The philosophy of autobiography

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service Instagram. As are her analyses of bloggers, Curtis sifts through a host of Instagram selfies of adolescents (for whom “aspects of identity are highly malleable and vulnerable” (185)), teenagers, and young women to construct some life story about them. She excels in her close readings of each posted pictorial. The selection of photographs by her subjects of study “focus on their bodies” suggests a “desire to be seen as physically mature and adult [coupled with a] “desire for self-affirmation or confirmation” (187) – these are the common threads she locates. However, like her analysis of Jackson’s videos, the analysis of “At Arm’s Length” feels incomplete, if not biased. Black women of varied ages have grasped the utility of Instagram to make possible the celebration of confidence in (re)invented toned bodies in before/after visuals; to celebrate fashion sense; to market their products; or, to rejoice in their (natural) hair and beauty among other events and occurrences. Curtis, however, neglects to acknowledge the adoption of this new media by adult black women to convey their myriad experiences.

While New Media in Black Women’s Autobiography offers some interesting passages, it does not fully contextualize the work within the field of Black autobiography by adequately discussing studies that inquire into the (new) ways in which Black women express themselves and within which New Media, in fact, settles comfortably on a continuum. I am thinking of (among others) Black Women Writing Autobiography by Joanne Braxton; “The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black Women’s Autobiography” by Nellie McKay; Dancing on the White Page: Black Women Entertainers Writing Autobiography by Kwakiutl Dreher; and, Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties by Margo Perkins. This reviewer often wondered why there are not more detailed references than the surface points made in the historical backdrops that open each chapter. In all, however, Curtis’s text should spark some discussion on the myriad ways Black women are writing about themselves across media.

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The philosophy of autobiography, edited by Christopher Cowley, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 242 pp., $30.00 (paperback), ISBN 022626792x

In his introduction to The Philosophy of Autobiography, Christopher Cowley suggests that the impetus for this collection of essays is to inspire further work in a field whose lack of development is genuinely surprising. As he notes, the absence in contemporary philosophy of a sustained engagement with the genre of autobiography is puzzling. This is especially true in light of the great interest in “life writing” and related forms of self-presentation in both academic criticism and popular culture today, but it is also true in light of the uniquely rich and indeed inspiring scholarship that such an engagement finally proves to yield. In presenting ten excellent essays that each instance a different philosophical approach to the study of autobiography, this collection does far more than open up a new area of philosophical aesthetics. More broadly, it gathers critical and far-reaching insights from diverse perspectives into the ways selves write their own stories and thereby engage in the ongoing projects of self-description, self-presentation,
and self-understanding. The scope here is extensive. Through readings of traditional autobiographies, philosophical autobiographies, works of fiction, and even films, the essays together constitute a kind of map or survey of new avenues of thinking about the horizons of autobiographical writing.

The contributors to this collection share the sense that the philosophical study of autobiography might be distinguished from a traditional literary or historical perspective on autobiography by an explicit attunement to larger long-standing questions and debates about selfhood, memory, knowledge, narrative, representation, and writing. For the contributors to *The Philosophy of Autobiography*, autobiography is not simply a genre, and it is of interest for the way its study inherently and sharply probes issues of the constitution of human identity. Christopher Cowley’s introduction aptly captures the way each contributor is concerned with complicating or overturning one particular myth about autobiography: that it describes a life, that it sets down a set of experiences, or that it mirrors and transcribes the self’s inner contents. For our commonplace view says that a life precedes and has coherence and integrity outside of the practices of making sense of it. In philosophical terms, Cowley describes the way these essays complicate such a view as an increasing distance from a starting point of Cartesian certainty and transparency. Yet there is a more general point to be made for literary critics, theorists, and historians in his fine introduction as well. Insofar as autobiography is “an activity that partly constitutes what it means to be a self” (3), it does not, as he puts it, deliver a preexisting package to its reader or interlocutor – facts, events, experiences, relationships, emotions, thoughts, ideas. Instead, autobiography is the process in which the self’s discovery and creation take place in what Cowley calls an essentially dialogical form. In autobiographical practice the episodes of a life begin to take the shape of a whole, and as the self arrives at a narrative form intelligible to itself and to others, a self-concept also comes into view. Thus the self discovers itself. This way of understanding autobiography as essentially creative or productive of identity (through the dialogue with others, with communities, and with our own self-images that it necessitates) has important consequences for our literary-historical conceptions of the genre too.

The volume begins with three essays that take up the relationship between autobiography and literature directly. Perhaps the collection's highlight, Garry Hagberg’s intelligent and lively contribution (“A Person’s Words: Literary Characters and Autobiographical Understanding”) interrogates the idea of selfhood that anchors our understanding of autobiographical writing: How do we conceive of human identity such that we have the myths about autobiography that we do? Hagberg offers the American pragmatist conception of the self (inspired primarily by James and Wittgenstein) as a useful alternative to the Cartesian picture of an autonomous, isolated, and sealed-off human interiority. In the pragmatist tradition Hagberg admires, the self is constituted by the layered relations into which it enters, and he argues that if the Cartesian self-transparent conception of selfhood were true, “autobiographical writing would simply be a matter of reading off internal content and reporting it externally” (41). In his incisive and often unexpected readings of Milan Kundera’s philosophical novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Peter J. Conradi’s biography of Iris Murdoch, and Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Hagberg shows how fiction, biography, and autobiography can work to reveal analogous insights about the contextual constitution of selfhood. Kundera and Rousseau, for instance, dwell with philosophical exactitude on the ways evolving contextual relations determine the meaning of even the most personal and intimate utterances. Hagberg’s interest through these readings is to begin to loosen the grip of the “philosophical myth”
(57) of autobiography on our imaginations. Philosophical literature, he claims, can remind us that we too often think of autobiographical content as the product of an inward gaze that yields immediate self-knowledge, as if the content of our lives and our minds were already there and it were a matter of simply turning our attention to it. In the contrasting picture to this myth that he carefully outlines, Hagberg argues that self-descriptive writing actually helps us to find, make, and compose ourselves, and that philosophy can begin to articulate the complexity and stakes of such an endeavor.

Marya Schechtman and Christopher Hamilton both approach the topic of identity and narrative by looking at cinema. Schechtman uses the 2006 film *Stranger than Fiction* to reflect on the ways real lives both are and are not like the lives of literary characters. She challenges Peter Lamarque’s classic objection to conflating literature and real life, and she claims that literature actually can help us see the significance of real life-paths and arcs, paths that are meaningful but not necessarily driven by the same strict sense of aesthetic organization and emplotment as literary works. She calls this perspective a “narrative attitude” (31) toward life and usefully distinguishes it from proper narrative. In his essay “Body, Memory, and Irrelevancies in *Hiroshima mon amour*,” Hamilton argues that Alan Resnais’s 1959 film puts forward a fundamental proposition about the necessity of self-deception in our own accounts of our lives. He argues that autobiographical acts can be understood as stratagems for avoiding the acknowledgement of the material vulnerability of the human body, and he uses Spinoza and Simone Weil to reveal how the film suggests that self-descriptions always at once seek the truth and flee from it. Both Schechtman and Hamilton focus on ways in which applying cultural forms to human lives can alternately illuminate and conceal the shape of experience.

The second group of essays addresses the relationship among storytelling, identity, knowledge, and memory from a distinctly philosophical perspective. While the spirit and mode of argumentation in this section might feel more unfamiliar to literary critics, the arguments themselves – especially John Christman’s insightful piece “Telling Our Own Stories” – carry insights whose relevance for literary study is well worth uncovering. In “Memory, Self-Understanding, and Agency,” Marina Oshana discusses the psychic connections persons have to their past lives, and she claims that recognition of oneself as a temporally extended being is required for self-governing agency, or even basic “selfhood.” She argues that “autobiographical memories” (106) are central in supplying constitutive elements of the self, and her essay takes up the hard topic of how conditions like amnesia and dementia challenge our conceptions of identity in very difficult ways. In an argument that confronts both the “realist” and the “constructivist” perspectives on autobiography, Somogy Varga maintains that we play an active, co-constituting role when we engage in autobiographical memory, and that such memory actually occupies a position somewhere between fact and fiction. From his perspective, self-deception is not an inescapable part of all autobiographical writing (as it is, for example, for Jacques Derrida or Paul de Man) but is instead a meaningful way to understand some forms of the intention to deceive. In “Autobiographical Acts,” D. K. Levy frames autobiographical practice as a form of action or presentation with a moral motive. For Levy, autobiographical acts are never innocent quests for self-understanding but instead active moral judgments over the perceived fruition of a life.

In the most consequential challenge in this collection to conceptions of selfhood grounded in narrative, John Christman argues that the narrative view of the self becomes more difficult to sustain when public standards of meaning and intelligibility are imposed on individuals who are oppressed. Christman uses Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Jonathan Lear’s interpretation of the Crow Indians of the United States to interrogate the assumed “narrativity” of selfhood implicit in many contemporary
interpretations of autobiographical writing. Through incisive readings of both, he shows that constructing a self-concept is often a conflicted negotiation between one's understanding of one's own experience and the standards by which a story becomes “tellable” and meaningful. He does not reject but in fact refines the narrative approach to the self by reminding us that narrative can be the site of a deeply complex struggle for a particular self-conception.

The final essays in the volume engage with the unique genre of “philosophical autobiography.” In a first-person account of the experience of witnessing her mother’s death and writing about it, Merete Mazzarella reflects on the ethical responsibilities of the autobiographical writer when writing about others. A commitment to using lived experience as the foundation for philosophical reflection is what connects the key occupations of J. Lenore Wright’s discussion of Simone de Beauvoir and Áine Mahon’s reading of Stanley Cavell’s Little Did I Know. Both Beauvoir and Cavell challenge conceptions of the self that seek to deny the fundamental relevance of concrete experience, and the power of both Beauvoir’s and Cavell’s philosophical voices pivots on the ways each transforms individual experience into the very grounds for philosophizing and having something “universal” to say. In Cavell’s “poetico-philosophical” (228) idiom especially, all knowledge for the philosopher must first be encountered and authorized as knowledge-of-the-self. Philosophical autobiography for him thus turns on our willingness to stand by our ordinary and everyday judgments.

The Philosophy of Autobiography is a satisfying and inspiring volume that transforms the intersection of long-standing questions into new avenues for thought and reading. It invites us to consider the broadest philosophical questions about what happens when selves write their own stories from the inside, and it gives these questions traction by offering a range of astute readings of autobiographical texts from an instructive variety of perspectives. Anyone interested in autobiography will find many exciting moments in this collection.

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