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Homo Narrator

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Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography
by Susanna Egan.
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Some years ago, I heard the psychologist Jerome Bruner give a talk about a girl named Emily. At two, Emily was a virtuoso night talker: put to bed, storied, kissed and left, there would be a brief silence, and then the small voice would begin. It could go on for hours. Her loving, anxious parents installed a bug in her bed and recorded her talk – so much for infants' right to privacy. Analysing the tape, academic eavesdroppers discovered that while in her talking Emily often worked on existential problems – practising the past tense, adjusting to the arrival of a baby brother and the consequent diversion of her mother's attention by sturdily listing all the other people she could rely on to change her nappy – what she did most, and most earnestly, was to rehearse the events of the day. She made stories out of encounters and contretemps with parents or playmates: stories in which she emerged, if not triumphant, at least unbowed. And then, having brought her self-and-history-making up to date, she would go to sleep.

At three, Emily abruptly stopped her night talking, nobody knows why. Perhaps she had done with nappies. Perhaps she had sorted out the past tense. Perhaps she found the recorder. More probably she had made the discovery we all make sooner or later: that it is possible to talk to ourselves silently, inside our heads, and not only at night. (You can read more about Emily and the multitude of things psychologists and linguists have made of her monologues in *Narratives from the Crib*, 1989.)

Homo narrator: the creature who tells itself stories about itself. As soon as she had language Emily had embarked on that lifelong interior conversation by which we salve abraded egos and make tolerable sense of intolerably muddled experience; by which we draft and redraft the secret histories of our lives. No one thought to doubt any part of Emily's stories because she was talking only to herself. Had she waited until she could write, had she confided her observations of herself and her performance in the world to a journal, our suspicions would have been roused. We would think the innocence of the record gone, because Emily would have been guilty of writing autobiography, and autobiography drapes itself across the space between history and fiction, head and hands on one side, feet precariously hooked on the other. Remember Anaïs Nin and her 'liary'. Remember Jack Kerouac, living dangerously so he could dash back to the quiet of his mother's house, sit down at his boyhood desk, and write his rough living down.

Nonetheless, until recently there has been an expectation, quite often met, that the autobiographer would try to tell it more or less as it was, or at least as he or she remembered it: that the reader would get a reasonably honest insider account reasonably free from conscious distortion, invention and too much narcissistic fiddling. We expected an intimate view of an individual who, by the act of writing an autobiography, declared themselves remarkable, and therefore worth the reader's time and attention: they would cast caution aside, and tell all. If Rousseau was possibly the first to think of this brilliant reader-snaring device – 'I will tell you all my secrets, especially the shameful ones, and I will hold you spellbound' – he was certainly not the last.

Precisely because of that promise of heroic honesty, readers were simultaneously attracted, and mistrustful. We assumed that autobiographies were written to impress, doubted the claims to transparent honesty, and often enough were proved right. Even apparently inconsequential facts could not be relied on: 'Henry Brulard' – as artificial a concoction as 'Stendhal' – claimed that he thought of writing his life-story at a suitably picturesque place on a gloriously sunny day when he was still on the sunny side of 50. His biographer exposes this engagingly frank first sentence as false: we are being nudged towards Brulard's preferred self-image.

Meanwhile, as our passion for unexpurgated details about our heroes intensified, another motive for autobiography emerged: the pre-emptive strike against would-be biographers. No one tackled that task more majestically and pre-emptively than the great Nabokov. Nabokov knew the inept ways of flat-footed biographers. He had lampooned them, gloriously, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. He had also suffered the attentions of one such biographer. So he returned to his original English-language version of his past, dauntingly titled *Conclusive Evidence*, and moulded out of crystalline memory, art and a determination to control his own life-telling the even more magnificently titled *Speak, Memory* – a performative utterance indeed, and clearly intended to repel all invaders. (It didn't. See what Michael Wood does with it in *The Magician's Doubts*, a book, astoundingly, worthy of its subject.) Hidden motives and additional adverbs were optional, but the autobiographer's central assertion used to be: 'here I uniquely, truthfully stand, and no one can challenge my authority in this story-telling.' In those days, all of ten years ago, the essential drama was between the autobiographer out to astonish and seduce, and the reader out to resist – to analyse and evaluate the techniques of self-presentation, or even to offer an alternative account artfully constructed out of the same material. Autobiography was an intimate art commanding an intimate response.

No more. Now, if we are to believe Susanna Egan, the game has changed. Egan tells us that modern theorists, recognising the 'necessarily fictive nature of writing', are no longer interested in truth-claims. Neither are they interested in narrative, because 'significant numbers of recent autobiographical works foreground the processes and present time of their own construction,' with 'many forfeiting historical depth for immediacy of experience and personal doubling of vision for interpersonal exchanges'. The modern or Post-Modern practitioner of '[auto]biography', Egan's preferred formulation, is out to hold a discourse not with us but with his or her alternative self or selves, or with some other party implicated in the life displayed – or, possibly, concealed.

Egan is bracingly clear as to her intentions: 'I propose first to identify some of the critical elements that generate and condition much contemporary autobiography, then to trace that "encounter of two lives" between reader and writer of life and of "life", repeated both outside and inside the text – an encounter that I describe, somewhat problematically, as "mirror talk" – and finally to expand that notion of interaction into the genres of autobiographies.' In 1993, John Sturrock could say in *The Language of Autobiography*: 'there has never yet been an autobiography addressed to a readership of literary theorists.' Now it looks as if that time is upon us. The general

reader, it seems, is left out of the loop, save as admiring bystander to all this dialogic discourse. If the point of the old game was to 'catch them out', to find facts or whole interpretations other than the ones our subjects throbbed to impart, now it seems it is the reader's and indeed the critic's role to stand back, watch and marvel.

To try to define a category in an area as promiscuous as literary production is to carve the sea, especially in autobiography, which is proliferating terrifyingly. Egan is prepared to narrow the field to 'contemporary', 'modern or Post-Modern' autobiography – but in all its protean forms. She explores ethnographic film-makers' use of overlapping voices, fragmented texts and confusions or obfuscations of identity in visual and verbal collage, even comics. She investigates examples of what she calls 'autothanatology', meaning the writings of those who write with death a close prospect. She gives attention to the [auto]biographies (now she's got me doing it) of highly conscious craftsmen like Hemingway, Maxine Hong Kingston and Michael Ondaatje: she offers an engrossing scholarly analysis of the fragments and corrected drafts which became Hemingway's *A Movable Feast*, presenting it as an experiment in describing the ambiguous dynamics of his complex, contestful, admiring relationship with Scott Fitzgerald, not the character assassination it is so often taken to be.

There is, of course, a problem. Two hundred years ago Rousseau was surely as aware an autobiographer, as conscious of the transformations and deformations wrought by translating emotion into speech and script, of casting inchoate experience into moral narrative, as any modern. But in difficult territory it is necessary to be intrepid, as any selection can be made to seem arbitrary, especially when the ultimate aim is not to enhance our capacity to read individual texts more intelligently but to map the spread of theory-in-action. Egan is most persuasive in her chapter on the dynamic of shifting place in what she dubs the 'autobiographies of diaspora'. 'Explorers of diasporic identity are ... the quintessential autobiographers of the late 20th century': where the post-colonial subject reflects on the permeability of all boundaries; where the self sees 'the coming together of many "I"s, the self as embodying collective reality past and present, family and community'. (Egan is in fact quoting Bharati Mukherjee here.) By contrast, I found her chapter on 'Literary Pyrotechnics: Finding the Subject among the Smoke and the Mirrors' which focuses on Breyten Breyten-bach's *Mouroir* and the autobiographical athletics of Mary Meigs wearyingly dense, but that is possibly a reflex of age. Her assessment of Primo Levi and the impossibility of autobiography after the Nazi assault on language also is unpersuasive, especially in view of Levi's superb critique and transcendence of it, and 'crisis', always a key identifier of modernity for Egan, does not to my mind fit the situation of concentration camp inmates, which may be better characterised as an intolerable stasis. Given her ambitions, it is not surprising that the quality of insight and argument varies. But her eclecticism is courageous, her specific analyses and elucidations vigorous and vivid, and her theoretical discussions clear. Unlike so many of her colleagues, Egan never mumbles.

Paula Backscheider comes from a very different stable. I suspect she would give short shrift to Egan's evasive autobiographers. She writes a fluent, good-humoured, often humorous prose, she wears her extraordinary erudition as lightly as a scarf, and her aims are disarmingly pragmatic: to offer a practical guide to the novice biographer based on her personal experience – a prize-winning biography of Defoe – and a remarkable range of intelligent reading (her bibliography is a treasure-trove). She begins with four nuts-and-bolts chapters crisply labelled 'The Basics', dealing with voice, choice of subject, evidence (what, finally, persuades?), and theories of life structures. A shorter section, 'Expansions', examines particular biographies. With characteristic worldliness she concentrates on biographies which have won major prizes. Even her chapter on experimental biographies favours the eccentric over the esoteric: biographies of God, of collectivities, of marriages, of a (famous) dog, even of a species (cod). She includes a pleasantly deadpan

description of the modes of representation employed by the biographer who so enraged Nabokov. She reviews a wide range of methodologies, from the exploitation of legends and anecdotes to techniques like handwriting analysis, of which she is sceptical, and the systematic analyses of grammar and word-usage, of which she is not. On theory she is cheerfully eclectic because particular theories come and go while the biographical form is timeless: ‘So what does a biography sound like? Most commonly, like history or like one of the great realist novels of the 19th century.’ It is timeless because it is popular, and Backscheider cherishes that popularity.

In her fascinating penultimate chapter shep examines the work of the highly-paid stars she calls the ‘British professionals’, first demonstrating them to be an authentic category, then evaluating their aims and techniques, then coming to some surprisingly stern judgments. She is highly sensitive to their cultural setting. Seeking the unifying factor in their work, she finds it in a sufficiently agreed history and a secure readership: ‘It is no accident … that England not the USA produced these biographers. They have a level of comfort with writing for what British publishers call “the educated general public”, a category that US booksellers steadfastly refuse to admit exists, and see themselves as creative artists with an audience for “serious literary entertainment”.’ She contrasts that British cultural and psychological confidence with the academic enclosure of serious American biographers, and the chronic political tensions which bedevil African Americans as they struggle to establish their right to a stable and coherent individuality in the face of embedded racism.

Backscheider believes that ‘of all the major literary genres’ biography ‘is probably the most political – the one most likely to influence how a nation and its history are defined’. She believes it is the intimacy of the relationship between biographers and their readers which gives the form its political and cultural power. That recognition makes her impenitently old-fashioned. She believes that narrative will continue to dominate biography because it is what readers want, narrative being ‘the chief means by which we understand a life, ours or anyone else’s’. She retains a strong preference for accuracy over invention: a biography is not a novel. And she believes the market for conventional biographies will grow, because there will always be new subjects and new audiences, and humans’ curiosity about their fellow humans is inexhaustible. Her book will be blessed by generations of biographers and historians to come, not only because Backscheider makes the rough places plainer, but because she celebrates the biographer’s art as at once compelling, horribly difficult and significant.

Having survived this fin de siècle we are all aware of the fragility both of the moment and of the ‘I’, and of the fluidity of their various representations. We are ready to acknowledge that most things are matters of unconfident negotiation and unstable outcomes. Egan seeks to formulate a new relationship between the ‘new’ autobiographers and their (remarkably patient) readers:

> Disrupting the contractual obligations of genre disrupts both expectations and satisfactions, enforcing an intense level of interpretive participation in the autobiographical act. Furthermore, as writers reflect the condition of their relatively unchartered experience, they foreground their processes of artistic production, as if to guide their readers through the quicksands of interpretation. Writer and reader in sequence create the narrator and subject of such autobiography, and this sequence, furthermore, can become an ongoing dance as the reader rereads or the writer produces more autobiographical work.

Some of us might accept this uncomfortable contract (although I think Backscheider would not) because we care about writing techniques and the existential and ontological dilemmas of our writers. But we don’t want these people to talk to their mirrors for the delectation of a handful of theorists. We want them to talk to us.