Me, Myself and Eye:

Narcissism and the ‘I’ of Autobiography

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My husband bought a book commemorating The Argus newspaper. Inside the cover was a copy of the front page from the paper’s 1952 edition, the day after Cup Day in Melbourne. A triumph, the newspaper reported, featuring its first ever colour photographs, including that of the winning horse, Dalray.

’Look at this,’ my husband said. ’It was printed on your birthday.’ Until then I had taken no interest in this book, but now suddenly, I wanted to examine it. I wanted to look for signs. What were the people wearing? How was the weather? I wanted to look for signs of what the world had been like the day I was born.

Is this narcissism? No, the literary critic, Nancy Miller would say. This self-referential tendency, she argues, is an essential aspect of reading that we all engage in, a type of ‘selection process’ rather like the way people read their horoscopes. Because it is your sign, you imagine it has something to do with you. ‘You take what applies to you—the description of your love life—and set aside what doesn’t: the warning, say, about your finances’ (Miller, 2000, p. 435). This tendency, which some might disparage as evidence of narcissism, reflects the way we attempt to find out about ourselves by joining others, particularly in the process of reading (and writing) autobiography. This self-referential tendency is not purely an act of narcissism; rather, as Miller writes, it is ‘a rendezvous with the other’ (p. 422).

Narcissism gets a bad press these days. To be told you are behaving narcissistically is an insult. Few seem to realise that a degree of narcissism is part and parcel of everyone’s personality quota and a necessity for survival. Narcissism is not simply a state of mind to be vilified but it can become problematic when, as the psychoanalyst Neville Symington argues, it defies ‘self knowledge’ (Symington, 1993, p. 11). In this paper I consider narcissism in the context of autobiography, and the degree to which the popularity of the genre can be viewed both as a consequence of narcissism and also as an attempt to deal with it. Autobiography in its finest form is not ‘antagonistic to self-knowledge’ (p. 11), but is conducive to it, both for the reader and for the writer. As the essayist and editor, Robert Atwan, writes, ‘In some of the best memoirs and personal essays, the writers are mysteries to themselves and the work evolves into an enactment of surprise and self-discovery’ (Atwan, 2001, p. xii). Unlike narcissism, it demands a state of mind that seeks certainty and sameness and loathes surprise.

The Australian Oxford Dictionary defines narcissism as ‘an excessive or erotic interest in oneself, one’s physical features’ (2002, p. 900). This narrow definition fails to recognise the complexity of the term in both its positive and negative aspects. Though, according to Symington (1993), it is a
mistake to try to separate narcissism simply into good and bad—good narcissism as self-esteem and bad narcissism as self-conceit. Both go together. According to Symington, there may be such a thing as ‘healthy selfishness’, but not ‘healthy self-centredness’ (p. 8). Generally all human beings look for connections with others from their earliest days. But sometimes for a variety of reasons some withhold their desire and love from others. Instead they focus all their interest and preoccupation on their own bodily and psychological wellbeing. According to Symington (p. 41), this turning away from the life giver, generally the mother as the ‘source of food, drink and shelter’ occurs when the close bonding between mother and infant is disrupted due to external factors that predispose a mother to be less available through such states as depression.

Freud was the first to take the myth of Narcissus and re-signify it to delineate the nature of love and self-love in psychological terms (p. 6). Others have followed. The story of Narcissus like all myths has been retold many times, with variations. According to Symington, it is essentially the story of a young man ‘with a stubborn pride in his own beauty’ (p. 6) whom the seer Teiresias predicted would live to a ripe old age, provided that he never knows himself (p. 6). Like Don Juan, Narcissus travelled the world attracting multiple lovers, men and women alike, all of whom he rejected. One such spurned lover, before he killed himself, called on the gods to exact revenge. Artemis the twin daughter of Apollo heard the dead man’s plea and made Narcissus fall in love while ‘denying him love’s consummation’ (p. 7). Shortly thereafter, Narcissus, exhausted by his constant travels, fell down at the side of a stream where he fell in love with his own reflection. He could not get hold of this beautiful other young man as he first saw himself mirrored in the water, nor could this man hold him. He tried and tried in vain. Eventually Narcissus recognised himself and in so doing fulfilled the seer’s prophecy. He lay there for hours gazing at his own image. How could he bear this torment, to possess and yet not to possess? Finally in grief he stabbed himself to death. Thereafter a single white narcissus grew from the pool of his blood; hence the term, narcissism.

In order to understand narcissism, it is necessary to consider some basic aspects of human development. To this end Symington writes about the way certain ‘psychic actions’ (p. 13), by which we have mutual contact with others, take place below our conscious awareness. These processes, those of introjection and projection, can either mess things up or can be creative for us and for the people with whom we come in contact. We make contact with others by ‘projecting ourselves into their world’ or by ‘introjecting them into our world’ (p. 13). In other words we either put ourselves into their shoes or Sve take them into our inner sense of things’ (p. 13). One of the most common ways of destroying self-knowledge is to project unwanted aspects of oneself, the jealous, the envious, the rivalrous feelings for example, into another, and then disown these feelings. Such projections can become the basis for prejudice in all its forms, all the ‘isms’, racism, sexism, ageism. Such prejudices often negate an empathic response. Autobiography is a means by which the gap between the self and other might be bridged. Despite its apparent self-absorption, autobiography extends beyond narcissism by providing a sort of mirror into which readers might look for signs of similarity as well as differences from themselves This is akin to the empathic mirroring provided by mothers to their infants in the early stages of life.

Autobiography invites the reader to resonate through the process of empathy. Autobiographical texts, which are narcissistic in themselves, namely texts that have been written purely to satisfy the narcissistic needs of their author, do not tend to be read widely, as self-indulgent writing does not involve the other. Such writing expects the reader to assume the same knowledge as the writer without having the details laid out on the page. The reader is not left to make up her own mind, rather she is told. The differences can sometimes be subtle but as a reader you know when it is happening. You become impatient, frustrated. You put the book down and leave it there.
True narcissism excludes the other. Effective autobiography is inclusive and takes its readers on a journey, whether familiar, similar to the writer’s own journey, or utterly different. The reader is nourished by this shared experience. It is a meal partaken by writer and reader together.

The literary critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that contemporary autobiography can be likened to a rumpled bed. They cite the artist, Tracey Emin’s exhibit, the unmade bed, with its soiled sheets, unwashed underwear, empty tampon packets and condoms, as signs of the life of an adolescent girl, testifying to her experience (Smith and Watson, 2001, p. 2). Emin’s autobiographical exhibit centred the bed among numerous personal memorabilia including home videos, portraits, adolescent drawings and text, a quilt, and evocative installations related to broader aspects of her life. In 1999 the Tate Gallery of London’s decision to select Emin as one of four finalists for the Turner Prize evoked vigorous controversy. The visual representations and the controversy this exhibit aroused reflect the state of the autobiographical genre today. There are those who suggest Emin’s exhibit ‘exceeds self-portraiture in what they see as its narcissistic self-absorption’ (p.4), but as Smith and Watson argue, there are others, particularly ‘young people’ who experience Emin’s ‘daring self-making and self chronicling’ (p.4) as a powerful example of visual and performative autobiography that is inclusive. Emin’s work invites the viewer to resonate with one young woman’s authentic self-representation in an immediate and evocative way (p. 2). Her exhibit challenges pre-conceived notions of what is of value aesthetically and what is not. In this sense, given that we tend to respond subjectively to creative communications, autobiography can help to bridge the gap between our impulse to attack what is unfamiliar and our attempts to understand it.

Ronald Britton (2000) writes about each individual’s need to integrate subjectivity with objectivity, that is, to be able to be yourself and to think about yourself, to be able to have experiences and to think about yourself having such experiences. Britton suggests that people who are unable to integrate the subjective and objective suffer from a narcissistic disorder, which he divides into two categories, those who are ‘thin-skinned’ and others who are ‘thick-skinned’ (Britton, 2000). These terms may be self-evident. Those who are thin-skinned are hypersensitive and easily hurt in everyday life, whereas those who are thick skinned avoid emotional contact and prefer distance and objectivity. Objectivity is ‘associated with the gaze, both a fear of being seen, and a fear of being described’ (Britton, 2000). All this takes place within the course of development. In the fantasy of oneness, when the infant experiences self and mother as one, there is no place for objectivity. But as the infant gradually becomes aware of the other, it must first accommodate to its mother’s existence as a separate being outside of its control. Then, later, it needs to negotiate an awareness of the family triangle, mother and father and self, the child. Two links connect the infant separately to each parent and a third link between parents from which the infant is excluded. If all goes well, the child’s developing awareness of the link between parents provides it with the prototype of a new version of relationship outside of the child’s self as part of the couple, in which the child is not a participant, rather an observer. As an observer, the child gradually develops the capacity to cope with the knowledge not only of witnessing, but also of being observed. This is a necessary forerunner to an awareness and acceptance of otherness and difference. This allows a shift from primary narcissism, the stage during infancy before the infant recognises the existence of mother as separate and when the infant experiences everything that happens as an extension of self, namely when the infant ‘cathects its own self with the whole of its libido’ (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p. 337). The term narcissism has undergone many changes since its introduction into the psychoanalytic lexicon in 1909 (Smith, 1985) and it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the refinement of the term in the history of psychoanalysis, other than to describe primary narcissism in Symington’s terms as ‘the state of non-object relatedness’ (Symington, 1993, x).
From the moment of birth, mother and baby respond to one another in powerful ways. This ‘shared eye to eye interaction is the most intimate relationship possible between human beings’ (Wurmser, 1987, p. 82), and the bond between mother and baby forms the prototype for all subsequent connections between people throughout life. It is only when we see and are seen, when we hear and are heard, that a matching occurs ‘between our own self-concept and the concept others have of us’ (p. 82). It is a primary function of autobiography to be seen, heard and recognised at an imaginative level. It is a primary function in the reading of autobiography to see and hear imaginatively in the interchange between writer and reader. If something goes seriously wrong in the earliest interchanges between mother and baby, if as Leon Wurmser argues, the interchange is ‘blocked and warped, the core of the self-concept is severely disturbed and becomes permanently twisted and deformed (p. 83). Herein lie the origins of narcissistic damage, the so-called ‘narcissistic wound’ that can result in excessive narcissism, a turning away from others with a parallel turning inwards to oneself as the source of all sustenance (Symington, 1993, p. 6). The damage and wounding that arises out of thwarted narcissism is seen to arise as a consequence of trauma. Caroline Garland describes trauma as ‘a kind of wound’, a psychic wound (Garland, 1998, p. 9). One way of attempting to heal this wound occurs through the transformational processes of writing and reading autobiography.

Each one of us must filter out vast amounts of external stimuli, messages from our internal world, and memories, every moment of every day, in order to concentrate on whatever task is at hand. Freud refers to this filtering screen as ‘the stimulus barrier’ (p. 128). Generally in life we move forward into scenarios and relationships that resonate for us from the past. More often than not we enter these situations in a bid to change something. Freud calls this tendency to repeat, the repetition compulsion. In The Analytic Experience, Neville Symington (1986, 128) describes the concept of the repetition compulsion as deriving from Freud’s attempts to make sense of how people deal with traumas such as the atrocities of war. Freud observed that soldiers returning from the front during the First World War dreamed again and again of the horrors they had experienced. Autobiography is an attempt to deal with the author’s need to make sense of the past, particularly, but not exclusively, in its traumatic aspects, though not necessarily. Likewise, the way we read autobiography is influenced in large part by our own experiences and the degree to which we might resonate with or recoil from the experiences and events recounted by another.

In exploring the notion of countertransference in the reading of autobiography, David Parker emphasizes the need for ‘intersubjectivity’ (Parker, 2002, 496), a term he borrows from Jessica Benjamin (1990). Countertransference is a term developed in psychoanalytic clinical practice. Some argue that it relates to everything in the analyst’s personality that affects treatment, while others consider it relates to unconscious processes that arise in the analyst evoked by the encounter with the analysand (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p. 93). Parker uses the term more loosely outside of the clinical setting to denote feelings that arise in a reader in response to the writer of a particular autobiographic text. The inter subjective realm, in which ‘the other the self meets is also a self, a subject in his or her own right’ (Benjamin, 1990, p. 20) contrasts with and complements the ‘intrapsychic’ realm, in which the self is ‘a discrete unit with a complex internal structure’ (p. 20). In exploring the ‘intra’ state we uncover the unconscious, in the ‘inter’ state we explore the space between the ‘self and other as distinct but interrelated beings’ (p. 20). Benjamin argues that both are essential: that the self be able to acknowledge that the other subject, although different, is also similar, ‘as another who is capable of sharing mental experience’ (p. 20).
Parker considers Benjamin’s perspective an essential ingredient in reading and critiquing autobiography. He takes the example of the popular and critics’ responses to Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss* (Harrison, 1997). Some critics argued against the book’s publication on several grounds, particularly Harrison’s narcissism. They considered Harrison to be self-seeking in publishing her book, wanting only the money, recognition and fame that accompanied its shock value, rather than respecting the right to privacy of her two small children. According to those critics, Harrison should have protected her own children from such knowledge. (Eakin, 2001, p.118).

Parker counters those critics by quoting from his own experience in writing his autobiography, but not before he details some of the arguments put up against Harrison, arguments that arise not from feminist critics, as Parker had at first imagined, but from others caught up in a self-righteous mind set, akin to what he calls judgmentalism… an ethic of difference that obliterates any sense of common humanity’ (Parker, 2002, p. 494). Parker considers it essential to counter judgementalism with awareness of one’s countertransference when reading autobiography. If transference consists of an unconscious tendency to superimpose our fantasy of the earlier prototypes of our parents onto another, then countertransference involves its opposite, the way we respond to the prototypes that others transfer onto us. There is a delicate seesaw process that goes on in any human interaction, akin to Symington’s notions of introjection and projection. We give out, we take in, and always this process is affected by our history, which in turn affects the way in which we interpret our view of others, of what they give as well as of what they take. There is a mutual process of recognition: the mother’s recognition of her child corresponds with the child’s recognition of its mother. According to Parker, the autobiographer needs to recognise the role of parents in the formation of self (p. 496) while readers of autobiography need to consider their own prejudices and blind spots in order ‘to enter more deeply… into the feelings of the person in the story’ (p. 428).

When a book, particularly an autobiography, arouses controversy, the extreme responses tend to be rooted in countertransferential reactions, and need to be considered if we are to judge the work fairly. In 1995, after *The First Stone* was met with such a polarised response, Helen Garner spoke out against her critics:

> What the book invites from the reader is openness—an answering spark. But I found that many people, especially those who locate their sense of worth in holding onto already worked out political positions, are not prepared to take the risk of reading like that. Perhaps they can’t anymore. What is not made explicit for readers like these is simply not there. Being permanently primed for battle, they read like tanks. It’s a scorched earth style of reading. It refuses to notice the side-paths, the little emotional and psychological by-roads. It’s a poor sort of reading that refuses the invitation to stop reading and lay down the page and turn attention inwards. And it’s always easier or more comfortable to misread something, to keep it at arm’s length, than to respond to it openly (Garner, 1995).

Garner’s comments here reflect Parker’s description of judgementalism as a ‘moral obliviousness’, a wilful ignorance and lack of consciousness (Parker, 2002, p. 494).

Nancy Miller argues that it ‘takes two to make an autobiography, to perform an autobiographical act’ (Miller, 2000, p. 423). Readers and writers, she considers, go through ‘a relational act that creates identifications … conscious and unconscious, across a broad spectrum of so-called personal experience’ (p. 423). She talks about the different pathways readers might follow in the process of trawling through the lives of others in memoir by exploring the connections between
her own life as a reader and the lives of two autobiographers, Joyce Johnson in Minor Characters and Hettie Jones in How I Became Hettie Jones. She chooses these two memoirs because the experiences described in both books overlap with Miller’s own experience of growing up in Manhattan during the 1950s (p. 424).

Miller demonstrates the way in which her reading of these stories evokes memories and identifications. She argues that a memoir that gives life to experiences akin to your own makes it more difficult for the reader, to maintain a sense of ‘self-possession; the boundaries of your past self may start to blur around the edges’ (p. 427). In this way memoir acts as a type of ‘interactive remembering-where the screen prompts the construction of memory itself (p. 427). Following the threads of another person’s life can lead you back into your own story and into a kind of dis-identification when your story diverges from the writer’s. This then contrasts with Miller’s third category of reading autobiography that occurs when the reader is faced with the task of looking into the mirror of memoir and seeing there a face that is radically different from one’s own. In such instances the reader seeks to ‘allo-identify’ with the writer, to read ‘across the body or under the skin of other selves … to time travel… your you becomes the text’ (p. 430). Thus memoir writing (and reading) becomes ‘a dialogue with the intertext’ (p. 430).

Miller refers to her Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death, in which she recounts her experience as the child caretaker of dying parents. She relates her experience to ‘the loss narratives … of the writing child and the dying parent’ (p. 422), including Simone de Beauvoir’s A Very Easy Death, Philip Roth’s Patrimony, and Carolyn Steedman’s Landscape for a Good Woman. Miller argues against the denigration of memoir, against the tendency is to see the genre as self indulgent in its apparent failure to maintain standards of objectivity, of scrutiny and theoretical distance. Memoir, Miller argues, rather than separating and dividing us through self-interests, can narrow ‘the degree of separation’ (p. 426) by operating as an aid to remembering. We recognise ourselves in another’s autobiography, however fleetingly, and the recognition makes our ‘own experience feel more meaningful: not “merely” personal but part of the bigger picture of cultural memory’ (p. 426).

Memory is central to human development. In the first few months of life, the baby needs what psychoanalysts call ‘holding’ or ‘containment’. In other words, the baby needs someone, usually the mother, to keep her in mind. Mothers need to remember their babies, to think about them, and to hold them in mind. In this way mothers first think for their babies, gradually become able to think with their babies, and eventually enable their growing children to learn to think for themselves. Central to this process is the development of memory. Wilfred Bion argues that the means by which a mother makes contact with her baby is through a process in which the mother’s mind acts as a container. This containment involves a level of emotional receptivity that forms the basis for all the other times during our lives in which we make intimate contact with another’s state of mind. Infant observation research suggests that along with this experience of being held, images are being formed in the baby’s mind initially of an inchoate physical nature. With the development of language and concomitant gradual physical and mental development the baby is able to formulate greater object constancy and eventually the ability to let the word take the place of the thing (Rustin et al, 1989, pp. 27–34).

Phil Mollon argues that ideally a mother is able to be responsive to her baby at all times, but in reality, in Donald Winnicott’s terms, when a mother is ‘good enough’, she is able to respond to her baby empathically most of the time (Winnicott, 1971, p. 10). Babies must learn to cope with small failures in empathy. It is these failures in empathy that Mollon argues are the precursors to shame. Babies need mothers who are able to help them deal with their sense of shame. All such
efforts occur in an intersubjective milieu. Its central ingredient, according to both Parker and Jessica Benjamin, is recognition. Recognition ‘includes not only the other’s confirming response, but also how we find ourselves in that response’ (Parker, 2002, p. 396). Recognition also suggests an element of surprise. Before the baby is born a mother has fantasies about it. Once the baby is born, with the baby’s help, the mother begins a process of rediscovering her baby all over again. To do this she needs to reconcile her fantasy of the baby, who in her mind is an extension of herself, with this new person who is in fact another. Similarly, in writing effective autobiography, there need to be elements of discovery, recognition and surprise. Some adults, in the absence of an experience of good enough mothering, use autobiography as a way of dealing with their shame. The autobiographic gesture can act as a type of sublimation, the process that Freud considered could enable basic self directed sexual drives to be lifted to a higher order of creative human endeavour.

There is a widely held view among psychotherapists that we must acknowledge our shame in order to mitigate its destructive potential. John Barbour, writing about conscience and truthfulness in the work of the autobiographer (Barbour, 1992, p. 157), argues that writing an autobiography can have a therapeutic effect, akin to that of confession. The sense of sharing one’s shame with another, a priest, or an audience, has the effect of reducing the crippling effects of shame. Instead of going off to hide, the shamed ones put their shame on display, whether in the privacy of the confessional or on the public stage.

Both shame and narcissism involve an evaluation of the self. In shame, the self is viewed negatively, in narcissism, the valuation is positive, namely self-love. In the extreme, such self-valuations can be viewed as a defence against shame (Lewis, 1997, p. 95). According to Sylvan Tompkins, the first to study the notion of shame in depth, The eye is the organ of shame par excellence’ (Wurmser, 1997, p. 82). The eye is central to narcissism, how we look upon ourselves, how others look upon us and how we imagine we are looked upon.

Autobiography begs for recognition—Garner’s ‘answering spark’ (Garner, 1995). We all need it, some more than others. Recognition deficits, Parker implies, are of a high incidence among autobiographers. Parker refers to a particular critic of Harrison’s autobiography, James Wolcott, who, in his review ‘Datingyour Dad’ (Parker, 2002, p. 498), accuses Harrison of duplicity. According to Wolcott, Harrison both wants the recognition that comes with the shock value of her book, but does not want to take responsibility for her experience. According to Wolcott, ‘no seduction is ever truly one-sided’ (p. 498). Parker urges us to ‘enter more deeply … into the feelings of the person of the story’ (p. 498), to empathise with the writer, with Harrison, who was clearly overwhelmed by her father’s desire for her to the point that she could not resist his attentions. Wolcott disagrees and urges condemnation, while Parker suggests the need for non-judgmentalism.

I think there is an added dimension here that demands consideration. Incest is awful to consider, but far easier when one person, the adult, can be seen as guilty, and the other person, the child, is considered innocent and blameless. When incest occurs between consenting adults, it becomes less clear-cut. When the power of the transference is considered, despite her adult status, Harrison was still a child in the presence of her father, particularly her unconscious hope that he might take the place of her remote mother (p. 499). Wolcott blames the victim. Glen Gabbard, who has worked extensively in the therapeutic setting exploring the violation of professional boundaries, quotes Freud’s view that the ‘transference is a lifelong template’ (Gabbard and Lester, 1995, p. 152). Gabbard argues against sexual relations between therapist and patient, the
therapist in loco parentis, and, by analogy, he writes, ‘father-daughter incest is abhorrent no matter how much time has passed since the daughter lived in the same household as the father and regardless of their status as “mutually consenting adults”’ (p. 152).

Wolcott ascribes Harrison’s decision to publish to her narcissism, her desire for the spotlight, whereas Parker rephrases the narcissistic label to one of ‘craving recognition’ (Parker, 2002, p. 499). Parker argues that writers, particularly those of autobiography, unconsciously desire their readers to ‘supply what their pasts didn’t’ (p. 499). The hope is that the words of the memoir will draw the readers’ eyes ‘in an act of empathic understanding (p. 499).’ Clearly there are some who respond to Harrison’s memoir in this way, but there are others, like Wolcott, who might reinforce the trauma and narcissistic wounding already endured by Harrison by their negative, blaming and shaming responses. Parker suggests the language of narcissism, of psychiatric labelling, is inappropriate when we are referring to something as central as ‘the hunger for understanding (p. 499).’ Wolcott contends it is best such shameful secrets remain hidden, but Parker argues such secrets ‘only serve to imprison the individual in unreal fears…[and] give the world too much power’ (p. 500).

As in the story of The Emperor’s New Suit (Andersen, 1837), it may be necessary to reduce the other’s power by revealing such secrets, particularly in relation to incest. Resistance to such revelations on the part of readers and critics like Wolcott may well arise out of their own unconscious sense of shame. Memoirs that involve ‘frank disclosures’ will be subject to negative countertransferential responses from some critics ‘for what they themselves cannot divulge’ (Parker, 2002, p. 500). So they attempt to discredit the memoirist by using pejorative labels like narcissism, perhaps intending to shame the writer into silence about that which the critic cannot bear to be spoken.

Parker and Miller both make a plea for empathy in the reading of autobiography, rather than continuing the cruel practice of accusations of narcissism. I read Parker’s autobiography several years ago. It comes as a surprise then when he writes in this essay on countertransference that he is ‘irresistibly reminded of an Australian autobiographical novel … in which the author tells the story of … the secret of his origins—he was conceived on the wrong side of the sheets’ (p. 500). On first reading I suspected he was talking about his own story and wondered why this writer, writing in defence of another memoirist, should find it necessary in an essay dealing with self-disclosure to be so obscure. A page later Parker decides ‘to come clean’ (p. 501) but not until he has quoted at length from his story. He then describes how writing the novel had completed a process of self discovery begun in his late thirties, a process that enabled him to overcome the shame he once felt about his estranged mother and thereby to identify more closely with Kathryn Harrison’s experience in The Kiss, by a kind of ‘intersubjective agreement’ (p. 502).

The coyness of Parker’s euphemism ‘on the wrong side of the sheets’ (p. 500) suggests to me that he still struggles with his shame. It is important to note here that Parker’s work takes the form of a novel, ostensibly fictionalised, though he makes no secret of its autobiographical nature. He can ‘come clean’ now, perhaps as a function of our greater acceptance of autobiographical disclosure. After all, you might say, ‘everyone’s doing it’. Everyone has a story to tell. Some manage to write it. Some even get published.

The drive to write our own story is strong, not merely as an aspect of narcissism but as a response to the need to share our world view with others, to be recognised, to give and to take, to move beyond the self to the other. Miller offers a defence against the so-called ‘navel gazing
regularly levelled against the genre’ (Miller, 2000, p. 424), and demonstrates that memoir reading, like memoir writing, participates in ‘a kind of collective memorialisation, providing building blocks to a more fully shared national narrative … [particularly within] the experience of a generation’ (p. 425).

The ethnographer, Greg Dening, writes about his desire to deal with the stories of other people’s lives as an historian within his own autobiographical ‘performance’: ‘It might seem self indulgent to bind these stories and others together. It probably is. But all writing—and reading for that matter—is self-indulgent …’ (Dening, 1996, p. 11). Elsewhere, the essayist, Robert Atwan asks the question, ‘What prevents personal writing from deteriorating into narcissism and self-absorption? … a question anyone setting out to write personally must face sooner or later’ (Atwan, 2001, p.xii). Atwan answers his own question. It ‘requires a healthy regimen of self-scepticism and a respect for uncertainty. Though the first person singular may abound, it’s a richly complex and mutable T, never one that designates a reliably known entity’ (p.xii). Truly narcissistic writing tends to disregard its audience and is unlikely to find one. Truly narcissistic writing is unlikely to be published, or widely read. It tends to be boring. Autobiography that is read, according to the writer Kathleen Norris, has ‘resonance—a deep and vibrant connection with an audience. The mysterious I converses with an equally mysterious I’ (p. xii).

Some academics consider autobiography to be an inadequate form of research. This again relates to the charge that autobiography is too subjective and self-reflective and therefore less worthy of serious consideration, unless of course we are examining someone else’s autobiography. At the Fifth International Autobiography and Biography Association Conference (IABA) held in Mainz, Germany, in July 2006, the greatest admiration was reserved for pure theory, as if theory alone, the disciplined and so-called objective, the non-self reflective, was the primary goal. The IABA conference title included the term autobiography, ‘Autobiography and Mediation’, and yet on the final day when the only other self-declared autobiographer stood to ask the audience how many were writing their own autobiographies behind the scenes, there was a great show of hands. However, only two had directly presented their own autobiographical work. It was not considered sufficiently academically rigorous perhaps though Thomas Couser spoke at one of the keynote sessions about the biography of his father. Perhaps biography, in the degree to which it is ostensibly about another, rather than the self, is considered a little safer. Yet the child writing about a parent must to a large extent be writing about himself. How can we judge our parents except filtered through our childhood experience of them? We can only discover ourselves outside of the mirror of our own and another’s projections by looking closely at ourselves.

The writer Patricia Hampl (1999) applauds the ‘mongrel nature’ of great autobiography as it arises from the ‘tango of memory and imagination’ (Hampl, p. 205). She argues that memoir is not simply a matter of retrieval of the past through remembering, rather it is an act of ‘protest and despair’ (p. 204) at the knowledge that ‘nothing lasts’ (p. 204). Autobiographers write from despair for a vanished past and transform it into a celebration of the story. Thus, born out of narcissism, autobiography moves beyond the confines of the individual into the minds of the many, whereby we can all share in its riches. As Miller writes, ‘the six degrees of separation’ between your life and that of another are in fact ‘degrees of connection … my memoir is about you’ (Miller, 2000, p.433). Similarly the narcissism of me, myself and I is inextricably linked to the otherness of they, themselves and they. The I/eye of autobiography reaches beyond narcissism. It is gregarious and inclusive in its sharing.
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