Paul John Eakin

What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?

> It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a "narrative," and that this narrative *is* us, our identities.
>
> —Oliver Sacks

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

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

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autobiography could relate. Developmental psychologists convince me, though, that we are trained as children to attach special importance to one kind of selfhood, that of the extended self, so much so that we do in fact regard it as identity's signature. The extended self is the self of memory and anticipation, extending across time. It is this temporal dimension of extended selfhood that lends itself to expression in narrative form of the kind Sacks posits as identity's core. For others, we are indeed versions of the extended self and its identity story; when we perform these stories, we establish ourselves for our interlocutors as normal individuals—something that Mr. Thompson tried to do, and failed.

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

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

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

What do these "snapshots" of "interrupted" lives look like? There were usually a dozen or more of them on the page, with a banner headline across the top an-

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nouncing some of the headings of the individual profiles, as, for example, this one from 17 November 2001: "A Taste for Fine Wine, a Seeker of Good Deals, and Fun on Halloween." The single large photograph that invariably headed the page—usually a picture of some makeshift urban shrine to the missing or else a burial scene—captured the commemorative intention behind the portraits arranged in columns below. Yet the portraits, striking in their informality, are clearly not obituaries in any usual sense, nor are they eulogies. The header for each piece features some leading characteristic, a kind of capsule identity or microstory: "The Gadget Guru," "A Motorcycle for a Ring," "Always Time for Golf." The short paragraphs that follow, touching on personal qualities, habits, favorite activities, and plans, highlight life plots now left incomplete. Ironies and fateful choices abound. The loose narrative fragments are exactly like the ephemeral bits and pieces of the stories we tell about ourselves every day, and this is not surprising, for the portraits were generated in conversations between reporters and those close to the deceased. While I will be focusing on autobiography in the second half of this essay on narrative identity, I feature these biographical pieces here because they display with such immediacy the scraps of identity narrative that make up all forms of self-narration and life writing. The "Portraits of Grief" page offers a kind of viewing platform, as it were, from which we can glimpse in a kind of freeze-frame what our narratively constructed identities might look like in the aggregate. We see, cumulatively, a veritable anthology of the models of identity and life story that are current in our culture; the homeliness, the familiarity, of this identity narrative material is deeply moving precisely because we use it to talk about ourselves every day. If this is what the narrative identity system, rendered in memorable shorthand, looks like when it is functioning normally, what does it look like when it breaks down altogether?

Picture an old man in a wheelchair clutching a teddy bear, an old man who has forgotten who he is, an old man no one else seems to know. This was John Kingery's plight, and I remember that when I read his disturbing story in the *New York Times* some years ago, it conjured up the fate that might await us all if our social identities should become unmoored from their narrative anchor in autobiographical memory. The front-page article reports that this eighty-two-year-old man had been abandoned at a dog racing track in Idaho: "A typewritten note pinned to his chest identified him as 'John King,' an Alzheimer's patient in need of care. He was wearing bedroom slippers and a sweatshirt that said 'Proud to be an American.' The labels on his new clothing had been cut away, and all identifying markers on his wheelchair were removed" (Egan). Identity theft squared, I thought. As it turned out, one of Kingery's daughters, who had been appropriating his pension and Social Security checks, had dumped him at the track; then a second daughter from an earlier marriage, reading her father's story in the paper, flew to his rescue. While the *Times* reporter's angle on the Kingery case was "parent-dumping," for me this man's story was his lack of story—for a time no one knew who he was. Are we diminished as persons, I wondered, when we can no longer say who we are? And while we can, what are our ethical responsibilities toward those who can't? The hard lesson of our population's increasing longevity is that more and more of us will live to witness if not to experience for ourselves what it's like to become de-storied individuals.

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

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

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

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

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that precedes the narrative, where Karr stresses the years of "research" she invested pursuing her story's "veracity."

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

So much fiction in this memoir. And yet. And yet. We need to reckon with Karr's insistence on the ostensibly factual: the dates, the photographs, the narrator's continuing struggle with her memory and her constant checking for error with her sister Lecia and her mother. So how should we read Pokey and her story? Is she only a character in a story, or does she stand for something more, a reasonably accurate portrait of young Mary Karr that would have a documentary, biographical value of some kind? Certainly the autobiographer reminds us frequently of her commitment to autobiographical truth, but in the last analysis, what seems to count most for her is her memory's report of what she once thought and felt; *this* is the past she seeks to reconstruct, and only she can be the arbiter of its truth. That is to say that for Karr—and for the autobiographers who interest me the most—the allegiance to truth that is the central, defining characteristic of memoir is less an allegiance to a factual record that biographers and historians could check than an allegiance to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states, an allegiance to the history of one's self. One way or another, all autobiography is about self, yet it is a measure of the difficulty of defining human consciousness that the place of self in autobiographical discourse remains comparatively unexamined. Advances today in brain studies, however, make it worth our while to revisit self, the deep subject of autobiography's "I."

So let me ask again, what is the relation between Mary Karr and Pokey, the seven-year-old Mary Karr figure in *The Liars' Club*? One answer could be that Pokey—or the protagonist of any autobiography—*and the self for which she stands* are both effects of language, and any relation between them would be perforce arbitrary and unstable. Indeed, developmental psychologists have studied how children learn what we may call the language of selfhood, and they show how children are taught by parents and caregivers what it means to say "I" as they begin to tell stories about themselves.[1] In the rest of this essay, however, drawing on Antonio Damasio's account of consciousness in *The Feeling of What Happens*, I want to consider a different source of self, tracing it to our bodies. Damasio argues that self is not an effect of language but rather an effect of the neurological structure of the brain. He radi-

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cally expands the meaning of *self*, suggesting its deep implication in the life of the human organism at every level.[2] I should pause here to note that Dr. Damasio is the M. W. Van Allen Distinguished Professor and Head of the Department of Neurology at the University of Iowa College of Medicine in Iowa City. I should also emphasize that I will be speculating about self in autobiography on the basis of neurobiological theory that is itself already necessarily speculative.[3]

The premise of Damasio's theory of self is "the idea that a sense of self [is] an indispensable part of the conscious mind" (7). Self is a feeling, specifically "a feeling of knowing," "a feeling of what happens." And what does happen? The body responds to its encounters with objects in its environment, and it also responds to its own changing internal states. And *self* is Damasio's name for the feeling of awareness or knowing that these events are taking place. To be conscious is to be endowed with this feeling of knowing that is self; the alternative is a pathological condition, which Damasio dramatizes in the striking case of a man undergoing an epileptic absence seizure: "He was both there and not there, certainly awake, attentive in part, behaving for sure, bodily present but personally unaccounted for, absent without leave. . . . I had witnessed the razor-sharp transition between a fully conscious mind and a mind deprived of the sense of self" (6–7).

For Damasio, the neurobiology of consciousness, of "the movie-in-the-brain," must address two interconnected problems: first, "the problem of understanding how the brain inside the human organism engenders the mental patterns we call . . . the images of an object"; and second, "the problem of how, in parallel with engendering mental patterns for an object, the brain also engenders a sense of self in the act of knowing" (9). Pursuing his movie metaphor for the stream of consciousness, Damasio asks, how does the brain generate "the movie-in-the-brain," and how does it generate "the *appearance* of an owner and observer for the movie *within the movie*" (11)? Underpinning Damasio's bold attempt to answer these questions is his conviction that "consciousness is not a monolith, at least in humans: it can be separated into simple and complex kinds, and the neurological evidence makes the separation transparent" (16). Damasio identifies two distinct kinds of consciousness and self: (1) a simple level of "core consciousness" and "core self", and (2) developing from it, a more complex level of "extended consciousness" and "autobiographical self."[4]

Underlying these two modes of consciousness, Damasio traces "the deep roots for the self" (22) to a "*proto-self*." Emphasizing that "we are *not* conscious of the proto-self," he defines it as "*a coherent collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the physical structure of the organism in its many dimensions*" (174). This mapping registers the body's *homeostasis*, W. B. Cannon's term for "the automatic regulation of temperature, oxygen concentration, or pH" in the body (39–40). In this homeostatic activity recorded in the proto-self Damasio discerns the biological antecedents of the sense of self that is central to his conception of consciousness, "the sense of a single, bounded, living organism bent on maintaining stability to maintain its life" (136). From an evolutionary perspective, self is not some abstract philosophical concept but rather a name for a feeling embedded in the physiological processes necessary for survival. Self, then, for Damasio, is first and last *of* and *about* the body; to speak of the *embodied* self would be redundant, for there is no other.[5]

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

The final and highest level of Damasio's three-tier model of mental reality is extended consciousness and autobiographical self, enabled by the human organism's vast memory capacity. Autobiographical memory permits a constantly updated and revised "aggregate of dispositional records of who we have been physically and of who we have usually been behaviorally, along with records of who we plan to be in the future" (173). It is this store of memories that constitutes identity and personhood, the familiar materials of life story and memoir. While it's true that our experience of life story is emphatically linguistic, Damasio aligns himself with developmental psychologists such as Jerome Kagan who maintain that the emergence of the autobiographical self does not require language, and he speculates that bonobo chimpanzees and dogs may well possess autobiographical selves.[6]

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

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

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to produce a single, unified experience, for example, of seeing a cat" (Searle, "Mystery: Part 2" 54). Consciousness seems inevitably to generate a sense of some central, perceiving entity distinct from the experience perceived. Damasio stresses, however, that there is no neurological evidence to support such a distinction, for despite the illusion of unified perception that "binding" miraculously creates, multiple centers of activity in the brain produce it. Continuing the long-term attack on Cartesian dualism that he launched in his earlier book, *Descartes' Error*, Damasio urges that his conception of self has absolutely nothing to do with "the infamous homunculus," the notion that there is a distinct space in the brain occupied by the "knower" function ("the little man"), which "possess[es] the knowledge needed to interpret the images formed in that brain" (189).

Damasio's anti-homunculus stance informs the language he uses to express the experience of knowing that is self: his choice of metaphors and his conception of narrative. I have already mentioned the first of his metaphors, the "movie-in-the-brain." He draws the second metaphor from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "you are the music while the music lasts." Both metaphors address perception by refusing any split between perceiver and perceived, and both stress process and duration. Paradoxically, although the feeling of knowing generates a sense of individual perspective, ownership, and agency, the rudiments of what will flower eventually as a sense of bounded identity and personhood, these proto-I-character features of consciousness are to be understood as fused with and not standing free from the life experience of which they are a part. The syntax of autobiographical discourse always posits a subject "I" performing actions: *I* do things, *I* feel and will; *I* remember and plan. By contrast, in the underlying syntax of core consciousness, self resides alike in both subject and predicate. Damasio probes this paradox when he writes of "the *appearance* of an owner and observer for the movie *within the movie*" (11), for "there is no external spectator" (171) for the "movie-in-the-brain." Consciousness *is* the watching, *is* the knowing. Similarly, repeating Eliot's music metaphor, Damasio writes: "The story contained in the images of core consciousness is not told by some clever homunculus. Nor is the story really told by *you* as a self because the core *you* is only born as the story is told, *within the story itself*. You exist as a mental being when primordial stories are being told, and only then. . . . You are the music while the music lasts" (191).[7] As Damasio's music and movie metaphors suggest, *self inheres in a narrative of some kind*. Narrative identity, then, the Sacksian notion that what we are could be said to be a story of some kind, is not merely the product of social convention; it is rooted in our lives in and as bodies.

Damasio's extensive use of narrative as a concept to express the experience of self at the level of core consciousness is at once both familiar and distinctive. Whether it unfolds in movies, in music, in autobiographies, or in the brain, narrative is a temporal form that "maps what happens over time." But for Damasio, narrative is biological before it is linguistic and literary: it denotes a natural process, the "imagetic representation of sequences of brain events" in prelinguistic, "wordless stories about what happens to an organism immersed in an environment" (189). The brain's narrative, moreover, is not only wordless but *untold*, as Damasio's paradoxical movie and music metaphors are designed to illustrate; instead of a teller, there is

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only—and persistently—what we might call a teller-effect, a self that emerges and lives its life only within the narrative matrix of consciousness. For Damasio, self and narrative are so intimately linked that to speak of the one is reciprocally to speak of the other. I believe that the same holds true for autobiography—hence my growing preference for terms such as *I-narrative*, *self-experience*, and *identity narrative*.

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

> *They are both temporal forms*: self is not an entity but a state of feeling, an integral part of the process of consciousness unfolding over time.
>
> *They both generate the illusion of a teller*: although the experience of selfhood inevitably creates a sense that it is being witnessed or narrated, a free-standing observer/teller figure cannot be extrapolated from it.
>
> *They both serve a homeostatic goal*: the adaptive purpose of self-narrative, whether neurobiological or literary, would be the maintenance of stability in the human individual through the creation of a sense of identity; as self-narration maps and monitors the succession of body or identity states, it engenders "the notion of a bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same" (134).

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

We tend instinctively to think of autobiography as a narrative container or envelope of some kind in which we express our sense of identity, as though identity and narrative were somehow separable, whereas Damasio's account of self posits that our sense of identity is itself generated *as* and *in* a narrative dimension of consciousness. Recall Damasio's "movie-in-the-brain" figure, which nicely encapsulates the gulf between experiential and neurological accounts of consciousness. We all can testify that consciousness generates "the *appearance* of an owner and observer for the movie" unfolding in our heads, while neurological findings oblige Damasio to stress that the owner-observer figure is located—paradoxically—"*within the movie*" it seems to witness and not outside it. Our sense of having selves distinct from our stories is, nevertheless, hugely productive, serving our need for a stable sense of continuous identity stretching over time. When we talk about ourselves, and even more when we fashion an I-character in an autobiography, we give a degree of permanence and narrative solidity—or "body," we might say—to otherwise evanescent states of identity feeling. We get the satisfaction of seeming to see ourselves see, of seeming to see our selves. That is the psychological gratification of autobiography's reflexiveness, of its illusive teller-effect.

To recognize the teller-effect as an illusion, however, to understand selfhood as

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a kind of "music" that we perform as we live, can prompt us to locate the content of self-experience in an autobiography not merely in the central figures of the I-character and the I-narrator where we are conditioned to look for it but in the identity narrative as a whole. In *The Liars' Club*, then, it would be the I-narrative *about* Pokey and not just the Pokey-character it features that would be the true locus of Mary Karr's reconstruction of her earlier self.[8] If in the counterintuitive syntax of consciousness self inhabits both subject and predicate, narrative as well as character, then autobiography not only delivers metaphors of self, it *is* a metaphor of self. The narrative activity in and of autobiography is an identity activity. Borrowing Damasio's borrowing of T. S. Eliot's metaphor, we might say that *The Liars' Club is* Mary Karr while she writes her story and perhaps even while we read it too: she *is* the music of her narrative while the music lasts. Why does she need to get her story straight? Not just to satisfy the biography police but rather to satisfy a psychological imperative that gravitates to the performance of narrative as integral to the experience of identity. Narrative is the name of the identity game in autobiography just as it is in consciousness and in interpersonal relations, and nowhere more so than in *The Liars' Club* where Karr makes clear that her own practice of self-narration is rooted in her father's tall-tale telling that shaped her childhood and her artistic vocation. If her childhood is filled with stories, so is her adult life, in which, she tells us, the narrative work of psychoanalysis played into the writing of her autobiography. And the autobiography's account of all this making of identity narrative comes to climax and closure with the twin stories-within-stories of her father's final tale and her mother's confessional revelations about her hidden past, a past so wounding that it had driven her to the knife-wielding act of madness that opens the memoir. Nowhere is Karr's belief in narrative as the motor of identity more strikingly displayed than in her response to her father's stroke at the end of the book. Devastated by the blow that silences Pete Karr and his voice for good, she responds to his aphasia by playing for them both a tape of one of his tall-tales—and, we might add, by writing *The Liars' Club*.[9] When we write autobiography and when we read it, we repeat in our imaginations the rhythms of identity experience that autobiographical narratives describe. I believe that the identity narrative impulse that autobiographies express is the same that we respond to every day in talking about ourselves; both may be grounded in the neurobiological rhythms of consciousness.

ENDNOTES

1. For an account of this research, see Eakin, *How* 106–16.

2. Damasio reasons that self must preexist language: "If self and consciousness were born de novo from language, they would constitute the sole instance of words without an underlying concept" (108). Damasio's formulation here, setting up two clear-cut "before" or "after" positions on the relation between self and language (and indeed on the relation between language and its referents), strikes me as problematic to the extent that it does not allow for the possibility of a dynamic interplay between them. Rodney Needham proposes, for example, that "new inner states" may be created and "distinctively experienced" as "new lexical discriminations are made" (77). See Eakin, *Touching* 97–100.

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3. Damasio is careful not to overstate his claims. "I regard the thought of solving *the* consciousness problem with some skepticism. I simply hope," he writes, "that the ideas presented here help with the eventual elucidation of the problem of self from a biological perspective" (12).

4. Damasio compares his "separation of consciousness into at least two levels of phenomena" with Gerald M. Edelman's twofold distinction between "primary" and "higher-order" consciousness (338n10).

5. Damasio cites Kant, Nietzsche, Freud, Merleau-Ponty, and others as precedents for his view that "the body is the basis for the self" (347n4).

6. Damasio usefully summarizes his thinking about kinds of self in two schematic, summary tables (174–75).

7. Neurologist Gerald M. Edelman characterizes perceptual events in the brain in a similar musical metaphor: "Think if you had a hundred thousand wires randomly connecting four string quartet players and that, even though they weren't speaking words, signals were going back and forth in all kinds of hidden ways [as you usually get them by the subtle nonverbal interactions between the players] that make the whole set of sounds a unified ensemble. That's how the maps of the brain work by re-entry." Quoting this comment, Oliver Sacks adds that in Edelman's conception of the brain there is "an orchestra, an ensemble—but without a conductor, an orchestra which makes its own music" ("Making" 44–45).

8. In identifying Pokey as the I-character in *The Liars' Club*, I am simplifying a rhetorical situation of considerable complexity in which the distinction between protagonist and narrator is fluid, for protagonists often assume, as Karr's does, a narrator function, and narrators cumulatively take on the solidity of a character.

9. Karr makes clear that the tape functions simultaneously as the record of a story and the record of an identity: "I started shuffling through a shoebox of cassette tapes on the floor till I laid hold to the one with 'Pete Karr' on the label in red Magic Marker" (303).

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