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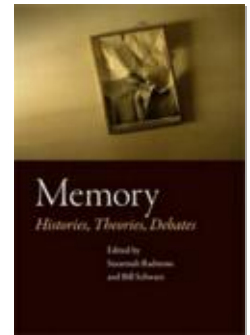
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18. Telling Stories

Memory and Narrative

Mark Freeman

Ever since the pioneering work of Sir Frederic Bartlett, it has become commonplace to assume that the process of remembering the personal past is a reconstructive one mediated by a host of significant factors, ranging from prevailing conventions of remembering all the way to the inevitable impact of present experience on the rendering of the past.¹ The recognition of this simple and seemingly indisputable fact has become something of a double-edged sword in the conceptualization of memory. On the one hand, it has vastly expanded the field of memory studies: memory, far from being the mere videotape-like replica of the personal past it was often assumed it to be, has emerged instead as a richly textured, multivocal text, as potentially relevant to the literary critic or the cultural historian as to the psychologist. On the other hand, however, the widespread recognition of the reconstructive nature of memory has destabilized the idea of memory itself.

Consider in this context the fact that much of what we remember about the personal past is suffused with others' memories—which are themselves suffused with *other* others' memories. Consider as well the fact that much of what we remember is also suffused with stories we have read and images we have seen, in books and movies and beyond. And, not least, consider the fact that all of this extraneous “second-hand” material will be folded into whatever “firsthand” material there may be through a process of narrativization, that is, a quite spontaneous process of transforming memory into narrative. There is a tendency still, among many, to use the language of *being-affected-by* to conceptualize this state of affairs: memory is affected by this or that factor or set of factors, which in turn implies that it remains possible to separate it out from such factors, that there remains something pure and unsullied, at least in principle. But if in fact there simply is no videotape, and if,

moreover, what we actually remember is always already suffused with “influences” of the sort just mentioned—which is to say, not merely affected by them by constituted through them—what can it possibly mean to speak of memory?

When it comes to writing about the personal past, of course, the issues at hand become that much more complicated. The inchoate narrative wrought via memory will become codified, solidified; a second order narrativization will take place. “Perspectives are altered by the fact of being drawn,” Updike has written; “description solidifies the past and creates a gravitational body that wasn’t there before.”² The issue of genre will become more acute as well, and, to a greater or lesser extent, whether consciously or unconsciously, there will be contact with specific plotlines and modes of telling. Some of the resultant texts will be memoirs, others autobiographies, others still works of fiction. And if recent history is any indication, there will emerge heated controversies and vexing questions concerning the very status of some of these texts: What really happened? How much reconstruction has there been, and of what sort? How much of the story is true? In which section of the bookstore does this belong? Perhaps there should be a new section entirely—a memory-and-narrative section, where all these different kinds of texts would find a home, with any and all questions about what they “really are” happily suspended. But we do not seem quite ready for this.

Remembering and Writing

In a provocative essay entitled “Book of Days,” Emily Fox Gordon recounts the process of transforming a personal essay entitled “Mockingbird Years” into a memoir with the same title. Although she had had some misgivings about doing so—not least because she was beginning to consider the genre of memoir “problematical”—Gordon had ultimately succumbed to the idea, the result being a lucrative contract and “one of the calmest, happiest periods” of her life. “I suspected that there was something a little Faustian about the deal I made with my publisher,” she admits, “but I found it difficult to fix my attention squarely on my qualms. It seemed slightly ridiculous to berate myself for accepting the terms of the marketplace and turning my essays into a memoir—a bit like putting on airs.”³ Gordon’s ambivalence aside, the fact of the matter was,

Mockingbird Years was exactly the kind of thing a publisher loves. It was old but new, a novel variation on a familiar theme. It fit neatly into a reliably salable subcategory of the “my story” memoir—the therapy saga—but it was distinguished from others of its kind by a contrarian twist. In my memoir, therapy was not the vehicle of deliverance but the villain: the troubles I brought into my therapy were minor, I argued, but the destructive effects of what I called my “therapeutic education” were not.⁴

Although she herself had read very few self-discovery memoirs, Gordon “somehow . . . had managed to absorb all the conventions of the genre. Perhaps,” she muses, “it was enough just to have lived in contemporary society and to have watched TV.”⁵ Notice here that we already have before us a significant problem—should we choose to regard it as such—frequently associated with both autobiographical memory and narrative alike: the way we remember, and the way we tell, is suffused with conventions, with schematic, even stereotypical, renditions of the personal past, derived from countless sources, many of which are external to one’s own personal experience.⁶ Ernst Schachtel’s classic essay “On Memory and Infantile Amnesia” spells out the conventional dimension of memory as follows:

If one looks closely at the average adult’s memory of the periods of his life after childhood, such memory, it is true, usually shows no great temporal gaps. It is fairly continuous. But its formal continuity in time is offset by barrenness in content, by an incapacity to reproduce anything that resembles a really rich, full, rounded, and alive experience. Even the most “exciting” events are remembered as milestones rather than as moments filled with the concrete abundance of life. . . . What is remembered is usually, more or less, only the fact that such an event took place. The signpost is remembered, not the place, the thing, the situation to which it points. And even these signposts themselves do not usually indicate the really significant moments in a person’s life; rather they point to the events that are conventionally supposed to be significant, to the clichés which society has come to consider as the main stations of life. Thus the memories of the majority of people come to resemble increasingly the stereotyped answers to a questionnaire, in which life consists of time and place of birth, religious denomination, residence, educational degrees, job, marriage, number and birthdates of children, income, sickness, and death.⁷

As a general rule, therefore, “The processes of memory thus substitute the conventional cliché for the actual experience.”⁸ This substitution, coupled with the aforementioned fact that much of what we remember derives from without, from sources outside the perimeter of our own firsthand experience, makes for a most complicated situation. Where does “my” memory begin and end?

In the case of those who elect to write about the past—that is, to turn their memories into narrative—the problems at hand may become that much more salient. Along these lines, Schachtel writes,

One might well say that the greatest problem of the writer or the poet is the temptation of language. At every step a word beckons, it seems so convenient, so suitable, one has heard or read it so often in a similar context, it sounds so well, it makes the phrase flow so smoothly. If he follows the temptation of this word, he will perhaps

describe something that many people recognize at once, that they already know, that follows a familiar pattern; but he will have missed the nuance that distinguishes his experience from others, that makes it his own. If he wants to communicate that elusive nuance which in some way, however small, will be his contribution, a widening or opening of the scope of articulate human experience at some point, he has to fight constantly against the easy flow of words that offer themselves.⁹

Judging from what Gordon says about *Mockingbird Years*, it is not entirely clear how strenuously she herself fought this fight. Indeed, after conducting an informal survey of self-discovery memoirs subsequent to writing her own, she reports that nearly every one—including her own—“can be reduced to the following formula”:

The protagonist (1) suffers and/or is damaged, often at the hands of parents, but sometimes as the result of an illness or repressive thought system, (2) seeks out or encounters a person or institution or vocation or influence that offers escape, healing, relief from, and/or transcendence of the original suffering and/or damage. These persons or vocations or influences turn out to be false, unreliable, or inefficacious (think of drugs, gurus, false religions, sexual obsessions, bad marriages). (2) is repeated. Each time the protagonist’s wish for relief is frustrated, the stakes grow higher: the reader’s sympathetic identification grows and the narrative tension increases. Just at the point when the reader’s pleasure threatens to become pain, the protagonist (3) stumbles across the finish line. Through the agency of yet another vocation or influence or person or institution, the protagonist at last achieves the relief, escape, or transcendence he has been seeking all along. (In my memoir, therapy was the oppressive force, writing the agent of liberation.) The drive toward narrative closure, which seems to be encrypted in human DNA, is realized in an emotionally satisfying conclusion.¹⁰

“Men”—and women—“like poets,” Frank Kermode adds, “rush ‘into the midst,’ *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems.”¹¹

According to Kermode, there is a measure of deceit entailed in this very process: “Novels . . . have beginnings, ends, and potentiality,” he suggests, “even if the world has not.”¹² Indeed, there is a distinct sense in which the novel “has to lie. Words, thought, patterns of word and thought, are enemies of truth, if you identify that with what may be had by phenomenological reductions.”¹³ The implication? To the extent that we partake at all of these fictive strategies in the course of our own efforts at remembering and writing—which on some level it would appear we must—we too must lie. There is even some evidence to suggest that these processes are organically connected. As Lauren Slater,

in her “metaphorical memoir” *Lying*, notes in this context, “The neural mechanism that undergirds the lie is the same neural mechanism that helps us make narrative. Thus, all stories, even those journalists swear up and down are ‘true,’ are at least physiologically linked to deception.”¹⁴

The theoretical story is getting decidedly stranger. Remembering the personal past seems to give itself over “naturally” (perhaps by virtue of its being “encrypted in human DNA”) to narrative, and narrative is in turn (the story goes) linked to lying. “Autobiography,” in particular, “is hopelessly inventive,” Michael Gazzaniga insists. On his account, there is a “special device” in the brain he calls the *interpreter* that “reconstructs . . . brain events and in doing so makes telling errors of perception, memory, and judgment.”¹⁵ The interpreter also tries “to keep our personal story together.” And, “To do that, we have to learn to lie to ourselves. . . . We need something that expands the actual facts of our experience into an ongoing narrative, the self-image we have been building in our mind for years.”¹⁶ The interpreter, therefore, “tells us the lies we need to believe in order to remain in control.”¹⁷ Once one turns this spin-doctoring process into autobiography, the lies become that much more pronounced.

Lies aside, there also remains the fact, noted earlier, that autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative alike entail present constructions of the past. As Michel Leiris notes in *Manhood*, the past has been reconstructed “according to my recollections, adding the observation of what I have subsequently become and comparing these later elements with those earlier ones my memory supplies. Such a method has its dangers,” Leiris notes, “for who knows if I am not attributing to these recollections a meaning they never had, charging them after the fact with an affective value which the real events they refer to utterly lacked—in short, resuscitating this past in a misleading manner?”¹⁸ The vantage point from which one remembers and writes, therefore, itself represents a kind of ending, which in turn serves to transform, and perhaps falsify, the meaning of the events of the past. These events point to the specific future that has become one’s present, which is of course why they were selected for inclusion in the first place. “The difficulty,” Georges Gusdorf has written, is simply “insurmountable”:

No trick of presentation even when assisted by genius can prevent the narrator from always knowing the outcome of the story he tells—he commences, in a manner of speaking, with the problem already solved. Moreover, the illusion begins from the moment that the narrative *confers a meaning* on the event which, when it actually occurred, no doubt had several meanings or perhaps none. This postulating of a meaning dictates the choice of the facts to be retained and of the details to bring out or to dismiss according to the demands of the preconceived intelligibility. It is here that the failures, the gaps, and the deformations of memory find their origin; they are not due to purely physical cause nor to chance, but on the contrary they are the

result of an option of the writer who remembers and wants to gain acceptance for this or that revised and corrected version of his past, his private reality.¹⁹

These issues may be especially pronounced in the case of fiction writers who write their memoirs or their autobiographies. “There are some semi-fictional touches here,” Mary McCarthy admits of her own *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. “I arranged actual events so as to make a good story of them. It is hard to overcome this temptation if you are in the habit of writing fiction,” McCarthy notes; “one does it almost automatically.”²⁰ For Philip Roth too, in *The Facts*, there was the need to “resist the impulse to dramatize untruthfully the insufficiently dramatic, to complicate the essentially simple, to charge with implication what implied very little.”²¹ On the basis of these accounts, it would seem that the process of telling stories about the personal past essentially involves lying to ourselves (via memory) and then further fictionalizing these lies (via narrative). Is there any other way of thinking about these matters?

Narrative Paradoxes

Thus far, several interrelated issues have surfaced that warrant our consideration as we explore the process of telling stories about the personal past. The first, dealt with succinctly by Schachtel, concerns the conventional dimension of autobiographical memory and narrative. On the one hand, it is clear enough that there is no escaping this conventional dimension. It is part and parcel of our hermeneutical situation, that is, the fact that we are always already in the world—in the midst of language, culture, history, “prejudice”—as we try to make sense of it.²² On the other hand, it is also clear that, even while there is no escaping this situation, there nevertheless remains a kind of pressure, a narrative pressure, to speak the truth. So it is, Schachtel told us, that the writer must always strive to move beyond convention—or, perhaps more appropriately put, to imaginatively rework convention in such a way that something new can be said. But what exactly does this mean? What *can* it mean?

Closely related to this issue is the aforementioned issue of the sources of stories. Gordon, you will recall, had told us that perhaps she had learned some elements of the genre of memoir simply by living in contemporary society and watching TV (and going to the movies, reading books, and so on). What she has also told us, in effect, is that these external sources have in fact become internalized and that the resultant narrative—as well as the memory on which it relies—is a curious admixture of her own firsthand experiences and those secondhand experiences bequeathed from without. There is thus something of a paradox here too, and it is not unrelated to the first one we encountered: just as there is no extricating memory and narrative from convention, there is no extricating that which is wholly “ours” from that which derives from without.²³ As noted earlier,

there remains a tendency to reserve the term “memory” for the former, the supposition being that knowledge derived from external (secondhand) sources gets imposed on the internal (firsthand) process. But if these external sources become constitutive of the very fabric of our memories, how are we ever to separate out internal from external, the “actual” from the “imposed”? And yet, there is a pressure here too, to do precisely this, a pressure to rely on our own memories and to tell our own stories as best we can. But what can this possibly mean? Is autobiography even possible?

The third issue, which we have already explored in some detail, is perhaps the most vexing of all. While Gordon had spoken of an inherent drive toward narrative closure, Kermodé, Slater, and Gazzaniga had gone so far as to relate the process of narrating to *lying*. I have suggested elsewhere that there is a deep and abiding connection between the narrated life and the examined life.²⁴ In a related vein, I have also suggested that remembering and narrating the personal past can be a vehicle of moral recuperation, that is, a vehicle for correcting the shortsightedness, or even blindness, that frequently befalls present experience.²⁵ Last, but not least, I have tried to retain a place in the process of telling stories for the possibility of telling the truth—indeed a deeper and more capacious truth than the one generally operative in much of contemporary thought, especially in the sciences.²⁶ How can students of memory and narrative have reached such radically different conclusions about these matters? From one perspective, the storyteller is a liar, as a matter of necessity and course. From the other, the storyteller may be seen as having the best available pathway toward self-knowledge. Both cannot be true. The challenge of rethinking the memory–narrative connection thus remains.

Let us return to Gordon’s essay to flesh out these difficult issues. “When I think of *Mockingbird Years*,” she writes,

I picture it as a crude map depicting the three essays from which it originated as aboriginal landmasses. In my mind, they are connected by a series of narrative bridges, long chains of interlocking “and then, and then, and then(s).” Even though I had adapted the original essays for use in the memoir, I view them as uncontested territories—pieces of the truth. The narrative bridges, on the other hand, seem to me to be flimsy things, instrumentally constructed, spanning a watery chaos.²⁷

Gordon acknowledges that the essays she had written were also constructions, as much as the narrative parts that would eventually unite them. She also acknowledges that the essays themselves partake of elements of narrative and that, consequently, they are hardly to be regarded as pure, immune from the sort of “flimsiness” she has come to associate with narrative bridges. As such, she writes, “I find it hard to account for my settled conviction that they were somehow *truer* than the parts I viewed as narrative bridges.”²⁸ But the conviction was there, along with an “uneasy conscience.” Something was amiss at the very heart of the memoir—indeed, perhaps at the very heart of memory itself.

“As memoirs go,” Gordon notes, “mine is fairly honest.” She did “take a few liberties here and there with details of décor and landscape, but there are no large-scale inventions, no outright untruths.” Moreover, “Everything that I say happened in my memoir happened, and happened more or less when I said it did.” What, then, is the problem? In what sense had she “distorted the truth of [her] life almost beyond recognition?” Here is her answer, which she frames in terms of “the tripartite lie of contemporary memoir”:

First, I presented what was only one of a multitude of possible autobiographical stories as if it were the story of my life. . . . Next, I allowed this narrative to influence the selections I made from the nearly infinite set of possibilities—and orderings of possibilities—that my life history afforded me. . . . Finally, and most seriously, I wrote from an impossibly posthumous point of view, as if I knew the final truth of my life—as if I were confident that nothing that happened in the future might yet revise it. While I was careful to hedge my bet with irony and a certain tentativeness of tone, I knew in my writer’s heart that where I left off, my readers would take over—their passion for narrative closure would finish the job for me. And then they would hoist me onto their shoulders and make much of me, or at least some of them would. The odd consequence of the lie of my memoir was that my mere, and logically necessary, survival was enough to turn my story into a triumph.²⁹

Part of the problem, from Gordon’s point of view, was a kind of narrative hubris, the audacity of supposing that she had discovered the “final truth” of her life. Perhaps, therefore, she ought to have been a bit more humble about what she could and couldn’t know of her life, of her self. But there was also the problem of narrative itself. Her perspective is a curious one. “I feel a little ashamed that I was so ready to sell my essayistic birthright for a mess of memoiristic pottage,” she confesses, “but I can’t deny that my book was better, or at least more readable, for having a story line. A narrative arc is necessary to a memoir of the kind I contracted to write, particularly one that encompasses all or most of a life and brings it up to the present day.” Her explanation: “It’s the length that does it: the brain will submit to an amoebically free-form twenty-page essay, but will balk at the prospect of three hundred pages without a through-line.”³⁰ The intra-psychic lie that Gazzaniga had spoken of, which was needed “to keep our personal story together,” is thus magnified in the case of memoir; without it, Gordon implies, readers’ brains would simply tune out after twenty pages, and sales would plummet. This, at least, is how it all appears now.

“For two years after *Mockingbird Years* was published,” Gordon continues,

I struggled to disentangle the triumphant narrative self of my memoir from my necessarily non-triumphant real self. I lost touch with my real past, and consequently lost access to the future; I was unable to live and consequently unable to write. Like a

character under a fairy-tale curse, I had no choice but to wait until a sense of the actual past returned to me—until the season of my false triumph had passed and the weeds of authenticity had grown high enough to obscure the orderly garden of memoir.³¹

Fair enough: clearly, there was a significant gap between the story Gordon had told and who she really believed herself to be. But is the problem here the seeming inevitability of hindsight and narrative working their self-aggrandizing ways? Or is it that Gordon had written an overly self-aggrandizing narrative, one that simply wasn't as truthful as it might have been? *Must* autobiographical narrative be triumphalist? *Must* the “garden” of memoir be as orderly as she suggests? *Must* memoirs lie?

The plot thickens: “The past I longed to retrieve was not just the past unmediated by the story of a life in therapy, but the past unmediated by any narrative at all. I wanted to rediscover my history under the aspect of nothing but itself.” Gordon, therefore, essentially wanted to engage in a kind of time travel, to a land before narrative, to a past whose future was as yet undetermined. “How did this past look as I turned back to face it? Very much the way the future looked to me as a child—like a great undifferentiated ocean of time. Here and there, events and impressions heaved up to break the surface of the unmapped waters of the past, but I had very little sense of the geography of the region.”³² Fortunately, there had been lots of baby pictures, which Gordon would be able to explore “as hungrily as an archeologist examining the artifacts of a lost civilization.” She needs these pictures; “without them I could no longer bring to mind the stages of a face that changed every week. How much more of the lost world of my history might I have been able to reclaim if I had taken more pictures, kept other kinds of records of time as it was passing?” Not only did these photos help Gordon remember her daughter as she had appeared throughout the course of her childhood; they also gave her “a foothold in time. Having recovered [her daughter’s] red denim overalls,” for instance, she “can also retrieve other details and scenes through association, and thus triangulate my way back into an era of which they have come to be an emblem. Those photographs—or at least a few of them—have become the central nodes of a whole system of recollection.”³³

Gordon is hardly to be faulted for wanting to return to those earlier days via the baby pictures; they allow a different kind of relationship to the past, one that is more concrete, more sensuous. But it remains unclear why this relationship ought to be elevated to the status of truth, and memoir demoted to that of the lie. There is a twofold assumption operative in Gordon’s essay as well as in the work of many theorists of autobiographical memory and narrative. The first part of the assumption is that immediate experience—that which occurs in the context of the sensuous present moment—represents a kind of baseline of the real; it is the foundation, against which all other accounts are to be compared, the indubitable archive of What Really Happened. And even if it is recognized that the immediate is itself mediated (and is in that sense not so im-mediate as the word

implies), there nevertheless remains the assumption that it is somehow purer, less tarnished by the sundry designs and desires we bring to the world upon looking backward and trying to make sense of it all. The second part follows from the first: insofar as memory—and, by extension, narrative—veer away from the fleshy immediacy of the (past) present moment, they cannot help but involve some measure of distortion and falsification. Often, following Bartlett especially, the more neutral language of “reconstruction” is used.³⁴ But there is no mistaking the thrust of such work, in which the leading terms are *accuracy* and *distortion*, “true” memories, which are closer to unmediated reality, and “false” ones, which deform it. The implication is clear enough: to the degree that memory departs from What Really Happened, in the sensuous fullness of immediate experience, it cannot help but falsify the past. Narrative simply makes matters worse.

I want to question this twofold assumption, and I want to do so in a twofold way. First, I want to question the tendency to equate the immediate, the momentary, the sensuous present, with reality. It is *one* reality, to be sure, but there is no necessary reason to consider it primary—the “baseline,” as I called it, against which any and all other renditions are to be compared. Indeed, there are profound limits to the present moment, precisely because of our all too human tendency to be unreflectively caught up in it.³⁵ I do not wish to denigrate the present moment; it undoubtedly has virtues of its own. What’s more, it can certainly be argued, compellingly, that too often we are blind to the present moment, moving through our lives all too hastily, all too unaware of what’s there, before us, in the world. There are nevertheless limits to the present moment, tied not only to blindness, hastiness, lack of awareness, and so on, but to the absence of that sort of temporal distance that allows us to see things in their full, or at least fuller, measure. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts the matter, “What a thing has to say, its intrinsic content, first appears only after it is divorced from the fleeting circumstances of its actuality.”³⁶ As such, temporal distance, so often assumed to be a source of distortion or outright falsification, bears within it a “positive and productive possibility of understanding.”³⁷

This brings me to the second reason for casting into question the twofold assumption outlined above. In line with questioning the immediate-moment-as-reality thesis, I want to question what might be termed the reconstructive-memory-as-inevitable-distortion thesis. Let me be clear about this issue: there *can* be distortion, there *can* be false memories, and all the rest. Inquiring into these sorts of issues is vitally important. This focus on accuracy and distortion, however, is but one axis of inquiry into the reconstructive dimension of memory. I therefore want to turn to a quite different axis of inquiry, my primary interest being in the *revelatory* power of memory—that is, its capacity to yield insight and understanding of the sort that could not, indeed that cannot, occur in the immediacy of the present moment.

Gordon has clearly made use of this revelatory power. As she now realizes,

The narrative of my memoir was a lie, and for some time it made my entire history disappear. . . . Like every story, it was told after the fact. I had no way of knowing until quite late that I would hear any call [to become a writer] at all, and when I did, I seized upon it to justify what was failed in my life. My memory subsequently colluded with the narrative scheme by consigning everything unrelated or potentially antagonistic to it—my studies; my motherhood; my marriage; the pleasures, pains, and struggles of my daily life; the ambition that I could hardly contain, much less conceal from myself; even the writing I did before I pronounced myself a writer—to relative obscurity, so as to dramatize my modest success by throwing it into bold relief.³⁸

There is a tragic aspect to this new story Gordon wishes to tell about herself. “The only way I seem to be able to reclaim my own experience,” she writes, “is to remember it ‘under the aspect’—under the aspect, that is, of narrative interpretation, which initiates distortions of the past as automatically as a rent in a stocking begins a run. . . . What comes later in a life draws its significance from what came earlier, but only in the dead letter of a narrative can what comes earlier draw its significance from what comes later. Life can be read backward, not forward.”³⁹

Where does this leave her? “My long-odds bet [about becoming a writer] paid off,” Gordon writes, “but even so, my reckless dismissal of so much in my life that did not fit my notion of destiny is something to regret.” There will be a brief meditation on this idea: “Regret. What can I make of this anachronistic sentiment? Regret is the obverse of the triumphalism I’ve been describing here. Its voice is quiet; in a noisily therapeutic age, all but inaudible.”⁴⁰ But there is an ironic twist to this final rendition of things: the very insight that Gordon has attained—about herself, about the seemingly inevitable distortions of the past, about the lie of memoir—has itself derived from memory, as has her regret. But it is precisely this measure of insight—attainable only in memory, via narrative—that is belied by the insistence on the lie of memoir and of narrative interpretation more generally.

This suggests that a more capacious view of both memory and narrative is warranted. The fact that memory is always already mediated does not mean that it is irreparably tainted and impure. Indeed, and again, the fact of memory’s mediation is the very condition of possibility for the emergence of insight into one’s past of precisely the sort we see in Gordon’s case. There are of course degrees of mediation: while some memories do emerge in relatively pure form, others are much more visibly permeated by mediating factors. In a related vein, the distinction between what might be called “first-order” memory—tied to “my own” firsthand experience—and “second-order” memory—tied to external sources—also remains. (As Eva Hoffman has insisted, those who lived through the

Shoah surely have a different relationship to that reality than those who have learned about it through others.⁴¹) But this distinction cannot, and should not, be framed in terms of the unmediated versus the mediated. Indeed, the challenge in this context is precisely to determine and to chart the multiple ways in which mediation works. By doing so, the idea of mediation may not only be deemed less troublesome by the likes of Gordon and others, but will also expand the space of memory itself and thereby minimize some of the regret that may be experienced over the fact of never quite arriving at the promised land of the utterly unvarnished past present. Is memory ever exclusively “mine”? Phenomenologically, the answer is surely yes: there is an irreducible “my-ness” to certain memories, especially those that involve sensuously felt experiences. There also exist some memories that seem to return us to what was, to a past present experience. But our very consciousness of this fact suggests that even these ostensibly pure Proustian resurgences are inseparable from the present act of remembering and all that we bring to it. Moreover, insofar as the process of remembering the personal past always takes place in and through language, culture, and history and thereby partakes of sources outside the perimeter of the self, what is “mine” is always already permeated by otherness.

The process of remembering the personal past is always already permeated by narrative as well—if not the full blown sort we find in memoirs and autobiographies, then the more inchoate sort, the rough draft⁴²—that exists the moment we try to make sense of the movement of experience. Indeed, it has been argued strenuously that the process of living is itself permeated by narrative, that indeed to be human is to live in and through the fabric of narrative time.⁴³ But what about the act of writing, the act of actually telling the story of personal past in a memoir or autobiography? A number of the writers from whom we have heard have suggested that, whatever problems the process of remembering may bring in tow, the process of writing exacerbates them. There is willful, conscious artifice; there needs to be a storyline, a “narrative arc,” as Gordon had put it, in order to draw readers in. As she herself admits, her book was that much better for it. Now, it is of course true that the process of writing about the personal past can simply falsify it, not only because writers sometimes concoct experiences that never happened or didn’t happen anywhere near the way they were described, but also because they sometimes fashion images of their lives that are patently out of sync with the actual movement of their lives. One needn’t be a hard-nosed empiricist or crude positivist to see that this is so.⁴⁴ It is equally clear, however, that some writers can and do write about the personal past in such a way as to disclose features of experience that would otherwise remain unacknowledged and unseen. We thus return full circle to Schachtel, who had spoken of the “widening or opening of the scope of articulate human experience” through writing.⁴⁵ Telling stories about the personal past thus turns out to be a most complicated business, sometimes veering toward lies, sometimes veering toward truths, indeed deeper ones than generally meet the eye. How is this possible?

Poiesis and Reality

Let me conclude this chapter with several fairly strong assertions about the relationship between “lies” and “truth” as these terms apply to the process of telling stories about the personal past. The first is that the notion of lies, when used to refer to the processes that go into the fashioning of life narratives, is parasitic on an overly narrow—and very problematic—notion of what reality is. The second assertion is that the conception of reality upon which this notion of lies is parasitic is problematic for at least two basic reasons. The first, again, is that it is equated with the allegedly raw and pristine, the unmediated and unconstructed, the “real stuff.” To the extent that reality is always already mediated, there is ample reason to question this conception. The second and more complicated reason is that this conception of reality is tied to a conception of time—basically, clock time, the time of lines, instants, sequences—that is inadequate to the dynamics of human temporality.⁴⁶ To draw these two ideas together: the conception of reality that usually surfaces when stories of the personal past are relegated to the status of artful lies is one that is imagined to be free of our own designs, a string of “stuff” that just happens, “in time,” and that we inevitably falsify when we later look backward and try to impose some order. With the help of the notion of *poiesis*, I want to cast this conception of reality radically into question. In doing so, I also want to suggest that rethinking the process of telling stories can open the way toward a more comprehensive, capacious, and adequate view of memory, narrative, and reality itself.

“What is essential to the story-teller’s position,” David Carr has suggested, “is the advantage of . . . hindsight, a . . . freedom from the constraint of the present assured by occupying a position after, above, or outside the events narrated.”⁴⁷ This position is a treacherous one. By being located “after, above, or outside the events narrated,” the story-teller—particularly the autobiographical storyteller—runs a number of significant risks. Gordon and some of the others from whom we have heard have done well to outline many of them. By virtue of this very position, however, the storyteller also has the opportunity to make sense of things anew. To “make sense of”: in this simple phrase, there is reference both to making, in the sense of a kind of constructive doing, and to explicating, in the sense of discerning what is actually there, in the world. It is at this juncture that the idea of *poiesis* may be useful. As I have suggested elsewhere, poets strive neither for a mimetic re-presentation of the world nor a fictive rendition of it. Rather, what they seek to do is rewrite the world through the imagination, such that we, readers, can see or feel or learn something about it that might otherwise have gone unnoticed or undisclosed. Contra Gordon and company, Yves Bonnefoy has suggested that “this world which cuts itself off from the world seems to the person who creates it not only more satisfying than the first but also more real.” Bonnefoy goes on to speak of the “impression of a reality at last fully incarnate, which comes to us, paradoxically, through words which have turned away from incarnation.”⁴⁸ Poetry, poetic language, rather than entailing the imposition

of meaning, entails disclosure, “unconcealedness,” as Heidegger calls it, its aim being nothing less than the revelation of truth.⁴⁹ Along these lines, poetry seeks to depict the “realer than real”; it is an effort to move beyond the exterior of things and thereby to actualize the potential of meaning the world bears within it. Notice here the parallel between memory and poetry: just as memory may disclose meanings that might have been unavailable in the immediacy of the moment, poetry may disclose meanings and truths that might otherwise have gone unarticulated. Both are thus potential vehicles of what might be termed *recuperative disclosure*; they are agents of insight and rescue, recollection and recovery, serving to counteract the forces of oblivion. In autobiographical narrative, memory and poetry meet.⁵⁰

Whether the process of telling stories obscures the personal past or reveals its hidden potentialities depends precisely on the storyteller’s capacity to use language artfully. “Under the law of aesthetic form,” Marcuse wrote some time ago, “the given reality is necessarily *sublimated*: the immediate content is stylized, the ‘data’ are reshaped and reordered in accordance with the demands of the art form. . . . Aesthetic sublimation makes for the affirmative, reconciling component of art, though it is at the same time a vehicle for the critical, negating function of art.” This critical function “resides in the aesthetic form. . . . The work of art thus re-presents reality while accusing it.”⁵¹ Herein lies the radical truth-telling potential of *poiesis*: “The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to *define* what is *real*.”⁵² Telling stories about the personal past, when done artfully, embodies this very power. It also shows why the mediating work of memory and narrative, far from necessarily obscuring reality, can reveal it and, through this revelation, redefine it. Returning to Schachtel one final time, the task of the storyteller is to “fight constantly against the easy flow of words that offer themselves”⁵³ in order to find those that will say something new and valuable, something that moves beyond the cliché, the stale sentiment, into a region of truth.

This perspective on telling stories applies not only to memoirs and the like but also to a wide variety of other texts and practices, both autobiographical and non-autobiographical. To be sure, one way to tell a story, one way to tell the truth, is to use language in such a way as to be representationally faithful to the past present. This seems to be what Gordon had most wanted to do. But there are countless other ways to tell stories and countless other vehicles for entering what I have here called a region of truth. Alongside memoirs, there are oral histories and other such ventures. Alongside the literary arts, there are the plastic arts. Alongside stories of the self, there are stories of others and of nonhuman realities. Some of these stories will follow a more or less traditional narrative path, beckoning readers or viewers to follow along. Other narrative paths will be much more tortuous, leading readers or viewers to fashion stories largely on their own. Whether these ventures succeed depends decidedly less on their representational accuracy than on their capacity to disclose a recognizable world and to do so in a way that somehow adds

to it, releases its inchoate potentialities. Finally, then, narrative *poiesis* is about the profound, never-ending challenge of fashioning stories able to do justice to the inexhaustible profusion of meaning that is constitutive of human life.

Gordon's situation, as considered in "Book of Days," is a complicated one, and there is much more to her story than what I have addressed here. Toward the end of her essay, for instance, she recalls concluding "that there was something to be said for planning to make a life instead of planning to make a story of my life."⁵⁴ Perhaps this gets to the heart of the matter. Perhaps, that is, her guilt and her regret were a function not only of the *kind* of story she was eventually to tell, which she couldn't help but see as an outright lie, but of the very project of storytelling. Why couldn't she just live? "How many times have I comforted myself with the old saw about how the unexamined life is not worth living?" In her case, however, it had come to feel that "the reverse might well be truer—that the un-lived life might not be worth examining."⁵⁵ For Gordon, it almost seems as if the relationship between living and telling can be formulated as a zero-sum game: had she lived more, she might have told less. There also might have been fewer glaring discrepancies between what was and how she came to tell about it. But it could be that living and telling are not so far apart as she implies. And it could also be that the process of telling stories, rather than leading straightaway to lies, can lead in the direction of truth. Had Gordon been better able to see and feel this possibility, she may have been able to avoid some of the guilt and regret that had so plagued her.

