

“Ways of Seeing”: Siri Hustvedt’s *The Shaking Woman* + Paul John Eakin’s *Autobiographical Consciousness: Body, Brain, Self, and Narrative*”



Charcot / Painting by Brouillet / 1887 André Brouillet's painting of the neurologist, Jean Martin Charcot, Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière, 1887.

Photograph: AKG Images/Erich Lessing

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jan/30/siri-hustvedt-shaking-woman>

Hustvedt on the Self—*Her* Self

“It appeared that some unknown force had suddenly taken over my body and decided I needed a good, sustained jolting” (4; e-book14).

“Every sickness has an alien quality, a feeling of invasion and loss of control that is evidence in the language we use about it” (6; e-book18).

“I decided to go in search of the shaking woman” (7; e-book19).

“A friend of mine at Columbia university when I was a graduate student and who was also a participant in the seminar, told me afterward that it had been like watching a doctor and patient in the same body” (30; e-book 51).

“Can I say that the shaking woman is a repeatedly activated pattern of firing neurons and stress hormones released in an involuntary response, which is then dampened as I keep my cool, continue to talk, convinced that I’ m not really in danger? Is that all there is to the story?” (116; e-book 85/159)

“The headache is me, and understanding this has been my salvation. Perhaps the trick will now be to integrate the shaking woman as well, to acknowledge that she, too, is part of myself” (174; e-book 124/159)

“I am the shaking woman” (199; e-book140/159).

Hustvedt on Methodology

I confess that in my gloomier moments I have wondered if a whole host of intellectual theories don't fall into the category of grand confabulation. (54; ebook 43/159)

Who are we, anyway? What do I actually know about myself? My symptom has taken me from the Greeks to the present day, in and out of theories and thoughts that are built on various ways of seeing the world. What is body and what is mind? Is each of us a singular being or a plural one? How do we remember things and how do we forget them? Tracking my pathology turns out to be an adventure in the history of experience and perception. How do we read a symptom or an illness? How do we frame what we observe? What is inside the frame and what falls outside it? Janet's patients didn't have brain scans, but Neil did. Neil's scan does not explain his dissociated orthographic memory. Automatic writing once had a place in medical theory. Now it is an outcast, a curiosity that stuns researchers. Why? (69; ebook 53/159)

Methodology Questions

How can we handle the complexity of the questions raised by the overdetermined relationships among **mind, brain, body, self, culture, and memoir**? How to parse these relationships? What lenses of “ways of seeing” to adopt or inhabit?

How can our each of our texts—a **memoir heavily inflected with brain research and theory as well as historical and cultural analysis and a work of autobiography theory that draws on neurobiology and cognitive science**—help us address these questions in manageable ways?

How do different genres shape and illuminate texts in distinctive ways? For example, what does an aesthetic or narrative representation do that’s different from an argument-driven work of critical theory? What does each genre—or the take of an individual writer within a genre—enable us to see? What does it occlude? What are the benefits and limitations of each approach?

How might “the evidence of experience” offer productive ways of addressing these questions? What are the benefits of the personal? What are the limitations or potential problems of the personal?

Hustvedt on Writing and Reading

When I am writing well, I often lose all sense of composition; the sentences come as if I hadn't willed them, as if they were manufactured by another being. This is not my day-to-day mode of writing, which includes grinding, painful periods of starts and stops. But the sense that I have been taken over happens several times during the course of a book, usually in the latter stages. I don't write; I am written. (72; ebook 54/159)

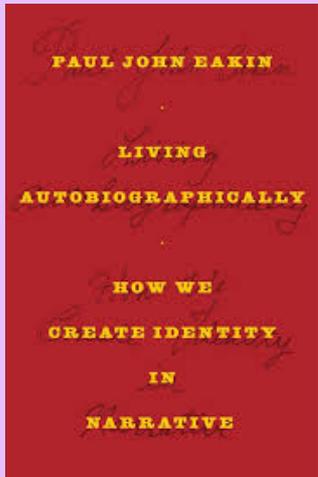
The closest we can get to this entrance into another person's psyche is through reading. Reading is the mental arena where different thought styles, tough and tender, and the ideas generated by them become more apparent. We have access to a stranger's internal narrator. Reading, after all, is a way of living inside another person's words. His or her voice becomes my narrator for the duration. Of course, I retain my own critical faculties, pausing to say to myself, *Yes, he's right about that* or *No, he's forgotten this point entirely* or *That's a clichéd character*, but the more compelling the voice on the page is, the more I lose my own. I am seduced and give myself up to the other person's words. Moreover, I am often lured in by very different points of view. The more alien, inhospitable, or difficult the voice, however, the more I find myself divided, occupying two heads at once. Overcoming resistance is one of the pleasures of reading. (148; ebook 106/159)

Hustvedt on Language and the Self

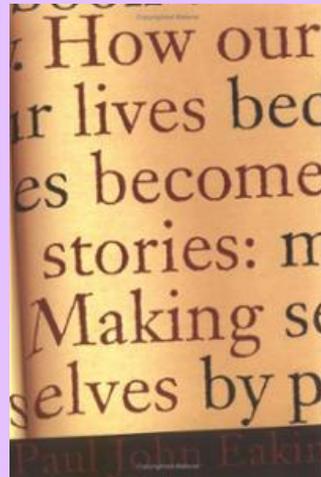
“I” exists only in relation to “you.” Language takes place between people, and it is acquired through others, even though we have the biological equipment necessary to learn it. If you look like a child in a closet, he will not learn to speak. Language is outside us and inside us, part of a complex dialectical reality between people. Words cross the borders of our bodies in two directions, outside in and inside out, and theremore the minimal requirement for a living language is two people. (55; e-book 88/159)

We organize the past as explicit autobiographical memory, what Antonio Damasio has called the ‘the autobiographical self’ ; fragments are linked in a narrative, which in turn shapes our expectations for the future. There can be no autobiographical self without language. (58; ebook 92/159)

Paul John Eakin on “Self-Narration”



2008



1999



If this picture of narrative identity I have sketched is correct, autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living. We don't, though, tend to give much thought to this process of self-narration precisely because, after years of practice, we do it so well. When this identity story practice is disrupted, however, we can be **jolted** into awareness of the central role it plays in organizing our social world. (4)

... I will make a case for “the organic basis of everything we are” by arguing not only that self and story emerge from our lives in and as bodies, but that our extended selves, our narrative identities, may contribute to the well-being of our bodily existence. (59)

Eakin's "Teller-Effect"

What becomes of the central player who animates our stream of consciousness, this "I" who thinks and feels and plans, if it can properly be described as merely a "teller-effect"? How can a "teller-effect" be endowed with a capacity for action? If we are to fathom this sense of a disconnect between the reality of our experience on the one hand and what neurobiological research can teach us about it on the other, we need to distinguish carefully between levels of analysis. Whereas, neurobiologically speaking, the structures that support selfhood are distributed across many areas in the brain, from a phenomenological perspective, the experience of selfhood is indeed centered, and is certainly the locus of conscious intentions; a neurological "effect" is nonetheless and simultaneously a profound experiential reality. **When we visit the interface between levels of reality, each with competing truth claims, how should we respond? (80)**

Conceptual Questions

1. What kind of “cultural artifact” is a memoir? Or an essay? **How does a writing mediate between mind and culture?** How do memoir and essay differ from a novel, poem, painting, or film?
2. If “autobiography structures our living” (Eakin 4); if “‘I’ exists only in relation to ‘you’ ” (Hustvedt 55)—how and why do we feel like whole, coherent selves? Do we feel that way? If we do, is this feeling a cultural construction or an inherent quality? If we don’t, why does the world tell us we do? How do the various texts we’re reading handle the question?
3. Have you ever had an experience—like Hustvedt’s shaking or Eakin’s jolts—that made you aware of your self as incoherent, split, fragment, constructed? What did it feel like? How long did it last? Thinking about it now, does it feel “alien” or can you “integrate” it with your self-image?