

CHAPTER 2

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Body, Brain, Self, and Narrative

In his flamboyant 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman promised his readers an astonishing experience: "Read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life,...and your very flesh shall be a great poem." Reading a book, done right, could work an amazing process of transubstantiation, bringing author and reader into an intimate, embodied relation: "Camerado, this is no book,/Who touches this touches a man." On the face of it, this is pretty extravagant stuff, yet from the neurobiological perspective on self and narrative that I develop in this chapter, Whitman's overheated description of reading a book may be less fantastical than one might think. As I suggested in chapter 1, there are many reasons to believe that what we are could be said to be a narrative of some kind. There I was considering the social dimension of our narrative identities, emphasizing our lifelong participation in a narrative

identity system. Now, inspired by Antonio Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999), I will explore the somatic, bodily sources of narrative identity. The linguist Charlotte Linde used interviews as the basis for her inquiry into life story and narrative identity; my own parallel investigation relies chiefly on the I-narratives that find their way into published autobiography. In the wake of my exposure to Damasio's research, I find myself reading autobiography in a new way, not only deepening my understanding of narrative identity but also—surprisingly—confirming the truth of Whitman's startling views about reading. What really happens when we read autobiography?

Antonio Damasio and the "Movie-in-the-Brain"

We all know that whatever else autobiography is, it is almost always an I-narrative of some kind. But what, exactly, does an autobiography's "I" represent? When we write or say "I," the pronoun operates reflexively, referring back to the biographical, historical person who writes or utters it. So far, so good—we already know this. But can we say more? For example, consider Pokey, the spunky child-protagonist of Mary Karr's best-seller, *The Liars' Club: A Memoir* (1995). Here is how her story opens:

My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark. I was seven, and our family doctor knelt before me where I sat on a mattress on the bare floor. He wore

a yellow golf shirt unbuttoned so that sprouts of hair showed in a V shape on his chest. I had never seen him in anything but a white starched shirt and a gray tie. The change unnerved me. He was pulling at the hem of my favorite nightgown—a pattern of Texas bluebonnets bunched into nosegays tied with ribbon against a field of nappy white cotton. I had tucked my knees under it to make a tent. He could easily have yanked the thing over my head with one motion, but something made him gentle. “Show me the marks,” he said. “Come on, now. I won’t hurt you.” ... He held a piece of hem between thumb and forefinger. I wasn’t crying and don’t remember any pain, but he talked to me in that begging voice he used when he had a long needle hidden behind his back. I liked him but didn’t much trust him. The room I shared with my sister was dark, but I didn’t fancy hiking my gown up with strangers milling around in the living room.

It took three decades for that instant to unfreeze. Neighbors and family helped me turn that one bright slide into a panorama.... (3–4)

The hair on the doctor’s chest, the pattern on the child’s nightgown, the air of menace—Karr’s account of this inaugural, traumatic memory is vivid, circumstantial, and involving, creating a “you-are-there” effect of immediacy that will be the hallmark of the narrative to follow. But where, exactly, are we located? In a text, in the past, in a mind? The shifting nature of the “I” here, speaking in the present even as it personifies itself in the past, makes this question even harder to answer; Karr’s seamless prose spans decades with ease. One thing, however, is certain. The passage establishes

the narrative as a work of memory, Karr’s probing of “one bright slide,” long repressed, to yield in “panorama” a terrifying episode that the rest of her memoir will reconstruct, in which the cowering child witnesses her mother, wielding a butcher knife, collapse into madness. Karr presents her narrative, then, as an attempt to recover the truth of the past. Her commitment to fact is signaled not only by the framing page for the first chapter, which presents a dated photograph of her mother (“Texas, 1961”), but also by the acknowledgments section that precedes the narrative, where Karr stresses the years of “research” she invested pursuing her story’s “veracity.”

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

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

So let me begin again and ask, what is the relation between Mary Karr and Pokey, the seven-year-old Mary Karr figure in *The Liars' Club*? The French critic and

autobiographer Roland Barthes would have had an easy answer to this question: Pokey—or the protagonist of any autobiography—and *the self for which she stands* are both effects of language, and any relation between them would be necessarily arbitrary and unstable. On the inside cover of Barthes's anti-autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), these words appear, playfully inscribed in Barthes's own handwriting: "It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel." Despite the nagging implication of some personal connection between author and text that the facsimile of his handwriting generates, Barthes repeatedly undercuts any autobiographical self-reference that the title might lead us to expect, insisting instead that the I-character in his memoir in no way refers to himself: "I do not say: 'I am going to describe myself' but: 'I am writing a text and I call it R.B.'" At this exemplary postmodern moment of his career, convinced that any identity that "R.B." could possibly refer to is elusive and problematic, lacking as it does any substantial central core, Barthes concludes, "Do I not know that, *in the field of the subject there is no referent?*" (56, emphasis in original).

My own earliest view of self was also language centered, like Barthes's, but different. I tried to steer a middle course between the position that self is an effect of language and a more traditional belief that self is some sort of innate, transcendental endowment, something we are born with, something we somehow just "have." Research into early childhood development persuaded me that self and language, mutually enabling and interdependent, emerge in tandem

when children learn to talk.¹ Moreover, developmental psychologists who study how children are initiated into their culture's practices of self-narration confirm this view; they document how children learn from parents and caregivers what it means to say "I" as they begin to tell stories about themselves. I was skeptical, however, that we could push our knowledge of the emergence of self-consciousness beyond this early point when children master language and develop narrative competence. I was convinced that "knowledge of the self is inseparable from the practice of language" (*Fictions in Autobiography* 278). In the light of research in developmental psychology and neurobiology, however, I now see good reason to pursue the origins of self before and beneath language, for work in these fields teaches us that self is plural, and that some modes of self-experience are prelinguistic. As I noted in the preface, in "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge" the cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser posits five distinct registers of self-experience, two of which predate the acquisition of language in the child's development and are characterized by direct perception unmediated by reflexive consciousness of any kind. The psychologist and psychoanalyst Daniel N. Stern shares Neisser's belief that some senses of self exist "long prior to self-awareness and language," and he pushes the threshold of self's emergence back to birth, "if not before" (6). If Neisser, Stern, and the developmental psychologists trace the emergence of self to

1. See Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography* 191-98.

a point well *before* language, we might say that the neurologist Antonio Damasio traces it to a point *beneath* language. For Damasio, self is not an effect of language but rather an effect of the neurological structure of the brain. He radically expands the meaning of *self*, suggesting its deep implication in the life of the human organism at every level.

In *The Feeling of What Happens*, Damasio reasons that self must preexist language:

If language operates for the self and for consciousness in the same way that it operates for everything else, that is, by symbolizing in words and sentences what exists first in a nonverbal form, then there must be a nonverbal self and a nonverbal knowing for which the words 'I' or 'me' or the phrase 'I know' are the appropriate translations, in any language.... The idea that self and consciousness would emerge *after* language, and would be a direct construction of language, is not likely to be correct.... If self and consciousness were born *de novo* from language, they would constitute the sole instance of words without an underlying concept. (108)²

Given these assumptions about language, Barthes's assertion that "*in the field of the subject there is no referent*" would be untenable. Damasio's position is diametrically opposed to it.

2. Damasio's formulation here, setting up two clear-cut "before" and "after" positions on the relation between self and language (and indeed on the relation between language and its referents), strikes me as problematic to the extent that it does not allow for the possibility of a dynamic interplay between them. Rodney Needham proposes, for example, that "new inner states" may be created and "distinctively experienced" as "new lexical discriminations are made" (77).

I should pause here to emphasize that in the discussion that follows I will be speculating about self in autobiography on the basis of neurobiological theory that is itself already necessarily speculative. Damasio is careful not to overstate his claims when it comes to wrestling with the nature of consciousness. "I regard the thought of solving *the* consciousness problem with some skepticism. I simply hope," he writes, "that the ideas presented here help with the eventual elucidation of the problem of self from a ~~biological~~ perspective" (12, emphasis in original).

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

For Damasio, the neurobiology of consciousness, which he refers to as "the movie-in-the-brain," must address two

interconnected problems: first, "the problem of understanding how the brain inside the human organism engenders the mental patterns we call . . . the images of an object"; and second, "the problem of how, in parallel with engendering mental patterns for an object, the brain also engenders a sense of self in the act of knowing" (9). Pursuing his movie metaphor for the stream of consciousness, Damasio asks, how does the brain generate "the movie-in-the-brain," and how does it generate "the *appearance* of an owner and observer for the movie *within the movie*" (11)? (Damasio's italics prod us to note the mind-bending idea of a moviegoer *inside* the movie he or she is watching—we step into the world of an Escher print as Damasio invites us to contemplate what common sense tells us cannot be true.) Underpinning Damasio's bold attempt to answer these questions is his conviction that "consciousness is not a monolith, at least in humans: it can be separated into simple and complex kinds, and the neurological evidence makes the separation transparent" (16). Damasio identifies two distinct kinds of consciousness and self: (1) a simple level of "core consciousness" and "core self"; and (2) developing from it, a more complex level of "extended consciousness" and "autobiographical self."³

Underlying these two modes of consciousness, Damasio traces "the deep roots for the self" (22) to a "*proto-self*." Emphasizing that "we are *not* conscious of the proto-self," he

3. Damasio compares his "separation of consciousness into at least two levels of phenomena" with Gerald M. Edelman's twofold distinction between "primary" and "higher-order" consciousness (338 n. 10).

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defines it as “a coherent collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the physical structure of the organism in its many dimensions” (174, emphasis in original). This mapping registers the body’s *homeostasis*, “the automatic regulation of temperature, oxygen concentration, or pH” in the body (39–40). In this homeostatic activity recorded in the proto-self Damasio discerns the biological antecedents of the sense of self that is central to his conception of consciousness, “the sense of a single, bounded, living organism bent on maintaining stability to maintain its life” (136). From an evolutionary perspective, self is not some abstract philosophical concept but rather a name for a feeling embedded in the physiological processes necessary for survival. Self, then, for Damasio, is first and last *of* and *about* the body; to speak of the *embodied* self would be redundant, for there is no other.⁴

With the advent of core consciousness, which Damasio characterizes as an “*unvarnished sense of our individual organism in the act of knowing*” (125, emphasis in original), a core self emerges that preexists language and conventional memory. This core self “inheres in the second-order nonverbal account that occurs whenever an object modifies the proto-self” (174). Core consciousness, occurring in a continuous wave of transient pulses, is “the knowledge that materializes when you confront an object, construct a neural pattern for it, and discover automatically that the now-salient image of the object is formed in your perspective, belongs to you, and

4. Damasio cites Kant, Nietzsche, Freud, Merleau-Ponty, and others as precursors for his view that “the body is the basis for the self” (347 n. 4).

that you can even act on it” (126). Individual first-person perspective, ownership, agency—these primary attributes of core consciousness are also key features of the literary form of self, the “I” of autobiographical discourse.

The final and highest level of Damasio’s three-tier model of mental reality is extended consciousness and autobiographical self, enabled by the human organism’s vast memory capacity. Autobiographical memory permits a constantly updated and revised “aggregate of dispositional records of who we have been physically and of who we have usually been behaviorally, along with records of who we plan to be in the future” (173). It is this store of memories that constitutes identity and personhood, the familiar materials of life story and memoir. While it is true that our experience of life story is emphatically linguistic, Damasio aligns himself with developmental psychologists such as Jerome Kagan who maintain that the emergence of the autobiographical self does not require language, and he speculates that bonobo apes and dogs may well possess autobiographical selves.⁵

I have asserted that all autobiography is about self, and Damasio argues that self is a primary constituent of all conscious experience. Is there a link between self in its literary and in its nonverbal, biological manifestations? I believe that there is, especially if we interpret autobiography as in some sense the expression of what Damasio terms the autobiographical self, and I think that this link takes the form

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

of a shared activity of representation. I propose to explore this connection in three steps: First, how does the body manifest self? Next, how does Damasio articulate this bodily manifestation of self? And finally, how is self expressed in autobiography?

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

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

Damasio's anti-homunculus stance informs the language he uses to express the experience of knowing that constitutes self; it affects his choice of metaphors and his conception of narrative. I have already mentioned the first of his metaphors, the "movie-in-the-brain." He draws his second metaphor from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "you are the music while the music lasts." Both metaphors address perception by refusing any split between perceiver and perceived, and both stress process and duration. Paradoxically, although the feeling of knowing generates a sense of individual perspective, ownership, and agency, the rudiments of what will flower eventually as a sense of bounded identity and personhood, these proto-I-character features of consciousness are to be understood as fused with and not standing free from the life experience of which they are a part. The syntax of

autobiographical discourse always posits a subject "I" performing actions: *I* do things, *I* feel and will; *I* remember and plan. By contrast, in the underlying syntax of core consciousness, self resides alike in both subject and predicate. Damasio probes this paradox when he writes of "the appearance of an owner and observer for the movie *within the movie*" (11), for "there is no external spectator" (171) for the "movie-in-the-brain." Similarly, repeating Eliot's music metaphor, Damasio writes: "The story contained in the images of core consciousness is not told by some clever homunculus. Nor is the story really told by *you* as a self because the core *you* is only born as the story is told, *within the story itself*. You exist as a mental being when primordial stories are being told, and only then.... You are the music while the music lasts" (191).⁶ As Damasio's music and movie metaphors suggest, *self inheres in a narrative of some kind*. Narrative identity, then, the notion that what we are could be said to be a story of some kind, is not merely the product of social convention; it is rooted in our lives in and as bodies.

Damasio's extensive use of narrative as a concept to express the experience of self at the level of core consciousness

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

is at once both familiar and distinctive. Whether it unfolds in movies, in music, in autobiographies, or in the brain, narrative is a temporal form, which "maps what happens over time." But for Damasio, narrative is biological before it is linguistic and literary: it denotes a natural process, the "imagetic representation of sequences of brain events" in prelinguistic, "wordless stories about what happens to an organism immersed in an environment" (189). The brain's narrative, moreover, is not only wordless but *untold*, as Damasio's paradoxical movie and music metaphors are designed to illustrate; instead of a teller, there is only—and persistently—what we might call a teller-effect, a self that emerges and lives its life only within the narrative matrix of consciousness. For Damasio, self and narrative are so intimately linked that to speak of the one is reciprocally to speak of the other; I believe that the same holds true for autobiography—hence my growing preference for terms such as *I-narrative*, *self-experience*, and *identity narrative*.

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

- *They are both temporal forms:* self is not an entity but a state of feeling, an integral part of the process of consciousness unfolding over time.
- *They both generate the illusion of a teller:* although the experience of selfhood inevitably creates a sense that it

is being witnessed or narrated, a freestanding observer/teller figure cannot be extrapolated from it.

- *They both serve a homeostatic goal:* the adaptive purpose of self-narrative, whether neurobiological or literary, would be the maintenance of stability in the human individual through the creation of a sense of identity; as self-narration maps and monitors the succession of body or identity states, it engenders "the notion of a bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same" (134).

While I am deeply attracted to the idea that autobiographical narrative might be tied to the well-being of the human organism, an idea that I will explore further in chapter 4, it is the second point, concerning what I have termed the teller-effect, that has more immediate potential not only to illuminate our reading of autobiography but also to enlarge our understanding of the I-characters and I-narrators that structure our stories of our selves.

We tend instinctively to think of autobiography as a narrative container or envelope of some kind in which we express our sense of identity, as though identity and narrative were somehow separable, whereas Damasio's account of self posits that our sense of identity is itself generated *as* and *in* a narrative dimension of consciousness.⁷ Recall Damasio's

7. Like Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*, Damasio stresses narrative as much more than a literary form, approaching it instead as a sense-making structure that maps and monitors temporal events. I should emphasize that in drawing attention to the movie and music metaphors Damasio uses to develop his thinking—the apparently paradoxical notion, for example, of a "wordless"

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

To recognize the teller-effect as an illusion, however, to understand selfhood as a kind of "music" that we perform as we live, can prompt us to locate the content of self-experience in an autobiography not merely in the central figures of the I-character and the I-narrator, where we are conditioned to look for it, but in the identity narrative as a

or untold story—I do not mean to imply that there is anything loose or merely metaphorical about the concept of narrative these figures are intended to express. For further discussion of the proposition that narrative could be said to be a mode of consciousness rooted in phenomenological experience, see Eakin, *Touching the World* 190–98.

whole. Returning to *The Liars' Club*, then, it would be the I-narrative about Pokey and not just the Pokey-character it features that would be the true locus of Mary Karr's reconstruction of her earlier self.⁸ If, in the counterintuitive syntax of consciousness, self inhabits both subject and predicate, narrative as well as character, then autobiography not only delivers metaphors of self, it is a metaphor of self. The narrative activity in and of autobiography is an identity activity. Borrowing Damasio's borrowing of T. S. Eliot's metaphor, we might say that *The Liars' Club* is Mary Karr while she writes her story and perhaps even while we read it too: she is the music of her narrative while the music lasts. Why does she need to get her story straight? Not just to satisfy the biography police but to respond to a psychological imperative that gravitates to the performance of narrative as integral to the experience of identity. Narrative is the name of the identity game in autobiography just as it is in consciousness and in interpersonal relations (as we saw in chapter 1), and nowhere more so than in *The Liars' Club*, where Karr makes clear that her own practice of self-narration is rooted in her father's tall-tale telling, which shaped her childhood and her artistic vocation. If her childhood is filled with stories, so is her adult life, in which, she tells us, the narrative work of psychoanalysis played into the writing of her autobiography.

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

And the autobiography's account of all this making of identity narrative comes to a climax and closure with the twin stories-within-stories of her father's final tale and her mother's confessional revelations about her hidden past, a past so wounding that it had driven her to the knife-wielding act of madness that opens the memoir. Nowhere is Karr's belief in narrative as the motor of identity more strikingly displayed than in her response to her father's stroke at the end of the book. Devastated by the blow that silences Pete Karr and his voice for good, she responds to his aphasia by playing for them both a tape of one of his tall tales—and, we might add, by writing *The Liars' Club*.⁹ When we write autobiography and when we read it, we repeat in our imaginations the rhythms of identity experience that autobiographical narratives describe. I believe that the identity narrative impulse that autobiographies express is the same that we respond to every day in talking about ourselves; both may be grounded in the neurobiological rhythms of consciousness.

Doing Consciousness

I began this inquiry into narrative identity by pointing to the process of self-narration constantly unfolding in our

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

heads. Doesn't Antonio Damasio's neurobiological perspective on self and narrative, however, unsettle this familiar experience? What becomes of the central player who animates our stream of consciousness, this "I" who thinks and feels and plans, if it can be properly described as merely a "teller-effect"? How can a "teller-effect" be endowed with a capacity for action? If we are to fathom this sense of a disconnect between the reality of our experience on the one hand and what neurobiological research can teach us about it on the other, we need to distinguish carefully between levels of analysis. Whereas, neurologically speaking, the structures that support selfhood are distributed across many areas in the brain, from a phenomenological perspective, the experience of selfhood is indeed centered, and is certainly the locus of conscious intentions; a neurological "effect" is nonetheless and simultaneously a profound experiential reality. When we visit the interface between levels of reality, each with competing truth claims, how, then, should we respond? This is precisely the issue that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson address in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), when "a scientific truth claim based on knowledge about the neural level is contradicting a truth claim at the phenomenological level" (105). "The phenomenological and neural levels," they remind us, "provide different modes of understanding, the first in terms of everyday experience and the second in scientific terms" (106). And so they ask, "do we want to say that only one of these levels is relevant to explanation?" (108). "Embodied truth," they conclude, "requires us to give up the illusion that there exists a unique

correct description of any situation. Because of the multiple levels of our embodiment, there is no one level at which one can express all the truths we can know about a given subject matter" (109).

Does neurobiological knowledge have the power, then, to undermine the truth of our experience of selfhood? No one, I think, has anything to fear from Damasio's account of consciousness on the score of agency. In fact, I would say that the psychologist Daniel M. Wegner's *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (2002), which also brings to bear a neurobiological perspective on mental activity, presents a much more formidable challenge to belief in our capacity to will our actions. I certainly thought so when I read the column by John Horgan in the *New York Times* that brought Wegner's work to my attention. I was working on the ethics of life writing at the time, so I was primed to wonder what might become of morality, of personal responsibility, if conscious will proved indeed to be an illusion. According to Wegner, the findings of brain studies are at odds with what we think we know about our actions: "*The experience of consciously willing an action is not a direct indication that the conscious thought has caused the action*" (2, emphasis in original). Instead, "the experience of conscious will kicks in at some point *after* the brain has already started preparing for the action" (54, emphasis in original). Because "we can't possibly know (let alone keep track of) the tremendous number of mechanical influences on our behavior . . . , we develop a shorthand, a belief in the causal efficacy of our conscious thoughts" (27–28). What is the relation between

our representation of conscious experience—whether of the will or of self—and the totality of mental life both conscious and unconscious that our representations purport to describe? Wegner's notion of a shorthand that we employ to make sense of our experience strikes me as apt, and not disabling when it comes to ethics, for we operate as intending moral human beings on the basis of our apprehension of conscious experience and not from a conceptual knowledge of its neurobiological substrate.

But what if brain damage limits our ability to function as purposeful moral agents? Recent developments in neuroscience have been invoked to challenge traditional conceptions of moral responsibility. Neuroscientific findings, notably in the form of brain scans, have been introduced in American courts as a defense against criminal charges.¹⁰ In *The Ethical Brain*, the cognitive scientist Michael Gazzaniga captures the potential reductiveness of such neurobiological accounts of human conduct in a witty chapter title, "My Brain Made Me Do It." What such explanations omit, he argues, is the world of social and cultural experience that shapes the values we acknowledge as guiding our actions. When it comes to responsibility, Gazzaniga stresses the distinction between the physiological and social dimensions of our experience: "Brains are automatic, rule-governed, determined devices, while people are personally responsible agents, free to make

10. The ethical and legal implications of such evidence are extremely complex and only beginning to be investigated by experts in the emergent fields of neuroethics and neurolaw. For a brief overview of some of the key issues, see Rosen.

their own decisions" (90). Despite this caution about the gap between neural and social registers of experience, Gazzaniga proposes to negotiate it when he advocates a search for a "universal ethics" that would take the embodied nature of our humanity into account. "Knowing that morals are contextual and social, and based on neural mechanisms," he urges, "can help us determine certain ways to deal with ethical issues" (177). It is precisely the idea that morals have a basis in neural mechanisms, though, that has seemed to cloud the familiar precept of taking responsibility for our actions. What if those mechanisms become impaired or never function properly in the first place? The journalist Malcolm Gladwell describes research by the psychiatrist Dorothy Lewis and the neurologist Jonathan Pincus into the organic causes of criminal violence. Their work, which targets the link between ethics and the brain, suggests that brain injuries (notably frontal-lobe damage) combined with childhood abuse can produce "such terrifying synergy as to impede . . . individuals' ability to play by the rules of society" (Gladwell 135). The etiology of violence that Lewis and Pincus reconstruct leads Gladwell to conclude, "Advances in the understanding of human behavior are necessarily corrosive of the idea of free will" (145–46), indeed "corrosive of self" (142). "Is a moral standard still a moral standard," Gladwell asks, "when it is freighted with exceptions and exemptions and physiological equivocation?" (147).

When I read about the thought-provoking research of Wegner, Lewis, Pincus, and others, it can seem as though we are being asked, in the name of cognitive science, to exchange

a sublimely clear picture of cause and effect on the order of Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling for a mass of firing neurons. Should it make us uneasy, then, to think that what we are as individuals, as selves, as persons, is derived from our human nature as biological organisms? Antonio Damasio celebrates what the brain creates, while Lewis and Pincus remind us of what the brain can destroy; what the body gives us—self and the moral life—it can also take away. As Jonathan Franzen, faithful witness to his father's inexorable mental decline, put it in "My Father's Brain," surely "we are larger than our biologies" (33), yet he also acknowledges "the organic basis of everything we are" (19). And where does that acknowledgment take us when it comes to selfhood? The cognitive scientists Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi capture the aim of my investigation of Mary Karr's autobiography in this memorable formulation of their own research: "We are trying to connect a description of something out there—the brain—with something in here—an experience, our own individual experience, that is occurring to us as conscious observers" (11). Consider the representation of self, I proposed, in a passage from Mary Karr's memoir, juxtaposing two different perspectives, one literary and one neurobiological. This modest experiment taught me two things: (1) that "self" content might be distributed throughout an I-narrative and not merely contained in the I-characters and I-narrators where the conventions of autobiographical discourse condition us to look for it; and (2) that "self" is not only reported but performed, certainly by the autobiographer as she writes and perhaps to a surprising degree

by the reader as he reads. As far as our capacity for action is concerned, I saw more self, more agency, than I had before, not less. As Antonio Damasio might have put it, in writing autobiography Mary Karr was doing self, doing consciousness: "You are the music while the music lasts."

"Doing consciousness"—this emphasis on autobiography as performance, as action, will be my theme in the rest of this book. In the first two chapters I have sketched out the social and somatic "givens" of our narrative identities, the factors that temper the illusion of total autonomy inevitably accompanying our acts of self-presentation—those moments when *we* say who we are. But indeed we *do* say who we are, and in the final chapters of this book I want to look at how particular individuals use the cultural and somatic equipment they are given when they make identity narrative. In chapter 3, resuming the social perspective that guided my inquiry in chapter 1, I attempt to discriminate the part of freedom in the mix of cultural and specifically economic forces that govern the identity work society requires of us as players in a narrative identity system. In chapter 4, by contrast, picking up on my concerns in chapter 2, my perspective is at once narrower, targeting the body's homeostatic requirements, and much, much broader, proposing that the act of autobiographical self-fashioning that we perform every day may possess an adaptive, evolutionary value for the human organisms that we are. The materials I am working with in these chapters—published autobiographical narratives—are literary, to be sure, but as I see it, they are much more than that, offering a precious

because tangible record of an otherwise evanescent process of identity construction that is central to our lives. It is this existential imperative in our talking and writing about ourselves that I seek to recognize when I speak of these acts as "living autobiographically."

CHAPTER 3

IDENTITY WORK

People Making Stories

In the winter of 1849–50, at work on his ambitious project to chronicle the lives of London's working poor, Henry Mayhew interviewed an eight-year-old girl selling water-cress in the streets of the East End. "The poor child," he writes, "although the weather was severe, was dressed in a thin cotton gown, with a threadbare shawl wrapped round her shoulders. She wore no covering to her head, and the long rusty hair stood out in all directions." The child's account of herself opens as follows:

"I go about the streets with water-creases, crying, 'Four bunches a penny, water-creases.' I am just eight years old—that's all, and I've a big sister, and a brother and a sister younger than I am. On and off, I've been very near a twelvemonth in the streets. Before that, I had to take care

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