LIVING AUTOBIOGRAPHICALLY

How We Create Identity in Narrative

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CHAPTER 1

TALKING ABOUT OURSELVES

The Rules of the Game

We tell stories about ourselves every day. Sometimes we can get other people to listen to them, but even when we can't, at any given moment this process of self-narration is constantly unfolding in our heads, in however loose and disorderly a fashion. In a certain sense we are always talking about ourselves to ourselves if to no one else, making plans about what we're going to do, reviewing what we have done and thought and felt. This talking in our heads is the primary content of what the psychologist William James taught us more than a hundred years ago to call the stream of consciousness. More recently, the neurologist Oliver Sacks has made as bold a claim for the function of this self-narration in our lives as any I have ever encountered: "It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative,' and that this narrative *is* us, our identities" (*The Man Who Mistook* 110, emphasis in original).

Sacks's 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 puzzle raised by this disturbing case, the radical equivalence Sacks proposes between narrative and identity, between the stories we tell about ourselves and who we really are.

If Sacks is right, and I am convinced that he is, then talking about ourselves involves a lot more than self-indulgence; when we do it, we perform a work of self-construction. The very phrase "talking about/ourselves" tends to separate selfhood from the act of expressing it, to attribute an independent existence to the "ourselves" we would be "talking about," whereas the "talking," I argue, actually calls our narrative identities into being; there is a mutually enhancing interplay between what we are and what we say we are. In speaking of *narrative identity* in the pages that follow, I propose, as Sacks does, an extremely close and dynamic relation between narrative and identity, for narrative is not only a literary form but part of the fabric of our lived experience. When it comes to our identities, narrative is not merely *about* self, but is rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self. In this chapter I explore the social sources and ethical implications of this notion of narrative identity.

Jolting Events

"This narrative *is* us, our identities"—surely the idea that what we are is a story of some kind is counterintuitive and even extravagant. Don't we know that we are 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 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 term *extended self* comes from the psychologist Ulric Neisser, who has identified at least five kinds of selfhood, involving physical, social, and mental contexts.[1] It is Neisser's extended self, the self of memory and anticipation, the self existing continuously across time, that is the primary subject of autobiographical discourse. According to Neisser, by the age of three, children are aware of themselves "as existing outside the present moment, and hence of the extended self" (47). 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 narrative is especially suited to registering the effects of time and change that are central to this mode of self-experience. As a result, the extended self takes the form of a narrative identity, and identity narratives serve as the medium

1. See the preface where I present Neisser's five kinds of selfhood.

for displaying that self in interpersonal encounters.[2] For others, we are indeed versions of the extended self and its identity story; when we perform these stories, we establish ourselves for others 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 practice is disrupted, however, we can be jolted into awareness of the central role it plays in organizing our social world. I want to consider two events that had this jolting power for me.

First, September 11. The erection of a viewing platform at Ground Zero in lower Manhattan in the months following the disaster testified to the desire of ordinary people 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 cataclysmic material event, in the days that followed we had to reckon with the grievous rent in the social fabric produced by the sudden death of nearly three thousand people. This social dimension of the catastrophe is harder to see, but

2. See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* for an elaborate account of narrative as a temporal form.

I think that when the *New York Times* created "A Nation Challenged," a special daily section that chronicled the aftermath of September 11, the paper helped us to envision 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 did so many people tell me they had read these portraits with intense fascination? I know I did. Yet for most readers, the victims were neither friends nor 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 would urge, to an instinctive reflex to heal the rupture in these lives that we accept as somehow representative of our own.[3] 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

3. On September 11, 2006 the *Times* published a follow-up to the "Portraits of Grief" project to record how some of the bereaved were dealing with "the healing process." See "Revisiting the Families."

magnitude of the project is arresting: more than eighteen hundred portraits had been published by the end of 2001.[4]

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 announcing some of the headings of the individual profiles, as, for example, this one from November 17, 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, were clearly not obituaries in any usual sense, nor were they eulogies. The header for each piece featured 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 followed, touching on personal qualities, habits, favorite activities, and plans, highlighted life plots now left incomplete. Ironies and fateful choices abounded. The loose narrative fragments were 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. They displayed

4. In fact, on December 31, 2001, the *Times* published in a composite double-page spread a list of all the names of the victims whose sketches had appeared in the "Portraits" project up to that date, a wall of names on the order of Maya Lin's Vietnam memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C. See "A Nation Challenged."

with striking immediacy the scraps of identity narrative that make up all forms of self-narration and life writing. In characterizing these "portraits" as "loose," "informal," and "fragmentary," I mean to suggest just how close they are to the *spoken* exchanges in which we transact our narrative identities. The novelty of the "portraits" is precisely a consequence of the ordinariness of the identity material they present, an ordinariness that accounts for the fact that there was no preexisting written genre to capture it—why, indeed, should this material be preserved? "Small talk," we call it. What we say about ourselves in passing is usually swept away, the detritus of discourse, and it takes a rupture in the normal unfolding of everyday life to bring it into view and remind us of its value as identity's bedrock. The "Portraits of Grief" pages offer a viewing platform, as it were, from which we can glimpse in a 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 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 the "Portraits of Grief" suggest 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

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 reported 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 is like to become de-storied individuals.

The Case against Narrative Identity

Thinking about the "Portraits of Grief" and John Kingery's story, I see many reasons to believe that what we are could

be said to be a narrative of some kind. In an essay titled "Against Narrativity," however, the philosopher Galen Strawson has dismissed the idea of narrative identity as merely an "intellectual fashion" (439) currently in vogue among academics. He, for one, reports that he has "absolutely no sense of [his] life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form" and no "great or special interest in [his] past." Why indeed would he be interested in his past, he goes on to say, when he can say of his sense of "self," "I have no significant sense that *I*—the I now considering this question—was there in the further past" (433). Strawson consistently—and mistakenly—assumes as he does here that a sense of one's life as a narrative of some kind is exclusively the consequence of one's having a sense of continuous identity, a sense that the person one is now is in some way the same as the person one has been at earlier stages of one's life. For Strawson it seems to follow, then, that if your sense of identity is discontinuous, you will be indifferent to narrative formulations of your identity's story. Is this in fact the case? I think not, but let's consider discontinuous identity as Strawson models it, for this is the basis for his resistance to the idea that narrative can provide a primary structure for our experience of selfhood.

Although Strawson does not disavow his possession of autobiographical memories nor their "from-the-inside character" (434) (that sense of immediacy and particularity that are the hallmarks of firsthand eyewitness experience), he insists that he cannot access previous identity states; he cannot reexperience or reinhabit them. Distinguishing with an asterisk the "I" and "me" of his present self from those

of his past, he concludes: "So: it's clear to me that events in my remoter past didn't happen to me*" (433). Strawson's statement here may be arresting, as I suspect he intends, but in fact it merely echoes a commonplace sentiment in the literature of autobiography. Henry James (whom he cites by way of illustration), Malcolm X, Christa Wolf—these are only a few of the many autobiographers who insist on their experience of discontinuous identity, the sense that they are not now who they were. There is both psychological and neurological support for this view. The novelist and autobiographer David Malouf makes this penetrating observation about the impossibility of recapturing earlier, *embodied* selves:

> That body is out of reach. And it isn't simply a matter of its being forgotten in us—of a failure of memory or imagination to summon it up, but of a change in perceiving itself. What moving back into it would demand is an act of *un*-remembering, a dismantling of the body's experience that would be a kind of dying, a casting off, one by one, of all the tissues of perception, conscious and not, through which our very notion of body has been remade. (64, emphasis in original)

As Malouf suggests, consciousness is not a neutral medium in which memories can be replayed and the past repeated intact. While we may have the sensation that we are capable of reliving the past—Vladimir Nabokov, Marcel Proust, Nathalie Sarraute, and many other autobiographers have claimed they could—research in brain studies offers no support for

belief in invariant memory or belief in the possibility of re-experiencing earlier states of selfhood. Nearly twenty years ago the neurologist Israel Rosenfield argued that memories share the constructed nature of all brain events: "Recollection is a kind of perception, . . . *and every context will alter the nature of what is recalled*" (89, emphasis added).[5] So if it is true, strictly speaking, that we are not now who we were and that we can never hope to repeat the past in any absolute sense, does it then follow that the idea of narrative identity and the life story that would feature it become irrelevant to our lived experience of selfhood? Why does Strawson think so?

Generalizing from his own experience of discontinuous identity, Strawson posits that all human beings belong to one of two distinct "styles of temporal being" (430), which he terms the Episodic and the Diachronic. Episodics, such as himself, believe that their identity states are discontinuous: Because their sense of self in any present bears no obvious

5. Yet consider the testimony of persons who have experienced a deep trauma of some kind and who report the sensation of literally repeating past consciousness. Describing his research in the Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, Geoffrey Hartman cites the case of Jolly Z., who was asked what she sees when she is "back there." "Struggling for words, and still not entirely present," Hartman writes, "she answers: 'I'm not here. . . . I don't even know about myself now. I'm there . . . somebody else talks out of me. . . . You see it's not me. It's that person who experienced it who is talking about those experiences' " (ellipses in original). Hartman comments: "An entire phenomenology of traumatic memory is encapsulated in statements like these." Unlike the more usual stance of the individual engaged in recollection who, as Malouf suggests, needs somehow to traverse the gulf that separates the past from the present, Hartman's victim of trauma is already "back there"; so completely is she inhabited by that earlier identity state that she can say, "I'm not here." (The testimony of Jolly Z. quoted by Hartman appears in Kraft 22.)

connection to their sense of self at any previous point in their history (they are not now who they were), their selves and lives are never organized in narrative form. In sharp contrast, Strawson's Diachronics believe that their identity states are continuous (they *are* in some sense who they were), and they can see their selves and lives accordingly in consecutive narrative terms. I say "believe" advisedly, because Strawson never makes clear whether he is describing a given of felt experience or an attitude toward it. He asserts that "the fundamentals of temporal temperament are genetically determined" (431); however, although he states that his Episodic and Diachronic categories are "radically opposed" (430), he describes himself as only "relatively Episodic" (433). It is hard to know, then, given this wobble in Strawson's thinking, just how seriously one should take his identity categories; but the case he makes against narrative identity is instructive and worth a further hearing.

So how *do* individuals sort out into Strawson's Diachronic and Episodic categories? I think that Strawson is correct in his belief that most people would identify themselves as Diachronics—that is, if they ever gave much thought to such identity questions, and they probably don't. I think most people probably believe in continuous identity at some level, and they probably think of their lives in developmental terms. Do they believe, with Wordsworth, that "the Child is Father of the Man"? Well, sure. But, as with opinion polls, the answers you get to a question depend on how it is asked. If you ask people whether they believe in continuous identity, most, as Strawson reports, will say they do. If you ask

them, though, about the extent to which they can call up the past, about whether they can actually reinhabit earlier periods of their lives, pressing them as to whether they can in the present reexperience earlier states of consciousness, I suspect that many of these previously unreflecting Diachronics would admit to being Episodics too. My hunch is that most of us probably belong in part to both camps.

The primary weakness of Strawson's case against narrative identity is that his Episodic and Diachronic categories, in addition to their intrinsic instability, simply do not connect coherently and predictably with a narrative outlook on experience. Strawson himself seems to admit as much when he comments, "I've made some distinctions, but none of them cut very sharply" (446).[6] Many an Episodic turned autobiographer, for example, including writers such as Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Stendhal (all of whom Strawson cites as models of the Episodic type), *do* take a narrative interest in their experience. For a characteristic instance, take John Updike. He definitely fits the Episodic profile: "Each day, we wake slightly altered, and the person we were yesterday is dead" (221). Yet he proceeds in *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* to reconstruct his past in narrative to recover something of those earlier selves. That is to say that Episodics may have a special motive for an interest in narrative precisely *because* they are Episodics.

6. See James Battersby, who systematically dismantles Strawson's binary thinking and concludes that "we should then reject his whole scheme, eliminating in the process any concern about aligning ourselves on one side or the other of the Diachronic/Episodic divide" (42).

It is time for full disclosure: Strawson, I infer, is radically different from me when it comes to the rhythms of consciousness, which in my case, sleeping and waking, are invariably narrative in cast. Most mornings I wake with relief from agitated dreams and their puzzling plots, only to resume, as William James suggests we do, the unfolding of my own stream of consciousness, which, despite astonishing jolts and cuts as memory jumps from one time frame to another, pulls to a steadily invented story line of present and future plans. In sharp contrast, Strawson celebrates a fleeting and absolute present—"what I care about . . . is how I am now" (438)—and he invokes an eighteenth-century English philosopher, the Earl of Shaftesbury, as the patron saint of this Episodic mode:

> [But] what matter for memory? . . . If, *whilst I am,* I am as I should be, what do I care more? And thus let me lose *self* every hour, and be twenty successive selfs, or new selfs, 'tis all one to me: so [long as] I lose not my opinion [i.e., my overall outlook, my character, my moral identity]. (quoted in Strawson 438, emphasis in original)

What would it be like to live without memory? What would it be like to lose one's "self" every hour, indeed every few seconds? Think back to Oliver Sacks's Mr. Thompson, the man whose memory had been gravely damaged by Korsakoff's syndrome. In Mr. Thompson Sacks portrays an Episodic in extremis, an individual who "*must literally make himself (and his world) up every moment.*" As we have seen, it is this man's desperate condition that prompts Sacks to

reflect on the narrative anchor of human identity, observing that "each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative,' and that this narrative *is* us, our identities" (*The Man Who Mistook* 110, emphasis in original). (This is the same formulation of narrative identity, by the way, that Strawson quotes and attacks in "Against Narrativity.") The clinical context of Sacks's observation is instructive and sobering. Note that Mr. Thompson, unlike Strawson, doesn't enjoy the safety net of a sense of himself as a "human being taken as a whole," that sense of continuous identity that underwrites Strawson's comfortable claim of discontinuous identity. Strawson's brief for the Episodic life, which he characterizes as "truly happy-go-lucky, see-what-comes-along" (449), strikes me as breezy and untested. To be sure, who is to say that Mr. Thompson is not a happy man? Who would judge him to be diminished as a person? Strawson, I take it, would not, for he rightly opposes an ethics that would link narrative capacity and personhood. But would he—or the Earl of Shaftesbury—really want to *be* Mr. Thompson? Perhaps, but I have never encountered anyone who did not hope that memory and the sense of life story it supports would survive intact to the end. In my experience, most people fear memory loss and the death of the extended self that follows from it—witness the widespread anxiety about Alzheimer's disease and aging in the United States today. It is this fear that Sacks captures when he wonders whether loss of memory entails loss of identity: "Has [Mr. Thompson] been pithed, scooped-out, de-souled, by disease?" (*Man* 113).

I think that Strawson is mistaken when he attributes the dominance of the idea of narrative identity to "intellectual fashion." What he fails to reckon with is that we are embedded in a narrative identity system whether we like it or not. Our social arrangements—in the United States, at least—assume that we all have narrative identities and that we can display them on demand. I should emphasize that I regard this narrative identity situation as both culture specific and period specific, although I suspect that something like it obtains and has obtained in many times and places. Two clarifications are in order here. First, with respect to *culture,* a counter that one needs to use with care when speaking of particular cases: the anthropologist Marianne Gullestad, whose work I will present in some detail in chapter 3, cautions that individuals today may belong to several "partcultures" simultaneously ("Reflections" 18–20). She advocates accordingly a concept of culture that is sufficiently supple to address the complexities of contemporary life, "reconfigur[ing] it as a set of permeable, less bounded, and less tightly integrated structures and practices" (14). I think her notion of partcultures is very useful: the divide between the world of work and the world of home would be only the most obvious illustration of our daily encounters with partcultures and their requirements. My second clarification, about which I'll have more to say later on in this chapter, is that various factors—of gender, of class, of race and ethnicity—inflect our socialization into the narrative practices of our settings.

My claim that we are players willy-nilly in a narrative identity system may seem surprising and counterintuitive, given that we doubtless believe that we talk about ourselves

both freely and spontaneously. Don't we conduct our lives, after all, in a culture of democratic individualism? In fact, the language we use when we present ourselves and our stories to others is a rule-governed discourse, both when we talk and when we write. Because the rules that govern our self-reporting are more obviously visible in the case of written narratives, I will look first at a conveniently prominent example from the world of mass media and public life. Then I will show that when we talk about ourselves, in however fragmentary, spontaneous, and casual a fashion, we are also operating under the discipline of a rule-grounded identity regime. In both writing and speaking we can get into trouble for breaking the rules.

Truth or Consequences on *Oprah*

It is hard to imagine how autobiography's usually tacit conventions could have been given greater exposure than they were in the case of James Frey's memoir, *A Million Little Pieces,* which was adopted by Oprah Winfrey's Book Club in the fall of 2005. The controversy over this book, which erupted a few months later, caught my attention on Tuesday, January 10, 2006. In an article in the *New York Times* titled "Best-Selling Memoir Draws Scrutiny" (Wyatt), I learned that a website suitably named The Smoking Gun had posted a critique of Frey's story on January 8, charging that he had "wholly fabricated or wildly embellished details of his purported criminal career." The initial response from Doubleday, Frey's publisher, reported on January 11 in the

Times under the heading "When A Memoir And Facts Collide" (Wyatt), was dismissive: by Doubleday's permissive definition, in a memoir, anything goes—it is the author's call. But that same night, the author was called to account on CNN's *Larry King Live*. Quizzed by King, Frey conceded that he had made up some details, but he stood by the basic truth of his story, namely, "that he was an alcoholic and drug addict who overcame his addiction" (Wyatt, "Writer"). Moreover, Oprah Winfrey called in to Larry King during the show to express her continuing faith in Frey and his "underlying message of redemption" (quoted in Dowd). As Maureen Dowd's column put it a couple of days later: "Oprah! How Could Ya?" And on the 13th, the *Times* ran an editorial on Frey titled simply "Call It Fiction."

Just when I thought that the Frey flap was running out of gas, if anything, it picked up speed in the following days. By this point, the story was popping up everywhere in columns, letters, and cartoons. On Sunday, January 15, one week after the Smoking Gun posting, the *Times*'s lead story in the Week in Review section featured a wide-ranging discussion of autobiographical truth under the title "My True Story, More or Less, And Maybe Not at All" (Kennedy). That same Sunday, on the op-ed pages, Mary Karr, author herself of two outstanding memoirs, wrote a scathing attack on Frey titled "His So-Called Life." "Call me outdated," she announced, "but I want to stay hamstrung by objective truth." "Distinguishing between fiction and non- isn't nearly the taxing endeavor some would have us believe," Karr commented scornfully, "sexing a chicken is way harder."

Frey's story took a darker turn in its second week of intense media scrutiny. Recovering addicts weighed in on the inaccuracies of his account of life in a treatment center, although Doubleday found a couple of the recovered to stand up for its battered author. More damaging were the columns about the Frey affair by Michiko Kakutani (on the 17th) and by Frank Rich (on the 22nd). They saw something more disturbing in the Frey case than the unmasking of a mediocre talent who had aspired to be in the same league as Hemingway, Kerouac, and Mailer. Interpreting Frey's success as the culmination of what she called "the memoir craze" and the popularity of "recovery-movement reminiscences," Michiko Kakutani argued that it illustrates the culture's pernicious drift toward relativism, a bending of the truth that creates a climate in which the existence of the Holocaust can be questioned. In "Truthiness 101: From Frey to Alito," Frank Rich castigated Frey and his book as exemplars of what the Comedy Central star Stephen Colbert had called "truthiness." In an age of spinning, the winners are those with the slickest stories: "It's the truthiness of all those imminent mushroom clouds that sold the invasion of Iraq," Rich observed.

The climax of the Frey story came, fittingly, on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on January 26, and it made the front page of the *Times* the following day: "Live on 'Oprah,' a Memoirist Is Kicked Out of the Book Club" (Wyatt). In addition to Frey and herself, Winfrey had assembled a large supporting cast that included Nan Talese (Frey's publisher at Doubleday) and columnists Dowd and Rich. Winfrey expressed her contrition for the mistake she said she had made when she called

in to Larry King to support Frey, which she feared had left the impression that she was indifferent to the truth. Winfrey then rebuked Frey for deceiving her and her book club's readers; she rebuked his publisher as well for not properly vetting the book. "You lied," she told Frey bluntly. Truth or consequences, as they say: on January 30, Frey's film deal was in trouble ("Studio Has Second Thoughts"), and by the end of February I read that his book deals were also falling through ("Riverhead Books Pulls Out of James Frey Deal").

Text, person, culture—the Frey case put three questions into play: What kind of book is *A Million Little Pieces?* Who is James Frey, really? And what kind of culture promotes a man like this and such a book? What the Frey episode confirms is that the reception of memoir is contractual: readers expect autobiographers to exhibit some basic respect for the truth of their lives—break that trust and suffer the consequences. And who, then, is the arbiter of autobiographical truth? Clearly not the author in this case—Frey was totally unreliable. And clearly not the editor and publisher—Nan Talese's notion of memoir was self-serving, a lame attempt at damage control. Oprah Winfrey, then, or The Smoking Gun? In the last analysis, readers, individually and collectively, monitored the memoir's claims to truth. In this instance, to be sure, the author and his publishers gamed the generic system and made a temporary killing. The Frey controversy did turn out to be about packaging:

- about the definition of a literary genre (the author eventually confided that he had discussed with his agent and publishers whether to market his book as a novel or a memoir);
- about the author's identity (had he really led the criminal life he said he had? etc.);
- about the values of the culture at large (truth or "truthiness").

Whereas we probably don't learn much about the novel as a kind of writing from reading the newspaper, in the case of autobiography, we do. Why is that? Because autobiography is a referential art: it self-consciously, usually explicitly, positions itself with reference to the world, and when it does so, it invites—at least potentially—the kind of scrutiny that Frey's book in fact received. We can write about our lives in a memoir as we like, but we can't expect to be read as we like—not, at any rate, if we flout the conventions, and in the case of autobiography, telling the truth is the cardinal rule. Readers cut memoirists plenty of slack when they are having fun, and that includes readers of Mary Karr and Frank McCourt. *The Liars' Club* and *Angela's Ashes* feature unusually vivid and hugely extended accounts of the authors' lives as quite young children—pages and pages reporting verbatim dialogue that young Frank would have overheard at ages three, four, and five; 170 pages describing Mary Karr's life at age seven. Call this fiction, call it imaginative reconstruction; these writers impress us as trying to tell the fundamental biographical truth of their lives. As Karr puts it memorably, "I want to stay hamstrung by objective truth." But cross the line, as James Frey confesses he did, and the memoirist gets kicked out of the book club. Breaking trust with the readers

of your memoir, moreover, proves to be a potentially actionable offense: in September of 2006, Frey and his publisher apparently agreed to recompense readers who filed lawsuits claiming they had been defrauded when they bought *A Million Little Pieces*.[7]

The Narrative Identity System

Talking about ourselves is also a kind of genre, as it turns out, with rules and penalties that bear on our recognition by others as persons; as with memoir, so in self-narration, the culture's fundamental values are at stake. Despite our illusions of autonomy and self-determination—"*I* write my story, *I* say who I am"—we do not invent our identities out of whole cloth. Instead, we draw on the resources of the cultures we inhabit to shape them, resources that specify what it means to be a man, a woman, a worker, a person in the settings where we live our lives. It is easy enough to posit that we draw on models of identity as we go about the business of making our selves, whether in our lives or in writing about them; it is much more challenging, however, to specify how this process works, especially because I think our practice of self-construction is largely unconscious.

7. See Motoko Rich. As of November 2007, 1,729 people have asked Frey's publisher to reimburse them for buying the memoir. Although the claims for reimbursement so far have cost only $27,348, Random House has paid $783,000 in legal fees and another $432,000 in costs related to the settlement. See "A Few Little Pieces."

If even our casual conversation about ourselves is regulated by conventions, why aren't we more consciously and explicitly aware of them? To begin with, the habitual, daily performance of self-narration tends to mask the fact that we participate in a rule-governed system; after years of practice, we operate on automatic pilot; we know the identity protocols by heart. The working of the system becomes visible, however, when memory fails and narrative competence collapses, or when self-narration is deliberately refused. Then the link between identity narrative and normality becomes manifest. As Kay Young and Jeffrey Saver put it bluntly in their study "The Neurology of Narrative": "Individuals who have lost the ability to construct narrative . . . have lost their selves." We can test their view against our own experience, for most of us have encountered individuals whose memories and narrative competence have been impaired by injury, disease, or failing powers—it is an increasingly common occurrence in an aging population such as our own.

The refusal of self-narration offers an equally revealing if rarer insight into the operation and social significance of narrative identity. William Chaloupka uses the case of the Hood River "John Doe" to illustrate Michel Foucault's understanding of the link between the individual and the apparatuses of state power. Here was a man, arrested for stealing a car, who refused to tell police in Hood River, Oregon, anything about himself, even his name. Training a Foucauldian lens on this otherwise minor episode, Chaloupka concludes that "the act of autobiographical telling has roots and functions crucial to the operations of contemporary power" (378).

John Doe's refusal to identify himself disrupted customary grids of identity processing, making them instructively visible as a result. The bafflement of the police in dealing with this anomalous situation points up how the judicial system normally functions. According to a local paper, John Doe "would probably have been out of jail already had he cooperated with authorities." "Without a past," the paper comments, "no one could determine if Doe was a risk to flee the area" (cited in Chaloupka 373). John Doe was eventually identified by his father, who had seen a picture of his son circulated by the police. "Soon after his name was discovered," Chaloupka reports, "[he] was sentenced to ninety days in jail and was promptly released on probation, as he had already served far more than ninety days" (388).

Whether we are considering a contrarian John Doe or our forgetful elders, lapses in identity narration generate consequences, including possible confinement in prisons or long-term care facilities. These consequences confirm that the interpersonal exchange of self-narrations is a rule-governed regime and that the rules are enforced. Others police our performance, and it is also true that we do this policing ourselves. We monitor and judge what others tell us (we exchange glances, we may even roll our eyes); we determine that our interlocutor is "not tracking," has "lost it," and so forth. The psychologist John Shotter claims that our participation in what I am calling a narrative identity system is governed by "social accountability": "What we talk of *as* our experience of our reality is constituted for us very largely by the *already established* ways in which we *must* talk

in our attempts to *account* for ourselves—and for it—to the others around us.... And only certain ways of talking are deemed legitimate" (141, emphasis in original). The analyses of Chaloupka, Foucault, and Shotter sensitize us to the presence of social constraint in the exercise of self-narration; our sense of autonomy, of total control, is something of an illusion when it comes to talking about ourselves. The source of our narrative identities, they propose, is not some mysterious interiority, but other people.

How do we know how to play this narrative identity game? Training in self-narration begins early, and the fact that it does testifies to our tacit complicity in the working of the system. We introduce our children to the practice of making identity narrative during an unusually rich phase of early childhood development in which the child's newly acquired language and narrative skills combine with temporal awareness and a nascent sense of social accountability to lay the foundations of autobiographical memory. This training takes the form of what psychologists call the child's "memory talk," homely little stories that parents and caregivers coach us to tell about ourselves. The early materials of these collaborative efforts in making a life story are slight, to be sure—a walk around the block, activities at nursery school, a trip to the zoo—but they provide practice nonetheless for longer, solo flights of self-narration in the time to come. In these parent-child conversations "children learn the conventionalized narrative forms that eventually provide a structure for internally represented memories" (Fivush and Reese 115). Describing this process of socialization,

Robyn Fivush offers this memorable formulation of the give-and-take between awareness of self and autobiographical memory: "The self-concept and memories of past experiences develop dialectically and begin to form a life history. The life history, in turn, helps organize both memories of past experiences and the self-concept" (Fivush 280–81). Children learn not only that they are expected to be able to display to others autobiographical memories arranged in narrative form; they learn what is tellable as well.[8]

Lest my account of the child's initiation into what I am calling a narrative identity system seem to predicate a one-size-fits-all model of narrative practices, I should point out that research into "memory talk" offers a quite nuanced picture of this phase of a child's socialization. With regard to gender, for example, Robyn Fivush and Elaine Reese identify two "distinct parental styles for talking about the past," an "elaborative," discursive style, and a "repetitive," utilitarian style. "Elaborative" parents "tend to have long conversations in which they embellish aspects of the story and generally provide a richly detailed and progressive account of events" (Fivush and Reese 119), whereas "repetitive" parents "tend to have short conversations with their children about the past," repeating "the same questions over and over in an attempt to prompt the child into giving the 'correct' answer" (121). Fivush and Reese are intrigued to note that "parents tend to be more elaborative with daughters than

8. For a more extended treatment of narrative identity and the emergence of the extended self in early childhood, see Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories* 102–23.

with sons" (125), and they conclude that "males and females have different preferred modes of thinking about and talking about the past, but can switch styles depending on the context" (127).

It is also true that class is equally a player when it comes to training the young child how to talk about the past. Assuming that "selves vary substantially within and across cultures," Angela Wiley and her colleagues investigate personal storytelling "as a medium through which European American youngsters begin to construct selves that bear the imprint of an autonomous cultural framework" (833). On the basis of a study of narrative practices in two communities in Chicago, one working-class and one middle-class, they concluded that each community had "its own distinct way of structuring children's autonomy" (843). In the working-class community, "in the context of jointly narrated stories of the child's past experiences, children participated freely and thus had extensive speaker rights but were expected to achieve their own authorship by engaging in the practices as a near equal." Narrative autonomy—"to have one's own view and to express it"—emerged as "a prize that young children have to work to obtain." By contrast, the model promoted in the middle-class community proved to be "one where children are given autonomy, in small increments, as a gift from the adults around them": "to express one's views is a natural right, rather than something that has to be earned or defended" (843). As a result, the familiar show-and-tell exercises in U.S. elementary schools, for example, a characteristic forum for practice in self-narration, may

prove to be a more comfortable fit for the middle-class child than for the working-class child.[9]

In addition to factors of gender and class, any comprehensive account of the child's achievement of narrative competence needs to include comparative, cross-cultural research. It is a big subject, and I can do no more here than acknowledge its importance. Peggy J. Miller, whose work on the narrative practices of children I find particularly impressive, has this to say about what such investigations should involve: "We need more detailed ethnographic and micro-level description of how various types of discourse are practiced cross-culturally and of how these verbal practices are organized *vis-à-vis* children. . . . We need to know more about how children participate in and make use of these practices at various ages: what are the conditions under which children acquiesce to, misunderstand, get confused by, playfully transform, or resist socializing messages?" ("Language as a Tool" 88).[10]

Cumulatively, whatever it is that we are acts as a kind of magnet or nucleus attracting particles of life story that we can—and do when prompted—fashion into the forms of life narrative that we recognize as autobiography. By the time we reach adulthood we know how to deliver a suitably edited version of our stories as the occasion requires. For the most part, we are not left to our own devices when we talk about ourselves, for protocols exist for many of the kinds of self-narration we may need to use—in churches,

9. The authors cite research by Michaels.

10. For characteristic examples of Miller's work, see "Instantiating Culture" and "Personal Storytelling."

in courtrooms, in meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, and so forth. Institutions even produce manuals stipulating the kinds of stories they want us to tell.[11]

I don't think that the process of adult self-narration has attracted anything like the research devoted to the child's practice of "memory talk." Perhaps this is to be expected, for on the face of it we might well ask what more we could learn about an activity so familiar that we perform it without thinking. Yet if we follow the lead of Michel de Certeau, everyday practices of any sort are likely to be rule governed, and self-narration proves to be no exception. This, at any rate, is what Charlotte Linde discovered when she investigated a particular form of "life story," the vocational accounts offered by white middle-class professionals in answer to the question, "What do you do?" Linde concludes that the notion of narrative identity is so deeply rooted in our culture that it functions as a criterion for normality: "In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person," she comments, "an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story" (3). Such an expectation is culture specific: as Linde sees it, we happen to live in a culture that subscribes to "the idea that we 'have' a life story, and that any normally competent adult has one." Following the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, she presents narrative identity as "part of the interpretive equipment furnished to us by our culture" (20).

11. See, e.g., Brooks, and Warhol.

What, specifically, does using this equipment require? Above all, the ability to construct a narratively coherent life story. Narrative coherence, Linde argues, derives from principles of causality and continuity, and, once again, it is culture that supplies what she calls "coherence systems," "cultural device[s] for structuring experience into socially sharable narrative" (163). Freudian psychology, Marxism, feminism, most religious faiths—Linde points to these as examples of large-scale sources of narrative coherence. I am struck by the connection Linde makes between narrative self-presentation and normality. She claims that an individual's refusal to supply an appropriate answer to the question "what do you do?" will appear "anomalous and, eventually, sinister" (53). Our performance of self-narration, then, takes place in an environment of social convention and constraint. Having mastered its rules and developed a repertoire of stories about ourselves, we tend—at least socially—to merge with them: in this sense our stories are our selves.

Two caveats: what we think we are, of course, is doubtless not identical to what we say. Moreover, returning to the consequences for the individual of narrative incapacity and memory loss, I would not want to assent to the proposition that the de-storied person has become de-selved. There are many modes of self and self-experience, more than any self-narration or autobiography could relate, and I will conclude this chapter by considering nonnarrative modes of selfhood in the case of an individual suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Nonetheless, in social settings of any kind, it is our narrative identities that define us. So far I have been concerned

to establish that when we talk or write about ourselves, there are conventions we need to observe if we want our self-reporting to be accepted by others as satisfactory. Now I want to look more closely at what these rules are and how they work. The stakes turn out to be high, for we are all players in what I have called a narrative identity system, an identity regime that not only sets limits, socially, to what we can say and write about ourselves but determines as well our recognition by others as normally functioning persons.

Narrative Rules, Identity Rules

When we write autobiography or memoir in the United States, our self-reporting may seem to be an expression of the egalitarian individualism enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. May we, though, say and write whatever we please when we engage in self-narration? Not necessarily, as we saw in the James Frey controversy, not unless we are prepared—depending on the nature of the case—to suffer consequences of considerable gravity. A Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú, made front-page news when the anthropologist David Stoll accused her of having stretched the truth in her autobiography, prompting journalists to wonder whether the Nobel selection committee would reconsider its prize award to her.[12] The novelist Kathryn Harrison's memoir of her incestuous affair with

12. See Rohter.

her father triggered a flood of condemnation in the press for what was seen as mercenary self-exposure at the expense of her young children.[13] These instances feature published autobiographers, but we are all of us judged when we tell the stories of our lives. This judging, always taking place, manifests itself most strikingly when memory loss and other disabilities prevent our performing self-narration according to the rules, or performing it at all. What all these examples suggest is that while we may well have the right to tell our life stories, we do so under constraints; we are governed by rules, and we can expect to be held accountable to others for breaking them.

As I said before, these rules are tacit because the daily performance of identity story is instinctive and automatic, and so it is chiefly when they are perceived to have been broken that they are most clearly displayed and articulated. I want to consider three primary transgressions—there may be more—for which self-narrators have been called to account: (1) misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth, (2) infringement of the right to privacy, and (3) failure to display normative models of personhood. The seriousness of these charges for those accused is registered in the consequences that may follow from the alleged violations: public condemnation, litigation, and (potentially) institutional confinement. Telling the truth, respecting privacy, displaying normalcy—it is the last of these obligations that points

13. For a review of the reception of *The Kiss,* see Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories* 153–56.

most directly to the big issue that they all three signal and underwrite: What are the prerequisites in our culture for being a person, for having and telling a life story? To link person and story in this way is to hypothesize that the rules for identity narrative function simultaneously as rules for identity. If narrative is indeed an identity content, then the regulation of narrative carries the possibility of the regulation of identity—a disquieting proposition to contemplate in the context of our culture of individualism. I should note that when I refer to "our culture," I am thinking chiefly of the United States, although one of the examples I will be discussing is drawn from western Europe. My hunch is that wherever self-narration is practiced, it is done under certain tacit constraints; these constraints, however, doubtless vary from culture to culture.

The idea that autobiographical discourse is rule governed is not new, but dates from the dawn of autobiography studies, in the 1970s, when Elizabeth Bruss and Philippe Lejeune established the genre's poetics. Drawing on speech-act theory, Bruss sought to formulate "the constitutive rules" a text needed to satisfy in order to "count as" a bona fide instance of autobiography (8). Similarly, Lejeune highlighted the contractual nature of autobiographical discourse with his notion of a "pact" articulated in the text that determines its generic status for the reader.[14] There is nothing in the least trumped up about this talk of "pacts" and "rules"; to the contrary, Bruss and Lejeune were only bringing system

14. See Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact."

and order to the rule consciousness hovering close to the beginning of most autobiographies. For a delicious send-up of the promises and disclaimers that autobiographers instinctively make before they get started, read the elaborate Shandean prefaces to Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), or Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* itself. Wallowing in "The Knowingness about the Book's Self-Consciousness Aspect" (xxvi), Eggers produces in effect a playbook for writing memoir by the rules. My primary concern with rules is different from Bruss's, Lejeune's, and Eggers's, however, for I am approaching autobiography not only as a literary genre but also as an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation. Written autobiographies represent only a small if revealing part of a much larger phenomenon, the self-narration we practice every day. Thus the rules question I want to examine is not only What is expected of this text in order for it to "count as" autobiography? but also What is expected of this individual, as manifested in this self-narration, for him or her to "count as" a person?

Telling the truth—this is surely the most familiar of the rules we associate with autobiographical discourse, and I think that the importance we attach to it is abundantly clear in the James Frey controversy I discussed earlier. Definitions of autobiography as a literary genre inevitably feature truth-telling as a criterion, and Bruss is no exception, for she made truth-value the centerpiece of her analysis of the autobiographical act (10–11). I have been arguing, though, that autobiography's narrative rules also function

as identity rules, and that when they do, the rule-defined entity may shift from text to person. When the public responds to rule-breaking autobiographers, not only the literary function of autobiographical discourse but its identity function may come into play. You don't make the front page of the *New York Times* as Menchú did for violating a literary convention—or so I thought until James Frey landed there following his high-profile shaming by Oprah Winfrey. Two controversial autobiographies, one by Menchú and one by Binjamin Wilkomirski, illustrate the primacy of identity issues for the reading public; the reception of these texts confirms that the truth-telling rule doubles as both generic marker and identity requirement.

On the face of it, David Stoll's book-length exposé of *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1999) would seem to contradict my point, for he seems initially concerned to establish whether or not the Menchú text belongs to the literature of fact, a question of genre. Stoll, a theorist and historian of Central American revolutionary movements, seeks to determine whether Menchú's chilling account of the injustices and atrocities inflicted on the Maya by government institutions and the army offers reliable eyewitness testimony. For example, did Menchú see her brother Petrocinio burned alive by army forces in the public square at Chajul? Did she work under exploitative conditions on a coffee plantation on the coast? Not, Stoll argues, if she was a student during those years at a Belgian Catholic boarding school in Guatemala City. Although Stoll does not impugn the large-scale truths of Menchú's story, the suffering of her

family and her people at the hands of a repressive regime, he does establish the likelihood that Menchú incorporated the experiences of others into a text that purported to be limited to what she had seen with her own eyes.

In the second half of his book, however, Stoll's first question, Is this text telling the truth? is supplanted by a second, Who is the person telling this narrative and why? In an especially interesting chapter, he reconstructs the making of Menchú's narrative and the role it played in the development of her identity.[15] He portrays Menchú as an impressionable young woman who had witnessed a lot of suffering, although she had been away at school when many of the key events she reports took place on her home ground. He theorizes that she became caught up in a revolutionary movement, the Committee for Campesino Unity, that persuaded her to use her story for the purpose of propaganda, enlisting international support for the embattled guerrillas.

What is instructive about Stoll's response to *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is his ambivalence, which colors the unstable tone of the book, depending on whether he is evaluating a text or judging a person. He is by turns dispassionate and accusatory, and the characterization of Menchú and her narrative changes accordingly: when he tests her story as an eyewitness account, he concludes sternly that some of the time she is lying; when he casts Menchú as a revolutionary propagandist, however, he portrays her much more sympathetically

15. The composition of the narrative turns out to have been a rather complex project, probably involving others besides Menchu and her collaborator, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. See Stoll 177–88.

as a mythmaker who had every reason to tell the story she did to the anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray in Paris in 1982. Some of the time Stoll invokes the literary function of the truth-telling rule, and some of the time what I am calling its identity function; he has not sorted it out.

At the risk of oversimplifying a rather complex case, I want to set Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* (1995) alongside *I, Rigoberta Menchú* to illustrate the stakes involved in telling the truth. Like Menchú's *testimonio,* Wilkomirski's narrative invokes the authority of the literature of witness; it purports to be an autobiographical account of a child's experience of the Holocaust. In Riga, at the age of two or three, did Wilkomirski witness the execution of a man who may have been his father? Did a woman who may have been his mother give him a crust of bread at Majdanek? Did he see starving children gnawing the flesh off their fingers? The rarity of the young child's perspective in the literature of the Nazi death camps, together with the shocking contents of the story, made the book an instant sensation; *Fragments* was widely translated and won several literary prizes.

Like Menchú's narrative, Wilkomirski's was attacked as untruthful, notably by the Swiss writer Daniel Ganzfried, who claimed that Wilkomirski was not a Latvian Jew who survived the horrors of Majdanek and Auschwitz but a non-Jewish Swiss native, the son of an unwed mother named Yvonne Grosjean. According to Ganzfried, Wilkomirski spent the war years in a Swiss children's home until he was placed with a Dr. and Mrs. Kurt Dössekker in 1945; he was legally adopted by them in 1947. A number of

journalists have corroborated Ganzfried's findings, and in the face of mounting outcry against the book, Wilkomirski's German and American publishers, Suhrkamp Verlag and Schocken Books, both withdrew it from circulation in the fall of 1999. Eva Koralnik, Wilkomirski's literary agent, hired the Swiss historian Stefan Maechler to investigate the case, and Maechler's exhaustive report definitively confirmed Ganzfried's charges.[16]

Both Menchú and Wilkomirski claim to have been eyewitness observers of major and disputed passages of twentieth-century history; and both their narratives have been subjected to rigorous fact-checking and verification. Menchú has emerged from this scrutiny comparatively unscathed, while Wilkomirski has been completely discredited. Why? To be sure, the initial revelations about Menchú were disturbing, and she was clearly on the defensive, engaging in various forms of damage control, publishing a new version of her life story, distancing herself from Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, with whom she collaborated on her first autobiography and so forth. But the outcome was certainly not what high-church right-wingers like Dinesh D'Souza had hoped for: the decanonization of the newest saint in the pantheon of Western civ courses at Stanford University and elsewhere. For one thing, her large-scale facts were accurate even if she was guilty of presenting the testimony of others as her own. For another, her motive for doing so, the creation of

16. I draw on articles by Eskin, Gourevitch, and Lappin in reconstructing Wilkomirski's story.

effective propaganda supporting an oppressed people, seems understandable, legitimate, and even admirable.

Wilkomirski's facts, on the other hand, did not check out; he proved to be an impostor, although commentators have been hard-pressed to decide what to make of this flaky, weepy, moody man: Is he shamelessly opportunistic, or delusional? His motives seem inscrutable at best, reprehensible at worst—reprehensible in that doubts about survivors' testimony have the potential to corrode belief in the Holocaust. While Menchú's career as a human rights activist continues, Wilkomirski's career as a Holocaust victim and self-appointed advocate for child survivors of the camps abruptly ended in dishonor. The British withdrew the *Jewish Quarterly* prize for nonfiction from *Fragments* (Wilkomirski did not return the prize money), and the French apparently asked Wilkomirski to return the plaque they gave him. Meanwhile, Wilkomirski was sued in Zurich for fraud in a class-action suit representing some 12,000 readers.[17] In both these rule-breaking controversies, the autobiographer's character supplanted the accuracy of the text as the primary concern, with the identity function of the truth-telling rule overriding its generic, literary function. This is especially clear in the case of *Fragments:* If the book could not pass muster as autobiography, why not simply repackage it as a novel? Because it is not generic status that is at issue; it is

17. Blake Eskin, who covered the Wilkomirski case extensively for the *Forward,* alerted me to these developments in Great Britain, France, and Switzerland.

not the text but the person, and Bruno Grosjean-Dössekker-Wilkomirski's credibility seems to have been destroyed.[18]

To break the second rule constraining the practice of self-narration, respect for the privacy of others, is to suffer damage to one's reputation, as with failing to tell the truth. In both cases, in addition to being tried in the court of public opinion, one may—in France and Switzerland, at any rate—be tried in a court of law.[19] Respecting privacy rights, moreover, may well be at odds with telling the truth, indeed, with telling one's story at all. And because we insist on telling our stories, I suspect that most of us break this rule of privacy almost every day, for, as Philippe Lejeune reminds us, "private life is almost always a co-property" (*Moi aussi* 55, my translation). If autobiography involves inescapably the display of privacy, autobiographers lead perilous lives, morally speaking, whether they like it or not; some of them, however, are well compensated for violating privacy—that is one obvious reason for doing it.

When Kathryn Harrison published *The Kiss* in 1997, her memoir of her affair with her father received many hostile reviews, which approached the book as symptomatic of the

18. Elena Lappin reports that Arthur Samuelson of Schocken Books initially responded rather breezily to the charges against Wilkomirski's text: "It's only a fraud if you call it non-fiction. I would then reissue it, in the fiction category. Maybe it's not true—then he's a better writer!" (49). In the event, Schocken Books republished *Fragments* as an appendix to Stefan Maechler's expose of Bruno Grosjean's Wilkomirski persona. See Maechler.

19. Lejeune reports two cases—admittedly rare—in which publishers were obliged to cut material deemed to have violated the individual's right to privacy; the reissued texts have white spaces indicating the location of the offending passages. See Lejeune, "L'atteinte publique à la vie privée" 72–73.

ethical failings of the so-called age of memoir. Harrison's story did not place her in the by-now familiar position of the victim of child abuse, a position that is central to the literature of incest—she was a junior in college at the time she began a liaison with her father. In publishing her book, did she become a victim of another kind, a martyr to autobiography's rule of telling the truth? Most of the blurbs and some of the positive reviews, usually by other memoirists, praised Harrison precisely for her honesty and courage in telling her shocking story. Whether or not she was a victim, she was seen by some to have victimized her two young children in making her story public. In a revealing exchange at an Authors Guild forum in New York on April 8, 1997, the reporter Warren St. John characterized Harrison's response to a question concerning "the memoirist's responsibility to his or her family" as "cavalier": "'All's fair in love and war, in this case,' she said." St. John notes that Frank McCourt, also on the panel, took a more conservative stance about his disclosure of sensitive family material in his own memoir, *Angela's Ashes* (1996): "I could not write about my mother and her affair with her cousin until she was dead, because she couldn't live through it." At least one person who initially celebrated Harrison's memoir as "an account of a moral victory" apparently had second thoughts. According to St. John, Robert Coles, identified on the dust jacket as the author of *The Moral Intelligence of Children,* "'recanted' a blurb he provided for [*The Kiss*], saying he had not realized Ms. Harrison had young children of her own who would have to cope with her public revelations" (9).

In Harrison's case, it was not the facts of her story that were in dispute—commentators seemed prepared to accept them at face value—but the act of self-narration itself: Should she have told her story at all? Should respect for the privacy of others have taken precedence over an otherwise commendable allegiance to telling the truth? And did Harrison fail to respect her own privacy in disclosing her story? One of the early reviewers, Cynthia Crossen for the *Wall Street Journal,* said as much when she advised Harrison to follow Crossen's grandmother's standard advice, "Hush up." Harrison claims that an inexorable psychological imperative drove her to write her story, but the authority of that motive was compromised for McCourt, St. John, and a good many other commentators by their sense of baser motives at work. Even more than the predictable promotional activities, which included Harrison's appearance on national television's *Dateline* and *Today* shows, a sensation-grabbing feature on Harrison by her husband, Colin Harrison, in *Vogue* captures the moral ambiguities surrounding *The Kiss.* Exploited or exploiter? In the *Vogue* piece, "Sins of the Father," the husband's account of the psychological necessity that drove his wife to tell her story is paired with a glossy full-page photograph portraying the former incest victim as a disturbingly glamorous fashion plate. Even if she was not guilty of "merchandizing pain," as Warren St. John put it, was she guilty of a still graver flaw in writing and publishing *The Kiss,* a fundamental deficiency in moral culture? Curiously, it may well be that Harrison has been judged more harshly for violating privacy—both others' and her own—than for breaking the incest taboo.

Of the three rules for self-narration I have identified, infractions of the last one—the obligation to display a normative model of personhood—can entail the most serious consequence of the entire set: institutional confinement. "Infraction," I am afraid, does not strike the right note, conjuring up as it does a sense of conscious, deliberate action. By contrast, the transgression I am targeting here, while based on the act of self-narration, is surely involuntary, as opposed to the willfulness involved in distorting the truth or invading privacy. With this last rule, it is not so much a question of what one has done but of what one *is:* one is judged by others to be lacking in the very nature of one's being in a profound and disabling way. This issue of normalcy points up the difficulty of finding a single term to characterize the constraints that govern self-narration as a group. "Conventions" suggests something milder, I think, than "rules," something linked to manners and literary forms, whereas "rules" connects more obviously with the idea of discipline and consequences, so I have opted for "rules." Conventions or rules—my discomfort with terminology reflects the fact that my third "constraint" differs in kind from the first two, and I do not want to ignore that difference. To the contrary, in the discussion that follows I want to shift my perspective from the obligations of those who perform self-narrations to the responsibilities of those who receive and judge those performances: this is where the ethical dimension of a narrative identity system is most strikingly displayed, this is where the potential for the regulation of identity narrative to slide into the regulation of identity is realized.

The most arresting instances of self-narrations that involve a failure to display normalcy have been documented in clinical settings, surfacing for our inspection when observers such as Oliver Sacks and Daniel L. Schacter publish such cases and comment on them. I presented Sacks's portrait of Mr. Thompson, a man suffering from Korsakoff's syndrome, in the opening pages of this chapter, for it displays the identity issue I am concerned with in succinct and arresting fashion. As we saw, memory loss inflicted a devastating blow to his sense of continuous identity, severely limiting his ability to articulate a stable narrative account of himself. Working overtime to supply the identity deficit, Mr. Thompson kept generating new selves and life stories minute by minute, making Sacks wonder whether "there is a *person* remaining" (*The Man Who Mistook* 115) beneath this narrative excess. Sacks himself hesitates to embrace the logic of narrative identity that is at work here, the move to read narrative disorder as an index of identity disorder, but the implication that troubles him in the case is precisely the rule of normalcy I am concerned with. Social accountability conditions us from early childhood to believe that our recognition as persons is to be transacted through the exchange of identity narratives. The verdict of those for whom we perform is virtually axiomatic: no satisfactory narrative (or no narrative at all), no self.

What are the consequences for those affected by this linkage between narrative and identity disorders? Mr. Thompson, for example, was not disciplined in any way as a result of his narrative identity inadequacy. Moreover, as far as

I can make out, the medical profession does not interpret impaired narrative competence specifically as a criterion for diagnosis and institutionalization, although there is abundant evidence of the use of narrative in a broad range of therapies.[20] Nonetheless, Michel Foucault and Roy Porter have explored the disciplinary uses of diagnosis in general in Western culture. Closer to home, G. Thomas Couser points to Susanna Kaysen's best-selling memoir for "documentary evidence . . . that she was hospitalized as much for nonconformity or rebellion as for mental illness." In Kaysen's case, the title of her narrative, *Girl, Interrupted,* captures her sense of the cost of arrested identity. She reports a therapist's comment that her diagnosis—borderline personality syndrome—is easily applied to "people whose lifestyles bother [those in a position to make diagnoses]" (151). We all know, moreover, that in various societies people inconveniently differing from some mainstream norm have been institutionalized or eliminated. What I am suggesting is the potential punishment confronting those who fail to display an appropriately normal model of narrative identity. This disciplinary possibility is latent in any enforcing of norms.

Stepping back from speculation about enforcement, let's consider the ethical issues that come into play when selfhood is claimed to be diminished or absent in these cases.

20. Not only is the practice of making narrative believed to confer a therapeutic benefit but the ability to deliver a coherent self-narrative is often accepted as a sign of (recovered) health and normalcy. See, e.g., Marcus, who argues that Freud implies that "a coherent story is in some manner connected with mental health," and that "illness amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself" (92).

I find myself returning again and again to Sacks's accounts of individuals suffering from Korsakoff's syndrome, not only because they represent extreme—and hence revealing—examples of memory loss, but also because Sacks includes his own personal response to the clinical observations he is recording, the fear and threat he feels—and we feel with him—in the face of such calamitous injury to identity. In Sacks's reading, the trajectory of these cases runs as follows: because of brain damage, the patients suffer memory loss, which manifests itself in aberrations of self-narration; as a consequence of this neurological event, these de-storied individuals are deemed to have become de-selved. This loss, which he variously describes as a loss of "life" and "existence" as well as "self," fills Sacks with a "peculiar, uncanny horror" (*The Man Who Mistook* 40); confirming his own response, he writes that people who encounter such individuals "are disquieted, even terrified" (111–12) by them. The hallmark of these damaged identities is a loss of affect; as Sacks puts it, "It is not memory which is the final, 'existential' casualty here... but some ultimate capacity for feeling which is gone" (114).[21]

How precise may we be in describing these momentous determinations about the quality of an individual's

21. The psychologist Daniel L. Schacter's observations concerning individuals suffering from massive amnesias parallel Sacks's. He portrays "Gene," e.g., as stranded in the present: "And just as his recollections of the past are devastated, he thinks little about the future. It does not occur to him to make plans" (149–50). Again, accompanying the atrophy of the extended self in cases of Korsakoff's syndrome is the loss of affect that troubled Sacks (146). Schacter concludes that individuals afflicted by such memory losses are diminished as persons: "When the past vanishes as the result of amnesia and dementia, so does much of the person" (160).

selfhood? As I have suggested, two leading features of these cases seem to be involved: impaired self-narration and loss of affect. First, the inferences concerning self-narration: obviously there is an implied appeal to a model of normal selfhood, and what can we say for sure about that model? Its structure is that of the extended self, stretching across time, and it is this temporal structure, apparently, sustained by memory, that supplies the armature for the meaning of experience, the content of a "life," of an "existence"—what Sacks refers to as "depth" (*Man* 112). Because the performance of self-narration confirms that identity is in working order, it easily becomes a primary criterion for normalcy. Turning to the unnerving loss of affect that fills witnesses with dismay, I would note that what we have is affect in the observer registering the absence of affect in the observed. That is to say that judgments about damaged selves are not necessarily the result of some easily objectified principles but rather the consequence of affect's agency in the observer.[22] If this is the case, then the ethical issues involved in such judgments become quite complex, and our responsibilities not easily determined.

Lest we distance ourselves too quickly from these admittedly extreme clinical examples, we should remind ourselves that analogous instances of narrative identity disorders have become routine in the age of Alzheimer's disease. Advances in contemporary medicine coupled with a rising standard

22. For the role of emotion and feeling in the exercise of rationality, see Damasio, *Descartes' Error.*

of living ensure that an ever-growing number of people we know will outlive themselves, in a sense with which most of us are becoming increasingly familiar. How do we respond to incoherence or memory lapses in the self-accounting of the elderly? "She was not herself today," we say, and our comment offers a fairly mild, forgiving, and potentially hopeful assessment of our forgetful relative; perhaps she will be herself tomorrow—"she's at her best," we add, "in the late morning."[23] But a darker question is lurking in the language we use to describe our sense of the identity situation here: Is she a self anymore?

Clinicians and ethicists have retreated with good reason from such totalizing conclusions, especially in the light of growing knowledge about the manifold registers of self-experience, but the extended self that is the protagonist of self-narration enjoys so central a place in our living that we are conditioned to accept it as the hallmark of functioning identity. When we do so, we accept as well a temporal framework for its story—it lives and dies a *narrative* existence. We deal comfortably and even conventionally with the beginning of our story; it is the ending that gives us trouble. "I was born . . . ," we say, and we haul out the family photo albums if we are lucky enough to have them, papering over the void of the extended self's prehistory, the period that so-called

23. Because I am dealing with *failed* narrative here, the evidence is by definition going to be fragmentary, usually presented—when published—in the matrix of a clinical narrative of some kind. This is why I turn from published texts to anecdotal evidence derived from everyday experience. I believe that we all have such stories to tell about non-stories. Similarly, Schacter observes, "I believe that a science of memory has room for both laboratory and everyday studies" (319, n. 29).

infantile amnesia has erased.[24] Adult amnesias, however, bring us face-to-face with the end of identity's story, the collapse of the extended self when the memory and narrative skills that support it fail. When self-narration stops, does self stop? Should we conclude that when the extended self has perished, it is time to pull the plug? If narrative is indeed a category of experience and not merely a literary form, however, can we be so sure that it is no longer functioning just because we can't observe it in its most familiar verbal manifestations? Moreover, some nonverbal, nonnarrative senses of self doubtless continue to function after extended selfhood has run its course. And while we are interrogating the proposition that self-narration is the sine qua non of identity, we should pause to consider its exclusionary implications for those individuals—many autistics, among others—who never master narrative in the first place.[25] Study of the conventions that enter into our conception of the normal person is a huge subject, and I limit my concern here to the decisive role played by the performance of self-narration in establishing our recognition by others as normal.[26]

I have been arguing that what we say or do about identity narrative carries the potential to transfer and apply to identity; that is, under the regime of social accountability, the regulation of narrative and the monitoring of identity go hand in hand. If this is in fact the case, then other questions

24. See Nelson 157–59 on infantile amnesia.

25. See, e.g., Smith.

26. See Hacking, "Normal People," for a useful introduction to the concept of the normal person.

demand our attention: What are the prerequisites for having an identity in our culture? And does everyone get to have one, and on whose terms? While some aspects of personality are obviously part of our genetic endowment, John Shotter and other developmental psychologists persuade me that in important ways we learn from others to be the persons we say we are. Is there a more fundamental social process than this making of identities? It entails not only consequences for those who break the rules but responsibilities for those who enforce them. In mapping some of the rules governing the self-narrations we are taught to perform as children, telling the truth, respecting privacy, displaying normalcy, I am struck by the fact that moral issues color each of them, leading me to conclude that ethics is the deep subject of autobiographical discourse. "The deep subject of autobiographical discourse"—I first used this phrase in an essay I wrote to introduce a collection of essays called *The Ethics of Life Writing*. At that time, my observation was triggered precisely by thinking about the breakdown of narrative identity. In *The Self in Moral Space: Life Narratives and the Good,* David Parker has confirmed my sense that ethics is central to the practice of life writing. "All autobiographers," he contends, "necessarily define themselves in relation to strongly valued goods" (172).

Earlier I proposed that in an American context the right to write our life stories may seem to be a natural extension of our rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I want to turn now to a thought-provoking essay by James Rachels and William Ruddick in which they make liberty

itself a precondition of personhood. Distinguishing between "*being alive*" (a "biological notion") and "*having a life*" (a "notion of biography"), they hold that "only persons have lives" (226, 228). To the person they attribute what I would characterize as a distinctly *autobiographical* consciousness, a set of "self-referring attitudes" that "presuppose a sense of oneself as having an existence spread over past and future time" (227). "Victims of dire poverty, illness, and slavery," they reason, "might retain the capacity for social responses and yet have none of the intentions, plans, and other features of will and action that define a life" (228). If you have to be a person in order to have a life and—I would add—a life story, then conversely, do you have to have a life story in order to be a person? When they specify "a sense of oneself as having an existence spread over past and future time" as a criterion of the person, their thinking dovetails suggestively with the notion of the extended self I have been exploring in this chapter: individuals suffering from Korsakoff's syndrome and Alzheimer's disease, for example, would no longer qualify as persons. Our fear of this "personless," post-identity state is reflected in complex controversies about last wishes and life-support systems. In order to address these existential emergencies, we attempt to fashion legal instruments—living wills, durable powers of attorney, and other forms of so-called advanced directives—in which we state now what our intentions will be when our powers of speech may fail us later on.[27]

27. See, e.g., Grady.