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The Resilient Machine: The Body as the Source of the Autobiographical Self

Taryn Heon

Several of the most vibrant memoirs ever written have been crafted in the face of experiences in which memories have become elusive, language has been lost or distorted, or awareness of social cues has been compromised. Contrary to the postmodern paradigm that would purport that selfhood unfolds out of language or discursive interactions with the external world, a rich body of evidence has evolved to show that selfhood—and the resultant narrative that is shaped from it—begins at the bodily level. The *tabula rasa* that theoretical arguments propose to be the default state of the mind and the self may not be ‘*rasa*’ at all—rather, the canvas that is the self is already painted, and thus is not dependent upon the brush of language for the emergence of first-person perspective. Selfhood, and the ability to know and in some way translate the self, is a physiological gift.

In *The Feeling of What Happens*, neurobiologist Antonio Damasio defines a concept parallel to the self, or the narrated “I,” which he refers to as “core consciousness” (qtd. in Eakin 69). As he begins to demonstrate this concept, Damasio articulates the problem of language and consciousness quite aptly:

If language operates for the self and for consciousness in the same way that it operates for everything else, that is, by symbolizing in words and sentences what exists first in a nonverbal form, then there must be a nonverbal self and a nonverbal knowing for which the words ‘I’ or ‘me’ or the phrase ‘I know’ are the appropriate translations, in any language. (108)

According to Damasio, “[we] rise above the sea level of knowing, transiently but incessantly, as a *felt* core self, renewed again and again, thanks to anything that comes from outside the brain into its sensory machinery or anything that comes from the brain’s memory stores toward sensory, motor, or autonomic recall” (172). Our bodies own our stories.

Jill Bolte Taylor, another neurobiologist, reveals how selfhood and first-person perspective can emerge without the presence of linguistic faculties in her memoir, *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist’s Personal Journey*. Taylor writes about experiencing the disintegration of her observer capacity, memories, and other organizing elements of her mind while still maintaining a sense of groundedness in her self and in her ability to ‘know,’ in Damasio’s use of the word:

As the language centers in my left hemisphere grew increasingly silent and I became detached from the memories of my life, I was comforted by an expanding sense of grace. In this void of higher cognition and details pertaining to my normal life, my consciousness soared into an all-knowingness, a ‘being at *one*’ with the universe. (41)

Taylor’s experience speaks to Damasio’s position, wherein the conscious mind still maintains its ability to perceive, to maintain a sense of ownership, and to enact agency in

spite of a loss of higher cognitive processes such as language. She was still experiencing, living, and undoubtedly connected to the life all around her—fundamental ingredients for a narrator. In that moment, she ‘knew’ her story, even if she was not employing hindsight perspective to make sense of it in words.

In his book, *I Is an Other*, author James Geary touches upon another subject of writing, the metaphor, and illustrates how this literary device is not just influenced by, but is dependent upon the physiological processes of the body through the phenomenon of synesthesia. The memories that we call upon, in order to evoke an emotional reaction through the use of metaphor, are tied to mixed sensory experiences. Geary writes,

Many of the metaphors we use every day are synesthetic, describing one sensory experience with vocabulary that belongs to another. Silence is *sweet*; facial expressions are *sour*. Sexually attractive people are *hot*; ... a day at the office is *rough* ... Along with pattern recognition, synesthesia may be one of the neurological building blocks of metaphor. (77)

Furthermore, Geary demonstrates how this connection between metaphor and physiology may be universal: “Studies of nineteenth-century English, French, and Hungarian verse and twentieth-century poetry in Hebrew suggests that many different languages and cultures tune into the same sensory scale” (78). He deepens his argument by describing an experiment with graduate students at Tel Aviv University in which the students were asked to make interpretations of forty synesthetic metaphors derived from Hebrew poems. The participants were asked to interpret the metaphors in their traditional form (e.g.: “coarse whiteness” and “fragrant purple”) and then in their reversed form (e.g.: “white coarseness” and “purpled fragrance”). Researchers found that the participants could interpret standard metaphors with more ease than those positioned in reverse, exhibiting how the directionality of synesthetic metaphors follows the same directional pattern of metaphor in general. In this way, metaphor, by being synesthetic, transcends even language itself. Knowledge of the self, which is often translated through metaphor, may be independent of language. One could argue that the metaphorical representations of the self that we use, then, are not simply linguistic references to other objects, but they are translations of what we already know at the cellular level.

One might expect that the capacity for language play and metaphor use might limit individuals with interpersonal challenges (such as Asperger’s syndrome or autism) from being able to capture their ‘core consciousness’ on the page. However, a number of memoirs have been written by persons with these disorders, such as *Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger’s* by John Elder Robison and Temple Grandin’s book, *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism*. In her memoir, Grandin explains,

Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures. Language-based thinkers often find this phenomenon difficult to understand, but in my job as an equipment designer for the livestock industry, visual thinking is a tremendous advantage. (3)

Grandin writes about how language serves as a secondary and often foreign function in her life. In spite of her difficulty with language, as well as difficulty perceiving an audience, she has managed to write a full-length memoir, which might not seem fathomable—as Oliver Sacks writes in the foreword to Grandin’s book. “Writing did not come easily to her ... because she lacked an imagination of other minds, of the fact that her listeners were different from her, were not privy to the experiences, the associations, the background information in her own mind” (xvi). What Grandin accomplishes in her writing, however, is a spell out of her embodied experiences with autism. Through descriptions of her sensations and inner world, which she navigated by way of visual patterns and symbolic associations, Grandin is able to convey that she did in fact have a sense of her self. Oliver Sacks also discusses the unprecedented nature of this accomplishment, “because it had been medical dogma for forty years or more that there *was* no ‘inside,’ no inner life, in the autistic, or that if there was it would be forever denied access or expression” (xiii). Language, though helpful for conveying one’s inner world, is not the only mode of achieving a sense of self; as Grandin’s descriptions of her inner world show, the body compensates through other sensory routes to engender a sense of self.

While it may seem cold and detached to think that life writing is a physiologically-driven act, this position may have more to tell us than disappointing news. The use of subgenres within memoir writing may not be of importance—disability memoirs, trauma memoirs, coming-of-age memoirs, captivity memoirs are one in the same, as they are all accounts of what happens in the body—they are all testimonies of the human condition. With subgenres and categorizations falling at our feet and losing their importance, we begin to see that perhaps there is a self that is independent of, for instance, the traumatic events we experience. The body, a resilient and vibrant machine, serves as the vessel and the conduit for our stories—even in the face of impairment.

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