In ancient history, as mentioned, the very fact of “seeing”, of being present to an historical event, was a sufficient enough proof of the reliability of the account, and it would have sounded absurd to doubt what was nothing but

²³ Interestingly, in Ancient Greek, the past tense of “to see” – I saw – is translated with the present tense of the verb “to know”. Having witnessed certain facts thus equates to knowing them, and the knowledge intended is qualified as true knowledge.

direct, first hand testimony. Hence, thanks to the presence of God, or thanks to the presence of the author, (in this case a historian), there were no reasons to doubt what was transmitted. The question, and a vexing one, is to see whether the same can be said for the *history of a person* once God is not anymore an infallible guarantor.

A first crack in the texture of authenticity can be attributed, as Yagoda notices, to the influence of fiction on first person narration. The influence of fiction is summarized by Yagoda as a shift from the practice of telling the life of a *person*, to the growing tendency of writing the life of a person as the life of a *character*. On a technical level, the distinction cannot be made; unless we are previously informed, we cannot, in most cases, tell the difference between an actual life and an invented one. And yet, discovering that what we believed to be true is instead a literary construction is likely to upset us; in fact, the discovery of fake memoirs, and the ambiguity generated by this shift in first person narration, did upset more than one reader. His leading example, when looking at European literature, is Defoe. Defoe was a surprise for readers who were not yet used to the subtlety of a narrative that could easily tell a “mock-autobiographical” story without maintaining any allure of authenticity. Yagoda stresses how Defoe was addressed in the pamphlets of the time as a liar; his Crusoe was a mysterious figure to which the audience paid the same attention paid today to controversial movie stars. History and romance belonged, as also noted by Hume, to two different compartments, and the possibility of blending the two initially required an effort to which the readers were not accustomed.

However, more than a contamination, and perhaps depreciation, of autobiographical writing, what was happening was something different. We are here at the intersection of another

literary evolution, one that will lead to the establishment of the modern novel. James Wood, in his acute analysis of the main elements of fiction²⁴, notices, for instance, how memoirs gave rise, through their attention to consciousness and confession, to a radically different conception of fiction, starting with Flaubert and ending in the linguistic and philosophical complexity of authors such as Joyce or Woolf.

And yet, even the bifurcation of modern novel and autobiography did not quite suffice in settling the problem of authenticity. What I mean is that memoirs, despite not being novels or, more generally, works of fiction, could not fully go back to the crystal clarity of spiritual autobiography. Modern times had by then surpassed the certainty of faith, and the redemption only God could have given had been substituted by a much less forgiving audience: society itself. More recent memoirists had no God to rely on as a guarantor of their “confessions”; reliance had instead to be conquered, and conquered through what is, in the end, a shift in the perception and creation of autobiographical narratives.

Yagoda adopts this line of thought, namely, the infiltration of fiction into memoir, to introduce the importance of the posthumous work of Rousseau. Rousseau’s endeavor is not only controversial in its authenticity; it is, most importantly, controversial in its very intentions. Rousseau’s work is, intentionally a confession, but one enmeshed in the texture of uncertainties; too many accounts of his own self are provided, and there are numerous contradictions, if not lies, created for the purpose of apologizing for his own life and conduct. The need of presenting ourselves according to the truths we like others to know is, as Yagoda would agree, talking about

²⁴ Wood, J. (2008). *How Fiction Works*. New York: Picador.

how to reconstruct a character, the character we either take, or hope ourselves to be. We cannot metamorphose in fictional characters, but we can tweak several details belonging to our lives; sometimes, it seems, we can also lie.

I will, in the next chapters, return back to the issue of whether we should really consider these alterations as lies, or if instead we should see in them another evolutionary point in the history of memoir. Yagoda does not linger on this issue and goes back to an analysis of memoir aiming at explaining their commercial success and their impact on today's publishing industry. His analysis remains valuable: it documents a history full of witty details, but it does not reflect on the philosophical value that these details and changes carry within. It is on these issues that I instead want to focus.

4.1. James Olney. Augustine, Rousseau, and Beckett. A History of Weaving

A more apt history of memoirs, and one that relates more conspicuously with philosophy, is the one proposed by James Olney²⁵. Olney shares with Yagoda an interest in the evolutionary history of memoirs, but instead of looking at the actual shifts in editorial production, sees these steps as part of memoir's capacity to become a form of, to use his expression, "life-weaving".

Life weaving evokes the ability of memoir not only to create something, but also to

²⁵ Olney, J. (1998). *Memory & Narrative. The Weave of Life-Writing*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

engage in life-writing in such a way that the writing itself has to follow a determinate pattern. Patterns are designed products, they involve rules and they usually also have a goal, a *telos* to achieve. What might be the teleological cause of a memoir is, to echo Aristotle's definition, also a formal cause, the essence of memoirs, namely the person in his capacity to affirm self-identity. The goal, in other words, is to express the life of a person by discovering the "essence", or the very nature, of that person. The product of weaving is the encounter with the author, an encounter that is experienced simultaneously by the author and the audience. Olney traces the history of memoirs by specifically emphasizing the effort, and the commitment of the authors of memoirs to the weaving of their lives, and so to themselves.

Olney deepens Yagoda's analysis by beginning to see in the narration of the person an effort toward the definition of personal identity. Olney's work is about how the "I" emerges and defines itself. His historical approach is reminiscent of Vico's circles of history; as Vico did for history, memoir can unfold in a beginning, middle, and an end. The first element of this trilogy is, once again, Augustine, the second Rousseau, the third Beckett. We have, in the three of them, three different approaches to the relation of the "I" and the unfolding, the weaving, of life. The authenticity Augustine reaches through the aid of devotion and conversion is challenged by the incapacity to confess present in Rousseau. What in Augustine closely resembles the recitation of a psalm is fragmented by Rousseau's approach to himself. What for both are still reachable memories, and memories we are able to understand, collapse in Beckett's incapacity of finding a solution to autobiographical research: no memory can be recalled, and no self can be found.

I will analyze these steps separately starting with Augustine, who, differently from Misch

but similar to others, I consider to be the origin of autobiography in both its historical and philosophical value. I will then move to Rousseau and to the complications his *Confessions* add to the panorama of autobiography. Rousseau is an intermediate step, one in which we find an antithesis: the authenticity of Augustine is here broken, and there is no spiritual help on which to rely. In Beckett the concern will not even be on the possibility of tracing back our memories; memories are at this point impossible to recall, their loss is a first sign of a new, fragmented self – a self that cannot even recognize himself. This analysis, the emphasis on the “weaving” of the narration and on the central role of memory and recollection, is, I believe, the most apt reflection on the evolutionary steps that memoir has taken.

Augustine

As mentioned, Augustine’s *Confessions* stem from a spiritual basis and from the intimate, but also intricate relation characterizing the discovery of the self in and through God. The role of God can be seen under multiple perspectives, all at least in part intertwined with autobiographical writing. In particular, as seen, the presence of God is what secures the authenticity of the narration; confessing is the path to redemption God has chosen.

There are multiple analogies that can be made between religion and the act of remembering and narrating memories; among them it is crucial to consider the parallel between the Trinity and the mind, and the following importance given to memory. As Olney notices:

There is a necessary relation that obtains, Augustine would say, among the Persons of the Trinity that is repeated – rather more dimly, rather more darkly – in the threefold aspects of mind: as memory is to understanding and will, so the Father is to the Son and the Holy Spirit; as understanding is to memory and will, so the Son is to the Father and the Holy Spirit; and as will is to memory and understanding, so the Holy Spirit is to the Father and the Son.²⁶

²⁶ Ibidem: 49.

The sudden availability of the secrets of the mind through confession shares the same authenticity of the Trinity; the truth contained and certified by God is transferred to the truth revealed through confession. Augustine, as an autobiographer, does not have the problem of selecting which memories are to be recalled and which are not, nor does he worry about the path that the narrative should follow. There is, in other words, only one pattern to follow in order to “unweave” his consciousness, and no other way in which Augustine’s life could be otherwise “crafted”. If God’s pattern is followed, then the “I” will finally be disclosed, a self based on a much stronger template, the one of religious authenticity.

Inside this pattern, we find a deeper insight into how to conceive the status of memory. Memory is, in fact, not only the first and essential component of the mind, but also the very beginning of the process of narration; memory is, in itself, *already* part of the narration in its capacity of including in itself an organized narrative structure, the structure of the Trinity.

Learning how to weave memory, how to recite, recall, and reveal it through his faith in God, is of crucial importance to Augustine’s conversion, and the very engine of his autobiographical narrative.

Rousseau

Augustine had found in God the narrative to present himself to himself, the past to the present; a narrative capable of showing the continuity of the person in the eternal “tension of consciousness”. Rousseau does not have this narrative; he has to build the concept of redemption by himself, and he often fails. Despite wanting to condense his autobiography in one single work, Rousseau ended instead with three separate autobiographies, today collected in a single

volume by Pléiade: the *Confessions*, the *Dialogues*, and the *Reveries*. This triad matches three forms of expression, respectively, narration, dialogue, and meditative sketches; it is also interesting to notice how the three forms are representative of the structure of remembering, or of weaving, selected by Rousseau. There is a linear way of constructing a pattern, a dialectical phase in which Rousseau compares and contrasts his own voices, and a circular one related to the meditation of a “finally alone” man, a man that is, in accordance to his philosophy, back to the agonized state of nature that so often appears in Rousseau’s philosophy. In the end, it can be argued, Rousseau wants to narrate himself as the perfect candidate for his original state, a condition that despite encompassing all humanity is also veined by “amour de soi”, love of the self, a self able to achieve a state of harmony.

Alas, harmony is hardly the right term to describe Rousseau’s self, and the veil of his philosophy is often lifted to give attention to Rousseau’s daily life and conflicts with society. If Augustine’s *Confessions* is fulfilled in conversion, Rousseau’s *Confessions* is a manifestation of the unrealized desire of forgiveness, a desire for apologies to be heard. Signs of this torment abound in Rousseau’s life²⁷, and they all show how critical the idea of being listened to, of having an audience will become in the practice of autobiographical narration.

Autobiography is rarely a solipsistic endeavor; aside from finding the self, autobiography

²⁷ An example of Rousseau’s tormented attitude toward his narration can be found in his attempt to deliver his manuscript to the altar in Notre Dame. Rousseau narrates the story of when, a pristine copy of his *Confessions* in hand, he walked toward the altar of Notre Dame; the copy was accompanied by a note on which he simply wrote “Deposit Handed Over to Providence”, without any indication of the nature of the work, or, if it matters, the identity of the author. Rousseau was hoping to find in the church a better audience together with a more reliable editor for his work. Unfortunately the attempt failed; Rousseau soon lost his confidence, left Notre Dame, and decided instead to bring the manuscript to Condillac. This also turned out to be another disappointment, but one interesting for our purpose. Condillac, despite his erudition, could not quite get the autobiographical and apologetic urgency of the work. He had little to say about what he thought of Rousseau’s life, and his comments were of a literary and stylistic nature, rather distant from what Rousseau really wanted. Rousseau is certainly recognized as a gifted writer, but this time he was not waiting for the solace of artistic bravery, but for a much more straightforward comment, an opinion on the nature of the author. He wanted to know the *effects* his book has caused and what kind of judgment those effects were to generate.

is also a presentation of the self, what we want ourselves to be. But there is more, autobiography is also a way of communicating an educational message, be it the frequent intrusions of Rousseau's own thought, (a point also valid in Augustine), or the necessity of moral evaluation, something Rousseau knew, and craved. This generates a frantic series of apologies, excuses, remarks of candor and oblivion, remarks on the educational path that his life had to follow. The incidents told, including abandoning all his children to a foundling hospital with the almost certain prospect of death, are always presented as forced, and yet reasonable choices.

In the *Dialogues* Rousseau's apologies are amplified by the blatant fragmentation of his personality. Initially, this fragmentation seems to be the result of the decision of using dialogue as a form of expression, as Olney notices:

In theory if not always in practice, dialogue itself is grounded in a symmetrical exchange so that from its title onwards the *Dialogues* is a text of divided/joined patterns or halves, and Rousseau regularly emphasizes this both in the way he represents the dialoguists and in the way they represent themselves. At the outset, "Rousseau" knows "J.J.'s" writings but not his reputation, while "the Frenchman" knows "J.J.'s" reputation but not his writings; "Rousseau" refuses to meet "J.J." who is universally "known" to be monstrous, and "the Frenchman" refuses to read "J.J.", whose writings are universally "known" to be monstrous.²⁸

But even this scheme soon gets abandoned; Rousseau starts reassembling his different selves according to new patterns, and new confrontations. Rousseau evaluates himself through his different and permanently unstable beings; he is his own "judge". Fragmenting his own self is not a stylistic feature of the narration; it is a psychological condition. If Rousseau is doubling himself it is because, very likely, he does not know how not to. Not quite the postmodern fragmented self, but not solidly defined either, Rousseau sees his multiple appellatives as

²⁸ Ibidem: 174.

belonging to a whole, the whole in which he goes back to being “moi”, an “I” that can only be at ease in his own internal world.

We can see in Rousseau the beginning of a new problem in memoirs. The problem with Rousseau is that his desire to portray his own life can be accomplished only through the prismatic presentation of a number of characters that hardly fit into one single man, the writer Rousseau. These characters are not fictional; the various *Rousseaus* represent the tentative authenticity in which Rousseau can see his own identity, what he would have liked the reader to see. It is hard to inquire about his intention, but it is possible to suppose that Rousseau’s reticent approach to his own self might be motivated by the research, through memoirs, of an identity that better describes the self as a concept in itself.

This identity, or at least the idea of a stable identity, tries to establish itself in the last stage of Rousseau’s autobiographical recollection, namely, the *Reveries*. In the *Reveries* man is in the state of nature, a state, contrary to Hobbes, where human beings, because of the lack of societal constraints, are still unaware of ethical vices, cruelty, and corruption. The state of nature is a state of purity, one connected exclusively to nature and sensibility. This is, arguably, what the internal reflections of the *Reveries* are supposed to show us; past the dialectical phase, and finally done with the linear narration of events of his life, Rousseau wraps things up in fantasy.

The idyllic nature he describes is, once again, far from his actual life, and cannot be considered as a realistic setting. After moving across different “*hes*”, Rousseau changes the reality of facts and tries to depict what in the end is a mythical original state. The obsessive

changes and the compulsory nature of his work reveal Rousseau's own fear of failing to find himself in reality together with a beautifully intricate mechanism of defense.

If an evolutionary point has here to be underlined, it is the acceptance of a tormented self, a self that makes mistakes, alters the truth, remembers and forgets with the same skillful mannerism.

Discussing the relevancy of Rousseau's work in the history of memoir, Olney writes:

This, in a general way, is what Rousseau did in the history of self-writing. He cut the self loose, leaving it without ties, anchor, or direction, and to modern descendants he left as starting point what, for him, was the endpoint: a free-floating self, uncentered except in itself, and quite unreal.²⁹

Autobiography will not after this point have any other Augustinian figure, and more scattered selves will take hold on the problem of finding and narrating identity. But the last word on this issue has to be given, according to Olney, to the closing author of the triad, Beckett, with whom dissociation is acknowledged and freed from ethical judgments; dissociation from the self becomes not the problem of life narratives, but the only outcome.

Beckett

Beckett represents, according to Olney, the final step in the evolutionary development of autobiography. There is, in Beckett, no specific work that can be addressed as his confession, and, even more specifically, there is no material to be collected from memory. In Augustine, memory is a part of the mind, and a part given to us by God. Recalling memory is an action he engaged in under the supervision of God and in the assurance provided by faith. Augustine's memories are doomed to find a narration in conversion, and conversion is what guarantees the success of the autobiographical mechanism of confession. In Rousseau memories are scattered,

²⁹ Ibidem: 208.

and remembering is painful; the pain of remembering is in Rousseau the problem of being forgiven, not by God, but by his contemporaries. Together with a compendium of his theories, among which his fascination for a forever lost state of nature, Rousseau's autobiography introduces, for the first time, the philosophical problem of finding, in narrative, an authentic self. More than solving this problem, Rousseau makes it more vivid, to the point at where we might begin to despair over the possibility of finding in autobiography a response to what Augustine had considered the "most important question": himself as a person.

Beckett does not try to fix this problem, and, to a certain extent, he cannot. The reason he cannot is because the task of remembering has become an impossible task. Beckett's self is a self with no memories, a self who cannot anymore claim identity. At the same time, this last fragmentation is not a final statement regarding the impossibility of narrating the self; it is, instead, the opening of a new reflection on what memories can do for us. We might not know who we were thirty years ago, as Krapp fails to recognize his own voice in the tape, but we need the tape, and so memories, to creatively "recreate" ourselves. Olney focuses specifically on the double value of memory for Beckett: memory as a means and memory as a substance:

...As a man Beckett no doubt remembered, probably in a rather blurred manner, whatever happened (or did not happen) thirty years or sixty years earlier between himself and his mother; as a writer however, what he remembers is that he has placed the "memory" as a thematic bit at carefully chosen, significant spots in different works. Recalling and tracking the occurrences of such a motif, we are able to follow the course of Beckett's career.³⁰

The substance of memory is Beckett, the author and the character; his works add to memory the creativity intrinsic to experience, but also the reasons why experience can

³⁰ Ibidem: 342.

ultimately render memory a problem. Even though Beckett is the possessor of those memories, the possibility of him playing with his memories, and in part inventing them, is still open in the very act of writing literature.

Beckett inherits from Augustine the necessity of recollecting memories; the difference is that this necessity is now an impossibility. Far beyond Rousseau, Beckett is left without apologies; there is no reason to make something appear as a certified account of our lives if there is no possibility of recalling it. On the one hand, we can recur to a fictional reconstruction of memories. On the other hand, we accept that because of its subjective and “internal” quality, memory is hardly sharable; being profoundly hidden in us, it is sometimes impossible to find it in us as well. It is important to emphasize how this nonetheless remains a form of learning. Memoirs teach us what it means to say “I”, but also the enormous difficulty of saying it. This is a high form of recognition, and one readers can engage with.

It is at this point that we are back to a contemporary conception of the art and craft of memoir. Olney sees it as a form of weaving where every pattern evolves in the course of history. There are recurring themes: memory, the difficulty of its rendition, the self being a constant question to itself, and, finally, the problem of whether memoirs have found themselves too close to the threshold of fiction, thus abandoning the possibility of seeing in autobiographical narration an example of what it means to find the “true” person behind a life. It is in the framework of the evolutionary history of memoir outlined by Olney that other memoirs can be placed and analyzed. This analysis will lead to further insights into the nature of the self, as well as to how, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the

practice of autobiography can hardly be detached from philosophical investigation.

Conclusions

In this chapter I tried to delineate a brief history of memoir by considering its origin as well as the appropriateness of the term “memoir” instead of autobiography. I contemplated, and discarded, the possibility of seeing a beginning of autobiography in antiquity, and agreed instead with the idea according to which memoir finds its origin in spiritual autobiography and, specifically, in Augustine’s *Confessions*.

Tangentially to this problem, I considered the debate regarding whether to adopt the term “autobiography” or the term “memoir”. The lack of an agreement on the topic, led me to accept both terms interchangeably; what today is more commonly addressed as memoir has in the past been considered to be “autobiography”, and vice versa.

Finally, relying on the work of James Olney, I discussed the idea of autobiography as the history of “life-weaving”. This notion seems to capture several of the elements that constitute autobiography as a genre, and specifically elements leading to an analysis of the person, or to what later on in this thesis I will characterize as a research of the self. Issues such as memory, identity, authenticity, self-consciousness, etc., are crucial to the understanding of autobiographical practice and will be analyzed in two following chapters of this thesis.

In what follows, I will analyze two other crucial features in the production and understanding of memoirs. First, I will locate memoirs in reference to narrative theories. One of the leading problems, together with establishing what counts as a narrative and to what extent

memoirs can be considered narratives, is related to, as the evolutionary history of memoir has shown, the pervasive presence of what might look like fictional elements. The fear of seeing in memoir another form of fiction is related to the problem of whether memoirs are reliable narrations. The ways in which memoirs can manage to preserve authenticity despite the intervention of lies, modified facts, etc., is of particular interest especially when we are reminded that the very goal, and the final answer memoirs ask for, is to present a “real” self, a disclosed self in possession of a specific identity. These issues, the status of memoirs as a fictional or as a non-fictional narrative, and what it means to authentically narrate the self will be the focus of the next two chapters. It is after analyzing these problems that I will go back to the problem of the self, the author of memoir.

For life is no uniform uninterrupted march or flow. It is a thing of histories, each with its own plot, its own inception and movement toward its close, each having its own particular rhythmic movement; each with its own unrepeated quality pervading it throughout.
John Dewey

Chapter II

The Narrative Structure of Memoir

In the first chapter of this thesis I dealt with two initial problems. First, I considered what I labeled a “question of definition”, namely whether we should consider the term memoir to be more appropriate than autobiography, or vice versa. Second, I focused on the problem of identifying an origin for this genre. Regarding the first problem, the analysis of different definitions in both literature and film led me to conclude that despite the more widespread use of the term memoir in today’s literature, autobiography has assumed a similar, if not almost identical, connotation. For the rest of this work I will then use the terms interchangeably. The second problem was instead of historical nature. Memoir is not a recent phenomenon; memoir went through a considerably eclectic and variegated evolution, one adding more and more features to a genre that is often comparable, in its insights and difficulty, to philosophical practice. But where are we supposed to place the beginning of autobiographical narration? The majority of the literature sees the beginning in Augustine’s *Confessions*, and yet, some have argued that the *Confessions* might not be the first instance of autobiography. I thus considered the possibility of seeing a beginning to the history of memoir in the ancient world, just to refute this hypothesis. I privileged the account presented by James Olney, and, in particular, his

evolutionary conception of memoir as the history of “life-weaving”. It is in this latter position, and in the turning points represented by, respectively, Augustine, Rousseau, and Beckett that memoir fully gains consciousness of itself. The history of memoir, I concluded, can only start once consciousness emerges as the subject and main question of memoir; it is from this point that I will begin my analysis.

While presenting these two problems, I often used the term “narrative” without however confronting the problem of what constitutes a narrative, and whether memoirs can be considered a narrative. In this chapter, I thus aim at addressing this issue by reviewing several positions in narrative theory, and by gauging their relative contribution to a theory of autobiographical narrative. I am interested in showing not only that memoir is a narrative, but also that it is possible to isolate a number of conditions that qualify memoir not as a “sub-genre”, but as a genre deserving its own narrative theory.

In this chapter, I will limit my analysis to purely structural features of narrative; specific attention will be given to the problem of narrative closure, to the role played by emotions, and finally to the possibility of including the evaluation of facts and events as a structural element of autobiographical narrative. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at some of the most problematic features of memoirs as a genre, dedicating more space to the problem of whether memoir should be located entirely in nonfiction, as some kind of a historical documentary on the self, or whether instead the frequent similarities and overlaps with fiction might lead memoir to cross the boundary of these two categories.

1. Narrative and Narrative constructions

Not everything is a narrative. A list of things to buy, the schedule of a conference, notes taken during a seminar and similar examples do not constitute narratives. In these cases we do not find rules to follow, similarities or recurring elements. And yet, narratives are incredibly common forms of expression and understanding; recognizing something as a narrative, and understanding events in terms of narratives is something we do all the time, something that belongs to the way in which we communicate and understand ourselves as well as the environment surrounding us. The importance of seeing narrative as a cognitively intuitive and shared mechanism adopted in understanding is not only a fact on which several theories converge, but also a first insight into the study and description of narrative.

Gerald Prince's account of narratology stems precisely from this point. My decision to start with Prince is thus motivated by the belief that the construction of narratives is not only something we recognize or learn how to identify, but something closely connected to cognition and to our reasoning abilities. This latter aspect, as I will explain at length in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, is not only necessary to narratives generally construed, but also, and specifically, to autobiographical narratives. In what follows, I will summarize Prince's account and then move to alternative theories with the purpose of finding, among them, the conditions that need to apply when considering autobiographical narratives.

Prince begins by showing how, despite the inevitable influence exercised by different cultural backgrounds, or the not always overlapping versions generated by the inevitable "re-telling" of the same story, we have, almost as an ingrained mechanism, the ability to agree on

common features enabling us to read and cognize something as a narrative. Stressing this point even further, he claims that these intuitions are in fact the same among different individuals and social groups, thus entitling us to a conspicuous degree of narrative competence:

(...) Not only do we all have certain intuitions (or know certain rules) about the nature of narratives and what they mean, but also, to a certain extent at least, we all have the same intuitions and know the same rules. It is this set of rules and intuitions, this narrative competence, that allows us (human beings) to produce and process narratives, to tell, retell, paraphrase, expand, summarize, and understand them in like manner.³¹

Our narrative competence becomes the starting point of Prince's conception of narratology: the examination of "what all narratives have in common, narratively speaking, and what enables them to be narratively different"³². There is, in other words, the open and initial possibility of analyzing narratives under a common denominator, only to later proceed to the analysis of their specificities. The categories that should be followed are, according to him, *explicitness*, where minimum interpretation is left to a user, *completeness*, and *empirical plausibility*. Moreover, Prince compares narratives to a grammatical form composed by the following elements: a) a finite set of rules generating the macro and microstructures of all and only sequences of narrated situations and events; b) a semantic component interpreting these structures; c) a finite set of transformational rules operating on the interpreted structures and accounting for "narrative discourse" (order of presentation, frequency, point of view, speed, rhythm...); d) a pragmatic component specifying the cognitive and communicative factors affecting the processing tellability, suitability, and narrative value of the output of the first three parts, and e) an expression component, allowing us to translate into a given medium of representation –such as written English. For instance, a novel such as Jeffrey Eugenides' *The*

³¹ Prince, Gerald. "Narrative Analysis and Narratology", in *New Literary History*. Vol. 13, No. 2, Narrative Analysis and Interpretation (Winter 1982): 181.

³² *Ibidem*: 181-182.

*Marriage Plot*³³ involves: a) the macrostructure of a marriage relationship between two of the main characters and a microstructure involving a historical marriage in the Victorian period; b) a semantic according to which each voice is to be interpreted as the voice of a college undergraduate at Bard College; c) a structure composed of three alternating voices narrating the same story from different standpoints at interlocking segments of time; d) our reliance on each of them to fully understand the story; e) modern English.

This grid is meant to provide a structural analysis of narratives to which all narratives respond; it helps categorizing different narratives according to the questions they pose, the salient points expressed, and so on. But this structural conception is not the only contribution provided by narratology. For Prince, a structural analysis of narratives is intimately combined with the analysis of the *meaning* of a text, its semantics.

Examples of semantics are widespread in literature, and the proliferation of schools of linguistics has provided an impressive number of accounts that are, however, beyond the scope of this work, and not the primary concern of Prince either. In fact, Prince's connection between a structural analysis of the text and its meaning does not aim at the identification of a particular reading, as for instance a Freudian, Marxist, or Feminist reading; his goal is instead to flesh out what features of an initial, intuitive, and almost "mechanical" interpretation can help us identify meaning, a meaning that supposedly *everyone* can grasp. Hence, the shared ground of common features summarized in the abovementioned list of categories is matched by the possibility of accessing an equally sharable interpretation.

³³ Eugenides, Jeffrey. (2011). *The Marriage Plot*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

A second step in Prince's analysis is to draw from the common features, and common interpretations identified on the basis of shared intuition, a set of narrative classes characterized by both obligatory and optional components. These classes are needed in order to identify, in the larger framework of narrative, specific "theoretical narratives" as, for instance, the class of first person narration, the class of posterior narration, the class of third-person narratives, etc. This process is deductive in nature and allows for a fluid and holistic approach to narratives, as he writes:

(...) Given a list of features pertinent to narrative, a class of possible narratives that specifies for its members a number of these features constitutes a theoretical genre and there are as many genres as there are possible specifications. The set is also clearly not prescriptive: Thus, it does not specify which features a given work must possess in order to qualify for a certain label; in fact, it does not use any labels. Rather, the set is descriptive of possibilities (it simply describe possible classes which narratives –extant or not- can be said to constitute or belong to).³⁴

This methodology, and so the fluid and deductive system according to which theoretical narratives are linked to the establishment of genres, has the undeniable advantage of preserving the uniqueness of each text without worrying too much about its belonging to a narrower and more dogmatic conception of genres. Yet, as every holistic account, it is under the risk of including, or, in some cases, excluding too much. This worry is particularly urgent when, as in this thesis, the goal is instead to identify binding conditions for a genre, conditions that are, in this sense, necessary.

In trying to identify a narrative theory of memoirs, I committed myself to the acceptance of the possibility of finding rules of narratives that belong specifically to autobiography, and that

³⁴ Prince, Gerald. "On Narrative Studies and Narrative Genres", in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Narratology Revisited I, Summer 1990: 278.

distinguish it from other genres. Despite agreeing with the fact that narratives are often recognized according to a set of intuitions, I nonetheless think that these intuitions can be formalized and can lead to more adequate binding conditions.

My approach shares with Prince the idea that our narrative competence is something close to a biological, evolutionary feature we all possess, but it moves from the acknowledgment of such biological tendency to a more analytic exposition of necessary and sufficient conditions. I am thus more inclined to abandon a holistic account of narrative and narratology per se, and to instead pursue a more rigorous approach. This approach can be derived from the similarities, but also from the conflicts present in the two theories I am about to present. After their discussion, I will be able to restrict my analysis to the conditions applicable not just, and more generally, to narratives, but to autobiographical narratives.

2. The Structure of Narratives

2.1. Aristotle and Narratives

The first sign of interest in the structure of narratives, and in the structural specificities of different genres, dates back to Aristotle and to his treatment of tragedies. In the *Poetics*³⁵, Aristotle not only managed to re-establish the artistic status and importance of tragedies and poetry from the accusations leveled by Plato, he also proceeded to an analysis of the conditions that a tragedy must have in order to properly be called and appreciated as such. Aristotle begins by isolating six parts, (Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, and Melody), and further moves to the examination of the conditions that each of these parts

³⁵ Aristotle. (2005). *Poetics and Rhetoric*. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics.

should meet. Among the six parts of tragedy, Aristotle concentrates on the plot; his analysis of the plot will become a precious component in the overall debate on narratives. In contrast to the other elements, plot is something that can be discussed and applied more generally to other genres such as fictional and nonfictional narratives, and, more specifically, as I will later consider, to a narrative theory of autobiography.

The structure of the plot enables us to understand the unfolding of events as the elements of a “complete, whole action”; the articulation of a beginning, middle, and an end allows us to perceive the story in its unity, and not as a succession of unrelated happenings. From the presentation of events, to the mechanism of reversal and recognition, tragedies have as their goal the achievement of completeness, something aiming at reaching a final answer, and the most important answer, only by the end. Famously, it is in the ending that Aristotle saw the crucial part of tragedies; not only is the end charged with the structural task of completing the narrative, thus providing us with a feeling of completeness and unity, the end is also what takes us to the desired emotional finishing, what Aristotle named catharsis, purification. Catharsis is usually defined as the feeling of pity and fear, it determines our involvement in tragedies, but also, if properly achieved, it marks our capacity of distancing ourselves from the combination of events, and grasping the “meaning” of a tragedy in all its aesthetic and moral import. Through catharsis, the audience attends to its own emotions, thus combining a participation in the narrative with evaluation and, as argued by Aristotle, a moral lesson. Observing the extreme emotions depicted in tragedies allows us to enlarge our spectrum of emotions leading to what is potentially a better understanding of ourselves. The extremes experienced in tragedies work as the opposite poles of our moral and emotional make-up; they provide us with the possibility of

finding the “mean”, the balance between extreme emotions that is necessary for a virtuous life. A narrative that does not touch the acme of catharsis has failed to organize and structure events, and it is for this reason devoid of the right emotional and moral content.

In Aristotle both the ordering of events and emotional content are necessary conditions in order to refer to something as a tragedy. These two elements are also the cardinal points of the two approaches to narrative structure I am about to present. I will consider Noël Carroll and David Velleman’s accounts of narratives as the preferred theories to begin an analysis of narratives generally conceived, and as the building blocks for the construction of a narrative theory of autobiography. I will begin with Carroll’s analysis and with the importance given to the notion of narrative closure. I will then present Velleman’s objections to this theory, and his elaboration of an alternative account of narrative based instead on emotional cadence. The underlying belief is that a narrative theory of memoirs can be found at the intersection of the two.

2.2. Causality and Narrative Closure

Carroll’s notion of narrative closure is partly derived from Aristotle’s treatment of endings. Closure, it should be noted, does not apply to all forms of narratives. It does not, for instance, apply to historical narratives, or to most of the conversations we engage in in daily life. Closure depicts instead a specific aspect of narratives, namely the achievement, as in the case of Aristotle, of a feeling of completeness:

The notion of closure refers to the sense of finality with which a piece of music, a poem, or a story concludes. It is the impression that exactly the point where the work does end is just the right point. [...] Closure is a matter of concluding rather than merely stopping or ceasing or coming to a halt or crashing.

Closure is achieved through a mechanism of questions and answers. The right level of completeness will then be the level in which all the important questions evoked find a response. We can, of course, picture a chain of evolving questions based on different levels of urgency. For instance, finding an immediate response to what is the name of a serial killer in a thriller would not complete the narration in the right fashion; it would be a preposterous response that should only come after the presentation, and solution, of a number of intermediate questions. Questions can be categorized according to different degrees of saliency, and it is in response to saliency that we can evaluate whether or not a story has reached the necessary closure/completeness. There will be a network of questions structured according to few macro-questions, as the main tenets of the story, and a number of micro-questions working as connecting traits for the remaining narrated events.

The emergence of questions is, in Carroll's account, an entirely natural process; what makes it natural is our cognitive predisposition toward understanding events in terms of causes and effects, or, simply put, according to their causal relations. It follows that the core structure of narratives, being based on questions, causes, and answers, effects, mirrors the structure of thought and understanding. The responses we can provide to macro-questions are causally dependent on the "questions" lying within determinate causes. Hence, we can claim that narrative closure depends on the answered macro-questions framed in a cause-effect dynamic. Carroll summarizes this process in five main points. 1. The discourse represents at least two events and/or states of affairs; 2. In a globally forward looking

36 Carroll, Noël . "Narrative Closure", in *Philosophical Studies* Volume 135, Number 1/ August, 2007: 3.

manner; 3. Concerning the career of at least one unified subject; 4. Where the temporal relations between the events and states of affairs are perspicuously ordered; 5. Where the earlier events in the sequence are at least causally necessary conditions for the subsequent occurrence of the events and/or states of affairs in the chain of events being described or are a contribution thereto.³⁷

The importance of closure in the debate over narrative structure can easily be extended to the analysis of our own personal experiences. Closure provides our experiences with unity, a unity achieved as the completion of a causal structure ascribed to the narrative. Causality adds meaning by providing the reader with information about the intentions of the characters, and raises questions and expectations in the audience. Causal connections imply the presence of intentions, together with the possibility of seeing a chain in the achievement of the plans and goals set out by the story. History, personal as well as collective, is a matter of careful etiology.

Causality, when seen from the perspective of autobiographical narratives, can be seen as the methodology applied in order to trace the map of our own identity. I will touch upon this topic, and specifically on the problem of self-identity, in the fourth chapter of this thesis; yet, it can already be observed how a cause-effect mechanism can be applied to the ordering of the events of a life. The importance of relevant macro-questions can be understood, in this sense, as the importance of investigating a life according to precise, significant paths. What is significant is, in Carroll, the unfolding of the structure; identity, I believe, can easily follow from this pattern, and from the possibility of seeing an etiological

³⁷Idem: 11.

chain connecting the main events of a life.

As appealing as this solution sounds, it is worth considering a different trajectory. The question at stake is whether causality is indeed the main connecting mechanism leading to the establishment of closure. In the philosophical tradition, emotions have often been seen as the competitors of causality in the achievement of closure. An example of this stance can be found in Dewey's account of aesthetic experience. As Dewey³⁸ notes, albeit being embedded in the flux of experience, not everything constitutes "an" experience. The construction of this latter kind, or, to continue along the lines of Dewey's expressions, the sense of unity perceived within experience, is our only entry pass to pursue the double goal of interacting with both the world and ourselves. The unity of an experience, and so its significance, is achieved through three intertwined components; first, the experience needs to display a narrative structure involving closure, second, it has to be memorable, and, lastly, it has to preserve a sense of uniqueness.

Dewey almost completely overlooks the role of causal inferences, and he dedicates more time to the analysis of the cementing force of aesthetic emotions; in fact, it is only through emotions, and through what Dewey refers to as "significant" emotions, that we are able to recognize an aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experiences, to briefly conclude, do show closure, but closure is ultimately identified by the presence of a "significant" emotion. Are then emotions what we should investigate in order to provide an altogether different account of narratives? Velleman, in criticizing Carroll's account, provides a positive response to this question.

³⁸ Dewey, John. (1934). *Art as Experience*. New York: Minton Balch.

2.3. *An Objection to Causality*

Velleman, as Carroll, begins his analysis with Aristotle's conception of tragedies, but instead of insisting on the connections that can be identified in the unfolding of the plot, he focuses on the possible developments that can be inferred from the phenomenon of catharsis. Velleman, in other words, abandons a purely structural analysis and reflects instead on the effects generated by the emotional components of narratives, and on the corresponding emotions felt by the audience in the understanding of narratives.

By and large, narratives are seen, in his account, as ways of organizing events in an intelligible whole³⁹. The question that needs to be answered in order to provide a narrative theory would then be a question about *how* this organization is supposed to be understood and felt as a narrative. As mentioned, the reply to this question cannot be found, according to Velleman, in an underlying system of causal connections. Not only are causal connections not "tight enough" to hold the narrative in a cohesive whole, they are not and should not be considered a necessary condition of narrative. It follows that our ability, and the text's ability to trace causal inferences cannot be regarded as the cognitive elements applied in the understanding and definition of narrative. In Velleman's conception, a narrative is instead identifiable through what he defines as "emotional cadence", namely, the final emotional reaction triggered by the events composing the story.

More specifically, emotional cadence is a cluster concept encompassing Aristotle's conception of catharsis as the combination of pity and fear, JB Shank's emphasis on the cognitive processing of "memorable experiences", Louis Mink's idea of "grasping

³⁹ Velleman, David. "Narrative Explanation", in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 112, No. 1 (Jan., 2003): 1.

together”, and Ronald De Sousa’s reliance on paradigm scenarios as our biologically programmed response to events.⁴⁰ I will analyze these components both in reference to the general structure of narratives, and to the particular narrative that is instead required by autobiography. My conclusion is that, despite the importance of emotional cadence and its primary role in autobiographical expression, the very idea of disjoining it from causal connections is implausible and, in general, it shows an overall misunderstanding of both Aristotle’s intentions and Carroll’s aims.

Velleman’s approach to Aristotle seems rather counterintuitive. Velleman recognizes the presence of both plot organization and catharsis, but he somehow separates the two concepts; instead of seeing in catharsis the emotional effect generated by the solution of the main causal questions raised by the tragedy, he sees it as an emotion that can be triggered even by an absurdist reading of the events, a reading that is, in this sense, deprived of explicit logical connections. As in the several “scandalous” stories that make it to the news, our emotions are triggered independently from an accurate understanding of the causes leading to the events depicted, and yet, these emotions are enough to make us identify something as a story. But is this comparison tenable? Is the recognition of something as a narrative independent from the structural connections provided by causality? Before responding to this question, it is worth analyzing the remaining qualifications of emotional cadence.

Shank maintains that our understanding of events is based on their assimilation to events that are already familiar to us, events we have stored in memory. The most memorable of these experiences are, for the most part, experiences that have already been

⁴⁰ Ibidem: 12.

“coded” in a narrative form. For instance, my understanding of an adventure book is likely to be filtered and understood on the basis of my own experience of extensively traveling in West Africa as an adolescent. My memories of that period of my life are enhanced by my way of both consciously and unconsciously framing the succession of events in the form of a story that can be told, a story that belongs to me more intimately than others. This point is strengthened by another element, this time taken from Mink. Like Schank, Mink focuses on understanding, but his attention is not exclusively based on the importance of recognizing in the events narrated a familiar story. In a way, Mink expands the concept of reaching out to a familiar story to the capacity of establishing an interactive mechanism according to which we become able to “grasp things together”, and refer token events back to a more typified event. For instance, a series of narratives can be grouped together under labels such as “adventurous narratives”, “romantic narratives”, etc. De Sousa also expands on Schank’s “familiar narratives”, by adding to our capacity of recognizing them, the capacity of attributing to them an interpretation, or what he defines as a “normal response”. These responses reflect the cognitive and embodied dispositions that we tend to associate with definite paradigm scenarios. According to De Sousa, our responses to cultural artifacts such as narratives are extensions of the natural biological responses we associate to a set of paradigm scenarios we are familiar with. Velleman, combining these accounts, takes paradigm scenarios and their cognitive implications as the framework with which to observe the development of emotions, and their consequent role in making us understand narratives as explanatory mechanisms.

To sum up, Velleman’s argument is composed of a definition of narrative as a “genre of explanation”, and by two premises. First, the stories we remember from our lives

are remembered in virtue of their emotional impact, and second, that the narrative shape of these stories is “determined by the nature of human affect”⁴¹. The nature of human affect is here understood as the very physiological and psychological process through which we observe the progression of emotions, from their arousal, to physical symptoms and consequent motivational dispositions, to their ending. Velleman sees in the progression of emotions the progression required in narrative in order to provide a feeling of completeness. Only emotions, and not causality, can lead to a proper ending and to a full grasp of the explanatory force of narratives. Emotions are chosen as the leading condition of narratives because they have a clear beginning and a clear end – emotional cadence – whereas causality, being just a connection, is something we can, for the sake of a full understanding of the narrative, ignore. Velleman would then conclude that:

(...) The audience of a story understands the narrated events, first, because it knows *how they feel* (emphasis in the text), in the sense that it experiences them as leading it through a natural emotional sequence; and second, because it knows *how it feels about them* (emphasis in the text), in the sense that it arrives at a stable attitude toward them overall. (...) The audience may or may not understand how the narrated events come about, but it understands what they mean – what they mean, that is, to the audience itself, in emotional terms.⁴²

Velleman’s account relies on the clear advantage of seeing the understanding of narratives as an interactive mechanism grounded on the biological arousal and understanding of emotions. But are emotional cadence and its ability of providing an emotional ending the privileged and necessary condition of narratives? My answer is that despite the clear relevancy of emotions in narratives, their role should not be taken as a necessary condition; furthermore, their role cannot, contra Velleman, be detached from an appeal to causality and causal connections.

⁴¹ Ibidem: 18.

⁴² Ibidem: 19.

2.4. *An Assessment of Velleman's Account of Narrative*

A first criticism has to do, as anticipated, with Velleman's reading of Aristotle. Velleman sees emotional cadence as unrelated to the causal connections present in the plot. It follows that the achievement of catharsis is independent from the structuring of the plot. Such a claim, I believe, goes against the very focus of Aristotle's theory, namely, the analysis of tragedies. Starting from their composition, it is important to notice how tragedies effectively begin only after a presentation of the events has been provided. The events presented in a tragedy are anticipated by an introductory speech "updating" the audience on the status of the story prior to the occurrence of events; the audience of tragedies is, for this reason, an *informed* audience. The presentation of events is precisely what allows us to begin raising questions about the possible outcomes of the story, thus providing a structural beginning to the chain of micro and macro questions that will lead to the solution of events. I insist that, without this presentation, and without the following framing of what is about to happen in terms of causes and effects, catharsis could not be achieved. Catharsis is in this sense not only a feeling, but a feeling based on how the events are connected into a plot of which we already know the necessary premises. Hence, catharsis is not just an emotion we reach by confronting the emotions displayed with our memories of similar scenarios, it is the final achievement of a cognitive process enhanced by the structuring of determinate events in the plot. The structuring affects the legitimacy of emotions, it makes them rationally understandable; without such structure, and again, a structure that is forced onto the audience from the presentation of events onward, the understanding of tragedies as a narrative would be incorrect, or at best partial.

The misconception in the relationship between Aristotle's two components of tragedies, plot and catharsis, is carried on in a general rejection of causal connections as a necessary condition of narrative structure. What Velleman seems to be doing, is to separate the understanding of the content of narratives from their structure, but is this possible? This question can be better understood by reflecting again on whether causality, as the leading component of the structure of narratives, can be fully eliminated.

Causal connections are our privileged tools to analyze experience; our ability to identify causal connections is part of our cognitive make-up. It follows that our recognition of causal chains is necessary in the production, as well as in the reception of narratives – it is a fact about us. We want narratives to make sense to us, and it is hard to believe that emotional participation can by itself supply us with it. Emotions are more ambiguous in nature, and their presence is equally relevant in narrative and non-narrative scenarios. Emotions might indeed lead us away from the understanding of the explanatory power of narratives, an explanatory power that is instead easy to structure and analyze once we identify a causal framework. But the issue is not only related to understanding; even if we assume that emotions can in fact flesh out the explanatory power of narratives, single emotions are hard to retain unless we see, suppose and adopt a causal origin. The feeling of pleasure we eventually experience after watching a film would be volatile and somewhat ill defined, if we were not able to question why certain emotions have been triggered by the film in question. The memories and feelings that we tend to remember the most are those found at the end of a causal chain, be it imposed on us, or simply “made up” through our natural tendency toward causation. This is not to say, and on this point I agree with Hume, that the establishment of a causal chain will always prove satisfactory and epistemologically

coherent; yet, it is hard to deny that causation is, more than a mere logical construction, a biological, ingrained response, something we enact unconsciously, and consciously reflect on.

A second strand of objections to Velleman is based on the advantages resulting from seeing a correlation between causality and emotions. Causality helps us understand complex emotions as well as scenarios of which we have little knowledge. This is because causality does not exclusively work as a tool for understanding and structuring a given text or situation; it can also offer an opening to counterfactual scenarios. Once a chain of causes and effects has been established, we simply have to work on the relative plausibility of different combinations without, for this reason, having to reconsider everything from the beginning. In this latter sense causality is what might make us “rethink” our standard attitude toward familiar paradigm scenarios, and disclose new possibilities of understanding, interpreting, and learning from a narrative.

My last objection is related to the application of causality and emotional cadence to our interest toward narratives, and, ultimately, to our interest in autobiographical narratives. Emotional engagement is constitutive of memoirs, but emotional participation is something that stems from the presentation of personal events in a structure that is likely to be causal. We want to respond, in other words, to the macro-question of why a character becomes the narrator, and, more broadly, a person. Failing to see in causality a necessary condition of narratives eliminates the very interest in the mechanism of questions and answers proposed by the narration of a life. As much as certain events might randomly present themselves in our lives, most of them are related to a system of questions, goals and desires we want our

future to unfold and embody. Moreover, without the clear ordering causality can provide, it would be hard to identify a distinction between macro and micro questions. To borrow a definition from Chatman⁴³, narratives are constituted by kernel and satellite events. Kernel events are of course fundamental but, and especially in the character analysis developed in memoirs, satellite events might be of great importance in the understanding of how the author depicts himself, and in the reader's approach to the main character, i.e. the author. Dismissing the importance of causality as a necessary ingredient of narratives endangers our ability to connect kernel and satellite events, making of the latter kind only a somewhat redundant addition.

Velleman denies causality as the explanatory power of narratives, and favors a mechanism of explanation based on the recognition of our emotions, and on their further application to the narratives we encounter. As mentioned, despite recognizing the importance of emotions and emotional cadence, I do not take it to be a sufficient structural ingredient of narratives. Aside from the previously mentioned objections, I also believe that adopting Velleman's account would lead to a misunderstanding of the nature of the audience's encounter with autobiography. If, on the one hand, our motivations and responses to autobiographical narratives are biased by how we would feel in the situation undergone by the author, on the other hand, we might also encounter an emotional attitude to which we are not sympathetic. Even more drastically, we might face emotions that are foreign to us, and that do not parallel or match the way in which our emotional and biological make-up would have made us act when confronted with events similar to the ones described by the memoirist. I do not, so to speak, have to recognize the emotional

⁴³ Chatman, Seymour. (1980). *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

states, choices, and decisions unfolded in a personal narrative as already belonging to me, as something I relate to in light of my previous emotional responses; I can, however, learn from them and sympathize with them once I understand *why* certain events have been dealt with in a certain way.

Marcel Proust, among all, has expressed this concept clearly. In several early scenes of *In Search of Lost Time*, the little boy is caught pondering over the effects of narratives on the reader, in this case, himself. He recognizes the desire of seeing himself and his own emotions in the books he is reading. He wants his imagination to anticipate the narration and see what he was expecting to see, and yet, those narratives are “without his soul”, they are distant from how his own psychological and emotional expectations; the books escaped him and gave rise to other routes he became able to understand only after investigating their origin, reasons, and causal connections. Causal connections are in this sense what we need to search if we want to fully embrace the “discoveries” narrative reveals to us, whether emotional, or of entirely different nature.

3. Toward a Theory of the Narrative Structure of Memoir

Causality, as shown in the previous section, is far from hindering emotional engagement; on the contrary, it is a powerful tool to pinpoint it. It is the structure that affects the mind that puts us in the disposition to feel something. And, once we have felt something, we are likely to remember the importance of this feeling because of its relation to a certain etiology. It is the connection between causal structure and emotional value that works, I believe, at the core of autobiography as a narrative. In this respect, it is worth considering another position, advocated by Goldie, as a possible middle ground between the

two aforementioned theories.

Goldie's account is closer to our purpose in having to do not only with structural conditions of narratives generally construed, but also with the conditions that should apply in the case of *personal* narratives. Thus far I have discussed the structure of narrative in virtue of its explanatory power – an explanatory power achieved, according to Carroll, through causal connections and closure, and, according to Velleman, through emotional cadence; it is now time to turn our attention to what, in our lives, we cognize as a “narrative sense of the self”⁴⁴, and to the autobiographical narratives resulting from it. To begin with, we need to step back and re-interpret the conditions of closure.

Goldie has provided such re-interpretation through the development of the concept of “narrative thinking”. In his account, closure, when applied to the self, is not simply a structural dynamic; closure comprises both evaluation and emotional understanding. A sense of evaluation, and specifically of moral evaluation, becomes a necessary ingredient for introducing and understanding events as parts of a narrative that belongs to the subject who is narrating; a subject that, only at this point, can be said to engage in “narrative thinking”.

Narrative thinking involves three separate conditions; all of them need to obtain in order to identify something as a successful autobiographical narrative. First, we need a sense of coherency brought into the narrative by the use of causal connections. Drawing on Ricoeur, Goldie sees in the application of this feature to autobiography something more

⁴⁴ I have so far been using the terms “self” and “person” interchangeably. A more extensive discussion of what is intended with the notion of a “narrative self” will be carried on in the fourth chapter of this thesis. The main focus of this section is instead related to the structural conditions that need to be considered when engaging in autobiographical narratives.

than “making sense” of a plot through a tight mechanism of questions and answers. Causality is, in personal narratives, essentially “emplotment”. I will discuss this point and this term later on in this chapter; for now we can simplify its meaning by simply seeing in it a way of understanding and relating events taking the author and narrator as the privileged structuring viewpoint. It is with this viewpoint that the audience engages; by sympathizing with the authorial voice, the audience becomes able to see in the narrator a rationalizing thinker, thus accepting his or her story as the product of a thought process, and as an evaluative analysis. Secondly, an autobiographical narrative needs to be meaningful. Once again, meaningfulness has here to be associated not to a general thought process directed toward external facts or vicissitudes, but to an *internal* thought process where the first person agent is the leading object of investigation. Finally, and most relevantly, emplotment and the presence of a meaningful internal point of view lead to the emotional import carried on in narratives. The emotional import of a narrative is able to reveal both the narrator’s evaluation, and the narrator’s emotional response:

When I say that it reveals both the narrator’s external evaluation and the narrator’s emotional response, it does so – at least when the narrative is sincere – all of a piece in the following sense: say my narrative of what I did last weekend reveals that I now think that what I did was shameful, then it also reveals that I now think that shame is appropriate. Of course, it does not follow from this that I need actually feel shame every time I relate this narrative.⁴⁵

What is particularly interesting about this conclusion is that the presence of an emotional response and an evaluation is transferred from the author to the reader. The audience is invited not only to incorporate the point of view of the narrator, but also to come up with its own. This consequence is of crucial importance if we are to understand what

⁴⁵ Goldie, Peter. “One’s Remembered Past”, in *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (November 2003): 306.

counts as a successful narrative. As mentioned in the first chapter, memoirs are indeed a commercially and critically successful genre, and increasingly so. It might be possible, according to this intuition, to investigate the reasons behind their commercial and literary success precisely in the connection between expressed emotions and appreciated emotions, between the evaluation provided by the author, in this case the evaluation of his or her personal life, and the way in which we evaluate his or her standpoint. Furthermore, our capacity to follow this mechanism in the narrative is likely to induce the same mechanism in us. What I mean is that memoirs deal specifically with the causal connections, meaning, and evaluation of an individual life, the one of the memoirist, by at the same time inviting the same kind of analysis in us; we do not just respond to the events narrated, we respond to what a human life, generally construed, can experience. We put, in other words, the experiences of the memoirist in a larger context including what can generally be intended as the experiences constellating a life – our lives. But how does this process come about?

Goldie acknowledges the abovementioned cooperation by adding to the duo of narrator and audience a third, overarching instance: the thinker. The “thinker” is not exactly the narrator, nor is it the audience; the thinker is instead the representation of our capacity, in narrative, of making events narratable through the presence and recognition of an external perspective. As he explains:

[...] The notion of narrative in this wider sense [a sequence of thought responding to the three features] wide enough to include narrative thinking, does not imply the existence of a narrator as such, or of an audience. But there is still an external perspective: that of the thinker, thinking back on what happened and what he did. So it is the thinker who is able to grasp coherence and meaningfulness, and the thinker who, from his external perspective, is able to evaluate and respond emotionally to what happened and what he did. In the wider sense,

then, a successful narrative can be thought through by the thinker, and is narratable.⁴⁶

It follows that being a narrator and being part of the audience both involve a process of cognitive detachment through which I am able to transform our memories into the vicissitudes of a character. Simply put, we can step out of the present stream of thoughts and reconsider it from the standpoint of a character, thus seeing the events narrated as counterfactual possibilities to our own experience.

All the above elements; the importance of emplotment, the value given to evaluation, and finally the role played by the “thinker”, are required to achieve emotional closure, and it is ultimately only through emotional closure that personal narratives can be defined. Goldie emphasized how these components stem from a specific desire for evaluation; the evaluation of a life from the standpoint of the “thinker”:

The desire is to be able to look back in the right way on one’s past life from one’s present external perspective: not just seeing the causal connections, and making sense of why one then thought, felt and acted as one then did, but also seeing one’s own external emotional response as the appropriate one.⁴⁷

Goldie, by focusing on the importance of triggering a sense of self-evaluation, and specifically moral self-evaluation, in the audience, opens the door to a distinct form of closure. Emotional closure is different from Carroll’s account of closure in involving not only causal connections, but also a sense of evaluation; at the same time, it is also distinct from Velleman’s emotional cadence in being less concerned with emotions, and more with a specific structuring of thought.

⁴⁶ Ibidem: 310.

⁴⁷ Ibidem: 314.

3.1. Emotional Closure and Autobiographical Narratives

Goldie's structural conditions of autobiographical narratives, are, I believe, more apt than the ones that can be found in other accounts of narrative. What makes Goldie's solution plausible is the emphasis on both the memoirists and the reader. Memoirists and readers of memoirs are both, to a certain extent, readers of a life; writing a memoir implies "reading" the events encompassing a life from the standpoint of a narrative. In other words, by creating a narrative, the memoirist creates a reading and an interpretation of a life, he provides a solution, and an understanding to what otherwise would be a succession of events organized exclusively according to a chronological order. A narrative is a way of providing meaning, and, with meaning, a viewpoint to be transmitted to the audience. The reader of a memoir is asked to read not a succession of chronological events, but a narrative in which events are organized so as to provide an interpretation of a life. These interpretations, these "readings", trigger in the audience a response that goes beyond the mere registering of facts, and instead presents an opportunity to apply what narrated in the text, to a better understanding of personal lives. In this latter sense, memoirs can be analyzed in their educational value; memoir has heuristic value because of its capacity of providing us with a spectrum of scenarios that are relatable to the scenarios we might have encountered independently.

Goldie's main merit resides in his ability to recognize in autobiographical narrative a thought process directly involving the author and the audience. However, at least two possible objections can be raised. First, we need to consider the possibility of the presence, in personal narratives, of deceptive claims. Secondly, we want to take a closer look at what

Goldie names the “thinker”, and specifically at the relation between the thinker and the evaluation of a narrative. I will consider these problems in the order in which I presented them.

Authors of memoirs, as we have seen in Rousseau, are frequent victims of their own deceptive emotions, their evaluations are misguided, exaggerated; evaluation is often re-interpretation if not outright invention. The fear is to find the emotional closure binding the author and the audience to be unreliable. I think this problem can be avoided if we concentrate on what “deception”, as well as a reliable evaluation, signifies in the case of memoirs. It is, I believe, mistaken, to see in the evaluations provided by autobiographical expression, a source of epistemologically true beliefs. Memoirs are not a source of objectively justified beliefs, and the very notion of truth, if conceived as such, is misguided. In the next chapter I will expand on this issue and introduce, as a substitute for the notion of truth, the notion of authenticity, and what it means for a personal narrative to be authentic. For the time being, it is sufficient to point to the author, and to the complexity embedded in what is, in fact, a subjective point of view on the unfolding of a life. Asking for an objective viewpoint in memoirs would erase from the narrative the questions and difficulties that the very recounting of a life implies. In the first chapter, we have seen how some of these problems have emerged in the history of memoir, but we have also pointed out how fundamental these problems can be in casting a light on the identity of the subject.

The author of a memoir is a complex cognitive being who is intentionally presenting an account of the self that is dependent on several issues such as artistic aims, structural constraints, memory selection, etc. All these components cannot be analyzed from the

detached standpoint of objectivity, and in order to acquire meaning, they need to be understood in reference to the self. This is the contribution we search for in memoirs and it is also, most importantly, the reason we are so attracted to them. Different personalities, different solutions and different responses are precious cognitive material. The array of possibilities displayed enlarges our understanding of varieties of emotional closure. And, of course, we learn from them independent of their adherence to the status of facts. Personal narratives are neither right nor wrong, neither true, nor false; they are the signature of identity.

From a structural standpoint, there is little we can say on whether a memoir lies or not; not only the risk of deceptive claims is always present, it is also, more simply, a consequence of the subjective nature of autobiographical narratives. The structural questions that we instead need to ask, and what will be the main focus of the next chapter, is whether the presence of deceptive claims, alterations of facts, or even lies are sufficient to see memoir as a genre making of real lives works of fiction. Before returning to this point, I want to turn to my second objection to Goldie, and to consider whether the evaluation of events can be considered a component of the narrative structure of autobiography.

A second difficulty in Goldie's account, a difficulty I need to more urgently address in this chapter, is to understand the extent to which evaluation can really work as the necessary condition for a successful narrative. In particular, I am concerned with the presence, in Goldie's "thinker", of moral evaluations. Is the fact that we morally evaluate the vicissitudes and emotional manifestations of our lives a necessary ingredient of narratives? Goldie does not explicitly mention moral evaluation, and yet, emotional closure,

and so the critical understanding and acceptance of our actions in the past, seems to me to be too strongly connected to the feeling of having, or not having done, the right thing. I take this assumption to be intuitive, and yet, I do not find this point to be a necessary structural component of narratives. I instead want to emphasize how, despite the occurrence of moral evaluation in both the production and reception of autobiographies, moral evaluation is not a structural ingredient of a narrative theory of memoirs, but a secondary element that, despite its importance, cannot belong to the initial, skeletal conditions of autobiographical narrative. Adding moral judgment to memoirs is not forbidden or mistaken, yet, by doing it, we are crossing the boundaries of narrative and we are moving to a second layer of interpretation which overlooks the specificities of narrative construction to focus instead on evaluation, and, mainly, on the moral evaluation of the self. Memoir often leads to moral evaluation; it can be claimed that the reader's approach to memoirs frequently verges toward ethical considerations and judgments related to the moral conduct and decisions taken by the character/author, yet, there are at least two problems with this view. First, when it comes to narrative structure the main and initial focus should be on the structural components, and on how these components work as conditions for narrative. In other words, a first analysis of narratives should remain descriptive and should not immediately include an evaluative analysis. The conditions leading us to call something a narrative do not, by themselves, tell us how to evaluate a narrative, or what kind of evaluation, whether aesthetic, or moral, or of other nature can be applied to it. The analysis of the narrative structure of a genre is not sufficient to tell us whether a narrative is morally good, nor does it tell us whether artistic aims have been achieved: a perfectly structured narrative might be morally despicable or uplifting, or a poor or unique example of artistic endeavor. Secondly,

and going back to the specific issues raised by moral evaluation, we must observe how, despite the eventual occurrence of moral instances in memoirs, moral evaluation does not have to be the privileged evaluation. I can, for instance, provide an interpretation of memoirs completely devoid of moral considerations, and focus instead on the style adopted, on the blending of historical context and private lives, etc. Furthermore, in most cases the interpretation is suggested by the text and by the author. The protagonist of a memoir might want us to reflect on the moral impact of his or her decisions, but might also want us to overlook these elements. For instance, *Junkie*⁴⁸ is a dispassionate memoir centered on Burroughs' drug abuse; certainly, we can criticize his choices, but the author is not inviting such alternative, he only wants to describe, in the most arid fashion, what he takes to be a lifestyle, and a somewhat vulnerable one. Again, interpretation and evaluation should not be confused with a structural analysis of narrative forms. Thus, even though memoirs often entice an evaluative analysis, they do not need to, at least not when the context of our analysis is the context of narrative structure and its conditions.

Yet, the evaluative component within Goldie's "thinker", and so an evaluation related exclusively to the content of the narrative, might not be the only target that needs to be addressed in the case of memoir. The relation of memoir to time, and specifically the ability of memoir to encapsulate a historical moment, can lead to a reflection on whether the evaluation at stake can be attached not just to the consequences of specific actions within a life, but to the very conception of what it means to be an agent in history, and to our contributions, as subjects, to the historical succession of time. This issue is at the center of Ricoeur's notion of emplotment, Goldie's very inspiration, and also a recurring element and

⁴⁸ Burroughs, W. and Harris, O. (2003). *Junkie*. New York: Penguin Books.

source of reflection in memoir. In what follows, I will briefly outline Ricoeur's account and evaluate its importance in light of a few examples, which, more than others, seem to reinforce a conception of memoir as an evaluation of time and history.

4. History and Personal History. A Second View on Narrative and Evaluation

Few works, such as Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*⁴⁹, have reflected so closely on the hermeneutic, hence on the interpretation, that human agency requires when seen in the context of time and history. Even more interestingly for our purposes, Ricoeur's position toward the analysis of human actions is dependent on seeing these actions as organized in a narrative. Schematically, his work aligns together four elements: 1. history; 2. the problem of belonging to history as an individual and as a part of humanity; 3. a sense of agency; 4. the understanding of agency through a participation in time that takes the shape of a narrative. An analysis of these four concepts is crucial if we are to consider our role as agents in time in the context of autobiographical narratives.

In Ricoeur, the role of narratives is to add meaning to time, to make time "human time". Time, identity, and narrative are the leading components of Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology, the study of human beings as agents embodied in the texture of the world in which they participate. In his conception, every self is divided according to the Latin distinction between *Idem* and *Iipse*; the *Idem* side of identity is the given identity inherited through our participation in the world as physical, spatio-temporal beings; the *Iipse* feature of identity is instead related to our intentional capacities, or, to use Ricoeur's terminology,

⁴⁹ Ricoeur, Paul. (1984). *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

to our capacity of first desiring something and then “interfering” with the course of actions. Narrative fits into this distinction in being a form of interference; on the one hand, we interfere with time by shifting from the uniform flowing of time, what Ricoeur refers to as cosmic time, to the time in which our lives, albeit temporally limited and circumscribed, become meaningful in virtue of their relation to past experiences and future expectations. On the other hand, narrative charges events that would otherwise be simply contingent with a sense of “necessity”. The presence of narrative becomes what allows us to find a common history we share with others; this history is necessary to recognize our commitment and participation in humanity. To summarize, narrative encompasses two phases: the first phase situates agents in the temporality of existence, the second phase emphasizes how being situated is a necessity, the necessity of belonging, as humans, to the history and epoch surrounding us.

Organizing events in the necessary narrative of history is what Ricoeur defines as “emplotment”, a notion derived from a combination of Augustine’s conception of time, and Aristotle’s structuring of narrative.

As we have seen in the first chapter, Augustine’s work includes, together with a question on the nature of the self, a question on the nature of time. Time cannot, in Augustine, be quantitatively divided into past, present, and future; time is instead only understandable as eternal time, as the tension of consciousness where past, present, and future unfold according to the triad of memory, perception, and expectation. Time is, in other words, a performance of the mind in the quest of eternity, and it is only through the consideration of eternity that the narration of consciousness can take place.

This investigation becomes dynamic and structured only once the notion of mimesis, the imitation or representation of an action in the medium of metrical language, becomes the leading aspect of composition. In composition we find the necessity of structure, and it is here that Aristotle's role becomes essential in the definition of emplotment. The structuring of mimesis is the *mythos*, the story, where the elements are not anymore related to a conception of time as eternal but to a conception of time as logically structured. It is in this structure that literature emerges; most importantly, it emerges together with the idea of "oriented" activity, the understanding of action and character.

Once time is emplotted, and human activity becomes the object of speculation, the role of narrative is amplified from being a structure to becoming the starting point of evaluation. Evaluation is a necessary component of a narrative that is embedded in the significance of human action; along the same lines, we can say that the very way in which narrative structures events is what we, as human beings, are under the obligation to consider and evaluate. In both the production and the reception of narrative, we discover a sense of identity, where identity is understood as an active sense of personally belonging to the narrative as an individual and as the participant of an epoch. From the standpoint of autobiography, this latter element becomes crucial.

Our participation in time and history as constructed and woven through narrative provides us as agents with a better view of our role as characters in and through history. *Character* easily translates into "character development"; we become able, in other words, to see the development of ourselves as agents, we see ourselves in our actions, and we become the witnesses of our own decisions, dispositions, etc. We can, in this way, see and

evaluate ourselves through and thanks to our capacity to see ourselves as the direct participants of a narrative. Two points need at this point to be emphasized and kept in mind; first, any evaluation we might be able to reach, is, in virtue of the changing nature of historical time, always revisable. Second, the narrative in which agents are situated is never an insulated singular narrative but a narrative resulting from the intertwined relationship we carry with other members of our epoch.

Identity is better understood, in Ricoeur, as “we-identity”; it is a concept that extends our lives to the lives of others. Personal lives share human time and, with it, they share a history. It follows that any sense of personal identity achieved through narrative must be framed in the context of collective history. The sense of evaluation thus reached is in this way extended from a retrospective analysis of our actions, to the consideration and analysis of the actions of the collective corpus to which we belong.

4.1. A Brief Note on the Significance of Evaluation

The main difference between Ricoeur’s connection between narrative and the evaluation of a life, and the sense of evaluation given by Goldie, resides, I believe, precisely in this extension. What for Goldie is the evaluation of a “thinker”, an abstract cognitive entity shared by both the author and the audience, is in Ricoeur attached to an enlarged conception of agency. The evaluation of emotional and moral closure present in a single autobiographical narrative is extended to the hermeneutic circle, namely, the circle of interpretations in which lives are evaluated as embedded in a common, and yet ongoing, historical presence.

From the subjective evaluation of actions, we move to what is at least an attempt to capture the truth of an epoch. Ricoeur emphasizes how the truth of an epoch, albeit not objectively certain, still deserves the attribute of “truth”. What is true about the traces of history we bring with us through memory and through the work of historians, are the various etiological questions fostering the process of interpretation. By asking the “why” of an epoch we continuously research the “why” of narratives that are always sharing an individual and a collective dimension.

This specific sense of evaluation, its historicity and its relation to a larger hermeneutic is amply testified in memoirs. A considerable number of autobiographical narratives would simply not exist without a constant reflection on how life embraces not only other relatively close or relatively distant lives, but also a sense of history. For some memoirists, even more strongly, the very engagement in autobiography is possible only in virtue of our engagement with the interpretation of an epoch. The case of Hannah Arendt, Orhan Pamuk, Primo Levi, Toni Morrison, and several others is indicative of the need, in numerous authors, for establishing a connection between personal history and collective history, between the epoch in which we live and our position in such epoch. This connection becomes unavoidable once, to continue with Ricoeur, selves are considered in their “active” dimension, when they are conceived essentially as agents.

Focusing on agency is unavoidable when the autobiographers are, to use the definition of Kristeva, “exposed”⁵⁰. Our presence in history is not a realization; it is the texture in which lives become visible and consequently narratable. Differently put, we can claim that narration becomes the sign of our commitment to history, and, simultaneously,

⁵⁰ Kristeva, J. (2001). *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 3.

the means to solve the question of personal identity. Memoirists responded to this question in different fashions without abandoning the conception according to which the person who needs to be found is still a historical entity. In what follows, I will present some examples of memoirs abetting a vision of narrative similar to the one advocated by Ricoeur. I will begin with Hannah Arendt and move to more recent narratives with the purpose of emphasizing not only the importance of history, but also the difficulties that recollecting history raises in the construction of narrative.

5. Memoirists and History. Few Examples

For Hannah Arendt, the affirmation of the self through history becomes the proclamation of the “*vita activa*”. The Latin expression, from its usage in Cicero, to Arendt’s adoption of it, is linked to the necessity of political understanding and political action. Kristeva effectively summarizes this concept:

If thought is a *sophia*, Arendt says in essence, political action accompanies it, but above all modifies it into a *phronesis* that is able to share in the plurality of living beings. *It is through narrative, and not in language in and of itself (which nonetheless is the means and the vehicle in play here), that essentially political thought is realized.* Through this narrated action that story represents, man corresponds to life or belongs to life to the extent that human life is unavoidably a political life. Narrative is the initial dimension in which man lives, the dimension of a *bios* –and not of a *zoe*– a political life and/or an action recounted to others. The initial man-life correspondence is narrative; narrative is the most immediately shared action and, in that sense, the most initially political action. [emphasis in the text].⁵¹

In Primo Levi, it is instead the very affirmation of identity through life that takes the place of political action. The leading question of *Survival in Auschwitz*⁵² is already present in the original title of the book *Se Questo e' un Uomo*, (If This is a Man), reminding us of

⁵¹ Ibidem: 26-27.

⁵² Levi, P. (1996). *Survival in Auschwitz*. New York: TouchStone Book, Simon & Schuster.

the abominable destruction of personal identity perpetuated against prisoners. Names became numbers, heads were shaven, eyeglasses were confiscated, and anything even slightly able to aesthetically and morally underline individual identities was taken away. Identity was essentially *deprived* identity. In Levi we see the attempt, through narrative, of rediscovering, together with the stolen identity of the victims of the Holocaust, a sense of humanity.

The deprivation of identity is, at other times, demonstrated through the concept of exile. Pamuk, more recently, has reflected on how exile comes to signify the forced, political destruction of personal memories. His memory is, in the pages of *Istanbul*⁵³, both visual and linguistic through the combination of photographs and text. Here the task seems to be not the one of recalling history, but the one of asking history to remember us as persons. Pamuk works on traces, his work aims at the objectification of these traces. They are objectively part of a page, and yet too distant from the location where they actually took place. The only space exile leaves to memory is the space of literature, the only possible narrative is a reconstructed, literary narrative.

A last example of different ways of dealing with personal and collective history is the incredibly detailed work of Toni Morrison. Famously, the largest strand of Morrison's work is related to the recovery and narration of slave literature. Morrison herself did not take her work as an exercise in biographical writing, nor is it a case of nonfiction, documentary writing. It is instead autobiography seen through the question of finding a foundation to autobiographical expression. Slave literature calls for a reader; through

⁵³ Pamuk, Orhan. (2003). *Istanbul*. New York: Vintage International, Random House.

literacy, slaves wanted to prove their condition as humans, as reasoning human beings in search of a finally acknowledged identity. Morrison records their struggle; she unveils what is left covered. Rarely, almost never, have slave writers lingered on the injustice and atrocity of slavery; most writers dismiss the issue as “not important”, or, more poignantly, as a “history of the past”, something not even worth a paragraph. They are not victims, they are equal; they do not accuse, they conversely entirely refuse accusation, and yet Morrison could hear their voices, voices so clear and distinguished to become an essential part of Morrison herself – the attentive reader, and the critical writer. The discovery is the discovery of an interior life, and of what of that interior life still bears on her, the writer of a story belonging to them as well as to her:

First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollection of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. Zora Neale Hurston said, “Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.” These “memories within” are the subsoil of my work.⁵⁴

However, this is still not the end of the process; it is still not enough to construct a narrative of identity. Immediately afterwards Morrison adds:

But memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me. If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic.⁵⁵

But what is the mystery, what is the magic embedded in autobiographical recollection? It is, for Morrison, the necessary blend with fiction. Fiction is, according to Morrison, what brings to her images from the past. Through fiction, Morrison intervenes in

⁵⁴ Morrison, Toni. (1998) “The Site of Memory”, in Zinsser, W.K. (ed.). *Inventing the Truth. The Art and Craft of Memoir*. New York: Mariner Books: 192.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*: 192.

making sense of the images and traces of memories that slaves could not confess, of truths they could not write. Fiction is, according to her, what makes memory valuable to us, what makes her know *more* than what they did. Morrison closes her piece with a splendid and insightful reflection on memory and imagination:

...No matter how “fictional” the account of these writers, or how much it was a product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory. You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding, it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory –what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding”. Along with personal recollection, the matrix of the work I do is the wish to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives. But only the matrix. What comes of all that is dictated by other concerns, not least among them the novel’s own integrity. Still, like water, I remember where I was before I was “straightened out”.⁵⁶

My fascination with memoir has been initiated by such claims, by what seems to be the difficulty of conjoining the imaginary with real-life accounts. But imagination and facts are not, as I will more carefully argue in the next chapter, opposite ends; on the contrary, their combination makes remembering, as well as autobiographical narrative, possible. This relation is, I believe, at the core of an understanding of memoir, its content, and its expression.

Before moving to the abovementioned issue, namely to what role imagination, and even fiction might play in memoir, it is worth stepping back, after these examples, to the question of whether evaluation, now charged by the importance of evaluating historical presence, should be re-integrated among the structural conditions of memoir. I dismissed

⁵⁶ Ibidem: 198-199.

this option in Goldie's case because I saw in it an analysis, and moral evaluation of a content that, at least from a structural standpoint, does not need to be analyzed. Moral evaluation, as seen, can often occur in memoir, but evaluation, whether moral or of different nature, is not a necessary component of a structural analysis that should remain descriptive and definitional in its purpose. The case presented by Ricoeur is different in seeing the role of evaluation in the larger context of history and of "belonging to history". These examples show how such connection is indeed fundamental in certain cases, if not the very core of autobiographical analysis. At the same time, I think that what is necessary in terms of structural conditions of narratives is not specifically an evaluation of our life in light of the lives of others, and the epoch to which we belong. There is an important distinction, I believe, between an awareness of history and the evaluation of our lives in respect to history. The first can be limited to the placing in time of the vicissitudes of our life; it is simply acknowledging that as human beings we do belong to an epoch. In the case of autobiography this amounts to the intuitive claim according to which our memories are real because our past is real – we lived, and live through history. The second claim instead makes us reflect on the value of our actions and ultimately on our identity. I am more than willing to admit that the importance of time and of the possibilities given by historical participation and commitment might be an interesting way to follow the development of the character as a person. However, for purely structural purposes I think the narrative structure of memoir should include only the first point, namely, an awareness of history.

Conclusions

In this chapter I analyzed what I take to be the structural conditions of

autobiography as a narrative. I am thus not yet concerned with the content of memoir, and with the problems that the description of the person, from the problem of personal identity, to how personal identity might relate to narrative. In this sense, this chapter had the purpose of, on the one hand, laying down the necessary conditions for something to be defined as an autobiographical narrative, and, on the other hand, suggesting the presence of several philosophical issues, related to autobiography, that will become the focus on the remaining part of this work.

I began by focusing on Prince's account of narratology; this part aimed at presenting not only a framework for the study of individual narratives, but also a first hint into the relation we, audience and authors, have toward narrative. It is important to notice how, among all different forms of expression, narrative is adopted and recognized, at least in its more general features, almost intuitively. There is a connection between our psychological and cognitive make-up, and the use of narrative. From the standpoint of autobiography this becomes crucial in underlying how the expression and communication of our own lives assumes specific significance once it is structured in narrative form.

To start giving shape to the edifice of autobiographical narrative, I analyzed some positions in narrative theory moving from accounts of necessary and sufficient conditions of narrative, generally construed, to more specific accounts dealing instead with personal narratives. Carroll and Velleman, two exponents of the general conditions to define something as a narrative, present two different and yet potentially overlapping accounts. I analyzed the importance Carroll gives to the relation between causal connections and closure. Closure is achieved once all the main causally connected questions raised by the

story are satisfactorily answered. In Velleman, causality is overlooked and substituted with what he defines as emotional cadence. The focus is thus shifted from the structure in which events are organized, to our recognition and familiarity with the emotions displayed. In my conclusions, I rejected such cleavage and opted for what is instead a mingling of the two theories featuring both closure and emotions. Memoirs, I believe, need to *structurally* include both; the underlying causal structure becomes the map to follow in order to achieve the emotional resolutions implied by the narration of personal events. Causality does not hinder emotions; it enhances them and brings us closer to the very capacity of feeling the emotions depicted. Closure should be seen under two cooperating standpoints; first, we need to achieve completeness by working on the organization of the questions posed by memoir; second, we have to emotionally engage in the narrative by both recognizing the voice of the narrator behind the memoir, and by further relating the text to ourselves and our lives. This emphatic mechanism is, in the end, the most natural response to the unique question asked by memoir: a question concerning the identity of the narrator. The emotions felt and our capacity to relate to the author are crucial in the recognition of something as an autobiographical narrative.

A further insight into this conclusion concerns the nature of our emotional engagement with autobiography. Goldie sees evaluation as one of the most relevant features deriving from the sense of “emplotment” we attach to narratives. In my analysis, albeit agreeing with his idea of emotional closure, I decided to avoid recurring to evaluation and I limited my interest to descriptive and structural features. Emotional engagement might often lead to evaluation, and especially moral evaluation, but need not. Evaluation, when attached to the events composing personal narratives should be analyzed only as a secondary feature

of memoir, not as a structural feature.

Despite this conclusion, I contemplated another form of evaluation, presented by Ricoeur, which does not attach to the individual life of the author, but to the author as a member of the collective. Human beings live in history, and history is often reflected in the meditations and writings of autobiographers. At the end of this chapter, I briefly listed some authors that made of this feature of memoir the building block of their narration. It is hardly possible not to endorse the presence of this variety of memoir, but I nonetheless prefer, in my initial analysis, to eliminate the eventual evaluation of an epoch present in several memoirs and consider instead, as a necessary structural element, what is simply the awareness of history, and the awareness of belonging to it.

To summarize, I take the necessary structural conditions of autobiographical narrative to be:

1. A mechanism of questions related by causal connections in which the main question to be answered is a question that pertains to the very definition and description of the author as the main character of memoir.
2. A feeling of emotional closure achieved through our recognition of the emotional import of the events undergone by the author. There has to be, in other words, a feeling of interaction with the emotions raised and experienced by the author.
3. Recognizing an emotional import in the narration *does not* imply that the narration can only be grasped through evaluation; neither moral, nor historical evaluations are necessary structural ingredients of memoir.

4. It is necessary to recognize that the vicissitudes narrated in memoir are situated in history. From a structural standpoint, we need to recognize that memoir takes place in history, and it is, to a large extent, a sub-category of history itself.

The last point introduces a new strand of analysis. It is now important to ask whether memoir is indeed history, and thus nonfiction, or whether its existence, as emphasized by Toni Morrison, requires fiction as the element allowing us to narrate real events. This question will be the focus of the next chapter. In the fourth chapter, I will go back to the author, and to what it means to find a narrative of the self, and a self in the construction of a narrative.

...I asked him what he thought there was in us that forced us to tell stories to ourselves about our own lives – to make up stories that had such an arbitrary resemblance to our actual living. Why did we pick certain dots and connect them and not others? Why did we find it so irresistible to make ourselves into tragic figures with tragic flaws which were responsible for our pain? Maybe unfortunate things just happened; maybe there was just bad luck. Why did it seem like our greatest failures were caused by perversions in our souls?

Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?*

Chapter III

Memoir. Between Fiction and Nonfiction

I ended the previous chapter with a brief description of Morrison's relation to autobiographical writing. Morrison's essay, "The Site of Memory", as seen in the first chapter, is part of a collection of essays edited by Zinsser, and entitled *Inventing the Truth. The Art and Craft of Memoir*⁵⁷. I decided to focus on it because, when discussing what it means to write and collect information for a memoir, Morrison lingers on the relation that memoir establishes between imagination and autobiographical writing, and on the further connection that sees imagination as necessary for remembering. Morrison claims that only the act of imagination can allow her to write, and to, in a sense, "complete" the autobiographical works she considered in her research on slave literature.

In her understanding of autobiography, as well as in her practicing of it, Morrison feels the *necessity* of imagining. By imagining, I take her to mean "production of images"; images come to mind, images of places, and, in her case, the specific images of the people she is giving

⁵⁷ Zinsser, William K. (ed.). (1998). *Inventing the Truth. The Art and Craft of Memoir*. New York: Mariner Books.

voice to. She tells the story of literally “seeing” or, better, “having to see” these images in order to be capable of writing, on their behalf, their own story – and, as seen, the stories they were not willing to tell. The images she refers to are not fantastic projections; they are, instead, *real*, and are what allows her to refer back to the title of the volume, to develop her “art and craft” as a memoirist.

However, the very word “image”, and the related word “imagination” might seem, at first glance, to be at odds with a genre like memoir. The reason for this concern is that “imagination” appears to be more easily relatable to fictional works than to works, such as memoir, that have at their basis the nonfictional intention of describing the life of a person. If this concern is valid, then we might fear that the “images” Morrison relies on are fictional, and thus do not correspond to the historical status of facts. What the reader might worry about is that images, being the product of imagination, might lead to a misleading account of events and persons, to a false, deceptive account. If Morrison “imagined” the people she tells the story about then those people might never have existed, and their memories would be, in this sense, fictional. In virtue and because of imagination, Morrison’s autobiographical accounts might have the same literary status as *Gulliver’s Travels*.

The problem of attaching imagination to autobiography is, to put it crudely, the fear of having real events transformed into inventions. But is imagination really a form of invention? Is the title *Inventing the Truth* inviting the reader to see memoir as an oxymoron, the oxymoron in which the word “truth” and the word “invention” are trapped? Is sheer invention what Morrison implies with “imagining”? The goal of this chapter is to deny not only the assimilation of

imagination to invention, but also the very problem according to which memoir might be a blurred genre – a nonfictional narrative falling into fiction.

Before entering a deeper explanation of these issues, let me begin with some considerations on why, from the title of Zinsser's volume to the fears of a reader, autobiography has frequently been accused of recurring to invention.

1. The Fear of Invention in Autobiographical Narration

In the previous chapters, we have seen several examples of how the risk or suspicion of deception has appeared in the history of memoir. From Rousseau's adoption of apologies, doubles of identity, and at times even lies to narrate his life, to opposite extremes such as Heti's *How Should a Person Be?*⁵⁸, a book that declares itself to be a novel, but that adheres perfectly to her life, the question of what can be considered fiction and what nonfiction in the realm of personal narratives has become more and more urgent. And yet, despite the existence of controversial cases, I do not think that memoir can be considered a fictional genre, not even a genre in between fiction and nonfiction. The problems related to the classification of memoir are problems related to the search for identity carried on by the author, and cannot be limited to an analysis of the relative veracity of the claims made.

The problematization of the concept of identity, and the difficulty of responding to the question "Who am I?" have led to different narrative solutions that strongly diverge from a mere list of past events. Aside from the problem of finding a way to narrate identity, the complexity associated with the "weaving" of a life in a narrative form is also matched by more obvious, if

⁵⁸ Heti, Sheila. (2012). *How Should a Person Be?* New York: Henry Holt and Company.

not intuitive considerations. Among the most direct intuitions, we can, for instance, consider the problem of memory, and of how difficult it often is to retrieve details, moments, and happenings in our lives. We have seen, with Saramago, how the impossibility of fully remembering childhood can lead to the serene assumption, made by the author, that what we have might not have happened at all.

Another example worthy of consideration, is Georges Perec's *W, or the Memory of Childhood*⁵⁹, where the promise, and risk, of "invention" is fostered not only by his claims of possible uncertainty, but by the very structure of the book, which alternates a memoir from childhood and a fictional story, imagined by a child, about W, a lost island in South America where the entire population lives exclusively for the sake of sports and according to their rules. The book opens:

In this book there are two texts which simply alternate; you might almost believe they had nothing in common, but they are in fact inextricably bound up with each other, as though neither could exist on its own, as though it was only their coming together, the distant light they cast on each other, that could make apparent what is never quite said in one, never quite said in the other, but said only in their fragile overlapping.

One of these texts is entirely imaginary: it's an adventure story, an arbitrary but careful reconstruction of a childhood fantasy about a land in thrall to the Olympic ideal. The other text is an autobiography: a fragmentary tale of a wartime childhood, a tale lacking in exploits and memories, made up of scattered oddments, gaps, lapses, doubts, guesses and meager anecdotes. Next to it, the adventure story is rather grandiose, or maybe dubious. For it begins to tell one tale, and then, all of a sudden, launches into another. In this break, in this split suspending the story on an unidentifiable expectation, can be found the point of departure for the whole of this book: the *points of suspension* (emphasis in the text) on which the broken threads of childhood and the web of writing are caught.⁶⁰

However, the "arbitrary" story is not so arbitrary. At the end of the book we are told what the two stories have in common. The inhumane rules inflicted on the athletes of W are in fact poignantly similar to the tortures perpetrated in concentration camps. Sports have rules; evading

⁵⁹ Perec, Georges. (1975). *W, or The Memory of Childhood*. Boston: David R. Godine.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*: ii.

the rules leads to punishment, and rules were in fact established by the Nazi party, and unfortunately followed. The barbaric sport rules adopted by W are the rules that were adopted during Perec's childhood years, the same years he declares to be hardly possible to remember.

Contrary to the impeccable description of life and survival in W, the part dedicated to his memoir of childhood is composed by a series of snapshots of *perhaps remembered* facts, full of gaps and declared omissions. Perec reports a passage he had written in the past, his first attempt at writing an autobiography. The passage is marked with footnotes referring to Perec's later corrections on the first version. The corrections reveal new information acquired over time, but also the combination of the eagerness to write and the almost forceful urge to fill in what could not have been filled in. The passage I reported above ends with "the *points of suspension* on which the broken threads of childhood and the web of writing are caught". This passage is explainable only through the connection between the two stories – the history of W, and Perec's childhood. To put it differently, it seems that the imprecision of life can only be contrasted to the precision of fiction; Perec's childhood makes sense and becomes real in virtue of his description of W.

But the risk of invention is not simply related to the problem of remembering the past; in fact, several *auteurs*, such as Fellini and Orson Welles, have made of invention and fantasy the trademark of their identity as persons and artists. In *Fellini: I'm a Born Liar*⁶¹ and *F for Fake* the two directors reflect on some of the issues raised by autobiography, and, tangentially, on what their own autobiographies might imply. Here is the beginning of Welles' parable on fakeness and forgeries:

⁶¹ *Fellini: I'm a Born Liar*. Damian Pettigrew. 2002. Documentary.

Ladies and gentleman, by way of introduction, this is a film about trickery, fraud, about lies. Tell it by the fireside or in a marketplace or in a movie, almost any story is almost certainly some kind of lie. But not this time. This is a promise. For the next hour, everything you hear from us is really true and based on solid fact.

And the end:

I did promise that for one hour, I'd tell you only the truth. That hour, ladies and gentlemen, is over. For the past seventeen minutes, I've been lying my head off.⁶²

We might be tempted to say that Perec, as well as Fellini, Welles and several others are guilty of invention, if not of an entire, complex machinery of inventions. We might be inclined to press the issue further and claim that a large portion of autobiographical production is invention, even a lie. Yet, as mentioned, I do not take this hypothesis to be plausible; the issue at stake is not lying, nor is it invention. What we are facing in the case of autobiographical narration is, instead, imagination, and nothing in imagination should immediately remind us of invention or lies.

It is important, at this point, to open a brief parenthesis in order to show how imagination, in the literary debate, has been associated not with sheer invention, but with what is the cognitive ability of imagining. Stecker⁶³, to mention only one, specifically refers to the cognitive-imaginative value of literature, a value defined according to two main specifications. On the one hand, the cognitive-imaginative value is embodied in the vivid worldviews captured by literature; on the other hand, the value of literature is defined by literature's ability to provide us with a better understanding of our own person as well as others. It follows that the cognitive

⁶² *F for Fake*. Orson Welles. Janus Film. 1973. Documentary.

⁶³ Stecker, Robert. "What is Literature?", in *Reveu Internationale de Philosophie* 50, 1996: 681-94.

activity that imagination represents is an activity involving understanding, an understanding encompassing our selves and the world around us. The role of imagination, we can infer, is related to the significance of discovering something that may not so clearly appear outside the sphere of literature, and that is, at the same, time deeply related to us. Imagination is not an unregulated activity, it is instead what helps us regulate and understand the facts and events narrated in a literary form. If, from literature in general, we narrow down these considerations to the case of autobiography, we can begin to understand how imagination, from Morrison's images to the other examples mentioned can be considered a cognitive source allowing us to understand our own personal histories together with what surrounds us.

I thus far claimed that imagination cannot be easily equated with invention, but is instead at the core of the cognitive value of literature. Yet, this consideration is still not sufficient to free memoir from a second problem, namely, that it uses an ambiguous mixture of fiction and nonfiction. In order to deny the risk of equating memoir with fiction, I will take a closer look at the debate on the definition of fiction and nonfiction, and on the differences that need to be established between the two.

I will begin by analyzing accounts endorsing a strong conjunction, if not an overlap, between fiction and history, to later introduce more moderate positions concerning both the nature of fiction and nonfiction and our relative involvement in them. I will then test each of these hypotheses on the specific case of autobiography and proceed to what I take to be a more viable thesis for the genre in question. My suggestion is that imagination is needed to bestow memoir with authenticity; authenticity, a term that I will soon begin to define, is what brings

memoir back to nonfiction.

2. Fictional and Nonfictional Boundaries

2.1. Hayden White. The Narrativization of History

The historian Hayden White has advocated a strong affinity, if not almost an overlap, between fiction and nonfiction. White's reflection on the construction of history is dependent on an analysis of the role of narrativity, and on how narrative construction is the only true means through which history is not only communicated, but also understood. More specifically, the narration required by history is, according to White, the same kind that applies to the relating of imaginary, fictional events; in this sense fiction and history are comparable in that they use the same narrative structures.

White aims at merging two traditions; on the one hand, he flirts with the poststructuralist belief according to which there is no real distinction between fiction and reality, and the (in)famous claim stating that "all histories are fiction". On the other hand, he looks back at the tradition of the philosophy of history inaugurated by Hegel's *Lectures*, where the narrativization of history is taken as the privileged route to acquire historical consciousness, and the consciousness of an epoch. White refers to these two positions in order to explain the transition from "imperfect" histories to "history proper" by means of the narrativization of historical events.

Among “imperfect” forms of history, White considers Annals and Chronicles. It is not the purpose of this section to linger on the distinctions between these two modalities of historical narration; suffice to say that Annals and Chronicles are equally “imperfect” in failing to achieve closure, and in not being able to establish a clear ranking of their content. In both cases we find a sequence of events, which, without an understanding of what went before and after, would look meaningless and often incomprehensible. The information provided is not related by anything more than chronological succession, a succession deprived of meaningful connections, of kernel and marginal events. In “imperfect histories” political and social orientations are treated in the same fashion, and given the same importance as natural events; Annals and Chronicles record without explaining, or to use White’s expression, they do not “speak” to us.

In order to transition to “history proper”, historical events need more than being listed in chronological order; to become historically significant they require a further condition, what White defines as the authority of historical narrative:

In order for an account of the events to be considered a historical account, however, it is not enough that they be recorded in the order of their original occurrence. It is the fact that they *can* [emphasis in the text] be recorded otherwise, in an order of narrative that makes them as one questionable as to their authenticity and susceptible to being considered tokens of reality. In order to qualify as “historical”, an event must be susceptible to at least two narrations of its occurrence. Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened. The authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself; the historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable, imposing upon its processes the formal coherency that only stories possess.⁶⁴

In addition, to achieve such coherency, and thus to build a proper historical narrative, the historian does not only have to provide events with a structure; he also has to provide the

⁶⁴ White, Hayden. “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality”, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1. On Narrative (Autumn, 1980): 23.

narrative with authority, authority that is reached by adding a sense of ending to the narrative.

The same narrative expectations we develop in the case of fictional stories have to appear in the telling of history, and, with them, a sense of closure.

White's suggestion is that closure obtains, in the realm of history, through the means of morality. Historical narration achieves closure through the achievement of a moral meaning. Dino Campagni, who he uses as an example, adds moral meaning to the late medieval conflict between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines in Florence by clarifying his own personal judgment in favor of the Guelphs, and against what he thought to be the general corruption of morals infesting medieval Florence. Campagni's assumptions are persuasive and meaningful, according to White, precisely because of the ethical connotations that pervade them.

Moralism, according to White, allows for closure and, significantly, no narrativization of events can abstain from a moralizing impulse, whether the narrative at hand is fiction, or is endowed with the authority of history.

In other words, morality is used by White both as a means to evaluate history, and as a structural component in being the guarantor of a sense of closure.

I will soon return to the problem of whether historical narratives need closure, and whether, assuming this is the case, morality is what is needed for this purpose. I will also consider how these questions can be problematic if we take memoir, and the stories told in them, as analogous to historical narratives. For the time being, I simply want to remark how for White the narrative structure of fiction, of imaginary stories, is no different from the narrative structure

required by history. White does not imply, with this, that we “invent” history; there is, in other words, no invented organization of events. What White is instead defending is the idea that history must, in order to be meaningful, follow a narrative structure, and that such structure is identical to the structure in the case of fictional events. In part, this is a plausible remark; we do, in fact, understand fictional narratives, and their emotional and moral import, much better than a list of facts. In addition, it is legitimate to organize historical events in a narrative form; such organization, and so an organization built on narrative expectations, questions, and answers is also more likely to portray a coherent reflection of the validity of historical facts.

Yet, White’s assimilation of fiction and nonfiction is based *only* on their structural affinity, a similarity that is not, I believe, sufficient to claim that there are not significant differences between them. In what follows, I will analyze a number of objections raised against White’s account, to then move to different solutions in the understanding of the relationship between fiction and nonfiction.

2.2. An Assessment of White’s Position

A first concern with White’s account is related to the domain of his analysis. White’s account is supposed to provide a way of understanding the role of history and historical writing. History is inherently nonfictional in its intentions; in other words, the intention of history is to document, and report objective facts linked together in a coherent narrative that unfolds over time. The documentation, or, more generally, the content of history is supposed to be taken at face value, to be, simply speaking, what happened. The combination of an objective content, and

its overall intentions affect the variety and range of interpretations that can stem from historical narratives. The interpretation allowed by history is constrained by the validity and existence of nonfictional facts, and their recording has to adhere closely to the testimonies available to us.

It follows that, if we want to build an account of the structure of historical narratives, we should consider not only their eventual structural similarities with fiction, but also their differences in intention and content. The importance of the difference of intention between history and fiction is what allows us to distinguish among apparently difficult cases such as fictional history. What makes us distinguish a work of fictional history such as Roth's *The Plot Against America* from a work of genuine history is that only the latter has been written with the intention of documenting facts, and with the purpose of making us accept those facts as real historical testimony. Roth had no such intention; his narration is not attached to what truly happened in the United States; his aim is to provide a fictional tale, or what is often referred to as a "What If" story. If we limit ourselves to the structure of the narration, the fictional history told by Roth would overlap with work of genuine history, an overlap avoidable when considering what Roth wanted to write. The consequence of the lack of clear distinction among intentions and contents would lead to the opposite of what White is after, namely, to the impossibility of meaningfulness and significance.

Two other important objections, raised by Carroll, have to do with the connection between history and narrative, and to whether the same conditions that apply to narrative can also apply to history.

First, Carroll objects to White's claim that historical narratives require closure. Stories, as

seen in previous chapters, do need closure in order to be considered narratives; to again quote Carroll, closure obtains once all the micro and macro questions of the narrative have been answered, and there is thus nothing else the story can tell us. Historical events do not achieve this kind of closure; a battle or a war can end, but it is hardly impossible not to see in the ending of a war the beginning of another phase – there is no final event in the course of history, as there is no end to the happening of history. Narrative structure and closure are not essential to the “meaningfulness” of history, as White claims, and cannot be considered to be a constitutive part of history but an addition to it; an addition that comes from the realm of fiction, and it is thus liable to spoil the nonfictional function of history, which is instead a description and documentation of real facts. Closure is, in fiction, the product of the author’s ability of closing every development of the story by responding to all its questions; not only history cannot go so far, it does not need to. It is thus arbitrary to claim that closure and narrative structure are analogous to the ones adopted by fiction.

Carroll’s second objection, stemming from the difficulty of seeing in the adoption of a fictional structure an aid to the meaningfulness of history, is related to the importance, in the historical discourse, of causality. Causation is not exclusively a feature of narratives; natural events, social events, and obviously historical events are organized along the lines of a clearly identifiable etiology. In fictional narratives, the author *creates* causal connections; events are linked causally according to a plot structure that has been created by the author without any need of cementing the legitimacy of causation on any nonfictional, actual events. Of course, fictional narration requires certain plausibility, or, more specifically, an “agreement” between the author and the audience, but this agreement, as we shall soon see, is based on the acceptance of rules

established in the fictional sphere. The same cannot apply to the case of history, where the following of one event from the other is a “fact” and not an accepted connection established by the author and agreed upon by the audience. The kind of causation present in history is *necessary* and based on the observation and analysis of past events; the succession of events has to follow the order and organization in which the events took place. Narrative construction needs, as seen in the previous chapter, a causal structure. When we consider imaginary events, the author imposes the causal structure, whereas, in the case of historical facts, the organized causal chain of events is already provided by the very unfolding of history.

One last objection against White is the claim that moralism is what leads to a sense of closure. The sense of closure I am referring to is the one outlined in the previous chapter, namely, the idea, developed by Carroll, that closure is obtained once all the micro and macro questions of the narration have been answered, thus leading to a sense of ending. White’s claim is instead that closure is achieved by adding to the narration a moral stance. I am, on this point, in disagreement. I will not linger on the debate concerning the relative connection between moralization and narrative, and simply limit my criticism to the role of morality as the cement necessary in order to build historical closure. Even if we accept the possibility of closure in history, and, given that past events keep raising valid and urgent questions, we should not, I find White’s recurrence to morality to be only a conjecture, or at best an approximation. Being a necessary component of historical closure, moral reflection is ante posed to the actual presentation of facts thus providing us with a set of already *morally interpreted* facts. But why should the validity of historical facts be dependent on an already imposed sense of morality? If we accept this solution, then history can become highly dangerous. If a moral code is attached to

the reading of history, then certain moral values are going to appear objective when they may not be. We can speculate on the consequences that a morally faulty interpretation of facts would cause; what is taken as a nonfictional and accurate rendition of what truly happened would be veiled by an interpretation of the rightness or wrongness of these facts. To conclude, I believe it can be of critical importance for history to elicit moral evaluation, but this is not one of its structural components, and should pertain to the interpretation, and not to the writing of historical narratives.

I presented a number of objections against White's equation of the narrative structure of fiction and history. I also, on the same basis, reject an application of White's account to the case of memoir.

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the structural narrative conditions of memoir; what I did not consider is the actual content of memoir, and whether memoir as a genre can be considered to belong to fiction or to nonfiction. This problem is of particular importance, given the frequency, in the history of memoir, as well as in the practice and reception of memoir, of blurred boundaries.

An immediate reason for starting with White's account is that memoir is, or at least stems from, a narrative rendition of real facts. To put it differently, autobiographical narratives can be seen as being composed by *histories*, not by stories. Yet, this resemblance might be misleading; the histories told in memoirs cannot be treated and analyzed in the same way that we treat and analyze history. Memoirs are not chronologically organized collections of facts aiming at objectively documenting and relating facts together, or at least, this is not the primary intention

behind autobiographical writing. As we began to see in the previous chapters, memoir is characterized by the discovery and analysis of the memoirist; the goal of memoir is to disclose the self, and more specifically, to investigate the identity of the memoirist by expressing it in a narrative form.

Autobiographical narratives are personal; they reflect an internal perspective on how the events of a life have affected the author and his identity, a perspective that is inherently subjective. The investigation required by history is animated by the research of facts and events in light of their objective value; the research required by a memoir starts instead with what is the interpretation of facts from the standpoint of the author, an interpretation that might differ from what truly happened. The way in which autobiographies are crafted, from the selection of memories, to the way we remember, to the omissions unconsciously or consciously applied, are all revealing of the person behind the memoir, a person who has as his task not an objective rendition of what happened, but a response to the question of identity. History does not have to respond to these questions, and even if interpreting history might become a way of understanding, for instance, the very nature of an epoch in light of its relation to the past and present, we cannot claim this analysis to be a primary goal of history.

It is correct, I believe, to limit the similarity between history and memoir to their relation to real facts, namely to a similarity in nonfictional content. Yet, despite this similarity, memoir and history differ in their respective use of narrative, and, as seen, in their intentions.

The question that remains to be asked, given the difficulty of comparing memoir and history, is to what extent can White's analogy between nonfiction and fictional stories be

maintained in the case of memoir. My response is that memoir does in fact need a narrative structure, not because of its status as history, but because of the aims outlined above. What makes the use of narrative necessary, and especially the idea of closure, is that by the end of a memoir we want a response to the question “Who am I?”. In this sense, closure is probably the hardest task for the memoirist. The way in which a memoirist tries to respond to the question of identity does not share the same objectivity we require from historical facts. Again, facts, in memoir, are important because they shape the conception of agency and identity; facts are there to remind us of the subjective effort the writer made to make sense of a life. The same holds for the causal selections made in the narrative. A historian can decide to omit certain information from the recounting of historical events, but the omission, for instance, of a significant, crucial event would affect the reliability, and completeness of the account. It would be, to put it simply, a poor, or defective historical narration. Omissions, when considering the intention of history can be motivated by other factors, such as the relative unimportance of an isolated event. On the contrary, a memoirist might decide to omit even what, from an external standpoint, might be considered important facts, and focus instead on the revelatory power of a small, apparently insignificant episode. Omissions in memoir, and, sometimes, relevant omissions, are as informative, in memoir, as narrated facts. Memoir is often concerned with what is behind the page; the use of narrative is, in this sense, somewhat comparable to a map, a map guiding the author and the audience to an understanding of what is behind. We do not want history to work in the same way; historical omissions are not on par with the omissions we find in personal narratives.

In this section, I discarded White’s account both in the case of history and in the case of

memoir. Yet, denying the relevance of White's claims is not in itself sufficient to respond to the accusation according to which the author of an autobiography might be making imaginary assumptions, thus transforming real events into events that could be considered fictional. One may suspect, to put it differently, that there is no real distinction between the memoirist and a fictional character.

This problem is, I believe, only apparent; the events told in memoirs cannot be compared to fictional events, nor can the author of a memoir become a fictional character. To support my claim, I will begin by outlining a few prominent, and more promising positions regarding what should count as a fictional narrative, as opposed to what should count as nonfiction. Elucidating the rules, conditions, and terms of use of fictional narratives will be our initial scope. I will then, as in the case of White's account, analyze the plausibility of these accounts in reference to memoir, and proceed to my conclusions.

3. On the Distinction Between Fiction and Nonfiction

One of the leading strategies adopted both as a criticism of poststructuralism, and as the building block for a theory of fiction is to focus on what the *function* of fiction is, and on the ways in which fiction is adopted in the narrative discourse. In the words of Richard Walsh, this strategy is summarized as an attempt to see fiction as a rhetorical resource, and, more specifically, as an "exercise". In other words, whereas White argues that the properties of fiction are shared by all narratives, Walsh argues that the rhetorical function of fiction and nonfiction cannot be assimilated, and that fiction can be analyzed as categorically different from nonfiction

– fictional narratives have a distinct function and purpose.

Walsh considers, and dismisses, the option of seeing in the concept of mimesis the function of fiction. In particular, his account stems from an analysis of the conceptual evolution of mimesis, from the Aristotelian definition of mimesis as the “imitation of action”, to the idea, advocated by Ricoeur, of seeing mimesis as “configuration”. Ricoeur used the term “configuration” in strong connection to the interpretation in which the reader will engage after the plot, or *mythos*, has been outlined by the text. Mimesis is then, in Ricoeur’s conception, an interpretative activity propelled by the structure of narrative, and not merely a copy or a reproduction.

However, despite implying that fiction is characterized by a specific activity, Ricoeur’s analysis falls short of providing fiction with a strong framework of reference. As Walsh explains:

The paradoxical nature of the fictional situation is apparent as soon as it is recognized that the conceptual framework of the general must logically precede the determination of the narrative particulars, even as those particulars are supposed to advance our understanding of general truths.⁶⁵

The problem with starting with particulars instantiated by a fictional narrative is that these particulars, not being grounded in what is instead a nonfictional truth, or at least a nonfictional possibility, are still undefined and cannot work as the starting point of the interpretation process. In other words, the practice of “configuring” a fictional narrative cannot start from particulars, but from an overall understanding of the general framework and conditions

⁶⁵ Walsh, Richard. “Fictionality and Mimesis: Between Narrativity and Fictional Worlds”, in *Narrative*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (January 2003): 118.

on which the narrative is based.

Walsh's distinct solution to this impasse is, as I have anticipated, to substitute Ricoeur's notion of "configuration" with the idea of fiction as a form of "exercise" based not on the particulars of fiction, but on the way in which the narrative is articulated and received. The exercise of fiction is, according to Walsh, twofold. On the one hand, "fiction is able to undertake a constant renegotiation with the internal logic of mimesis"⁶⁶ by introducing new ways of making sense of the events narrated. On the other hand, the exercise analogy "allows for the range and multiplicity of motives for fiction and satisfactions offered by fiction – from the most innate pleasure to the most end-directed seriousness". Whereas nonfiction explains the particular "by appeal to generality", fictional particulars become a way of "thinking generality".⁶⁷ It follows that in nonfiction our understanding is based on a set of common beliefs we have about reality, whereas, in fiction, it is up to the particulars, as for instance the description of the gestures of a character, to invite the audience to a certain understanding and interpretation of the story. To sum up, the difference between fiction and nonfiction is, according to Walsh, ascribable to two different ways of thinking. "Nonfictional thinking" implies referring back, in our understanding, to what we know about the nature of reality; "fictionally thinking" requires instead an opening to the interpretation triggered by the particulars we find in fiction, without having to superimpose on these particulars an already constituted vision of reality. The rhetoric of fiction is thus explained by the difference between these two "thinking exercises".

Walsh's analysis of fictional narrative as an exercise of rhetoric has the undeniable

⁶⁶ Ibidem: 119.

⁶⁷ Ibidem: 120.

advantage of clarifying how narrativity must have, in its fictional and nonfictional capacities, distinct functions. At the same time, Walsh's analysis does not dwell on the multiple features involved in the thought activity, and specifically on what is the authorial intention leading to fictional construction and reception. In the remainder of this section, I will present a few solutions to this problem. The first, defended by Currie, relies on the role of authorial intentions as an insight into the function of fiction. The other, defended by Walton, sees the activity of fiction as the activity of "descending to the world of fiction" through the establishment of an agreement based on how beliefs are supposed to be structured in the production and reception of a fictional text.

3.1 Two Theories of Fiction. From Fiction as Illocutionary Act to the Making of the World of Fiction

A common solution adopted in order to more clearly define what the act of fictional narrative implies, relies on the assumption that fiction, as language, can be analyzed by focusing on the function of speech acts. Among the most relevant accounts of this approach, John Searle's theory is probably one of the best known. In what follows, I will briefly explain his position and refute it by contrasting it with two opposite theories defended respectively by Gregory Currie and Kendall Walton. Both Currie and Walton show how Searle's theory lacks an explanation of the distinction between fiction and nonfiction; their accounts, toward which I am more drawn, explain fiction by referring, respectively, to the specificity of the illocutionary acts involved in fictional assertions, and to the function played by fictional props in what Walton labels a "game of make-believe". I will analyze not only the importance of these theories in reference to fiction,

but also their relative impact in finding the proper location of memoir in the debate on the status of fiction and nonfiction.

Searle's theory stems from the consideration that "the illocutionary act performed in the utterance of the sentence is a function of the meaning of the sentence"⁶⁸. The very same words, according to the meaning we want to attribute to them, as for instance inquisitive, ironic, affirmative, etc., lead to different utterances, and to a different understanding and reception of the sentence. It follows that, according to Searle, the difference between fiction and nonfiction is to be found in the kind of performance that takes place in them; whereas nonfiction is characterized as an assertion concerning the status of facts, fiction is characterized as the illocutionary act of "telling a story". The act of telling a story is, in this sense, parasitic on nonfictional assertion in being a "pretense", and so essentially an imitation of what is done in nonfiction. This pretense, as specified by Searle, is not intended to be deceptive; it is instead similar to a performance, and thus dependent on utterance and not on meaning.

Currie

The idea of fiction as a pretense of an illocutionary act has been sharply criticized. In his assessment of the theory, Currie denies the status of fiction as a performance, and aims instead at treating fictional utterances in the same fashion as other assertions. The author of fiction is not pretending; he is instead asserting something, something that is fictional and not a pretense of something nonfictional. For instance, *Tender is the Night*⁶⁹ cannot be regarded as pretending to

⁶⁸ Searle, John. "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" *New Literary History* 6. (1975): 321.

⁶⁹ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. (2010). *Tender is The Night*. London: Vintage Books.

assert the story of Rosemary Hoyt's encounter with the Divers; Fitzgerald does not need to mask his novel under the idea of an illocutionary act that is not in fact performed; what he is doing is different, as Currie points out:

(the author of fiction) relies upon the audience being aware that they are confronting a work of fiction, and assumes that they will not take utterances that have the indicative form to be assertions. He is thus not pretending anything. He is inviting us to pretend, or rather, to make-believe something. For to read a work as fiction is to play a kind of internalized game of make-believe. (...) So the author of fiction intends not merely that the reader will make-believe the text, but that he will do so partly as a result of his recognition of that very intention. Recognition of that intention secures "illocutionary uptake".⁷⁰

I will soon return to the notion of make-believe, and to its formulation in the work of Kendall Walton. Currie's argument makes use of it, yet Currie's main aim is to dismantle the idea that the author's intention is the pretense of an illocutionary act, and to instead reconsider the author's intention under a different viewpoint. The author of fiction does not have to make the audience believe that what is told is a pretense; he has instead to engage the audience with the belief that the intention is to create and assert something *fictionally*.

Currie's proposal has the advantage of being able to demarcate the role of the author of fiction, and the following reception of the audience, more clearly than Searle's proposal. As Currie himself notices, for instance, Searle's proposal is not able to distinguish the kind of pretense an actor is engaging in during a performance from what is done by an author; the illocutionary act of the author is tailored on the intention of creating a specific work of fiction he has ideated. On the contrary, an actor is simply performing what the author prescribes, thus the sentences uttered by the actor cannot be treated on par with an illocutionary act, but only as the

⁷⁰ Currie, Gregory. "What is Fiction?". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 43, No. 4 (Summer, 1985): 387.

pretense of an assertion:

The author is performing a genuine illocutionary act determined by his intention. But the actor on stage is not performing any illocutionary acts. This is evident from the fact that what he is doing when he utters his lines is quite independent of any illocutionary intentions he might have. What determines that he is acting is the fact that his utterances and other actions are intended by him to conform to the script and to the directions of the play, together with the fact that he is doing these things in the right institutional setting.⁷¹

Currie's remarks on the intention of the author of fiction are also, and most importantly for our purposes, a useful tool in sorting out difficult cases, cases in which the perception of the work might lead to certain confusion regarding the fictional or nonfictional status of the work.

One of the examples mentioned by Currie touches on the problems raised by a work of fictional autobiography. It is nearly impossible, unless we are previously informed, to distinguish a fictional from a nonfictional autobiography. Martin Amis' *The House of Meetings*⁷², Rushdie's *Midnight Children*⁷³, and Pamuk's *My Name is Red*⁷⁴, to mention only some, are all examples of highly realistic autobiographical stories that might strike an uninformed reader as works of nonfiction. To stress the issue further, realism is not even much of a constraint, given that, as we have seen, even a work such as *Gulliver's Travels* was believed to be nonfictional. But if it is impossible to gather information from the text on the fictional or nonfictional status of an autobiography, how are we to distinguish them from novels and other works of fiction?

⁷¹ Ibidem: 399.

⁷² Amis, Martin. (2007). *The House of Meetings*. New York: Alfred. A. Knopf.

⁷³ Rushdie, Salman. (1981). *Midnight's Children*. London: Jonathan Cape.

⁷⁴ Pamuk, Orhan. (2001). *My Name is Red*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Currie's solution solves this problem by suggesting that it is not enough for the audience to find the story "true" to make it a work of nonfiction. The distinction to be found is not a distinction in content, whether the work adheres to plausible scenarios or not, but a more fine-grained intentional distinction. The distinction between a fictional memoir and an actual memoir is that in the former there is no intention of preserving what Currie calls an "information preserving chain", i.e., there is no need to relate fictional events back to what truly happened and is known about the real world. Even if we postulate a case of fictional history where the events described casually happen to be true and aligned with actual history, we cannot for this reason conclude that we are faced with a work of nonfiction. The intention is different: the intention is, again, fictional. To summarize, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is, according to Currie based on three interrelated elements; first, there is the authorial intention of making either a fictional or a nonfictional assertion; second, there is a need, in nonfiction, of an information-preserving chain relating what is narrated to basic knowledge about reality; third, and finally, the intention of writing fiction is the intention of presenting not a set of beliefs, but a set of make-beliefs, the beliefs we will follow for the duration of the fictional work.

Given this solution, we can gauge whether this distinction, heavily based on authorial intention, is sufficient to explain why memoirs, as I believe, should be considered works of nonfiction. If we follow Currie's suggestion, the author of a memoir has a specific intention, and the intention is to preserve a chain of information that is supposed to communicate something about the life and the person who is narrating. Even a memoir full of barely remembered facts, memory gaps filled somewhat imprecisely, or even, so to speak, a memoir that flirts closely with

invented facts, remains a work of nonfiction. It remains nonfictional given the intention of the author. We can claim that what needs to be preserved, the chain we are supposed to follow, is the chain leading to the identity of the author, or at least the chain of events that better describe the author. The author of a nonfictional memoir asks the audience to believe, and, in this, he is simply making an assertion that is far from a fictional assertion in virtue of its original intention.

I believe in intentionality as a strong component of the distinction between fiction and nonfiction; yet, to fully explain their differences, and to apply them to the case of memoir, it is important to examine, on the one hand, what is involved in the intention of the memoirist, and, on the other hand, to return to the briefly mentioned notion of make-believe, and to assess its importance in the case of autobiography. I will begin with the latter, and with Walton's analysis of it.

Walton

It is helpful, in order to understand Walton's definition of fiction as a game of make-believe, to jump back to the concept of imagination, a concept I analyzed at the beginning of this chapter. Walton, far from equating invention and imagination, is interested in explaining how imagination is not an unconstrained activity lacking a specific reference to the real world; it is instead the basis on which we delineate the conditions of fictional narration. Explaining how imagination works in fiction is important for two reasons. First, it is necessary in developing the notion of "fictional truth", and secondly, it is necessary in explaining why what is "fictionally true" does not have to be nonfictionally true. Imagination is the disclaimer allowing us to discriminate between two kinds of truths: there are truths belonging to the real world, and truths

belonging to the world of fiction. But how then, does fiction become true?

Walton's solution is disarmingly simple, and it can be bluntly summarized by the remark that what is true in fiction is true because we agree to it. As simple as this consideration might sound, it nonetheless touches on something we all have experienced, something we do spontaneously, and that belongs to our cognitive make-up. One of the most obvious examples of this attitude is children's playing. Playing is not an unruly activity; games, to be games, need rules, and rules have to be respected for the game to be played. Walton brings up the example of Eric and Gregory who decide that while they walk in the woods, stumps will be bears. "Stumps are bears" is clearly not true, and yet, within the context of their game, it is. It is true for a specific amount of time during which the two children will agree on believing that stumps are bears. Another group of kids might believe that for the time of the game one of them will be a doctor, one a patient, one an assistant. All these assumptions are true; they are true inside the boundaries of the game chosen.

Fiction works in the same way. When we read, for instance, a sci-fi novel, we do not question the plausibility of events. We listen and believe what the author is telling us; in a way, we play along. Taking what fiction tells us as true is the assumption we need to "descend to the world of fiction"; not only do we believe in what fiction tells us, we ought to. This latter point is particularly important to understand not only our reactions toward fiction, but also why we are so affected and moved by it. We are affected by fiction because we make-believe it, because we have decided to agree with the rules the author is giving us. When we watch *Richard III*, we are repulsed by the protagonist's conduct and somewhat paralyzed and fascinated by his intelligence;

the same impulse can be observed when screaming in front of a horror movie, or when we are moved by romantic comedies. These emotions, so vivid and similar to the ones we feel in real life are, according to Walton, quasi-emotions; namely, despite not being equivalent to the emotions we feel in real life, they are valid inside the boundaries of fiction⁷⁵. We have agreed to watch the story of an English prince working his way up to the throne in a series of dramatic and violent acts; it is a game we have agreed on, and, as in every game, we have emotionally reacted according to what the narrative has commanded as appropriate.

Stumps being bears, and other fictional stratagems are what Walton calls “fictional props”; props are needed to establish the framework in which fiction will unfold. As Walton writes:

Any work with the function of serving as a prop in games of make-believe, however minor, or peripheral or instrumental this function might be, qualifies as “fiction”; only what lacks this function entirely will be called nonfiction.⁷⁶

Walton’s theory is illuminating in understanding the activity required by fictional engagement. His conception of fiction differs from Currie’s in paying considerably less attention to the intentions of the author; fiction making is not for Walton an illocutionary act, because framing it as such will reduce the problem of defining fiction to the problems we encounter when classifying language. The activity of fiction is not a matter of how language is intentionally used in fiction by the author; the issue at stake is instead to frame the activity required in both the production and reception of fiction as an independent activity. Engaging in fiction is a human

⁷⁵ It is not the scope of this work, but it should be noted how Walton’s position regarding emotions in fiction is by no means the only one, and it is instead at the center of a large and interesting debate.

⁷⁶ Walton, Kendall. (1990). *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 41.

action, a frequent human action involving fictional objects, (such as places, characters, etc....), which we accept as props in the games of make-believe.

In the remaining part of this chapter, I will analyze how these theories bear on memoir, and how they can be adopted to better frame the position of autobiography as a form of nonfictional narrative.

4. Memoir as Nonfiction

In the previous section, I analyzed what I take to be two highly plausible accounts of defining fiction and separating fictional from nonfictional works. In what follows, I want to investigate the implications that can be derived from these theories in the case of memoir. In particular, my goal is to defend the notion of memoir as nonfiction by blending Currie's emphasis on the role of authorial intention with a reflection on Walton's idea of make-believe.

Currie separates fiction from nonfiction by focusing primarily on how authorial intention affects the fictional or nonfictional status of a work. I am highly sympathetic to the importance of the role of authorial intention in the reception and interpretation of artworks, and I think it is worth analyzing the specificities of authorial intention in the case of memoir. There are at least two issues: on the one hand, we need to consider what kind of consequences can be drawn from the fact that the author of memoir is also the subject of memoir. On the other hand, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, attention should be paid to whether the nonfictional status of autobiography can be maintained in the presence of discrepancies between the actual life of the author and what is narrated. Are these discrepancies an obstacle to the nonfictional intention of

narrating a life and a person? Is altering the status of facts a move toward fiction?

The two issues are, I believe, closely connected; I will begin with the former and adopt the conclusions found as a standpoint for the defense of the notion of memoir as nonfiction.

In fiction, the author is not the subject of the work, and a description of the author, a narrative based on the life and personality of the author is not central to the work. As much as it may be tempting to see in fiction the mini-biography of an author, a temptation to which both readers and critics have often succumbed, fiction is not constructed, or intended for this goal. This is not to say that the author of fiction disappears from the work, or, that, as poststructuralism holds, that the interpretation of a text is separate from the author who physically wrote it, and that the text, to use Derrida's expression, is "orphaned and separated at birth"⁷⁷. The author of fiction is, on the contrary, present in the work in virtue of the stylistic choices made, the articulation of the narrative, the voices, opinions, and points of view expressed. And yet, none of these elements have to disclose anything about the *identity* of the author, to the extent to which the work might be anonymous and nonetheless valuable. Again, a recognizable style, belonging to a certain movement, dwelling on similar themes, etc., are all elements able to bring us closer to who the author is; we might be able to infer something about his life and personality, but this is nonetheless *not* what a work of fiction aims at.

Whereas the author of fiction cannot be considered the subject of the work, the author of a memoir is the subject, and the main question a memoir is supposed to respond to. The identity of author and subject seems to be obvious in a work whose leading question is to "confess", to narrate the self. In the first chapter of this thesis, I borrowed Olney's definition and described

⁷⁷ Derrida, Jacques. (1988). "Signature, Event, Context" in *Limited Inc.* Chicago: Northwestern University Press.

memoir as a form of life weaving, where the author weaves a narrative with the purpose of understanding his or her own identity. And yet, as we have seen, the narratives produced do not always overlap with what happened in real life, thus creating what seems to be a cleavage between the flesh and blood person described by the narrative, and the actual narrator. It is somewhat paradoxical, but the narrator and the subject of memoir are not exactly equal, and, to a certain extent, we might even want to say that they are in a dialogue with each other, a dialogue in which the subject, in order to be revealed, has to become a narrator, has to create a personal narrative. In autobiography, we are not in possession of a number of objective facts related to the author, we are instead confronted with a narrated version of these facts, namely, with something that has been consciously ideated as the medium to best narrate what happened to the author. Without access to what truly happened, we are bound to follow, and to rely on the personal narrative presented to us as an explanation of the life and identity of the author. There are immediate consequences to this reliance, consequences related to both the difficulty of composing an autobiographical narrative, and of analyzing it as a disclosure of identity. We have to accept that the narrative chosen at a specific time might not be the same chosen later in life, as we must accept that a narrative is likely to develop on connections that are somewhat forced, and that it might also omit crucial episodes. And yet, these difficulties do not affect the nonfictional status of memoir, they do not because they are part of a narrative that has been intentionally construed as a narrative capable, at least potentially, of revealing who the author is.

In memoir, the intention is not to discover the author, where by “author” we mean the flesh and blood person who actually lived the life described, but the subject of a specific narrative. As we will further see in the next chapter, memoir responds to the question of identity

not in virtue of what happened in life, but in virtue of the author's capacity of enclosing life in a narrative form. The intention, and what I will refer to as the *primary intention* of memoir, is to find this narrative, and to find in this narrative the identity of the author.

It is important to emphasize how the intention of presenting the author through the construction of a narrative remains nonfictional. The autobiographical narrative produced by the author, despite all the difficulties listed above, is still an attempt to reveal and describe the identity of a person – the narrator. The presence of hard-to-believe events, omissions, or even the multiplication of autobiographical narratives during the course of a life, do not mine the nonfictional status of autobiography, if anything, these factors problematize the conception of what we take to be true in personal narratives.

The notion of truth I am referring to, and the one that should be adopted when considering the memoirist's intention, does not imply that the events need to be empirically verifiable, nor do I want to say that the events we are asked to believe can be treated in the same fashion as what epistemology agrees on being "true justified beliefs". For better or worse, an epistemological account of memoir cannot treat knowledge according to the paradigm of scientific thought. To understand the nature of autobiographical narrative and its status as nonfictional narrative, we need to rework the concept of nonfictional truth by keeping in mind the way in which nonfictional truths attach to the memoirist.

My suggestion is to avoid the confusions that the word "truth" implies in the philosophical debate, and switch to "authenticity". The word authenticity comes from the Greek

“authenticos”, composed of “autos”, the self, and “hentes”, to achieve, or to accomplish. In its usage, the word came to be associated with “origin”, and so to the possibility of finding a genuine beginning to something. In the case of memoir, the genuine beginning is the narrative found by the author; it is in the narrative that the author sees the unfolding of his or her life, and it is in this narrative that authenticity should be searched.

This is not to say that authenticity will always be reached, or that the ability of constructing a personal narrative immediately leads to a response to the question of who the person is.

In fact, if we were to analyze the large number of memoirs published today, or if we simply reflected, once again, on the complex history of memoir, we would likely have to agree that it is hardly possible to find an impeccably authentic presentation of the self. And yet, if we combine the role of intention with authenticity, if we see in the nonfictional intention of memoir the desire to discover a narrative that would present the person authentically, then we have a criterion to distinguish an imperfect, yet authentic memoir, from what is an inauthentic memoir. An inauthentic memoir is a work that begins with the intention of presenting the self as a character, and that is, because of this reason, a work of fiction. Fictional memoirs are popular, even brilliant works, but their goal is not to find the person, it is not to pursue authenticity.

On the contrary, if the intention of fully investigating the self is present, then we are allowed to consider nonfictional memoirs even works, such as Rousseau’s, that diverge from real life. When dealing with these cases, we are bound to reflect on the difficulties of presenting the self authentically. As mentioned, the difficulties of finding the authentic self range from the problem of recollecting past memories, to the acceptance of those memories, to the responsibility we have

toward our own self when we engage in the practice of confession. And yet, part of the importance of memoir is to focus on the different steps undertaken by the author in order to at least approximate this goal. A memoir failing at this attempt is more likely to show a progress toward identity than a failure in the delivery of facts; it is, again, not an inauthentic memoir, but an attempt toward authenticity.

Unlikely events, imaginary events, and distortions of facts can also be seen as attempts to approximate who the author takes himself or herself to be; even if we do not reach a completion of authenticity, our role as readers or viewers is to believe in the intention presented. Authenticity, it follows, is a parallel concept, and a contribution to what the intention of memoir is; it is only when a memoir misses the intention of authenticity that we can talk about an inauthentic memoir, but, it is important to notice, this would not be a memoir as described above, it would be a fictional work where the intention is not a search of the authentic person, but the presentation of a fictional character.

It is on this point, namely on the definition of memoir as a nonfictional narrative ideated by the author in order to unfold the authentic self, that a reflection on the notion of make believe becomes relevant.

Unlike fiction, autobiographical narratives do not ask us to “switch” worlds; there is no need, in other words, to descend to the world of fiction, to make-believe the events narrated; the world we need to look at, and believe in, is the world of the narrator. The “make-believe” activity of memoir requires us to search in memoir for an authentic dimension, and to monitor, together with the author, the choices made, whether of narrative or of another nature, in order to

reach such dimension.

We are mandated to believe the *way* in which the author sees himself; to put it differently, we are asked to believe in a specific portrayal, and in what the narrative tells us, to pursue the authentic identity of the author. Imagined facts can, in this respect, and as I will again show in the next chapter, be revealing of this struggle, and possibly our best chance to fully “see” the self behind memoir.

The fact that some of these happenings might be objectively false does not mean that the memoir is a work of fiction, not if the intention is still nonfictional and aiming at authenticity. In the case of fiction we make-believe a story; in memoir, we are bound to believe.

In this section I combined two notions, the primary intention of memoir and the significance of authenticity, with the purpose of reinforcing the conception of memoir as nonfiction. The primary, and nonfictional intention of memoir is not to provide an objective description of the person, but to research the identity of the person as the narrator of his or her own life. The intention of memoir is to find such a narrative, and to reveal identity through the construction of a personal narrative. Autobiographical narratives cannot be taken at face value, and they often include omissions, alterations, and the possibility of a proliferation of autobiographical narratives during the course of life. What characterizes autobiographical narratives is, however, not the reaching of a true and objective account of the person, but the discovery of an authentic identity. I defined authenticity as the sense of a genuine beginning, an insight into the life of the author; authenticity is akin to an analysis of the person where the author discovers a sense of identity through the narrative. Authenticity can entail the presence of omissions, as well as revisions; an authentic narration is liable to a wide range of possible

alterations, but these alterations are not fictional, but are instead crucial components of the practice of autobiography as a search for identity.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I analyzed, and discarded, the possibility of assimilating memoir to fiction. The risk of seeing in memoir the presentation of a life based on imagined facts, instead of the actual unfolding of the events, is triggered by the very history of memoir, and endorsed by both past and contemporary positions. In order to refute this claim, I analyzed several accounts debating the definition and function of fiction and nonfiction, and worked on the extent to which they can be applied to memoir.

My defense of memoir as nonfiction is not based on its similarity with history in possessing a nonfictional content, but on the presence, even in the case of a memoir diverging from the accurate rendition of the life of a person, of the nonfictional intention of discovering the person by means of a narrative. The author of a memoir is, in other words, “real” in relation to the narrative he or she wanted to build with the intention of revealing who the author is.

Specifically, the reality, the nonfictional status of what is narrated in autobiography, depends on the notion of authenticity, and on the distinction between authenticity and truth. An authentic narrative, and the following disclosure of the person through the narrative, is not based on objective facts, on what effectively happened to a person, or on an objective description of the subject, but on the capacity of the subject to become the narrator of his life and identity.

Authenticity is a matter of researching a narrative in which the author can find himself, and respond to what we will see will be the question of personal identity. Authenticity allows for omissions, alterations, it allows connections among events that did not actually take place, but that are nonetheless essential for creating the narrative in which the author sees himself. Authors can fail in this goal, and they often do, but even a failure in research has to be analyzed as a tentative step toward responding to the question of identity.

The notion of memoir as nonfiction is not only important in the classification of memoir as a genre; establishing the importance of a nonfictional description of the author through the adoption of personal narratives opens the door to a reflection on the relationship between the identity of the person and the adoption of narrative as a means to find such identity. This is the point that I will consider in the next chapter where I will expand on the notion of authenticity by working on its status in the creation of personal narratives.

I will consider the debate on the nature of the self, and, specifically, on what is defined as the narrative self. My research will be based on several scientific works in neuroscience and cognitive science focusing on the relation between the establishment of an authentic autobiographical self, and the necessity of linking such establishment to the production of narrative. The analysis of the narrative self I will present constitutes the last step in building a narrative theory of memoir that I will summarize in a last concluding chapter.

The autobiographical self is the brain state for which the cultural history of humanity most counts.

Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*

Chapter IV

The Narrative Self

My analysis of the problem of fiction and nonfiction, and specifically of whether autobiography can be thought as belonging to the first, led me to establish a distinction between the epistemological notion of truth, where truth is a set of justified beliefs, and what I instead take to be a key factor in the interpretation of memoir as a nonfictional genre, namely, authenticity. Specifically, I stressed how the research displayed in memoir is research aiming at the description and understanding of an “authentic self”. The distinguishing features of the authentic self are not to be found in the adherence to the facts, events, memories, and vicissitudes of a life as seen from an external, objective standpoint; they are instead found in the way in which the memoirist has appropriated those events into a narrative. What is present in memoir is the intentional decision of an author to select, modify, or even, in some cases, to invent a narrative capable of more suitably responding to what the memoirist takes to be the best representation of his or her own life.

When reading a memoir we are, in a sense, mandated to regard the narrative as the product of the authentic intention aiming at responding to the question of who the self is. As seen, this implies that we are, in our research, discarding works that lack this intention; such works are not interested in finding the self and they are, as seen in the concluding section of the former chapter, analogous to works of fiction.

Memoirs are forms of reflection on identity and on the process of finding identity; a process that might require diverging from an accurate description of what “truly” happened. The histories depicted in autobiography cannot be assimilated to “history proper”; the intention is not to document facts and relate them in a coherent, objective narrative, but to see facts in terms of constituting and constructing an identity, or personal self.

In this chapter I turn precisely to this latter point, namely to what it means to talk and to identify something as a personal self, and specifically, to what relationship can be established between autobiographical practice and the self. In the previous chapters I used the term person and self somewhat interchangeably, and yet, we are now at a point where memoir cannot only be identified with a description of the person, but with a specific self-reflective analysis, conducted in a narrative form, concerning the person and how the person becomes capable of developing a sense of identity. This latter point is, needless to say, a well-known problem in philosophy that has its beginning in John Locke’s theory of personal identity. In recent years, the debate has expanded, allowing the strands of philosophical research to mix with those of scientific research, most noticeably, with the study of consciousness and the mind. The problem of personal identity can no longer be seen under the exclusive lens of metaphysics; the problem of the self, of what it means to claim identity with our own self, is an issue concerning the very way in which our brain and cognition work. Cognitive science has broadened the debate on identity to incorporate the question of what in our cognitive, biological, and evolutionary make-up is involved in the construction of identity. If we are to analyze the ways in which the self is depicted in memoir, we would want to consider the biological and cognitive mechanisms leading to the creation and recognition of an autobiographical self. Analyzing the self from the standpoint of cognitive

psychology is by no means the only way of approaching this issue. The debate on the nature of the self is, and has been, a central topic of discussion in psychoanalysis; yet, cognitive science seems to be a preferred choice because of its relation to evolutionary psychology and the role played by narrative in the establishment of a sense of identity.

I will restrict my analysis to two main areas of research. The first, amply investigated by the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, focuses on the layer of consciousness he refers to as “extended consciousness”, and on the neural mechanisms leading to the emergence of this state and to what is, in the end, the emergence of the “autobiographical self”. The second area of research relies instead on the findings of folk psychology. I will consider the extent to which folk psychology has analyzed the development of a sense of the self in relation to our ability to construct narratives. Both the notion of an autobiographical self, and the importance of the adoption of narrative in the unfolding of the self, must be taken as the pre-conditions and premises to the analysis of the authentic self we find in literary and filmic memoirs.

I will also consider two objections associated, respectively, with the risks implied by first person narratives in the understanding of the self, and to the very problem of accepting the notion of a narrative self. The first objection, raised by Lamarque, claims that personal narratives are prone to a fictionalization of the self, and thus that they are not suitable to work as the privileged way to define and describe the “authentic” self. I respond to this objection by remarking how the construction of stories, and even, more importantly, the possibility of interpretative distortions and stylistic renditions of a life are not a hindrance to the identification of the self. On the contrary, these distortions are for the most part an inevitable component of our

cognitive make up and can contribute to the definition of those character features that allow us to respond to the question of identity.

The second objection, formulated by Galen Strawson, is more radical. Strawson's objection against the notion of a narrative self is that, to put it crudely, there is no such thing as a narrative self. I reject this hypothesis on different levels, and specifically on a cognitive level. The self, as I shall soon explain, is, and has to be, a narrative self.

Responding to these objections will allow me to further cement the role and relevance of the notion of a narrative self, and, most importantly, to move these considerations closer to an analysis of the meaning of the notion of an autobiographical self in the context of the production and reception of memoir. We will, to conclude, be able to cast a light on the cognitive basis leading to the question of what it means, and what is implied, in writing or filming a memoir. Literature and film, in their artistic endeavors, are a privileged means to understanding the nature of the self.

1. The Cognitive Basis of The Autobiographical Self. Extended Consciousness and the Autobiographical Self

We perceive our bodies and we attend to our thoughts; for the most part, we are able to leave Descartes' doubts aside and to resolutely claim that bodies and thoughts are in fact "known" to us. I do not doubt, for instance, that my fingers hitting the keys cause the ticking sound on the keyboard I am now using, nor do I doubt that the thesis I am writing is the product of thoughts I had and have. Bodies and thoughts, physical and mental presences, are somewhat directly in

front of me, and this may imply that the *knowledge* I have of my body and thoughts is uncontroversial. And yet, this is not quite the end the story.

Bodies and thoughts are not isolated instances; when referring to them we are inclined to say that they belong to us, and, more specifically, to our own person. Claiming that we are persons, that bodies, actions, and thoughts belong to us specifically, requires more than an acknowledgment of their presence; what is required is a conception of personal identity. The problem of personal identity is not concerned with perceiving my body moving at the present moment, nor is it solely related to the fact that I am now entertaining certain thoughts. What makes the problem of personal identity a complex problem is that the self that is now typing is also the self who was reading yesterday, going for a run the day before, and who, tomorrow will be at a play. How can I claim that I am the same person I was in the past and I will be in the future? What is it that makes me identify my actions and thoughts across time as the actions of a single person?

Locke first raised the problem of personal identity in his chapter on Identity and Diversity.⁷⁸ Locke's insights are particularly interesting for our purposes because he was the first to point to a connection between the way we narrate and feel toward our memories and the emergence of a sense of identity. We are, according to Locke, the collection of the memories of our past; we are conscious of them and, as agents, we act on the basis of these remembered facts. Being agents, making decisions, having volitions, etc., are based on the weaving of the episodes we remember; without them, our identity could not be established, and our responsibilities as agents would be null.

Locke's intuition is, for the most part, still acceptable. Our memories are in fact essential

⁷⁸ Locke, J. (1979) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Nidditch ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

to the development of a sense of the self, even though we can hardly claim, today, that only conscious memories participate in the establishment of the self, and that a sense of the self is based exclusively on what we remember from the past.

Locke's philosophical problem has been embraced, more recently, by cognitive science and neuroscience. Antonio Damasio is, among others, one of the scientists who has tried to provide an answer to this problem. Damasio's area of research is consciousness, and it is in the ramifications of consciousness that he sees a fertile ground for the analysis of what he calls the "autobiographical self". The autobiographical self is what allows us to see ourselves as persons, and to keep identifying ourselves as one continuous self during the course of life. I will here briefly summarize Damasio's position on the autobiographical self and then move to different accounts, based on folk psychological studies that aim at demonstrating how and why the sense of an autobiographical self is dependent on the construction of personal narratives.

Damasio distinguishes two primary layers of consciousness, core consciousness and extended consciousness; the autobiographical self is a product of extended consciousness, and yet, a complete analysis of it depends on a description of how the two layers interact. The construction of core consciousness begins early in life through the organism's processing of objects, physical entities, behaviors, attitudes, and emotions. Objects at this level are still not verbally construed, and yet, by recognizing them, the organism starts categorizing them according to different degrees of saliency. This categorization also, and importantly, requires placing the objects in a temporal and spatial context, a context that will thus become "known" to us later in life, as an invariant, stable background for the establishment of the extended self. The

stability of core consciousness is like the setting for a story of which we will become protagonists; it is, for the most part, an unconscious research of the material that will constitute our personhood. Without the stability and background information stored in core consciousness, the very registering of events and experiences as personal memories, and the realization that we are persons living a life in which we are agents, would be impossible. Core consciousness is not a uniquely human phenomenon, and, as mentioned, does not require the use of language. It is instead more akin to a collection of images; images organized in brain maps that display salient information temporally and spatially organized. Despite not being based on propositional expression, the brain maps generated by core consciousness can be viewed as the first instance of an inclination toward narrative, as Damasio explains:

Telling stories, in the sense of registering what happens in the form of brain maps, is probably a brain obsession and probably begins relatively early both in terms of evolution and in terms of the complexity of the neural structures required to create narratives. Telling stories precedes language, since it is, in fact, a condition for language, and it is based not just in the cerebral cortex but also elsewhere in the brain and in the right hemisphere as well as the left.

And again:

I believe that the mind's pervasive "aboutness" is rooted in the brain's storytelling attitude. The brain inherently represents the structures and states of the organism, and in the course of regulating the organism as it is mandated to do, the brain naturally weaves wordless stories about what happens to an organism immersed in an environment.⁷⁹

For Damasio, storytelling is essential to consciousness; in core consciousness storytelling is nonverbal, and yet, the articulations presented in core consciousness form the foundations for the development of the more complex articulations of extended consciousness. The objects we

⁷⁹ Damasio, Antonio. (1999). *The Feeling of What Happens. Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt, Inc: 189.

encounter and process at the level of core consciousness are the objects that extended consciousness further narrates as past experiences and future perspectives. From the story of the environment in which we are immersed, we move to the autobiographical story of an organism living in a known, personally owned, and meticulously mapped environment. Core consciousness is already organized in terms of stories, but these stories are not verbal. In order for these stories to become verbal, and compose the personal stories that identify us for who we are, they need to be elaborated through the more complex stages of extended consciousness. The narratives that are at the center of this thesis, autobiographical narratives, belong to what can be viewed as a second stage of storytelling, a stage that is nonetheless deeply engrained in the way in which our brain initially, and nonverbally stores information about the world.

This latter mechanism, the individual and personal appropriation of the objects, stimuli, emotions, and behaviors structured by core consciousness is the basis of extended consciousness. Extended consciousness, and not core consciousness, is what had captured the attention of Locke, and what emerges, in its prismatic forms, in memoir. Extended consciousness is the neurological source of conscience, agency, identity, personal points of view and memories, and, finally but not lastly, autobiographical narratives.

Damasio summarizes the three fundamental capacities of extended consciousness as follows. First, extended consciousness has the enhanced ability of retaining records of a myriad of experiences. Second, these experiences can be re-activated and connected together thus providing us with a sense of ownership over them. Lastly, we are able to develop a sense of individual perspective, something akin to the idea of possessing a “character” which extends

over the period of a life.

Extended consciousness is a necessary condition of personality; lacking it leads to a dispossession of the sense of identity. This case is documented in neurological pathologies such as schizophrenia, temporal amnesia, and, in a weaker fashion, in certain cases of depression. What is important to notice is that often, the “disappearance” of a sense of the self in extended consciousness is not matched by an impairment of core consciousness. In cases such as transient global amnesia, patients are clearly able to identify “core” features of their lives and experiences, such as for instance a job position, their own name, or the duration of a day, and yet, they are not able to “place” their actions in what remains a stable framework. I could, for instance, be aware that I am a Ph.D. student writing my dissertation without having any idea of what my dissertation is about, what I have written so far, or even what this very paragraph is about.

A fundamental function of the human brain, extended consciousness, is based on both neural structures and on the stability provided by core consciousness. Yet, understanding how extended consciousness works is not as immediate as identifying brain maps of information retention. By asking how extended consciousness works we are asking what it means to have a personality; furthermore, we need to confront the difficulties in expanding a personal sense of consciousness to the establishment of a personal narrative. In order to build a personal narrative, extended consciousness continuously rehearses specific behavioral patterns belonging to our past and future. “Personhood”, and the generation of identity, are based on several simultaneous active patterns. In order to grasp the complexity of the various pattern interactions, we can reflect on the various sources from which they are derived. We have to consider the combination of

genetic traits, the role played by the cultural environment in which we grew up, and furthermore, on the presence of unique episodes, episodes that touched us differently than others and remained impressed in our memory with particular vividness. In addition, the latter two factors are prone to our tendency toward remodeling information, and, most importantly, to the problems intrinsic to memory retention. Memory, in particular, is what makes instances of personhood so hard to localize in uniquely physical terms. Even though it is obvious to claim that we *have* memories, the source and content of these memories is not always something we consciously register. Furthermore, the ways in which we deal with memory are dependent on the environment surrounding us, and this we can only modestly control. We are often unaware of what and how we select and retain memories; we forget certain episodes as much as we are able to reactivate memories that have been submerged for a long period of time. We cannot yet tell what it is that causes such mechanisms, but it is hard not to consider these patterns as crucial in the development of the autobiographical self and in autobiographical narratives.

The flexibility of our memory system, differences in cultural environment, and finally the multiple interactions stemming from these factors lead to the frequent appearance of different behavioral patterns. Damasio's famous metaphor is of an orchestra going through and constantly rearranging different scores; the flexibility of these scores can lead to dramatic changes in our character and behavior that can episodically radically diverge from the ways in which we would normally act. And yet, this is not a real problem in the functioning of extended consciousness. We do not, in other words, lose and reacquire our autobiographical self. However divergent the lines of behavior might be, with the exception of pathological cases, extended consciousness maintains stability, and this stability is what guarantees a sense of personhood. We go back to the

self we are, or as Damasio puts it, “we return to home base”⁸⁰.

Our tendency toward going back to a self that is consistent overtime, and that can be characterized in a fairly stable fashion, is explainable as a survival mechanism; we are “historically continuous selves” because continuity is what allows us to be reasoning agents, and, because of reason, better equipped when dealing with different situations. The continuity of our selves is also, and importantly for our purposes, the starting point of our ability to introspect, analyze our thoughts, think of counter-factual scenarios, and develop, among others, an aesthetic and moral sense.

Reflecting on the role of extended memory and on the autobiographical self provides important insights to the issue of memoir. The work of memoirists can be viewed as the articulation, whether in literature or film, of a cognitive faculty we all possess as human beings. Memoir can be seen, in this sense, as the narrative in which the autobiographical self develops. A clear example of this stance can be found in Siri Hustvedt’s *The Shaking Woman or a History of My Nerves*⁸¹. Hustvedt, herself victim of a neurological trauma, searches for her identity as well as her autobiographical narrative in the history of her brain. In her memoir the analysis of neural patterns, (and pathologies), mingles with her personal life. Her strategy to find her own person, as well as to identify the struggles involved in finding the narrative that would properly describe her life, is to examine her own nervous system. The fragments of the past that our nervous system puts together in the establishment of the autobiographical self are the fragments she assembles when writing about herself. It is important to notice how this is not exclusively a literary choice or the intention motivating a skilled writer. The connection between language

⁸⁰ Ibidem: 225.

⁸¹ Hustvedt, Siri. (2009). *The Shaking Woman or a History of My Nerves*. New York: Picador.

expression and the mechanisms underlying the autobiographical self is a cognitive factor she acknowledges as crucial in life writing. Language allows memories and future expectations to solidify in “stories”. These stories, the different narrative choices made, from the articulation of a certain sentence, to the connections made visible among separate and often chronologically distant episodes, to the selections memoirists make regarding what to tell and what to omit, are the outcome and final edited product of an autobiographical self; a fundamental feature shared within our species.

To conclude, if we are to find a pre-condition for the importance, but also for the difficulty, of memoir, we cannot overlook the connection between autobiographical narratives and autobiographical selves – the basis is our brain.

To further cement the importance of the relation between cognition and narration I will present, in the next section, two further accounts highlighting how narratives are actually and actively used in the development of reason and in our ability to combine personal narratives with the personal narratives of others. I will begin with Hutto’s Narrative Practice Hypothesis, and then move to Marya Schechtman’s Narrative Self-Constitution View. In both cases the problem of personal identity is to be treated as intertwined with the creation of narrative. By analyzing the connection between identity and narrative we return to the issue of understanding what it means to refer to authenticity in the case of memoir. I believe, in other words, that the self behind memoir is only modestly biased by literary or filmic construction; it is, instead, an agent in search of the narrative capable of fully responding to the problem of identity.

2. Narratives and Cognition

2.1 The Narrative Practice Hypothesis

As mentioned in the previous section, narratives are a fundamental part of our cognitive abilities, and, specifically, the means through which our extended consciousness and autobiographical selves emerge. In other words, the construction of personal narratives is not something we impose on the self, but something happening at the level of extended consciousness. I accept this condition as a premise for the importance of narrative, and as a precondition for the affirmation, description and narration of the self in memoir, i.e. the author.

But simply stating that narratives are important and indeed a part of our cognitive system does not respond to a second question, namely, how do these narratives work and what is their importance in the development of reason and in the social sphere. The importance of this question is intuitively derived from the fact that selves are not just repositories of memory; narrative selves are not storage units. Even the mechanism through which memories are selected and organized in personal narratives points to the fact that selves are agents, and that, consequently, narrative and narrative practices should be understood as actions. By narratives as actions I broadly mean that narratives are based on intentions, that they have a function in responding and explaining a fact or a situation, and that they need to be, at least to a large extent, understood by others.

Folk psychology has contributed extensively to this debate by reflecting on the role of narratives in social dynamics and in the development of reason. Specifically, I will here focus on two recent folk psychological accounts. First, I will introduce Daniel Hutto's Narrative Practice Hypothesis for the purpose of explaining both our relationship to the narratives of others, and to explain how the narratives of others become a necessary component in the understanding of how

we make sense of our own actions, thus leading to an enhanced understanding of ourselves as agents. Secondly, I will consider Marya Schechtman's Narrative Self-Constitution View with specific emphasis on the problem of the characterization of the self through autobiographical narratives.

Hutto's interest is in the role played by narratives in navigating the social environment; such narratives are called folk psychological narratives in virtue of their ability of "explicating and explaining action in terms of reason"⁸². The ways in which we acquire, relate, and produce such narratives is at the core of the Narrative Practice Hypothesis that Hutto defines as follows:

The Narrative Practice Hypothesis claims that the normal route through which children become familiar with the core structure of folk psychology and the norm-governed possibilities for its practical application is through direct encounters with stories about people who act for reasons.⁸³

Our interaction with narratives is a developmental process beginning with childhood and leading to both an understanding of social practices and, consequently, of our own reason, intentions, and motivations for action. The specific relations we establish with the narratives encountered in the social sphere facilitate the emergence of the self.

Hutto's remarks on narratives do not, however, encompass narratives generally construed, but specifically narratives expressed from a second person point of view. His approach, in other words, despite considering third person narratives as useful in the overall growth of reason and knowledge, focuses on the stories we are told, or, as he puts it, on the "revelations" of the others.

By focusing on these kind of narratives, Hutto rejects the idea of the self as essentially a

⁸² Hutto, D.(2008). *Folk Psychological Narratives. The Sociocultural Basis of Understanding Reason*. Cambridge: MIT Press: 4.

⁸³ Ibidem: 5.

“spectator”. The “spectatorial” view of narrative would see us as the audience of a set of beliefs and reasons to act seen from an objective and all-informative standpoint. This kind of narrative interaction is certainly a part of how we acquire information, but it is, according to Hutto, at odds with the ways in which we ordinarily develop and attend to patterns of action and behavior. In the social environment we are hardly ever spectators, and, for the most part, the explanatory clarity of a spectatorial viewpoint is not given to us. What we face instead are fragments, particulars, details that, even if at times small, become relevant in the understanding of a situation. Our viewpoint is not *strictly* spectatorial because we are not only unable to observe situations in their full extension, but also because every situation requires, in order to be understood, our active interaction.

To simplify, whereas the spectatorial viewpoint looks at us as the audience of a play coherently unfolding in front of us, Hutto’s sees us as immersed in an environment in which each scene is cut and partial, where, in order to understand what goes on, we have to ask how these different parts available to us can be put together. The “sense” of what we see is not already embedded in the narratives we listen to, it is to be found in our ability to question the reasons at the basis of these narratives. As he puts it, we are not spectators, but active listeners.

Second person narratives, namely narratives told to us by others, are the narratives we listen to; when we listen to the narratives of others we are not provided with an objective and all-encompassing view of a specific fact or situation. Listening to others implies learning from a specific point of view; we are forced to look in those narratives for the reasons someone has acted in a specific way in an equally specific context. Hutto notices how in everyday situations the reasons someone has acted are often not as obvious and clear as a spectatorial view would

like them to be. The “other” is in this sense, out of reach; instead, if we allow second person narratives, the other comes close to us by providing individual explanations for an action. In Hutto’s words:

The fact is that we often engage directly with others in order to determine their reasons. This is quite unlike other forensic investigations that attempt to delve into the causes of other kinds of happenings. To establish with any confidence why an action was performed we simply cannot approach the issue using the same sort of method as we would when trying to determine, say, the cause of a plane crash. Our best chance, by far, is to rely on the revelations of the other: the authors of actions are uniquely well placed to explain their reasons for themselves. Of course, their admissions are defeasible; often people lie or are self-deceived about why they act. Nevertheless we have fairly robust methods for testing, questioning, and challenging such testimony when it is important to do so, as in legal cases.⁸⁴

Our best chances to understand the reasons that others acted in a certain way are to listen to their own explanations. I believe that part of what it means to be a reader or a viewer of memoir is to do precisely this, to listen. In memoir we are “active listeners”, and we do in fact “listen” to why the author has undertaken a decision, to the motivations leading to certain life choices, and to understand what those choices led to. These are, in fact, revelations, or, to move closer to the vocabulary of autobiographical narration, confessions. There are, of course, important distinctions.

When writing a memoir the reasons provided for an action are often charged with the task of providing a reason not only for the actions performed in relation to a specific, isolated episode, but in relation to the constructions and interrelations of episodes covering an entire life, or at least an important portion of a life. The reasons I can now provide, for instance, for writing this thesis would have to be linked to, say, the reasons why I first

⁸⁴ Ibidem: 12.

decided to study philosophy, why I've been cultivating an interest in literature and the arts, and why I developed a curiosity about the way people talk about themselves. My reasons will likely involve selected and significant memories as well as significant others, places, etc. And yet, despite these differences, I believe that the insights provided by second person narration are strongly similar to the insights we gain by "listening" to memoirs.

The narrative we get from memoir is explanatory of the other, in this case the author, as a person and an agent: without such narration the explanatory power of the narrative would be highly diminished. This analogy also highlights one of the main differences between biography and autobiography. Biographies put the reader in the position of a spectator, autobiographies, instead, invite a dialogue. In biographies we learn, what at least is supposed to be, an objective set of information on the life of a person, while in autobiographies it is the person who directly provides us with those facts, and with why those facts, those narratives and not others, have a specific personal meaning for the identity of the author as person and agent.

It should also be noted how the "revelations" of the other are not necessarily to be linked to the truth value or to the scientific and theoretical coherency of the other's perspective, but rather to the social, cultural, and somewhat personal accounts the other can provide. The narratives woven by the self, and this is the case for autobiographical narratives, depend on a number of different factors, among which include the constant source of confrontation and exchange that furnishes the environment surrounding the author. We do not expect the objective rendition of a life, but a subjective portrait, something that is not simply the product of research, but the product of introspection, and,

as we shall soon see, the product of an investigation into identity. This is one of the most significant consequences we can draw from Hutto's analysis; the Narrative Practice Hypothesis is not limited to the possibility, and to the need of understanding the narratives of others, it is also the background against which we develop our own reason. By listening, we store information and ways of thinking, while we develop responses that will further contribute to a better understanding of our narratives. I believe this mechanism is in place when reading and listening to a memoir, in that by confronting autobiographical narratives we are bound to consider our own narrative, how we respond to others, and how those responses help to shape our own stories.

The importance of Hutto's account in reference to memoir – to continue on the abovementioned idea – can be seen in the attention placed on the development of cognition through co-cognition. Hutto points out how learning children and the narrator (in early stages a parent) work together by providing propositional inputs of understanding. Parents as storytellers provide children with a specific viewpoint that enhances a vision of context and explains actions in light of this viewpoint. Children are constantly encountering new scenarios, and their first chance to understand what is going on in front of them is heavily affected by how they see their parents responding to various situations.

There is no such thing as a sterile ground of applied cognitive norms; reason, instead, develops as a vital narrative opportunity. As Hutto puts it, in the development of reason, training and learning are identical, and their identity leads to the possibility of finding a common psychological ground. It is from this interaction that the self develops and begins developing abilities such as the capacity for self-reflection and introspection. By listening to the narratives of others, I am not only able to reflect on their point of view, but

also to sympathize with them by placing myself in a similar situation. Without having to effectively live through their experiences, I am nonetheless able to speculate on how I would have acted in a similar condition. Moreover, by observing the behavior of the other, I become aware of what might be a radically different take from the one I might have had in that situation.

Second person narratives are in this sense characterized by a twofold exploration; on the one hand, I explore the social environment; on the other, I “explore” my own self. I am using the term “explore” because second person narratives are revelations and can have an educational value in learning about the environment and simultaneously learning about the self. This mechanism is enhanced in memoir because memoirs are not accounts of isolated situations for which reasons for actions are provided; memoirs explain large portions of life often characterized by complex patterns. Providing connections and reasons for action encompassing large segments of life is the explanatory task a memoirist has to face; as the audience of memoir, we attend to these carefully crafted explanations.

For our purposes, Hutto’s account can be adopted and expanded as a way to analyze the importance and effects memoir has on the audience. Memoir is from a grammatical standpoint, a form of first person narration, and yet, if we follow Hutto’s definition of second person narratives, we can consider the encounter with memoir as the encounter with a complex form of second person narration; it is about listening to the story of another person. We are, as readers or viewers, attending to the explanation of why not a single action, but a life was undertaken in a certain way. By attending to these explanations we become aware of more than a singular instance of behavior, we become aware of a character, a personality. This effect improves our emphatic reactions toward the character,

while simultaneously making us reflect on the comparison between our own personality and the one of the author. This kind of interaction between the author and the audience can be more or less manifest, and yet, it is a fundamental component in the analysis of how we feel about memoir, and, I suspect, one of the reasons for the success of memoirs.

A prominent debate in philosophy of literature is related to the extent to which we “feel” for fictional characters, and to what extent our emotions and feelings can be compared to the feelings we have in real life; in the case of memoir the problem is bypassed by our very knowledge that the characters are not fictional, and part of the power of memoir is that we *know* that it is a “true story”. There is no need in memoir to “descend” to a different fictional world because the world of the characters of memoir is *our* world, and hence subject to the social dynamics in which we are directly involved. Clearly, fiction also shows us social dynamics in which we might imagine ourselves to participate, and yet, these dynamics are not as likely to trigger in us a sense of judgment or evaluation. We know that the world of fiction is imagined, that the intention is to create an imagined, despite rule-governed, world, and that we are asked, as seen in the previous chapter with Walton, to “make-believe” in what is told to us. Their reality of our feelings and reactions toward fiction is, to once again adopt Walton’s terminology, a matter of fictional truth.

The complex second person narratives we attend to in memoir are instead a much more comfortable territory in which to exchange opinions and criticism. In my opinion, to seriously judge the legitimacy of the moral choices of fictional characters, whether praising or condemning them, is somewhat absurd, as it is somewhat absurd to, while watching a film, take sides or “hope” that the “enemy” will finally die. Mephistopheles in *Faust* is an

intrinsically evil character, and yet, condemning him because of his despicable moral code does not add anything to our understanding of the work. This does not mean that we cannot reflect on the actions of fictional characters, but simply that judgmental concerns are, in the case of fiction, out of place.

On the contrary, memoir is often prone to judgment; it is incredibly common for the audience to judge the memoirist, and memoirists are aware of this risk, so aware that, as seen in Rousseau, they might prefer to alter, mask, or simply hide certain facts. Even in milder cases than Rousseau, memoirists often confess how one of the difficulties in writing about themselves is to know that they will be read. Judging, however, can also involve reflection on why we judge in a certain way. To put it simply, by judging the author of a memoir we are likely to ask ourselves what *we* would have done in that situation, given that memoir deals with situations that we are to recognize as real and nonfictional. We are, in this sense, at dialogue with the author but also with ourselves. This latter point is, I believe, one of the strongest features of memoir; reading and watching memoirs triggers self-reflection and enhances our capacities to analyze our own lives. By attending to memoir we are likely to attend to feelings toward our own self and life that are similar in nature to the ones the author must have had when engaged in the construction of an autobiography. To a large extent, our relation to a memoir is closer than our relation to other genres because the construction of autobiographical narratives is a cognitive phenomenon and a privileged means to achieve what we have seen to be, with Damasio, the autobiographical self. The possibility of developing such affinity with the memoirist makes memoir a form of encounter, an encounter with the narrator, but also an encounter with, and reflection, on the narrators we are. Art, generally speaking, can be defined as an encounter, and, in the same way, this encounter is able to trigger self-reflection. Yet, the specificity of memoir is

that the encounter we are considering is akin to a face-to-face, intimate encounter with the author. In autobiographical narratives we do not attend to the presentation, explanation, or representation of a concept; we do not, in other words, attend to the artist's point of view on a particular matter, we, instead, dialogue with the artist on a personal level and on an intimate matter – life, and the relation of life to identity.

In the next section I will further focus on this point and expand upon the role of narrative in understanding the self. My goal is to move from an analysis of the narratives of others to how autobiographical narratives are created, and to their role in the constitution of the self. If with Hutto we have focused on the importance of narrative in the development of reason, our aim with Schechtman is to reinforce the notion that autobiographical narratives are an essential means in responding to the question of personal identity and something that belongs to our cognitive make up.

2.2 The Constitution of Selves in Autobiographical Narratives

With Hutto I pointed to some of the primary factors related to the reception of memoir. In particular, I highlighted how memoir can be seen, from the perspective of the audience, as a form of second person narrative. We are the listeners of memoirists as agents, agents that share their life “explanations” and selves with us. As I argued, this form of interaction with the memoirist can often entail a process of learning which covers both learning about the author of a memoir, and a mechanism of self-reflection in which we “substitute” ourselves with the memoirist. The focus of this section is to move from the reception of the narratives and revelations of others, to the actual constitution of personal

narratives. This constitution, in the work of Schechtman, is what allows us to solve the problem of personal identity and to flesh out the specificities of selves as agents.

Schechtman's method is based on characterization; her belief and primary concern is with the role of character features in allowing us to identify sameness of self across separate intervals or time, and, as it follows, in a lifetime. Characterization aims at the identification of the self, but this identification is based on the recognition of particular characteristics, actions, and experiences, ascribable to an individual person. These characteristics are further dependent on what she takes to be the four features of identity: moral responsibility, self-interested concern, compensation, and survival. The four features are tied together in being the main points on which a person has to reflect in order to be an agent in the world.

I will briefly elaborate on what the four features imply regarding how a person thinks and acts. A person, according to Schechtman, necessarily cares about the *moral* value and evaluations of her actions, thus adopting a self-judgmental stance. At the same time, the *self-interested concern* shows an interest in fulfilling personal desires and goals, where, by goals we also imply the feeling of wanting, for instance, to make a difference or to foster personal development. These desires are not, in Schechtman's analysis, mere abstract wishes but are instead deeply related to the past and the future expectations we can derive from our histories. In this latter sense, self-interested concern is balanced by a form of *compensation* through which we gauge, for instance, what we might or might not be willing to sacrifice. Finally, the combination of moral responsibility and a balanced self-interested concern constitute a broad sense of *survival* where the emphasis is specifically on the continuity of the self as a means of psychological survival. This sense of continuity is crucial in the establishment of a sense of identity.

As in Hutto, Schechtman's definition of the self is based on the social environment in which selves are essentially agents in the world. The four features are in this sense both derived from and dependent on a practical vision of the self; this vision is what allows us to see narratives as active mechanisms that need to be established on a cognitive level if we want the self to be able to exist, act, and experience life not in its single occurrences but in its totality. It is because of Schechtman's strong adherence to the practical features of life and of the environment, that her view seems particularly apt to the description of the complex autobiographical narratives we find in memoir. Memoir must involve social settings and social interactions; any author is, in being an author and in being a person, an agent, and it is under this constraint that I believe the narrative self of memoir should be analyzed.

Schechtman's analysis is useful in fleshing out some of the conditions that need to be present in the case of autobiographical narratives. In the second and third chapter of this thesis I insisted on the structural conditions of memoir, conditions related to the narrative rules that an autobiographical narrative should follow. The conditions I am interested in now aim at the establishment of a theory, which, through narratives, can explain what it means to be a person and, as the debate on personal identity holds, what it means to identify, over the course of life, our existence as the existence of one continuous and re-identifiable self.

Schechtman divides her Narrative Self-Constitution View in two parts. First, the belief that a "person creates his identity by forming an autobiographical narrative – a story of his life"; secondly, that the analysis of autobiographical narratives can "explain our intuitions about the relation between personal identity and survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and

compensation”⁸⁵. It is then through autobiography that a person not only finds identity, but is able to apply it to those elements, the four features that, as explained above, emphasize the role of the person as agent. Autobiographies can explain survival, and hence the psychological continuity we need to reach in life, the presence of moral responsibilities as well as self-interest, and, finally, the way in which self-interest is balanced, and compensated by what can be expected from the status of things, the environment, and, generally speaking, any constraint that may be applicable.

In order to fully see personal narratives as vehicles of identity, Schechtman emphasizes three constraints pertaining to personal narration. The first constraint is related to the nature of narrative form. In other words, her constraint is based on the fact that the presentation of the person has to unfold in a narrative, thus involving, as seen in the second chapter, meaningful logical connections among different episodes, and a sense of closure in which to gauge the relevance of the four features. Schechtman rejects the idea of seeing identity as divisible in separate time slices and argues instead for continuity, namely the idea according to which selves identify themselves as persons in virtue of their temporal extension in the past and the future. She admits that such continuity can be understood differently according to different cultures – and thus refers to possible clusters of narrative – yet, the idea of continuity, however expressed in particular narratives, is a necessary feature when considering the four features. Moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and the compensation that goes with it are based on the recognition that life is charged with past and future happenings and expectations. We evaluate, for instance, our self-interested concerns on the basis of past episodes and we establish a degree of compensation on future

⁸⁵ Schechtman, Marya. (1996). *The Constitution of Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 93.

expectations. If I am, for instance, preparing for a swimming competition, I am basing my daily training on the results I got from the past, and I can accept a further challenge to the extent to which I think my performance can improve until then.

The second constraint, what she refers to as the “Articulation constraint”, asks the narrative to respect cohesiveness and coherency. The degree of articulation has to be somewhat implicit in personal narratives, whether or not we explicitly tell our narrative to an audience. This constraint is dependent on the sense of continuity we derive from our lives, a continuity that is thus enhanced by the implicit organization of events. One might raise the objection according to which life stories are not always coherent; it follows, from this objection, that the self might not be able to find the implicit coherence and articulation connecting different life events. We might, so to speak, not be able to explain to ourselves why a certain event followed from past events of our lives. Aware of this problem, Schechtman specifies how such “incoherent” narratives cannot be used as a mark of personal identity; they are not, so to speak, revelatory of specific character features. However, even incoherent narratives can be of some help; a narrative lacking proper articulation can be viewed as the symptom of something that is still below the surface and might need further elaboration and clarification. No Narrative Self-Constitution View can be built when meaningful connections and articulations are lacking, and yet, such a narrative, in its omissions and vagueness, is still revelatory of the fact that omissions are *present*, and that, for this reason, the self is still unable to find a proper description.

The features of our narratives that are below the surface *are* (emphasis in the text) revealing of who we are, because they represent the missing elements of our explicit life stories—they fill in the pieces that make the incomprehensible elements of our explicit stories intelligible. In essence, then they tell us what aspects must be incorporated into an explicit narrative for a given person to develop fully as a person. Nonetheless, until

and unless they are seen and acknowledged by the subject herself, they play a different sort of role in her life than articulated aspects of her narrative, and so are less fully hers. They are, therefore, less attributable to her in the sense that is relevant to the four features, and so less fully hers in the sense that the narrative self-constitution view is trying to capture.⁸⁶

Finally, personal narratives are subject to the “Reality Constraint”. The reality constraint asks the narrative to approximate to a large extent the status of facts. As the articulation constraint, also the reality constraint suffers from a similar objection according to which the events narrated might not correspond to the “objective” status of facts. However, aside from pathological cases in which distortions can be extreme, a degree of imprecision is also a normal, if not natural part of our ability to recall facts and to store them in memory. As seen with Damasio, memory is often something we cannot consciously control and the reasons we recall and select certain episodes instead of others are not entirely clear to us. Most importantly, as Schechtman highlights, the different ways in which a narrative interprets reality, as for instance the omissions or simply the distortions of reality found in the weaving of personal narratives, are fundamental in identifying a personal, individual style; an element further cementing the characterization of a person. In her words:

The narrative self-constitution view does not, therefore, take what might from some perspective be considered errors in interpretation to be a threat to a narrative’s identity-constituting powers. On the contrary, the possibility of these differences in style shows the link between identity as defined by the narrative self-constitution view and the concept of identity operative in identity crises. The perspective according to which a particular narrative interprets a series of commonly agreed-upon events is what gives it its individual style⁸⁷

However, a further elaboration of this objection might compromise Schechtman’s

⁸⁶Ibidem: 119.

⁸⁷ Ibidem: 128.

account of personal narratives. Lamarque⁸⁸, for instance, has questioned the reliability of personal narratives in light of, on the one hand, the problem of fictional narratives, and, on the other hand, the problem of whether an eventual “fictionalization” of personal narratives might lead to a misleading rendering of the ethical values adopted and described by the narrative. In other words, Lamarque fears that the construction of a narrative involving the self would make of the self a fictional character, and thus dismantle the authenticity, and specifically moral authenticity, that personal narratives should instead carry within. This objection, if valid, would undermine the very connection Schechtman builds between personal narratives and the four features – given that the four features are supposed to connect the issue of personal identity to the ethical reflection implied in seeing persons as agents.

I will begin by summarizing the conditions that, according to Lamarque, characterize fictional narratives, and then state what these conditions imply in reference to personal narratives; my goal is to remark that these conditions are too strong and too limiting, and that they do not do justice to the ways in which personal narratives unfold.

Lamarque’s conditions of fictional narratives read as follows: 1. Character identity principle (where the description of the character is all that necessarily determines the identity of the character); 2. The opacity principle (where the different modes of presentation allow for an interplay between what we imagine and literary artifice); 3. The functionality principle (the creation of events is functionally explainable). If these conditions are applied to personal narratives, then the identity of the person would be jeopardized and, as a consequence, we would end up transforming our lives into mini-works of fiction.

⁸⁸ Lamarque, Peter. (2007). “On the Distinction between Literary Narratives and Real Life Narratives”, in *Narrative and Understanding Persons*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

As I just indicated, this position strikes me as overly strong. In order to refute Lamarque's thesis, I suggest trying to imagine what the three conditions of fictional narratives mentioned above would entail if applied to personal narratives. If we want to establish personal narratives as authentic and nonfictional, then the conditions for fictional narratives listed by Lamarque should be reverted in the following way: 1. Identity cannot follow from the way in which we describe ourselves; 2. Any description of a life is an attempt toward clarity and simplicity, and 3. Creativity cannot apply to the selection and presentation of real life events.

Regarding the first point, suffice it to say that I have so far committed myself to the view according to which the problem of identity can be solved by recurring to a narrative construction of the self in which the descriptions of persons are shaped according to a narrative format. Not every theory of personal identity, as we shall see⁸⁹, is related to narratives; yet, as I will demonstrate, a non-narrative vision of the self is perhaps possible, but highly implausible.

The second point, namely that personal narrative should try to achieve clarity and simplicity, is also objectionable. This is because it is very hard to understand what, in the case of narrative, constitutes "simple". Is an overly meticulous personal narrative simpler than one only sketching few, relevant features of a life? Or again, is the emphasis on emotions we often find in memoir a sign of simplicity and directness, or is it for the purpose of masking certain episodes with an ebullience of spirit? These questions are left unanswered; Lamarque's insight refers to the idea according to which a personal narrative should work toward "getting it right", and yet, there seems to be no standard of reference for what is "simple" or "right" in the ways in which persons talk about themselves.

⁸⁹ I am specifically referring to Strawson's objection against the narrativity thesis. This objection will be considered in the final section of this chapter.

Finally, Lamarque fears that creativity would make of personal narratives mini-works of fiction. In the third chapter of this thesis I analyzed the relative roles of fiction and nonfiction in memoir and concluded that memoir is a form of nonfiction aiming at an “authentic” presentation of the self. What I can now further emphasize is that authenticity does not have to exclude creativity. Creativity can be applied to personal narratives and can be advocated in a number of different ways; for instance, creativity might affect the selection and organization of episodes and memories, it might affect, in other words, the *style* the memoirist finds more consonant to the narration of his or her life.

Creativity is not sheer fantasy; in my approach to memoir I side with Schechtman and see in creativity a symptom of a specific style or personality more than the ability to generate stories that radically diverge from the status of facts. The kind of creativity I want to detect in memoir respects a certain reality constraint, and adopts reality as the set of information and beliefs that should be taken as the basis of an authentic personal narrative.

It is also important to remark how the absence of creativity in the construction of personal narratives is at odds with the way in which personal narratives cognitively develops. It is normal to tell, film, write, or at least speculate over narratives that despite being related to the same situation are not entirely overlapping. In fact, different narratives can be seen as the product of the constant reinterpretations and re-elaborations of our lives. Narratives, as seen with Damasio, have to be fluid and adjustable in order to satisfy not just the objective description of a portion of life, but the subjective description of life that is lived, and experienced by a self. Narratives of childhood, for instance, have to be attached to more recent narratives; the significance of an episode is based on its relation to other episodes, etc. This is not a problem,

and it is not a reason not to trust personal narratives; it is one of the many cognitive nuances characterizing the expression of the self. Contrary to what Lamarque argues, this is not an attempt to “fictionalize” life; it is simply a way of making sense of life in its continuity and in its relation to one continuous and yet evolving self. Being the “character” of a personal narrative is not like being a fictional character; fictional characters are not, or at least need not to be intended as the presentation of the author. Conversely, as seen in the previous chapter, memoir is characterized by the intention of finding a narrative in which the narrator, the author, searches and unfolds his authentic self. When a narrative is not intended to present an authentic self, then we are in front of a work of fiction, and there is no research, in fiction, for the identity of the author, for his authentic self. Lamarque is, I believe, concerned with the problem of attaching to the self a narrative that in fact does not belong to the self; and yet, such narrative would *fail* to describe the authentic self, and it would be, for this reason, not the work of nonfiction that autobiography is. Lamarque’s objection would then be valid only if applied to cases in which authenticity is not the goal and the primary intention of the narrative, not what the narrative is intended to display. And yet, as seen in this section, and in the discussion of the nonfictional status of autobiography carried on in the third chapter, I do not take this to be the case.

These considerations are important when considering the second risk implied by Lamarque’s criticism, namely that the tendency toward transforming personal narratives in “mini works of fiction” would lead to ethical problems in the understanding of the actions performed. This risk, as mentioned, would undermine Schechtman’s connection between personal identity and the four features. Yet, if we follow what has just been said, the risk of moral deception is outbalanced by a much closer look into the moral code of a person. This is, I think, easily visible

in memoir. It is not rare to find in memoir the very intention of explicating actions in light of their moral evaluation. Memoirs such as Mary Karr's *Lit* enforce this claim in being based on a narrative of faults and redemption; authors of memoirs come to terms with the ethical import of their decisions, and they present their actions under a self-reflective view in which actions are not only told but also evaluated. The moral authenticity we find in personal narratives has thus to be understood as an *assessment* of moral responsibility, and of how the author gauges the moral impact of the actions undertaken in the course of a life. This kind of vision of morality is further attached to the other features considered by Schechtman and specifically to self-interested concern, and to the degree of compensation it implies. It follows that the moral realizations we find in personal narratives are more complex than the realizations we can draw from the performance of a single, insulated action, and they have to be analyzed not only in reference to the motivations leading to an action and to its consequences, but also in reference to the relation between actions and a personal vision of the self.

3. Memoir and the Narrative Self

Schechtman's criteria of personal narration and Hutto's Narrative Practice Hypothesis are helpful in capturing elements that are relevant to the study of memoir. To begin with, Schechtman's emphasis on characterization, and on the study of the self as a person cast a light on the problem of personal identity as well as on the problem of "personality". When creating personal narratives in everyday life, we respond to the problem of personal identity by weaving narratives that are based on both the peculiarities of character each individual can claim to possess, and on the way in which, as individuals, we deal with our role as agents and with the

ways in which we stand in relation to the four features. It is important, once again, to remark how this is a cognitive phenomenon, and thus something everyone, to different degrees, tends to do. I am emphasizing, in other words, how the creation of autobiographical narratives is not exclusively a literary, or artistic effort. To a certain extent one might be tempted to say that it is part of human nature to respond to the question of identity by weaving personal narratives. When analyzing Hutto, the focus was on the cognitive need to listen to the narratives of others as a means to develop reason, and to navigate the social environment; with Schechtman we have instead raised the question of how and why personal narratives are created. We cannot claim that everyone is in search of an authentic rendition of the self, but we can opt for a minor claim, namely that the creation of personal narratives is what we unconsciously, and at times consciously, do to better understand ourselves as agents.

In this section I want to explore different ways in which literary and filmic memoir, as narratives intended to search the authentic self, can play with what is a natural cognitive tendency. Memoirs as artistic products enhance, emphasize, stimulate, and explain something that belongs to the nature of the self. The case of artistically accomplished memoirs is, in this sense, a privileged viewpoint for understanding the importance of personal narratives in the development of the person, and in the unfolding of identity. In what follows I will list some of the effects, and conclusions that can be drawn from adopting literary and filmic memoirs as examples of autobiographical narratives. Most of my considerations are based on how memoir is received by the audience, and yet, as I will show, memoir is likely to engage the audience in self-reflection, and, generally, in a deeper reflection on the question of the self.

3.1. *In Front of a Memoir*

The combination of stylistic features and a strong intentional desire to “find” the self through narratives have generated, in the history of memoir, an incredible number of histories of character and of how character relates actively to the society. Moreover, more clearly than in ordinary personal narratives, literary and filmic memoirs, in virtue of their enhanced aesthetic status, enforce the connection between identity and the four features, thus becoming a form of ethical reflection on the self. Memoir is an example of how artworks, generally speaking, can convey ethical values and trigger ethical reflection. This point is not new to the art debate and has, as its origin, Aristotle’s defense of poetry and specifically of tragedies. Memoir allows both the author and the reader to examine moral choices with the degree of distance provided by the narrative, and, furthermore, with the advantage of attending to moral choices that are already framed in the context of a life. The reader is in the advantaged position of exploring choices that had determined the course of a life without having to directly pay the consequences of such choices.

Moreover, because of the nonfictional nature of memoir, the actions described are more likely to belong to what the audience more commonly undergoes in real life. Surely, some fictional characters live through experiences that are absolutely “normal”, and yet, fiction is rarely, and does not always have to be organized along the lines of a “life-story”. Fiction can be limited to a few episodes and there is no need to know who the characters truly *are* aside from the “fictional moment” in which they are described. We are not interested, for instance, in the first years of schooling of Philip Roth’s Nathan Zuckerman, nor are we interested in all those

events that do not enter the sphere of action described by the fictions. We are not because those elements are not necessary in understanding the nature of the characters in reference to the plot presented. Contrary, in memoir, the emphasis is on the reality and authenticity of a person, i.e. the author, and the narration has to include elements capable of making us believe that the narration we are attending to is in fact the credible life of a person who lived through that life.

As much as we might at times hope to do so, we cannot live the life of fictional characters; we are stuck and absorbed in trivialities that we nonetheless are forced to notice and acknowledge as relevant in the constitution of a life-story. The events of a life are not “plotted”, the plot comes after the action. Reading a memoir gives us the undeniable advantage of assisting an already constructed plot that follows rigorous narrative choices; the rigor is given by the ex post facto reflection on life happenings that the author had to engage with in order to compose the memoir.

Memoir stimulates a conversation with our own self that our cognitive system is inclined to produce. The aesthetic distance provided by a book or by a movie allows us to suspend the emotional, psychological, and practical contingencies we face in daily life and to reflect more accurately on the implications of the actions and the choices undertaken by the author. As a consequence, we are often able to transfer such reflection on ourselves and to consider at least some of the questions, whether ethical or of another nature, entailed by our lives.

Secondly, the emphasis posed on personality and on its characterizing and somewhat unique features does not imply solipsism. Both Hutto and Schechtman focus not on the enclosed environment of an individual mind, but on the social environment. Beginning with Schechtman,

it should be noted how characterization and the four features are relational, and can only be grasped once we place personal narratives in the social context. Actions do not only affect the agent; moral responsibility is something directed toward us and toward others, and even self-interested concerns are based on a certain recognition of what we can and cannot do in relation to others. On the other hand, as seen with Hutto, the other is also a source of narratives, and listening to these narratives is essential in the understanding of the other as well as in constituting our own reason.

Writing or filming a memoir acknowledges these facts; the other, whether a relative, a friend, or more abstract entities such as a historical period or a location, is constantly acknowledged and emphasized in personal writing. This is because in no other cases as much as in the nonfictional world of memoir, the other has such weight, and the weight of the other is not eliminable. Parents, for instance, rarely disappear from personal narrations, and if they do, their absence might mean more than their presence in the context of the author's life. History, and with it the sense of an epoch, is one of the leading forces in the reflections on life contained in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, and in innumerable other works. Even places, such as Aciman's Alexandria and Pamuk's Istanbul can become active members of a dialogue leading to the weaving of autobiography. Memoir, once again, enhances the vision and the importance of the "other" in personal narratives, thus allowing personal reflections to become a dialogue among active participants.

The other can, in the context of an autobiographical narrative, be a person we met, or a place, or even the historical period in which we happen to live. And yet, we should be aware of how the first and most relevant instance of "the other" is, in autobiography, the author. When

reading a memoir we are not only attending to a story, we are not praising or diminishing the quality of a plot, and often we are not even so taken by issues of style – not only at least. Memoir is an example a basic human interest in encountering others, and in making these encounters significant. We have an interest, in other words, in why people, in this case the author, had certain intentions, certain motivations; we crave to know what the author did wrong and how he or she coped with life. It is not a coincidence, I believe, that the history of memoir began with “confessions”. Confessions are private dialogues; they entice a feeling of intimacy, they ask for such intimacy in order to be understood. Memoir calls forth in us the instinctual need of knowing the other, of engaging and listening. There is, in the practice of writing and reading autobiography, the human need for knowing other perspectives, and, on the other hand, of feeling involved in a dialogue. In part, this feature, both cognitive and structural, of memoir, makes memoir an example of a natural interest for narratives, and more generally, for the arts. Part of what we gain from an appreciation of narratives and of the arts is the possibility of getting into a dialogue with the work. In memoir, the dialogue is twofold, we are conversing, metaphorically speaking, with a piece of narrative, and we are simultaneously conversing with a person, who had the intention of telling a story about himself. There is nothing surprising in this fact, and the spontaneous fashion in which these feelings unfold and are played out in the practice of autobiography is motivated, as shown, by the very ways in which we cognitively deal with issues of personal identity – from development, to interaction, to recognition and self-evaluation.

Finally, the cognitive analysis of personal narratives undertaken in this chapter leads to another important claim on the nature of memoir. Memoirs embody the active desire to share

personal narratives. If a memoirist accepts the struggle of re-examining and displaying his or her life, it is not only because of a passion for self-scrutiny, but because talking about the self is, for the most part, a necessary ailment. Memoir, being a form of self-investigation, is also, in a slightly oblique sense, a form of therapy. The intention to find the authentic self is based on the necessity to be recognized for who we are, of being accepted, and of accepting ourselves. I believe that a strong component of the intention to write a memoir is to become able to accept the narrative that authentically describes the self, and to share it with others. It is, in other words, the intention to respond to the problem of who we are, and to find in the response a sense of closure and connection with that self.

Before summarizing the conclusions that can be drawn about memoir from the standpoint of a cognitive analysis of the narrative self, I want to consider one last objection regarding the legitimacy of seeing identity and the self through narrative proposed by Galen Strawson, who denies the connection between narrative and the self in his Anti-Narrativity Thesis.

4. Galen Strawson and the Anti-Narrativity Thesis

In his essay *Against Narrativity*, Galen Strawson attacks two tenets of the vision I, which Hutto and Schechtman defended in this chapter. Strawson disagrees with what he calls the psychological narrativity thesis, namely the thesis according to which human beings live or experience their lives in the form of a narrative that extends diachronically across past, present

and future. In addition, he criticizes what he refers to as the ethical narrativity thesis, namely the idea that only a narrative self is capable of self-reflection on the relative morality of actions.

The impression of the continuity of time is, according to Strawson, mistaken; a self can be seen as an episodic being, and an episodic self is not for this reason deprived of any capacity of ethical judgment. Such position stems from the idea that the act is the center of moral evaluation, and not the history preceding it; the outcomes of an action are already presupposed in the intention to act and can be analyzed in a strictly episodic fashion without having to recur to a diachronic evaluation.

Eliminating the importance of a diachronic view leads to a different conception of how a life can be told. In Strawson's terms, the description of the self does not involve narrative at all, but only what he refers to as "form finding". For instance, a "form" can be given by the way someone feels after a dinner with a close friend, or by the feelings that staring at a particularly challenging work of art can cause, etc. These forms are readily available in episodic instances of life and sufficient for self-understanding. None of these forms has, according to Strawson, to be related to a diachronic understanding of our lives, and can be analyzed separately as instances of the self.

Thus formulated, this thesis sounds highly implausible, as it is implausible to engage in self-understanding in light of a single episode. Yet, Strawson's thesis deserves more credit considering that he is not in fact referring to the "self" as seen in this chapter, but to a different entity, the SESMENT, (Subject of Experience that is a Single MENTAL Thing). As he describes it:

SESMENT is a unified period of experience as it is present and alive in the occurrence of an experience. [...] There cannot be a SESMENT without experience, and it is arguable that there cannot be an experience without a SESMENT. I take it that SESMENTS exist and are part of (concrete) reality. I think, in fact, that they are physical objects, as real as rabbits and atoms. It is true that this unpopular view depends on taking the word “objects” and “physical” in an unfamiliar way, but I think that we have to take them in this way when we do serious metaphysics from a materialist standpoint.⁹⁰

It is under the conception of the self as a SESMENT that the episodic nature of the self should be understood, and it is under this conception that the narrativity thesis could be rejected. In what follows I will present a number of objections that have been raised against Strawson’s view, and I will finally assess its implausibility in the case of memoir.

Van Inwagen begins with a criticism of the idea of SESMENTS and he questions what can make of SESMENTS as physical objects.⁹¹ Strawson acknowledges that SESMENTS cannot be objects recognizable because of their size and shape; he compares them to processes where by processes he means something similar to, for instance, performances. Yet, according to Van Inwagen, selves cannot be equated to performances; selves are ontologically definable as possessing not only properties, (as would also be the case for processes), but also a substance. Substances, following Aristotle’s definition, have properties but they are not like properties. The same applies to selves. In Strawson’s account the act of experiencing a certain situation is by itself enough to constitute a property, yet, whereas properties so understood can belong to a single, unrelated episode, and afterwards cease to exist, the same cannot be claimed for substances. Substance is not related to the presence of properties but continues to exist despite the alterations that properties can undergo. Along the same lines, a self has multiple properties attached to different episodes, but it is still a continuous substance. I do not, in terms of

⁹⁰ Strawson, G. “The Self and the SESMET”, in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6, No. 4, 1999: 99-135.

⁹¹ Van Inwagen, P. (2005). “The Self: Incredulous Stare Articulated”, in *The Self?* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing

“substance” become a different self when, for instance, I am biking over the Williamsburg bridge to get to Manhattan; my self remains the same despite the performance I am engaging in. The fatigue I might be feeling, the attention I am paying to the traffic, and the pleasant feeling of seeing the skyline of Manhattan are properties of that moment, or episode in which my self is involved, but they do not generate multiple instances of my self, nor do they alter its continuity.

Schechtman has raised a different objection.⁹² Her objection is based, as seen in this chapter, on the fact that in order to understand the problem of identity and the self we need also to consider how identity is dependent on the four features of moral responsibility, self-interested concern, compensation, and survival. These features point to the fact that the self is an active agent whose identity derives from the constitution of a personal narrative based on the actions undertaken and evaluated in the course of a life. When considering these aspects we are forced to refer to the larger unity of the person and not to a self considered uniquely in virtue of its metaphysical status as an episodic entity. As a person and as an agent, the identification of the self is based on what is implied by the past, and by future projections and expectations. Briefly, the focus, when dealing with the problem of identity, cannot be an episodic self detached from the continuity of a life, but a person understood in virtue of the complexity implied by agency and by what is outlined by the four features.

A last position worth mentioning on the connection between narrative and a diachronic self has been advocated by Catriona Mackenzie. Mackenzie relates the narrative diachronic

⁹² Schechtman, Marya. (2008). “Stories, Lives and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View”, in *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, Hutto ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

constitution of the self to the achievement of a sense of time.⁹³ Narrative thinking does not only have to work backward, it also has to somehow look at the self as a being with a future. Narratives, when related to autobiography are often forwardly oriented, they tend toward what the self will become once its position through time has been established. Mackenzie relates narrative thinking to imaginative projection where the self, in light of what is narrated, becomes capable of assimilating different points of view that will lead to a vision of what the future might entail. The ability to “see” a projection of the self in the future enhances our capacity for self-transformation; we are able to build on the narration of the past an image of what we might be in the future. This process implies an ability to “change” in light of the understanding of our own narratives. The future is in this sense based on the limitation imposed by the acknowledgement of the past, and this acknowledgment has to be strictly diachronic.

4.1 Being Narrative Selves

Applying Mackenzie’s argument to the case of memoir highlights how the narration of past episodes can also lead to an understanding of the future perspectives and decisions one might decide to undertake. The narrative thinking involved in crafting a memoir aims at understanding the past of a self, but it can also have a strong educational value in placing the self in the future. This point, as seen, accommodates a vision of memoir as a genre profiting, for the most part, from the diachronicity of life, where experience is seen as a continuum extending over time. If we follow Strawson’s intuition, the acknowledgement of experience is instead a momentary matter; in other words, experience is, for the self, what the SESMENT unit is

⁹³ Mackenzie, C. (2008). “Imagination, Identity, and Self-Transformation”, in *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, Kim Atkins and Catriona Mackenzie eds. New York: Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy.

experiencing at a specific time.

And yet, despite the advantages of a diachronic vision of the self, I do not think the core of the problem is whether selves are diachronic or episodic. The main problem entailed by Strawson's account is instead whether narrative is important, if not essential to the expression of the self. My position on memoir is not necessarily related to a diachronic understanding of the self; in fact, I think that it would be possible to build an episodic memoir in reference to time, but the episodes would still need to rely on some kind of connection, whether causal, emotional, or simply aesthetic. Simply put, we would still need a narrative.

The first observation to be made in favor of a narrative conception of selves stems from cognitive studies on the development of the autobiographical self I presented in this chapter. We began by seeing how a sense of narrative develops at the level of extended consciousness, we then moved to its advantages in the social environment and in the development of reason with Hutto, and we finally focused, with Schechtman, on the creation of personal narratives where attention was placed on the four features and on the constraints that need to be respected. The assumption behind these studies is that a narrative sense of the self is what allows us to be "persons" and to respond to the question of personal identity, and that, most importantly, our tendency toward a narrative presentation of the self is not an imposition, but a feature of our species.

At the same time, I believe that the advantages of a narrative conception of the self can be seen under a perspective that is not exclusively scientific, and that instead touches upon the reasons and the consequences of adopting a narrative approach. Literary and filmic memoir offer

a privileged perspective on this point in showing not only what might be an unconscious tendency toward personal narratives, but a conscious effort, or what at the beginning of this work, through the words of Zinsser, had been defined as an “art and a craft”. In this sense, a narrative account of the self should not solely be considered a form of introspection, but an actual action where the author, in the first person, takes a position on life and identity. The narrative construction of a life provides the author with a context of events and situations, and with the sense that these events are understandable in virtue of the narrative structure that has been given to them.

The action of memoir is not remembering, nor is it introspecting; it is providing a vision of the self, a vision the memoirist can, thanks to the mechanism of narrative, contemplate from an external standpoint. The struggle of memoir is often the problem in making internal and intricate research into an organized work, something manageable that sublimates the difficulties, if not the very mystery of expressing consciousness, by providing it with a structure where internal feelings and thoughts are understandable in the context of a life. Goldie⁹⁴ expresses a similar point when referring to the adoption of narrative as a self-governing policy, when he specifically refers to the ability to govern our emotions. For Goldie narrative is at the core of the way we think; narrative thinking is spontaneous and we apply it to daily situations in order to “govern” our emotions and plan our future. Emotions arise internally, and, to understand their import, to balance our engagement in a given situation, we step back and gauge their narrative unfolding; we become able to explain our reactions in context, and, importantly, we get better at “planning” the future. Through narrative thinking we encapsulate past and present, and we begin

⁹⁴ Goldie, Peter. (2009). “Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and Planning”, in *The Poetics, Aesthetics, and Philosophy of Narrative*. N. Carroll ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

to develop a picture of how their conception and structure can affect the future.

The idea of narrative thinking as a self-governing policy also opens narrative, and specifically autobiographical narratives, (Goldie himself sees autobiography as an example of narrative as a self-governing policy), to other considerations pertaining to the implications of personal narratives and why, I believe, they provide the privileged representation of the self. I will here consider two elements which, more than others, establish the cardinal role of a narrative presentation of the self; first, I want to emphasize how recurring to autobiographical narratives is, in fact, a way of providing life not only with a sense of stability, but with uniqueness. Secondly, I want to consider the blend of conditional thinking and responsibility that characterizes autobiography.

In the second chapter of this thesis I analyzed the necessary structural conditions behind memoir as a narrative. These conditions – among which I mentioned causality, a sense of emotional closure, and the awareness of the time in which life unfolds – are, I believe, the pillars for a structure that, as seen, is bound to portray the identity of the author and narrator. What can now be added is the way in which the structure is organized, its causal connections, the events described etc., will generate a narrative unique in its ability to express the self. By unique, I do not imply that there can be only one autobiography; people change over time and despite a certain constancy in terms of personality, what becomes relevant for the purpose of an autobiography, (and description of the self), can change. Uniqueness should be understood as the desire to see in narrative, a story about the self that only the self can tell, something leading to the authentic self. Narrating the self is, on the one hand, an essential and shared feature of human

beings, and, on the other hand, what most effectively makes them different from each other and unique in their own being.

The combination of a self-governing policy, and the sense of uniqueness transmitted by autobiographical narratives, is also, importantly, the source of a sense of responsibility. When we identify the self in an autobiographical narrative we commit to that narrative, in a way, we become that narrative. The process of discovery enacted by memoir has its completion in a self that is now, in virtue of the narrative, structured, organized, and interpreted. If this process is able to guarantee stability, it also has the ability to make the self accept the responsibility of being the person the narrative has described. If the narrative, so to speak, found a solution to the problem of the self, now that solution has to be embraced. Rick Moody, in the *The Black Veil*⁹⁵, a memoir on Moody's years of drug and alcohol abuse, provides an example of how the rendition of a life in a narrative can almost literally drag the author into responsibility. In the final chapter of the book, Moody lists what he left out, what he did not "confess"; he rants about it and his narrative changes, or better expressed, he dismisses the structure which he had imposed from the first page, and appropriate to the title of the book, lifts the black veil that covered these additional aspects to his past and personality. There is something akin to an overdose of courage in spelling out how his past had led him to sleep through the numerous phone calls his family had placed to his apartment, hoping to obtain his help while his sister was dying. There is, also, a parallel between having "left out" certain events from the narrative and having lost a close person; yet these two losses come back, they backfire in a narrative that is now, a few pages before the end, drenched in responsibility – nothing, in the end, has been left out: the narrative carries it.

⁹⁵ Moody, Rick. (2002). *The Black Veil*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

On the one hand, we are responsible for the creation of a narrative; on the other hand, once the authentic rendition of the self has been found, the narrative becomes something akin to a path the author can rehearse. Confronted by his own narrative the author can go back to the crucial turning points, can speculate on the existence of other narratives that had not, consciously or unconsciously been chosen. This element, the possibility of seeing the “conditionals” of the past is not only a way to learn from past choices, it informs us how to act in the future; it is, mainly, a form of assessment, and an assessment that is immediately connected to the sense of responsibility and uniqueness which the narrative communicates. I am relating the awareness of conditional scenarios with uniqueness and responsibility because, simply put, despite being able to see what a life might have been, we cannot go back. Every assessment of what could have happened is bound to remind us that the narrative followed a different direction; it became unique in a different way, and, finally, it is for that narrative, the *unconditional* narrative, that we are responsible.

I conclude this chapter by pointing out the advantages that a narrative conception of the self has in enhancing a sense of personal uniqueness and in cementing a sense of responsibility over life. The elements mentioned are intertwined and their connection is guaranteed by the very structuring of the narrative. One might argue that a single, unrelated experience can be unique, and that a single experience can trigger a sense of responsibility, but this is different from the uniqueness and responsibility we achieve if we commit to a narrative vision of the self. The uniqueness and responsibility that characterize autobiographical narratives have the power to describe more than a moment or a trait of our personality, they have the ability of *defining* who

we are; autobiographical narratives are subjective, they express the point of view of one person, but that point of view is likely to become more objective than we might expect. Memoirs are objects manufactured by the self to allow the self to see himself – “narrative mirrors”.

Conclusions

The vision of the self I defended in this chapter, and thus the vision that I take to be appropriate to describe the self that emerges in memoir, is based on studies in neuroscience and cognitive science. My insistence on a cognitive vision of the self is motivated by my desire to explain the issue of identity, and the description of the self that follows from it, in light of how we normally, if not biologically, act as cognitive beings.

In the previous chapter, I expanded upon the notion of authenticity and of how memoir, in being a nonfictional narrative, manifests the intention of describing the self for what the author “authentically” believes his or her own self to be. The notion of authenticity is not attached to epistemological criteria of “truth value” and cannot be investigated from an objective and all-knowing point of view. And yet, despite the subjective constraints inherent to the notion of the authentic self, this chapter has shown how the lack of objective criteria validating the truth of what is described in a memoir, is not an insurmountable problem. More precisely, asking for an impeccable rendition of the status of facts, and hence of the events and happenings of a life, is at odds with the ways in which our cognitive system creates and processes personal narratives.

I further emphasized in this chapter how personal narratives are not only spontaneous

products of our cognitive system, but an essential ingredient for the continuity of identity, and for our self-recognition as persons and agents. Specifically, I began by emphasizing how the notion of the autobiographical self is a deeply human and complex phenomenon which belongs to our consciousness and that needs to be expressed in order to attain a sense of “possession” over the persons we are. Damasio’s analysis of extended consciousness is a pre-condition for the study of the autobiographical self as it allows us to talk about ourselves as agents, to have a personality, and to see our lives unfolding through time. The sense of having a life, and of being the subject of a life is crucial to our cognitive development. Damasio further stresses how the sense of an autobiographical self is enhanced by our capacity to generate propositional narratives that encompass life happenings temporally and spatially organized.

In the second part of this chapter I considered two theories in folk psychology, respectively from Hutto and Schechtman that analyze in detail the connection between narratives and the self. Hutto’s contribution is related to the importance of second person narratives when navigating the social environment; listening to second person narratives allows us to simultaneously understand the “revelations” of others and develop our own reasoning abilities. I related Hutto’s account to the “encounter” with a significant other, i.e. the author, that takes place in memoir. Memoir can be seen as a complex form of second person narrative in which we do not simply listen to the explanations for an isolated action, but rather benefit from the explanations and confessions, that aim to clarify and explain who the author is, why he has undertaken certain decisions, etc. This encounter is also relevant in stimulating our own engagement with the narrative. Memoir can become a dialogue between the audience and the author, and this dialogue is likely to have a strong educational import.

Schechtman's account is relevant in seeing how personal narratives are constructed, and in analyzing their role in relation to the problem of personal identity. Personal identity is, according to Schechtman, related to the four features of moral responsibility, self-interested concern, compensation, and survival; these features are related to the combination of personal agency and autobiographical narratives, and to the importance of evaluating our position in the narrative to which we belong. Schechtman's position highlights what the creation of memoir implies; furthermore, her emphasis on the authenticity of the person in personal narratives helps us understand the meaning of authenticity in reference to memoir. An authentic memoir is a memoir that aims at the presentation of a person and that respects narrative, articulation, and reality constraints to the extent discussed in this chapter. A memoir that instead diverges from an authentic presentation of the self, fails in its purpose, and is thus comparable to a work of fiction.

I concluded this chapter with a last reflection, aimed to contrast Strawson's anti-narrative thesis, on why the self is bound to express itself narratively. Part of my response is, as seen, based on cognitive science, and on the very structure of the human brain. Yet, I also wanted to add how recurring to a narrative expression of the self also responds to the desire to see the self as unique, and as uniquely responsible for his life and identity. Narrative constructions deepen the mechanism of introspection and self-investigation in becoming a stable definition of who we are, and in making us accept this definition. What I believe narratives allow the self to see, is its own image, an image that is narratively extended to the entire span of a life. We can contemplate, with memoir, who we are.

In the contest between life and literature, life wins every time.
Anatole Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage*

Chapter V

Concluding Considerations

This dissertation aimed at providing a narrative theory of memoir, a theory capable of displaying the conditions that need to be established in order to call something a memoir. In each chapter I pointed to elements which, when seen in their combination, are able to define memoir in its structure, intentions, and implications. In particular, I focused on two leading strands of questions. On the one hand, I wanted to investigate the notion of memoir in its historical evolution and to derive from this evolution the necessary structural conditions that a memoir needs to respect as a narrative. On the other hand, my concern was related to the nonfictional status of autobiographical narratives, and to their not only close, but inevitable relation to the identity of the memoirist. In other words, my belief is that a narrative theory of memoir needs to include considerations concerning the structure of the narrative as well as an analysis of how this structure is ideated by the memoirist as a pathway to his own identity.

The first two chapters responded to the first of the abovementioned problems, the last two were concerned with the second. My strategy has been the same in both cases; I began with an analysis of some of the main works of literature on the topic, starting from more general considerations pertaining to narratives generally construed and then moved to the specific case of autobiography, and to the considerations and insights that are applicable to this specific genre.

The initial definition I adopted, a definition based on the evolutionary history of memoir sees this genre as a form of life-weaving, having at its center the identity of the memoirist. The action of weaving has the advantage of reminding us of the complex task of putting together significant episodes and memories that are capable of encompassing a life as it has been lived and experience from the first person point of view of the author. Yet, weaving, as a metaphor for the action implied in autobiographical expression, also points, I believe, to the idea of constructing something that not only related events, but that unites them cohesively into a narrative.

It is because of my belief in memoir as a form of narrative that I moved, in the second chapter of my thesis, to what narratives are and to what are the necessary conditions that need to be respected. After examining different positions on the topic of narrative, generally construed, I derived the elements that I believe characterize autobiographical narratives specifically. Memoirs, I concluded are narratives in the adoption of 1. Causal connections where an event has to logically follow from another, and where the main question that needs to be answered is a question on the identity of the person; 2. A sense of emotional closure, allowing the author to consider the emotions undergone in a whole, and; 3. A sense of awareness of the combination of time and the experiences constellating a life, an awareness that, in my understanding, is considerably less binding than an actual evaluation, whether moral or of a different nature of a life.

However relevant, structural conditions cannot fully capture the import of memoir as a narrative; what is lacking is a consideration of the fact that an analysis of memoir cannot be limited to how the narrative is organized; it has to be expanded to the intention that led to the

narrative. The problem of intentionality is fundamental in memoir because the intention is directed not just at a representation of facts, but at the presentation, if not at the definition of who the author is. If we were to imagine the intention of autobiography as a vector, we would have to see this vector as moving first inward, toward the person, and then outward, toward the narrative that at this point will define the person, and writer of autobiography.

Autobiography is characterized by the nonfictional intention of creating a narrative that will be considered authentic in its capacity to capture the identity of the self who is narrating. There are three components in this definition, first, the notion of nonfictional intention, second the meaning of “authentic” and the connotation of memoir as an authentic narrative, and, lastly, the problem of personal identity. The first two have been the focus of the third chapter; the problem of personal identity has been analyzed in the last chapter.

Discussing intentionality, and more precisely the nonfictional status of authorial intention in the case of memoir is important in light of the frequent accusation that memoir is comparable, owing to its lack of facts, to works of fiction. The authors of memoirs might be constructing micro-fictions out of their lives, and their status would then be equivalent to that of a fictional character. My refutation of this argument is not based on a defense of the relative reliability of what is narrated in memoir; I am not concerned with whether a memoir follows objectively what happened in the course of a life. The nonfictional status of memoir is instead to be found in the research of a narrative that would authentically present the self for who the self is. The authenticity of an autobiographical narrative is an expression of the self, founded by the self, as representative of identity.

Authenticity also relates to features of personal narratives that have been analyzed in the last chapter of this work. The emphasis, at this point, has been on how authenticity can attach to the creation of personal narratives. Autobiographical narratives are not only literary or filmic constructions; they are a feature of our cognitive system and essential to the way we develop reason, establish our role in society, act, and to the way in which human beings try to respond to the question of personal identity. The cognitive basis of personal narratives is also matched by some of the features that can be detected in autobiographies. I mentioned, as some of the most relevant, the feeling of uniqueness and the following sense of responsibility that follow from a narrative expression of the self. Beginning with an introspective analysis of memories and the past, personal narratives are capable of casting a light on the very definition of the person, and to present an account that leads to the specificities of each person, to the person's identity. When the intention described is not present, when authenticity is not the goal a narrative is trying to achieve, then we are not looking at what can properly be defined as a memoir; we are instead beholders of a fictional work.

My reliance on the structure of our cognitive system, and on what is our natural tendency toward building autobiographical narratives as a means to make sense of identity is based on the desire to find in the multifaceted history of memoir a common cognitive background, something that, to a certain extent, can justify its existence as a separate genre.

However, I want to remark how a scientific approach is neither able to resolve the discussion on memoir, nor to simplify the multiple solutions that memoirists have found to

respond to the question of identity. If anything, providing a cognitive basis to memoir, makes us turn back to its history, and opens a door to further insights into this genre. We can, in other words, speculate on how the brain processes identity, but we cannot generalize; we cannot see in one objectively describable mechanism a solution that would cover the production of each individual memoir. Each work, from the examples mentioned, to other past and future memoirs is, to a large extent, unique. What contributes to the uniqueness of memoir is the very uniqueness of each individual and the multiple ways in which personal narratives can be crafted. Memoir is the product of the intention to discover authenticity; even if we agree to see in this intention something akin to a cognitive mechanism we all share, we still have to go back to different memoirs to trace and observe the ways in which memoirists have constructed their authentic narratives – there is no shortage of examples.

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