

Making Stories, Making Selves

“Alternate Versions” in *The Stone Diaries*

In one form or another, the spectre of multiplicity still haunts criticism of *The Stone Diaries* a decade after its publication. This debate about multiplicity turns on several axes: is there one, or are there many, narrators of the life of Daisy Goodwill Flett? Is the “self” of this novel singular or plural? That is to say, is the represented subject “split by language” (Williams 131), so calling into question “the notion of a unified subject” (Briganti 183)? Or is Daisy the agent of her own destiny, taking action “within the narrative to reconcile what she knows with what she needs or desires” (Osland 97)? Conversely, is she a victim of social forces (Mellor 103), “erased from the record of her own existence” (*Diaries* 76), or does “the novel’s focus on Daisy’s ‘empty centre’” make her story of itself “redemptive” (Roy 124)? Is Daisy’s “life” a “tragedy” (Thomas, “writing” 79) or a “romance,” the record of a constrained and powerless identity, or of a powerful selfhood able “to use the potentially terrifying concept of many realities and many selves in a positive project of reconceptualization” (Johnson 222)?

Ultimately, every question hearkens back to the primary question about the narrative act. Is Daisy the subject of her own story? Or is she the object of someone else’s story? Is her life told by many narrators, as Winifred Mellor (98) and Gordon Slethaug (63) seem to think, or is her telling subject to the judgement of an omniscient narrator, as Simone Vauthier (184) and Wendy Roy (119) suggest in differing ways? Is Daisy’s “life” a biography, or autobiography, or even “Auto/Biography” (Briganti 175); and would her “self” then be a hybrid form as well? If Daisy has as little power to act as

Thomas and Mellor claim, her life truly represents the tragic constraints on women's lives. To Oslund and Johnson, however, Daisy's telling is far more evocative of the "romance" of transforming possibilities.

In what follows, I will extend Lisa Johnson's premise that Daisy's "compensatory gift, the startling ability to draft alternate versions. . . . has been given short shrift in Shields' criticism, and I hope to rectify this imbalance by emphasizing it here" (Johnson 190, 213). In place of Johnson's version of reception theory, however, I focus on recent work in identity theory to show how *The Stone Diaries* offers a wider prospect of identity formation than is permitted by current theories of cultural constructivism. For, by happenstance, if not by premonition, Shields' novel enacts a drama of identity formation that anticipates and reinforces the findings of Paul John Eakin in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999). The work of the novelist thus serves as an "alternate version" to the work of the theorist, both of which present overlapping models of an ever-widening, increasingly important, epistemology of pluralism in postmodern culture.

Making Selves

Recent findings in neural biology suggest that perception is inherently plural, since the brain is a network of neural networks, having multiple centres and billions of possible neural connections. Thus, "the brain's neural organization is constantly modified—both phylogenetically and ontogenetically—to adapt to the ever-changing demands of experience" (Eakin 13). The brain necessarily constructs perceptions of an environment to which the organism adapts; Gerald Edelman affirms that "[e]very perception is an act of creation" (cited in Eakin 16). Memories are also creations, since they are not stored on some biological hard drive (Eakin 106), but are themselves fresh "perceptions newly occurring in the present . . . As perceptions, memories share the constructed nature of all brain events" (18–19). And yet, if "[r]ecollection is a kind of perception," then "every context will alter the nature of what is recalled" argues Israel Rosenfield (cited in Eakin 19).

The illusion of a single, unified self is also unsettled by recent findings in cognitive psychology. Ulric Neisser (1988) identifies "multiple registers of self-experience" that point to at least five distinct selves: including the *ecological self*: "the self as perceived with respect to the physical environment"; and the *interpersonal self*: "the self as engaged in immediate unreflective social interaction with another person" (Eakin 22). Both selves emerge within two months of birth, while other, more complex selves develop from the third to

fifth years of human life: “[t]he *extended self*: the self of memory and anticipation, the self existing outside the present moment”; “[t]he *private self*: the self of ‘conscious experiences that are not available to anyone else’”; and “[t]he *conceptual self*: the extremely diverse forms of self-information—social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind, of subject and person—that posit the self as a category, either explicitly or implicitly” (22–3). So how are these several selves, in ceaseless acts of perceptual creation and re-created memories, ever bound together in the illusion of a single, unified identity?

“Responding to the flux of self-experience,” Eakin observes, “we instinctively gravitate to identity-supporting structures: the notion of identity as continuous over time, and the use of autobiographical discourse to record its history” (20). Our sense of continuous identity is thus dependent on narrative forms whose ultimate referent is *time*. So narrative becomes the primary medium of an “extended self” whose work it is to reconcile past and present images of self with anticipated images of the self in future. For good reason, philosopher Anthony Paul Kerby joins “narrative psychologists” like Jerome Bruner “in his belief that self-narration is the defining act of the human subject, an act which is not only ‘descriptive of the self’ but ‘*fundamental to the emergence and reality of that subject*’” (Eakin 21).

From the vantage point of cognitive psychology, it is hardly surprising that it has “occurred” to Daisy Goodwill at the age of 72 “that there are millions, billions, of other men and women in the world who wake up early in their separate beds, greedy for the substance of their own lives, but obliged every day to reinvent themselves” (Shields 283). Nor is it surprising that this fictional character, facing the end of nine decades of life, should come to the conclusion that “[a]ll she’s trying to do is keep things straight in her head. To keep the weight of her memories evenly distributed. To hold the chapters of her life in order” (Shields 340). For, amidst the ceaseless flux of existence, human beings seek continuity in the midst of change: “[W]hen we look at life history from the perspective of neural Darwinism, it is fair to say that we are all becoming different persons all the time, we are not what we were; self and memory are emergent, in process, constantly evolving” (Eakin 20). Even if the ontological question of identity could be settled, there would remain the epistemological question of how self-narration operates as an identity-supporting structure to sustain the illusion of continuous selfhood. Where does such a faculty come from, how and when is it acquired, how might it be influenced by culture, and how can it preserve what is fundamentally a new creation each and every day?

On the face of it, memory is the key factor in making an “extended self.” Olover Sacks’ Alzheimer’s patient, for example, “who remembered nothing for more than a few seconds, was obliged to ‘*literally make himself (and his world) up every moment*’” (Eakin 100). Continuous identity is evidently a product of continuing story, where “Narrative and identity are performed simultaneously. . . . What is arresting about this radical equation between narrative and identity is the notion that narrative here is not merely *about* the self but rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self” (Eakin 101). And yet, without memory, where is the self of self-narration, or where is the extension of the self in time? As Eakin puts it,

[S]tudents of memory today hold that past experience is necessarily—both psychologically and neurologically—constructed anew in each memory event or act of recall. Memories, then, are *constructed*, and memory itself, moreover, is plural. Despite the traditional notion of memory as a single mental faculty varying only in strength and accessibility, memory is not, Larry R. Squire reminds us, “a single faculty but consists of different systems that depend on different brain structures and connections.” (107)

Among several major memory systems—*semantic memory* of concepts and facts; *procedural memory* of acquired skills and habits; and *episodic memory* of personal incidents and events (Eakin 107–8)—episodic memory alone fosters the emergence of an extended self in time.

Episodic memory, however, turns out to be more than a matter of personal impressions or idiosyncratic choices; it is also a product of social conditioning. As Kenneth J. Gergen asserts “[t]o report on one’s memories is not so much a matter of consulting mental images as it is engaging in a sanctioned form of telling” (Eakin 110). Typically, the forms that memories take are already sanctioned in early childhood by “memory-talk” with parents and other caregivers. But the underlying purpose of such talk, according to psychologist John Shotter, is “social accountability,” the idea “that ‘one *ontologically* learns how *to be* this or that kind of person’ in conversation with others” (cited in Eakin 63). In other words, “what we talk of *as* our experience of our reality is constituted for us very largely by the *already established* ways in which we *must* talk in our attempts to *account* for ourselves—and for it—to the others around us . . . And only certain ways of talking are deemed legitimate” (cited in Eakin 62).

If “our subjectivity is itself structured as a conversation,” or, more precisely, if “the self is a dialogue which reflects and refracts concrete social interactions in which it plays a part” (Eakin 64, 65), then self-narration is

the best means of making ourselves accountable to others in socially acceptable ways, in forms intelligible to common experience. Indeed, such experience of memory-talk, both early and late, “conditions us to believe that our recognition as ‘persons’ is to be transacted through the exchange of identity narratives—no narrative, no self” (Eakin 126). What lurks in this dialogical imperative, however, is the pressing need of the child to acquire “narrative competence” (Eakin 106), in order to find social acceptance. One painful consequence of autism, for example, is the inability to express an intelligible form of selfhood, to share an experience of identity that reinforces a common sense of subjectivity. The majority of children do acquire this narrative competence in familiar settings of home and church and school. Foremost among educative influences is the family, which serves “as the ‘vicar of culture,’ indoctrinating the child in the received ‘genres of life-accounting.’ From this perspective we can think of the child’s sense of self as emerging within a crucible of family stories and cultural scripts” (Eakin 117).

On the other hand, culture’s coercive power to establish terms of reference, to determine what is and what is not legitimate experience, can set its deep impress in the soft wax of selfhood. In Western culture, we like to talk, John Shotter claims, “as if we all existed from birth as separate, isolated individuals *already* containing ‘minds’ or ‘mentalities’ wholly within ourselves, set over against a material world itself devoid of any mental processes” (cited in Eakin 62). Missing in this version of an extended self, however, is “the presence of the relational [self] in autobiography. . . . Shirley Neuman has studied one of its surprising and revealing absences, the suppression of the maternal body. The mother may well be the primary source of relational identity, she argues, but her invisibility in stories of ‘self-individuation’ has contributed to our difficulty in recognizing identity precisely as *relational*” (Eakin 56–7).

For feminist readers such as Chiara Briganti, addressing this absence is the supreme achievement of *The Stone Diaries*—“the reclaiming of the maternal body and the elaboration of its relation to language in a genre that has traditionally banished the body from representation” (185). While Briganti reclaims a necessary space for the “relational self” grounded in the mother-child relationship, the absence of this maternal body, of early “memory-talk” (with either parent), and of an acceptable family “script,” makes Daisy a narrative “orphan” in every sense of that phrase. For where could her memories come from, and how would she gain a sense of “dialogical identity”? How has she in fact acquired her stunning narrative competence? Or how does she revise the family script to suit the dictates of culture?

While one assumes that young Daisy has engaged in speculative forms of “memory-talk” with Clarentine Flett, her adoptive mother, about her mother’s death and her father’s desertion, one takes at face value Daisy’s confession of unreliability in “inventing letters or conversations of impossible gentility, or casting conjecture in a pretty light” (77), precisely because memory is already an act of creation. What her confession cannot explain, however, is what she means by a “primary act of imagination” that allows her “to hold on to her life” by “supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections” (76). Her search for origins in a ground that yields few clues, and in a time that allows for little “dialogical identity,” gradually reveals what is “primary” about this “act of imagination.” Belatedly, her father has tried, on the long train-trip from Manitoba to Indiana, to reclaim his 11-year-old daughter, “never breaking for a moment his flow of words. He was talking now about his dead wife, the child’s mother. . . . Some of this the young Daisy took in and some she didn’t” (89). In the end, “She drifted in and out of sleep, but even awake her mind kept coasting back to the surfaces of the Simcoe Street house in Winnipeg where she had lived most of her life. . . . The face of Aunt Clarentine floated by, smiling.” Her father’s monologue evidently comes too late and is too one-sided to make him the “primary” agent of the child’s “dialogical identity.”

The adult Daisy has nonetheless been able to gather enough scraps of family history that, in keeping with the dominant scripts of culture, allow her to invent corroborating witnesses for her story, setting these “witnesses” in a form of dialogical counterpoint that belatedly does the work of “memory-talk.” Thus she insists, early on, that: “[l]ife is an endless recruiting of witnesses. It seems we need to be observed in our postures of extravagance or shame, we need attention paid to us” (36–7). What witnesses are selected, however, or what “accounts” are chosen by Daisy to represent the story of her origins are not just “secured by whomever and whatever is available. What chance, what caprice!” (37). Rather, each of her narrative choices illuminates what it means to be a series of multiple selves that has come in the postmodern era to supplant a Cartesian model of unified, autonomous identity.

Making Stories

That Daisy is the narrator of her own story is signalled from its opening sentence: “My mother’s name was Mercy Stone Goodwill” (1). That she is truly a woman of good will is evident in her portrait of her parents’ married life. While Mercy calls her husband a “pick-and-nibble fellow,” Daisy admits

that, “[e]ating was as close to heaven as my mother ever came. (In our day we have a name for a passion as disordered as hers)” (1–2). That Daisy, a citizen of “our day,” declines to side with contemporary judgements is evident from the way she projects herself into the past, before reverting to the present tense: “And almost as heavenly as eating was the making—how she gloried in it! . . . It’s something to see, the way she concentrates, her hot, busy face, the way she thrills to see the dish take form” (2). That she is inventing this scene becomes evident in her subsequent retreat to the past tense: “Some sharp thought, the worry over how to keep the pudding cool, or perhaps envy for the Fletts’ new ice chest, brings on my mother’s first spasm of pain. . . . A witness, had there been a witness present in the little back kitchen, might have feared a fainting spell coming on, even though my mother is not much given to faintness” (4). Clearly, there is no witness for Daisy’s account. And yet she plays fair with us, announcing from the outset her ubiquity in time and space, attributes that link her to an old-fashioned omniscient narrator.

This “witness” who has to be imagined puts the daughter reflexively in the grammatical position of the mother who “imagines the soft dough entering the bin of her stomach” (6), uniting them syntactically as subjects of the sentence. At the same time, Daisy finds herself in a similar psychological position to her mother, her knowledge every bit as limited as that of the woman who “never knows when she blows out the lamp what to expect or what to make of her husband’s cries. . . . Niagara in all its force is what she’s reminded of as he climbs on top of her each evening, a thundering let loose against the folded interior walls of her body” (7). As far as we know, this inmate of “the Stonewall Orphans Home” (29) has never been farther from Stonewall than Garson, Manitoba, where her husband Cuyler Goodwill works in the marble quarries, and so is likely to have no conception in 1905—an age before movies or television—of Niagara’s true thunder. The fact that Daisy imagines this scene, that she has projected a moment of sexual confusion and longing onto her mother, will only emerge in a scene some 125 pages later when, on a visit to Niagara Falls, she recounts how “[s]he resisted an impulse to lean into the man’s chest, to shelter there, crying out her joy at having found this unexpected intimacy” (133–34).

That Daisy needs to invent witnesses to corroborate her story, or that she should turn, after the death of her mother, to “Clarentine Flett, a woman half-crazed by menopause and loneliness, and in mourning for her un-lived life” (37), accords with her need for “social accountability” (Eakin 63). Not

surprisingly, her stepmother Clarentine shares this sense of missing witnesses: “The men, her husband and sons, leave for the quarry at seven o’clock sharp and return at five. What do they imagine she does all day?” (11). The only “pair of eyes” that “can see through the roof and walls of her house and regard her as she moves through her dreamlike days” (11) must belong to the adult Daisy, who can have no inkling of what Clarentine thought before taking on responsibility for a motherless child.

Again, in the second chapter, we are taught how to read this narrative ventriloquist:

“She didn’t tell me,” [a bereaved husband] roars to the vacant sky, “she never told me.”

This is what he is unable to comprehend: why his Mercy had seen fit to guard her momentous secret.

He supposes he must look upon her silence as a kind of betrayal. . . .

Yes, it must be confessed—years later this is clear to me—that my father’s love for my mother had been damaged, and sometimes, especially when waking from one of his vivid dreams, he wonders if he is capable of loving the child. (60-1)

Daisy’s “confession”—her abrupt intrusion into the thoughts of the bereaved young husband—suggests her compulsion to imagine his loss, since she herself is implicated in it, having “caused” her mother’s death. But she suffers as well from her father’s abandonment of her at birth, from an underlying sense of betrayal that she projects onto him. The ultimate mark of Daisy’s “good will” is her willingness to give him the benefit of the doubt, to imagine her father suffering the same pain that has always shadowed her life. And so she sets about, through “a primary act of imagination,” to motivate his desertion of her in terms of a more acceptable cultural script. Cuyler has felt a prior duty, perhaps, or else he has followed a higher calling to perpetuate the memory of his dead wife.

If Daisy is “guilty” of “dreaming a limestone tower into existence” (76), it is only because this “monument to lost love” proves her father’s nobility, aligning him with the story of the Shah Jahan who, alienating his son and successor, would bring about his own downfall by building the costly “Taj Mahal” (71) as a memorial to his beloved Mumtaz. At the same time, Daisy manages to create a meaningful relationship with her absent father by joining him in an imaginative re-creation of the lost mother. This sort of autobiographical project, as Eakin reminds us, is “one of the most striking varieties of the relational life,” since it “concerns the parent who is—literally or figuratively—absent” (87–8). What Daisy does, in chapters on “Birth” and “Childhood,” is then less concerned with “Daisy’s displacement from

the centre of her story . . . each time Daisy is constructed—or constructs herself—as an other” (Roy 122), than it is with recovering the building blocks of an unfinished “relational self.”

The narrator of “Birth,” who, in her peroration to the story of her mother’s death, admits that, “It’s this wing-beat of breath I reach out for” (40), is still yearning a lifetime later to establish some relational identity with her mother. With extraordinary generosity, she offers an “alternate version” of her mother’s “betrayal” of her father—well before he comes, in the order of her narrative, to his own grief-stricken conclusion about his wife’s “betrayal”—as simple ignorance of matters sexual: what Victorian orphan would understand “the way of a man with a maid”? Simple corpulence—she is “an extraordinarily obese woman” with “jellylike features” (17), who rarely had her menstrual period—would also make it difficult to read the signs of her pregnancy. Long before (and well after) the fact, the child can forgive both her parents for being victims of a plausible misunderstanding.

That corpulence is a rationalization emerges from Daisy’s account of the parents’ “wedding portrait” (17) in which the woman, dressed not as a bride and looking unlikely to marry a youngster who looks more like her son (172a), blatantly contradicts this verbal portrait of a woman too fat to know she is with child. Nor is the boy who stands beside the woman in the photograph “an inch or two shorter than she” (33) in an otherwise pedestrian image titled “Cuyler and Mercy, 1902.” A final inconsistency—the postulated “wedding portrait” was taken a year before their announced “wedding date, June 15, 1903” (182)—is more than a sign of postmodern “playfulness,” a joke played on the faithful in the sanctuary of mimesis. Such a glaring contradiction looks more like motivated “play,” forcing the reader to re-read the narrative to date in order to realize the larger signs of Daisy’s “good will.”

While “it is true,” as Dianne Osland writes, “that a dawning recognition of the inconsistencies and impossibilities of Daisy’s narrative can slowly undermine confidence in the narrative verities that sustain the formative accretions of the coherent self” (96), it is equally true that a more generous interpretation bolsters confidence in the power of narrative to create coherence where it was lacking before, to transform a story of death and desertion into a culturally sanctioned script of good intentions thwarted only by circumstance. For both parents now appear, much as Daisy herself, under the aegis of “social accountability,” schooled in their daughter’s narrative “to be this or that kind of person,” in order to conform to “the dominant social ‘text’ to which we are held ‘accountable’” (Eakin 63). With this assurance,

the aging narrator affirms her continuity with the lost parent, feeling “her-self merge with, and become, finally, the still body of her dead mother” (359). Indeed, Mercy’s unwitting pregnancy may be a trope for the whole of Daisy’s autobiographical act, since the “self” of the teller comes to contain this unexpected other to which it gives birth. In giving narrative “birth” to her mother, Daisy also gives birth to herself—to an extended self more in keeping with the cultural script of loving parents who have wanted children.

One must not forget, all the same, the wise reminder of Dianne Osland that “it is surprising, and perhaps worrying, how many discontinuities we are prepared to overlook” in the novel, “how many simply do not register, how willingly we re-establish the terms of the contract between an external verifiable reality and life reconstituted in, or as, language” (96–7). While Osland seeks to remove such inconsistencies in Daisy’s plot from the poststructuralist field of “mere” play and to resituate them within the economy of coherent self-invention, she succumbs herself to the trace of reference in the very moment of advising scepticism: “But [Clarentine’s] reading of romantic novels, her unsettling discovery of the ‘secret hoard of tenderness’ (18) in the house next door, and ‘her lost hours, her vivid dreams and shreds of language’ (12) seem to have little more to substantiate them than an unusually fervent and possibly derivative phrase from next door in a letter to Cuyler in which she declares, ‘I loved your dear wife Mercy with all my heart’ (50)” (Osland 96). The probability that no such documents exist is signalled both by a lack of dates for the letters in this sequence—in stark contrast to the sequence of letters making up another chapter entitled “Work, 1955–1964”—and by her acknowledgment, at chapter’s end, that Daisy is quite capable “of exaggerating or lying outright, inventing letters or conversations of impossible gentility” (77). The invented “fact” of the letter is only meant, however, to justify Clarentine’s desertion of her husband inasmuch as she has heard Daisy’s father’s (invented) profession of a love stronger than death: “‘I love you,’ she heard young Cuyler Goodwill say to his immense, bloated wife, Mercy. ‘Oh, how I love you and with all my heart’” (16). Clarentine, like Cuyler, like Mercy herself, is thus given an alibi for betraying her husband in order to make a new life for herself and the orphaned infant in the bustling city of Winnipeg. The story of Daisy’s birth then becomes the story of a whole string of deceits lovingly transformed in the telling into a string of pearls.

“As makers themselves,” Eakin writes, “autobiographers are primed to recognize the constructed nature of the past, yet they need at the same time to believe that in writing about the past they are performing an act of

recovery; narrative teleology models the trajectory of continuous identity, reporting the supreme fiction of memory as fact" (98). One of the beauties of Daisy's act of recovery is the way her whole narrative seeks to redeem her past and the people in it, to affirm, with Nietzsche's Zarathustra, "Thus I willed it." Haunted by the story of this husband whom Clarentine deserted to care for her infant self, Daisy is left to imagine "Magnus Flett, whom she has never met but who stands in her mind as a tragic figure, abandoned by his wife, dismissed by his three sons, despised, attached to nothing. In a way she loves him more tenderly than she loves her husband, Barker. What exactly had Magnus Flett done to deserve such punishment?" (187). There is no answer, except to say that he serves as a metonym for her own sense of desertion.

Nor is there evidence to support Barker's claim in an (invented) letter to Clarentine that "Our Father, as you know, remained hardened in his heart to the end, and it is for him we must now direct our prayers" (55). Flying in the face of her future husband's claim, Daisy tells the story from Magnus' point of view, crediting him with such an intense longing for his lost wife that he memorizes one of her books, *Jane Eyre*, "so that if by chance his wife should decide to come home and take up her place once more, he would be ready. If this talky foolishness was her greatest need, he would be prepared to meet her, a pump primed with words full of softness and acknowledgment" (100–1). Magnus would be so prepared, that is, were he the same man as the 115-year-old Magnus Flett whom Daisy later finds in the Orkneys, but for whom there is no shred of evidence to cast him in the leading role of deserted husband, faithful unto death to the memory of a faithless wife (Williams 137). Indeed, the whole story confirms her claim that "she is cursed with the lonely woman's romantic imagination and thus can support only happy endings" (149). But the point is not that Daisy is a romantic escapist in flight from reality. To the contrary, this maker of stories, who would redeem her personal past, together with key figures in it, is a highly self-conscious, self-critical narrator of a story she admits is "written on air, written with imagination's invisible ink" (149). The larger question must be what purpose is served by imagination in "life writing" which does not even pretend to be "writing"?

Telling Privacies

For Eakin, writing is a late, though not a necessary, stage in the construction of life stories, since "we are always writing our lives in the act of living them, that we perform this life writing in narrative terms" (123). Indeed,

there would be no sense of “self,” or any form of identity, were it not for tellings in which we all share, assimilating the scripts of family and culture in “memory talk.” Daisy is not unique, then, in recounting, if “not writing,” her life story. As Shields once remarked to Joan Thomas, “[s]he’s thinking it, in exactly the same way that we all think our own life. We carry around this construct that is our own life. But no, she doesn’t actually put pen to paper or anything like that. She’s building it, and she’s building it out of the scraps of what she knows and what she imagines” (“Golden” 58).

This self who constructs a narrative order for herself does not need an audience to confirm her sense of internal consistency; the coherence of her identity is purely a private matter: “All she’s trying to do is to keep things straight in her head. To keep the weight of her memories evenly distributed. To hold the chapters of her life in order” (340). Evidently, this fourth among multiple selves is “the *private self*: the self of ‘conscious experiences that are not available to anyone else’” (Eakin 23). This private self is often present “before the age of 5” (23), as appears in Daisy’s account of her daughter Joan, and her burgeoning sense of secrecy. “Already, at the age of five, Joan understands that she is destined to live two lives, one existence that is visible to those around her and another that blooms secretly inside her head” (Stone 172). The child’s secret life is nonetheless narratively contained in Daisy’s private story of “Motherhood, 1947,” where it stands as a metonym for Daisy’s own secret thoughts, if not as a trope for her “telling privacy.”

At the heart of her very public role as a mother is Daisy’s intensely private sense that, “She may be crowded out of her own life—she knows this for a fact and has always known it—but she possesses, as a compensatory gift, the startling ability to draft alternate versions. She feels, for instance, the force of her children’s unruly secrecies, of her father’s clumsy bargains with the world around him, of the mingled contempt and envy of Fraidy Hoyt (who has not yet written so much as a simple bread-and-butter note following her summer visit)” (190). Revealing herself as the “alternate” source of these “public” accounts of her maternal identity, she recovers a measure of privacy in imagining the private thoughts of others, thereby revealing something of the mechanism of her own identity formation. So, for example, she offers two contradictory versions of her friend Fraidy Hoyt’s brief entrance into this child-centred life from which Daisy feels “crowded out”:

While she was there she thought: here is Daisy Goodwill with a distinguished husband and a large well-managed house and three beautiful children. Daisy’s got all that any of us ever wanted. . . .

Or else Fraidy Hoyt thought: oh, poor Daisy. My God, she's gone fat . . .
 And, Jesus, just look at this guest room. Hideous pink scallops everywhere.
 I'm suffocating. Four more days. (183-4)

The uncertainty about what her school friend really thinks is one more sign of Daisy's authorship of explanations dictated by "good manners," a reminder that an inaccessible dimension of the subjectivity of others can only be reached through imagination. But these "alternate versions" of Fraidy Hoyt also remind us of alternate versions of Daisy herself, one consumed by public demands, the other restored by means of telling privacies.

Once before, Daisy sensed how her private identity had been consumed by a public story of her "tragic" widowhood—"she who's still living in the hurt of her first story, a mother dead of childbirth, and then a ghastly second chapter, a husband killed on his honeymoon. Their honeymoon, I suppose I should say" (122). The truth is that there was never any honeymoon; the alcoholic bridegroom showed no interest in consummating the marriage. And so, "[y]ou might like to believe that Daisy has no gaiety left in her, but this is not true, since she lives outside her story as well as inside" (123). The ability to see herself as a free agent, outside, as well as inside, the constraints of public opinion, gives an emphatic denial to the claims of social constructivists who see only constraining webs of power.

A final dimension of this private self appears, in the very moment of its withdrawal, in a "private" prelude to a "public" discussion of Daisy's depression in "Sorrow, 1965":

She remembers her dear sweet Barker fondly, of course she does, she honors his memory, whatever that means; and she thinks of him, smilingly, every single time she rubs a dab of Jergens Lotion into the palms of her hands, floating herself back to the moment—a very private moment, she will not discuss it with anyone, though she records it here—in which he had extolled her smooth-jointed fingers, comparing them to wonderful flexible silken fish. (230)

The privacy of this thought, like the privacy of the act itself, floats upon a current of intimacy, the true dynamic of which is an extension of the private self, a real enlargement of its possibilities through sexual relation to another private self. And so "she will not discuss it with anyone, though she records it here." Yet where is "here"? Both in the theatre of her private imagination, it would seem, *and* in the intimacy of relation with her imagined auditor. It is as if her dead husband were somehow succeeded by the secret reader; this act of "telling privacies" finally reconfirms our own identity as private selves.

Registers of Self

That the whole account in chapter seven of Daisy's "Sorrow" belongs to Daisy herself is suggested by two things. The increasing distance from Daisy of the supposed "narrators"—from her children and close friends to Cora-Mae Milltown, a former nanny, to Skoot Skutari, the grandson of a Jewish peddler who supposedly "witnessed" Daisy's birth—makes it improbable that Cora-Mae, who has not been heard from before, would appear to tell us about Daisy's depression, or that Skoot Skutari, who likewise lives half a continent away, would have the slightest reason to know about her present circumstances. The same thing can be said about Alice's narrative of her mother: either the diaries she admits to having burned "in the fireplace and also the letters I had written home during my year away at college, letters full of gush and artifice" (234) have appeared out of thin air in the previous chapter (cf. 209–10, 212, 215–6), or else this later account is the imagined one, or—more likely still—both are invented since Daisy fails to catch the inconsistency. (By contrast, Alice has no reason to reconstruct the letters presented in "Work" that she now admits to having destroyed in "Sorrow," while Daisy has every reason to do so.)

What these plural fictional accounts of Daisy's sorrow have to show, however, is something else about expanded registers of self-experience. For, in one sense, what Daisy does in imagining others inferring causes for her depression is to mitigate the isolation of her private self—if not to undo the deprivations wrought by privacy itself—by reviewing and reconfiguring her interpersonal self in relation to each of these others. In every "narrator," Daisy finds a facet of character that reflects her back to herself, that establishes a thread of affiliation binding her to each in turn. What we get in each case is an awareness of the other as a private person, with judgements peculiar to that individual; likewise, in "theory" after "theory," we recognize the autobiographer's full assumption of her "conceptual self"—what Eakin terms "the extremely diverse forms of self-information—social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind, of subject and person—that posit the self as a category, either explicitly or implicitly" (23).

From the outset of "Sorrow," Daisy herself reminds us that it is her "mysterious suffering core which those around her can only register and weigh and speculate about" (230). Given this reluctance of the private self to reveal itself, we, too, are dropped as confidants, are left behind to speculate on the source of her unhappiness with other "witnesses." Even so, "Alice's Theory" anticipates a larger theory of selfhood emerging in Daisy's own story, since

Alice insists that “The self is not a thing carved on entablature” (231). Since “[i]n one day I had altered my life: my life, therefore, was alterable” (233), then, by corollary, her mother’s sad state must be alterable, too, just as it was after her husband’s death: “But then, presto, she became Mrs. Green Thumb. Her old self slipped off her like an oversized jacket” (239). Another “alternate version,” presented in “Fraidy Hoyt’s Theory,” leans on Freud’s theory of repression to suggest that Daisy has merely denied herself “the sharpness of early excitations,” to wit the “sexual spasm,” by means of which we are able to “enter the realm of the ecstatic” (247). While Fraidy’s opening bluster sounds true to her character—“You don’t expect Alice Flett Downing to believe in her mother’s real existence, do you?” (240)—her appeal to the reader to arbitrate among such privately-held theories warns us not to believe in the “real existence” of her own theory. Fraidy is clearly a mouthpiece for the ventriloquist who pieces together a theory about her “conceptual self” by tracing out its variegated roles and traits and attributes.

“Cousin Beverly’s Theory” is still appropriate to a single mother raising a child out of wedlock. “I think it’s the kids who’ve got her down. Being a widow she feels extra responsible, I can understand that” (250), Daisy’s niece says, although she also sounds like a projection of Daisy’s own voice speaking for Mercy, Cuyler, and Clarentine in the opening chapters. Moreover, Beverly’s conclusion begins to sound like Daisy’s judgement at the end of the chapter: “A person can make herself sick,” Beverly says, “and that same person has to will herself to get well again, that’s my personal theory” (250). “She’d like to clean her body out with a hoot of laughter and give way to the pull of gravity,” the narrator sums up her period of depression: “It’s going to happen. All this suffering will be washed away. Any day now” (263).

The claim of the title to be “Mrs. Flett’s Theory” is not weakened by a counter-claim in its opening sentence that “[s]urely no one would expect Mrs. Flett to come up with a theory about her own suffering—the poor thing’s so emptied out and lost in her mind she can’t summon sufficient energy to brush her hair, let alone organize a theory” (261). For she manages to constellate her “conceptual self” in terms of a whole series of “theories” that could not be organized by anyone but herself. Her refusal, at the outset of the chapter, to “discuss it with anyone” (230) is clearly belied at chapter’s end by the resumption of the first-person narrative which carries with it the double-voicing of an outside perspective: “In a sense I see her as one of life’s fortunates, a woman born with a voice that lacks a tragic register. Someone who’s learned to dig a hole in her own life story” (263). That

the one who says “I” cannot be “a narrator who knows more than Daisy knows or invents” (Vauthier 184) is evident from the present-tense narration of the ensuing paragraph: “Already, right this minute, I feel a part of her wanting to go back to the things she used to like, the feel of a new toothbrush against her gums, for instance” (263). The intimate nature of this physical revelation, together with its simultaneous merging of inner and outer perspectives, finally puts paid to the account of a conceptual self that, encompassing various registers of experience—bodily, relational, extended, and private selves—is mediated by a multitude of voices even as it renounces the “tragic” implications of social constructivism.

The Binding Problem

One crucial question remains to be answered: how does this multiplicity of selves gain the character of a unified identity? “Cuyler Goodwill, to supply an example, traveled in his long life from one incarnation to the next. In his twenties he was a captive of Eros, in his thirties he belonged to God, and, still later, to Art. Now, in his fifties, he champions Commerce” (91–2). Cuyler himself is never concerned to unify his serial identities, and yet his account of them hints at two linking mechanisms by which these plural identities are finally bound together: “And he is oddly unapologetic about his several metamorphoses, rarely looking back, and never for a minute giving in to the waste and foolishness of nostalgia. ‘People change,’ he’s been heard to say, or ‘Such-and-such was only a chapter in my life’” (92). The instrumentality of language may not suffice for “neurobiological accounts of subjectivity” that pose what John Searle calls “the question of how different stimulus inputs to different parts of the brain are bound together so as to produce a single unified experience” (cited in Eakin 15). But the constancy of first-person pronouns in autobiographical accounts (Cuyler’s reference to “my life”) help to create a sense of ontological, as well as linguistic, continuity in the “grammar” of existence.

Daisy’s use of pronouns thus does two things simultaneously: it uncovers multiple subject (and object) positions of the self in the “natural” syntax of experience; and it creates a necessary agreement of subject and object, of private and public identities, of past and present selves, in the formation of her life “sentences.” So the older narrator tells how the eleven-year-old girl

could only stare at this absence inside herself for a few minutes at a time. It was like looking at the sun.

Well, you might say, it was doubtless the fever that disoriented me, and it is

true that I suffered strange delusions in that dark place, and that my swollen eyes in the twilight room invited frightening visions.

The long days of isolation, of silence, the torment of boredom—all these pressed down on me, on young Daisy Goodwill and emptied her out. Her autobiography, if such a thing were imaginable, would be, if such a thing were ever to be written, an assemblage of dark voids and unbridgable gaps. (75-6)

Such “voids” and “gaps” are bridged in this passage by a “grammar” that allows the user to shift roles, to play a dynamic variety of parts in the ongoing drama of identity. “In [Emile] Benveniste’s memorable phrase, ‘ego’ is he who *says* ‘ego’” (Eakin 21). Even as Daisy stares down the tunnel of memory at this childhood self called “she,” she looks outward simultaneously at the immediate world as “you,” thus crossing the gap between subject positions in the space of an apposite phrase (“on me, on young Daisy”), so creating as well a further identity of teller, told, and hearer. For each of these positions, while invariable in its syntax, is capable of being filled by the identity of another—whichever “you” hears whatever “I” might say about whichever “her.” Because of these multiple linguistic roles, it does appear likely that as Ian Burkitt puts it, “[t]he self is a dialogue which reflects and refracts concrete social interactions in which it plays a part” (cited in Eakin 65).

The self can even carry on this dialogue posthumously, as appears in the last chapter “Death” where Daisy drafts “alternate versions” of her obituary, one of which announces, “Flowers gratefully declined,” the other of which begins, “*Flowers gratefully accepted*” (343). Moreover, there are alternate versions of her epitaph, one conforming to public decorum—“*In Loving Memory of/ Daisy Goodwill Flett/ 1905-199-*”—the other moving toward private meditation—“*In Loving Memory of/ Daisy Goodwill/ Who . . . Made the Decision/ After Prolonged Reflection/ After Torment/ With Misgivings With Difficulty With Apologies With/ Determination/ To Lie Alone in Death*” (347). This latter demonstration of subjectivity in all its multiplicity is latterly directed outward, however, not inward, to the old problem of “binding.” For Daisy, who senses her life scattering into a series of lists and catalogues, of menus and recipes, also imagines her children sorting through her personal effects and finding another woman than the one they thought they knew: “This beautiful man fell out of a window. Her lover. Her brand new husband. Think if that happened to you. Would you want to talk about it?” (351). Daisy sees her children coming to accept her private identity against which they had so long conspired by thoughtlessly “crowd[ing] her out of her own life” (192). Yet she imagines them imagining alternate lives for her:

“Do you think her life would have been different if she’d been a man?” (353). In the end, they could still fail to grasp the truth of her private self:

“I am not at peace.”

Daisy Goodwill’s final (unspoken) words.

“Daisy Goodwill Flett, wife, mother, citizen of our century: May she rest in peace.”

Closing benediction, read

by Warren M. Flett,

Memorial Service, Canary Palms.

(361)

And yet the legacy Daisy bequeaths to her children is not so different from the scraps and fragments of knowledge left to her by her own dead mother: another scattering of evidence with which to begin the process of imagining a life they can no longer take for granted, nor may even hope to possess in its totality.

The story Daisy constructs up to her last moments—“DAISY (GOODWILL) FLETT Peacefully, on ___, in the month of ___ in the year 199_” (343), the incompleteness of the dates as telling as her later confession that “I’m still here” (352)—turns out to be her ultimate story of a self that she imagines extending beyond death, her “life” turned into a site where others are now left to gather her remains. Even so, her continuing goodwill offers her successors a model by which to redeem the past, much as she has done for others before her. Autobiography thus gives way to the possibility of another kind of afterlife in the “social accountability” of biography. Only now, the reach of her “extended self” extends through the generations to bind all who interpret her story together across time. So the work of making selves becomes at last the work of making communities. In more than one sense, the self turns into a richly rewarding dialogue.

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