

## Introduction

# Life Writing and Cognition

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Consider failure. Evidence from neuroscience suggests that it may be a key element of our cognitive functioning. Failure allows the brain to update its mental models of the environment, a phenomenon known as predictive processing. In the words of Ellen Spolsky (in this special issue of *SubStance*):

[Human understanding] doesn't roll out in continuous space or time sequence, but rather in multi-level self-correcting loops that depend on prior experience and expectations. It emerges from our bodily actions as well as from our brains, and from our interactions with others. The work is parceled out to various subsystems and entangled with failure.<sup>1</sup>

Literature, of course, is built around failure—or failure narrowly avoided—depending on the genre. There is no story in the perfect interpretation of others, no need for change. Yet, as Joshua Landy reminds us, if one comes to literature hoping to profit by characters' mistakes, one goes away disappointed. Works of fiction do not provide “insights.” Contrary to common expectation, they are not “oracles” designed to “deliver laws of experience, deep abiding truths about the world, ‘messages’ about who we are and how we function and what we ought [or ought not!] to do” (8). To put it differently, they exploit failure because it is so powerfully tellable, but they do not instruct us how to avoid failures in our own lives.

Books in the self-help category position themselves least ambiguously in relation to failure. Their insights are designed to facilitate “self-correcting loops” on high conceptual levels. To anticipate our failures, they assiduously and creatively seek regularities in the world in which nothing (to quote Spolsky again) “in or outside of the brain/body stands still for very long,” and any conclusion is always ready to be destabilized.

Life writing approaches failure yet differently—although we must remember that the term covers a broad range of genres: from the bil-

dungsroman and autobiographical novel on the more “literary” end, to memoirs of particular life experiences that seek to avoid literary styling as part of their commitment to unadorned truth. Although many biographies and autobiographies (e.g., those written by politicians and other public figures, or those concerned with social change) are structured around a plot of overcoming—which is to say, avoiding or reframing failure—life-writing’s relationship with failure is more complicated than this description suggests.

First, unlike self-help books, life-writing narratives do not necessarily offer recipes for avoiding failure, because they may be too intricately bound up with the specific circumstances of their authors/protagonists. In that respect, their insights can be as elusive as those offered by fiction. For instance, someone hoping to glean a “message” from Christa Wolf’s *Patterns of Childhood* may walk away with something along the lines of: if you grow up in Nazi Germany and want to come to terms with your transformation from a teenage acolyte of Hitler to a famous East-German writer, you should write a brilliant soul-searching memoir about the vicissitudes of memory. Easier said than done, and just about as useful to the reader as a message plausibly inferred from Chaucer’s “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”: “if you [are] a talking rooster, you should beware of talking foxes, talking foxes tending to be particularly seductive” (Landy 23). Which is to say that the allure of “this really happened” does not easily translate into “and here is what you should do to avoid it happening to you or if it happens to you.”

Second, some life-writing narratives offer sustained meditations on failure—that is, if we think of failure not in the conventional terms of giving up and ending in disappointment but in the cognitive-scientific terms of flexibility and self-correction—which is to say, they are *meditations on being alive to the world*. In fact, it can be argued that the “phenomenal” (Couser 3) growth of public interest in life writing in the first decades of this century<sup>2</sup> is bound up with the public intuition that there are now many more different ways of failing, that is, of engaging the world. And by “bound” I mean that life writing does not merely play catch-up with the new sociocultural reality in which “previously silenced” subjects of biographies and autobiographies, such as “women, people of color, [and] Indigenous peoples” (McCooey 277),<sup>3</sup> as well as people with significant social, physical, and cognitive disabilities, have become representable. Instead (to stay with the predictive processing hypothesis), the act of writing a memoir from their perspective itself brings about the reality in which this perspective is tellable and valuable.

What is at stake in adapting the neuroscientific perspective on failure as an ongoing engagement with one’s environment? To begin with,

we already know how well a different perspective has served us, that is, how salutary it has been for our individual and public mental health. I am talking about the familiar view of failure rooted, in part, in the history of nineteenth-century American financial crashes, which elevated some and destroyed others and seemed mysterious in their choice of winners and losers,<sup>4</sup> unless one viewed failure as a “moral verdict,” a punishment doled out to those lacking in inner virtue. It is because of this cultural association between failure and “a deficient self” (Sandage 2) that we may still approach the “previously silenced” stories with a default expectation of the plot of overcoming. This is to say that we may still expect a narrative about how one has worked hard to transcend a specific situation to get some share of benefits traditionally accruing to those effortlessly embodying success: male, mature (i.e., as opposed to a child or an old person), white, heterosexual, coming-from-an-intact family, able-bodied, and neurotypical. This teleological framework depends on essentializing both failure and success. That their essences remain vague and the goalposts keep moving does not make this framework less powerful or less toxic.

Thinking of failure in terms of “multi-level self-correcting loops” allows us to escape this teleological trap. It puts the emphasis on being rather than on overcoming. And that, as essays in this special issue of *SubStance* demonstrate, can kick into gear mechanisms associated with metacognition, which entails paying attention to the present—in all its sensory, embodied, affective, and social complexity—instead of monitoring the distance between where one is now and some future moment of triumph (which can also be imagined as having figured out, once and for all, some thorny problem).

Consider the essays by Rita Charon, Andrew Elfenbein, and Ralph Savarese, which resist gestures toward easy solutions to problems of (self) representation in, respectively, illness and medical care; racially inclusive curriculum; and disability. Instead, they suggest contexts in which readers can engage in joint explorations of current ways of thinking about these issues. Life writing, in this approach, models a broad range of interesting failures, brimming with opportunities for collaborative examination of assumptions.

Rita Charon’s “Writing our Lives to Live Them: The Cognitive Forms of a Narrative Medicine” looks at the exponential increase, in the past several decades, of life writing in illness and healthcare by patients and medical professionals, including both established and amateur writers. The explosion of such stories, she notes, has “causes and consequences.” The latter range from giving voice to “otherwise silenced . . . reporters of illness and care,” and “creating communities that some consider to be healing,” to flattening complex experience “in the absence of writerly

skill," and, counter-productively, forcing "clinicians and patients to see the full tragedy of what illness consigns them to, paralyzing further action."

Stories of illness and care thus require "rigorous collaborative reading practice." Training in such practice is now offered by several medical programs, including the Division of Narrative Medicine at Columbia University, which Charon directs. The program features "required courses in writing, close reading, and studies of visual images to allow health professions students to grow in the capacity to critically observe themselves and others and to understand their own motives, assumptions, and actions."

What can be gained by a metacognitive inquiry into the memoirs of patients and medical professionals? Readers (who may tomorrow, themselves, become authors) may start noticing, for instance, how often these narratives implicitly depend on one of two modes of (self)representation, which Charon calls "universalizing" and "particularizing." As she explains,

[Patients and clinicians may] face a similar array of cognitive challenges in their transactions. Both groups' cognitive tasks require logical, reductive, and universalizing operations as well as imaginative, associative, and particularizing ones. [The first set of tasks] requires mathematical and analytic logic models while the second . . . requires literary, affective, and relational gifts. . . . For both clinicians and patients, the particularizing operations rely on such aesthetic functions as sensory reception, affective attunement, subjective resonance, and awareness of the possible meanings of things. . . . Perhaps participants 'turn on' one set of cognitive wheels while idling the other. Perhaps the epistemological and aesthetic tasks have to be accomplished in turn. Alarming, perhaps the accomplishment of one set of tasks hampers accomplishment of the other. And what befalls the clinicians and the patients who are skilled in one set and impoverished in the other?

Charon's essay does not offer a vision of a perfect/optimal blend of universalizing and particularizing modes, emphasizing instead the need for awareness about these modes across different contexts of illness and care. Similarly, Andrew Elfenbein's "Life Writing, Identity, and the Classroom: Perspectives from Social and Educational Psychology" suggests that, while a "diverse student body deserves diverse and decolonized syllabi," the problem of "white indifference to other perspectives" won't be solved by an ideal, that is, a perfectly representative syllabus. Instead, a conversation about assumptions behind the choice of texts should itself be a part of the syllabus, with a particular attention being paid to the danger of "treating any single text as exclusively representative of social groups portrayed in it." As Elfenbein puts it:

Creating a more genuinely inclusive curriculum should instead encourage students to think about why works end up on a syllabus to begin with. Such a discussion could include an examination of the assump-

tion that authors represent social groups and an exploration of what the pros and cons of such an assumption might be.

Elfenbein's essay provides a blueprint for such a discussion (instructors grappling with the issue of inclusivity may consider using it in their classrooms to start off this kind of conversation with their students). He focuses, in particular, on two issues: first, the treatment of works that are not life-writing as life-writing, with the implication that their authors are talking about themselves, and that their presumably "authentic" stories exclusively represent the experiences of social groups depicted in them; and second, "the assumption that racial matching between reader and author will promote reader engagement." Drawing on studies in stereotyping and reader identification from educational and social psychology, he explores "characteristics of reader, texts, and literacy context" that complicate reflexive assumptions about the role of racial matching with reader engagement with life writing. As he writes,

While instructors may want their white students to recognize the systemic effects of racism, using works on the syllabus to achieve that end may disadvantage students through the persistent association of underrepresented races and trauma. Life writing may be especially vulnerable in this respect because its claim to attention is its immediate representation of subjective experience, whose representations depend on well-established conventions. Yet, as I have noted, the rhetoric of immediacy can lead to essentializing readings, especially of BIPOC authors. It may be more useful in the classroom to explore what kind of relatedness can be gained from reading life writing and what its limits and applicability may be.

Life writing's attractiveness to readers is also the trait that most quickly leads to problems. It offers an unrivaled promise of intimacy with another person, more than any other literary genre. Yet when that intimacy becomes part of classroom practice, it places considerable responsibility on the teacher to interrogate just how that intimacy is being used and who benefits from it, especially in relation to the challenges of not essentializing difference. Only then can life writing live up to its potential of disrupting the damaging power of stereotypes.

Life-writing's greatest strength, that is, its promise of direct access to another's "authentic" self, thus also appears to be its greatest failure. Because the authentic self is always a construct, the process of its construction—and the attendant pitfalls—differ from one context to another. For instance, while the classroom may be particularly susceptible to relying on categorization and stereotyping, the fMRI lab problematically depends on the mediating role of a person most conversant with the technology. And that may mean, as Ralph James Savarese shows in his essay, "The Neuroscientist's Memoir: Dramatic Irony and Disorders of Consciousness," that even the best-intentioned scientist may end up perpetuating ableism, while reporting, as it were, directly from another person's brain.

Savarese's essay focuses on Adrian Owen's *Into the Grey Zone*, a memoir of a cognitive neuroscientist who found an ingenious way to communicate with clinically unresponsive patients, by placing them into a fMRI scanner and asking them "to perform imaginary motor and spatial imagery tasks." But the questions that he ended up asking them, once he did reach them (e.g., "do you want to die?"), as well as his emotional response to them ("pity, disgust, and awe at the patient's 'courage'"), entrench the view of "disability-as-spectacle, as alien presence," observed by privileged spectators who would not be able to "imagine wanting to live in this condition." This perspective is further strengthened, of course, by the genre of the book: readers are invited to think and feel with the heroic and sympathetic first-person narrator, appealingly allied with patients' families in his struggle against the skeptics who refuse to see signs of consciousness in people with locked-in syndrome.

As a lifelong disability activist, Savarese is well aware of how ableist assumptions "can infect every aspect of an ally's 'support': from finding a way for the significantly disabled person to communicate to drawing conclusions about their quality of life." In spite of its iconoclastic outlook, Owen's memoir is unselfconscious about its commitment to the dominant paradigm of the "normal." As Savarese puts it, to "this scientist, significant disability is, by definition, a lamentable problem, one that cannot be ameliorated by accommodation and inclusion."

Yet Savarese refuses to engage in the conventional literary-critical bashing of science. As he sees it,

[To] dismiss Owen, by waving the wand of critique, is to downplay the truly remarkable innovation that is this form of alternative and augmentative communication. It is also to undervalue the very complicated science that undergirds it.

... In this moment of purported decline, the humanities in general, and cognitive literary studies in particular, should embrace science. Fatuous critique or dismissal serves no one. Again, the achievement of Owen's team is nothing short of magnificent. Where might it take us? Yet the way that Owen presents the achievement falls short. We must hold out for viewpoints that expand the circle of respect. Dignity, in sum, is complication, not reduction to some general principle, some norm of body and mind. A notion of difference should guide us.

In other words, rather than simply dismissing Owen's failure, we are invited to stay with it and see where our "self-correcting loops" may take us from here. For there is no triumphal overcoming at the end of this day—neither for the clinically unresponsive patients, nor for literary critics, nor for scientists—unless we consider the quality of attention that we can bring to life writing about disability a triumph of its own: a victory over one's craving for an easy solution and for "reduction to some general principle."

Texts on the fictional end of the life-writing spectrum have their own strategies for resisting the siren call of the easy “overcoming” scenarios. To describe one such strategy, we may want to borrow another concept from cognitive science, *distributed cognition*, which locates cognitive processes not in individual minds but in cognitive ecosystems, which include other minds, interpretive communities, and artifacts. Thus, essays by Ellen Spolsky and Lisa Zunshine focus, respectively, on texts that use distributed subjectivity to meditate on painful or unresolvable issues. Elena Ferrante’s serial bildungsroman, *Neapolitan Quartet*, and Christa Wolf’s autobiographical novel, *Patterns of Childhood*, both depict female protagonists who are born into communities that betray their children. In *Neapolitan Quartet*, the young people’s upbringing, in 1950s Naples, fits them only for life in the social world constructed by patriarchal, Camorrist, and fascist social contracts and “a culture in which verbal and physical violence is constant and lifespans short,” as Spolsky writes. *Patterns of Childhood* follows Wolf’s attempt to reconstruct her memories of growing up in Nazi Germany in the 1930s-1940s and being an active member of the girl’s wing of the Hitler Youth. The narrator of each novel grows up to become a writer, but the projects of connecting their present writing selves to their respective childhood experiences depend on networks of distributed subjectivities. Thus, Wolf creates an alter ego for her childhood self, called Nelly, and undertakes a road trip to her childhood town, accompanied by her brother, husband, and teenage daughter, whose impressions and reflections are woven in with the reminiscences of the grown-up narrator. In *Neapolitan Quartet*, “the work of becoming a writer is . . . distributed not only over time and space, but among an only occasionally cooperative crew of four [possible alter egos], each with a slightly different way of making sense of the challenges faced.”

Ferrante and Wolf thus model, albeit in very different ways, distributed metacognition (i.e., thinking about thinking, emerging from a network of subjectivities) and the role it can play in reshaping one’s reality. Wolf’s narrator has to contend with the loss of “authentic” memories of her childhood, and with it, perhaps, any “little hope of an eventual self-acquittal” (8). What she develops, in their place, is a meditation on the process of remembering, which casts its wide net over the surviving physical landmarks, over bits of old songs and poems, and over halting conversations she is having with her fellow travelers about what *they* remember. She also revises her presumably surviving memories, increasing their social complexity, which is to say, making Nelly more aware of her own and other people’s mental states and thus connecting the child Nelly to the writer that she is destined to become. Crucially, this last revision takes place behind the scenes, for, as Zunshine shows, earlier manuscript

versions of *Patterns of Childhood* don't contain some of the complex meta-cognitive reflections present in the published version.

Failure is essential to both protagonists' projects of self-realization as writers. Their painstaking endeavors to make sense of their lives can never reach a point of triumphant resolution, but the process of writing keeps extending the "little hope of an eventual self-acquittal" or of change. As Spolsky puts it,

Ferrante displays the struggles of the human mind in its dynamism, negotiating desire and conflict in inhospitable cultural surroundings in a way that doesn't give up on the possibility that a writer can not only describe but also enact an alternative. Furthermore, and this is my focus here, she has told the story of the growth of a creative mind that models the current recognition of the centrality of failure in brain structure and function.

No overcoming, then, but a more compassionate aspiration of *not giving up the possibility* that a writer can not only describe but also enact an alternative. For an extreme closeup of description *as* enactment we turn to Laura Otis's exploration of "multimodal imagery" in Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* and Natasha Trethewey's *Memoorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir*, memoirs written in the wake of shattering personal traumas. Bauby was the editor of *Elle*, when, at forty-three, he had a cerebrovascular stroke that left him almost completely paralyzed; he dictated his memoir by blinking his left eyelid.<sup>5</sup> Trethewey's mother was murdered, at forty, by her former husband (Trethewey's stepfather); thirty-five years later, Trethewey, now a famous poet, "is writing to honor her mother. Her own learning and growth shape the story she tells, but her evocative descriptions invite readers to imagine life in her mother's mind and body."

Of particular interest to Otis is the phenomenon of "sensory integration"—which is to say, mental images whose evocative power depends on *several* sensory modalities (see also Gabrielle G. Starr). Both Bauby and Trethewey "use multimodal imagery, remixed sensory impressions that involve more than one sensory modality," to give readers access to "the emotions and thoughts of people whose worlds they have entered." As Otis sees, it, the stakes of engaging readers' social cognition through multisensory imagery may be especially high in life writing:

Combining neuroscientific findings about sensory systems with writers' craft knowledge and literary scholars' analysis may yield further insights into how words can awaken and blend sensorimotor images in diverse readers. In the genre of life writing, readers' responses may matter even more than they do with fiction, since the work of imagining a life fosters an understanding of its value. ... Eliciting multimodal imagery in readers won't enable them to live in the skin of a magazine



editor paralyzed at 43 or an intelligent, courageous, abused woman trying to raise her daughter. But encouraging readers to do the cognitive work multimodal imagery demands may help their imaginative processes to run deeper—and turn toward all the human experiences not yet represented in life writing.

Moreover, life writing's experimentation with imaginative processes arising in unique personal and historical contexts may have been going on for much longer than we realize. Casey Schoenberger's essay, "The Smell of Inner Beauty in Ancient China," focuses on Qu Yuan's *Li sao* (*Sublimating Sorrow*), written around the 4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and, arguably, the first instance of Chinese autobiographical writing. The poem is deeply engaged with various aspects of social cognition that evolutionary biologists and cognitive psychologists are trying to understand today, embodying those issues in the arresting figure of its (presumed) author and main protagonist.

*Sublimating Sorrow* is a meditation on failure. Its narrator is an "aggrieved statesman": a formerly trusted counselor, banished forever from the court of his liege and reduced to channeling his frustrated political ambition into a poem about his virtue. To prove that virtue, which is to say, his "inner beauty"—which, alas, cannot be borne out by "great deeds" and thus has to depend on the impact of well-chosen poetic images—the narrator describes himself in terms that may strike his readers as grotesque, claiming, for instance, that palace ladies envy his "mothlike" (long) eyebrows. While the immediate inspiration for such images may lie in the shamanistic tradition, their enduring rhetorical potency may also be explained by the workings of the principle of "biological handicap," first proposed by Amotz Zahavi in 1975. As Schoenberger writes,

[The biological handicap principle] is an evolutionary theory of seemingly counterproductive traits, like a peacock's long tailfeathers or a buck's over-large antlers. Shamanistic traditions world-wide often take such features as marks of extraordinary spiritual potential and/or personal development, as less ostensibly beautiful handicaps, like a hunched back or lame gait, could sometimes also be. By adapting "beautiful handicap" imagery, originally conceived as external marks of invisible spiritual potency, to the goal of evoking a literary subjectivity, Qu Yuan arguably inaugurated life writing in the Chinese tradition.

Thus, while the speaker of *Sublimating Sorrow* may ostensibly compound one failure (his frustrated career ambition) with another (his grotesque eyebrows), their cumulative effect may be the strengthening of the poem's rhetorical message, which is that he is both trustworthy and accurate in his estimate of his extraordinary inner virtue. It is an interesting question to what degree life writing today may still depend on the tacit evocation of the "beautiful handicap" principle. For instance, to return to

Elfenbein's essay, when we privilege "trauma as the key to authenticity," do we still subscribe to that particular vision of literary subjectivity? Asking this question does not automatically imply the critique of literature's reliance on the "beautiful handicap" principle, at least not directly. What it does imply, however, is the reminder that authentic subjectivity is a construct, and that complex cultural artifacts, such as life-writing narratives, keep reaching out to cognitive predispositions and biases to somehow anchor this unstable construct. Cognitive literary theory thus alerts us to the possibility that one way to understand literary history is to see it grappling, among other things, with problems of social cognition (e.g., whom can we trust? What elements of personal stories signal the teller's commitment to truth? What bodily features?) and developing temporally stable solutions to such problems (e.g., genres).<sup>6</sup>

Sensory integration is another important feature of *Sublimating Sorrow*, and it seems to function here similarly to what Otis describes in her analysis of Bauby's and Trethewey's memoirs, when she observes that "multimodal imagery, remixed sensory impressions that involve more than one sensory modality" may give readers access to "the emotions and thoughts of people whose worlds they have entered." We are still in the realm of social cognition, but the solution to our problem (i.e., what is the other person really feeling? How do we know if they are telling the truth?) is now configured through a different set of embodied cues. For instance, Qu Yuan adorns himself with fragrant plants, thus blending smell, sight, and touch; he also treats us to a short version of what mindfulness practitioners today call the body scan, evoking, first, a sensation of a crown lying on his head, and then a sensation of pendants hanging from his waist and gently beating against his body as he moves around, thus interweaving sight, touch, and proprioception. On both occasions, the bounded sensory modalities attest to the speaker's commitment to virtue and truth. As Schoenberger explains:

In the second half of the same couplet, the speaker states that his "inner beauty" finds a match in a "refined bearing/appearance" which includes adornment with fragrant plants. In addition to their medicinal, purifying, and apotropaic functions, such fragrance was thought to attract benevolent spirits as flowers attract bees, or pheromones in some species attract mates. Slightly later, while seeking solace in a return to his "original dress/commitment," "Sublimating Sorrow's" protagonist proclaims, "High-high the crown that towered on my head, oh—Long-long the pendants that dangled from my waist." Large headdresses and hanging ornaments feature prominently in shamanic costumes around the world, as well as in many traditions of elite dress. By describing the peacock-like quality of his appearance, "Sublimating Sorrow's" protagonist signals his invisible commitments in a manner more credible than simply stating them ever could be.

Indeed, on some level, signaling one's invisible commitments (i.e., intentions) remains an important mandate for life writing. Life writing sometimes begins after the option of overcoming has been removed: the liege will not call Qu Yuan back to his court; the narrator of *Patterns of Childhood* will not be reborn into a different community; the author of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* will not regain control of his body. In the absence of teleology (i.e., a move from "failure" to "success"), close attention to one's intentionality—always embedded within one's social and physical environment and anticipating pushback from that environment—emerges as the *raison d'être* of the genre. Paradigms from cognitive science, including predictive processing, metacognition, distributed cognition, sensory integration, and the "beautiful handicap" principle, offer literary critics new ways of thinking about patterns and biases involved in the construction of invisible commitments. When living gets hard, life writing is social cognition writ large.

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### Acknowledgment

I am grateful to Joel Kniaz and Ellen Spolsky for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

### Notes

1. See also Spolsky, "The Biology of Failure."
2. According to Yagoda, "total sales in the categories of Personal Memoirs, Childhood Memoirs, and Parental Memoirs increased more than 400 percent between 2004 and 2008" (28).
3. See also Kadar, *et al.* for a discussion of "diaries, letters, journals, ego documents, memoir, documentary film, video, live dramatic performance pieces, and indigenous oral narrative" in the expansion of the role of "experience-based narratives of geographical and social places and historical periods" (1).
4. See Stansell.
5. See also Savarese's essay in this special issue for a critical take on the paradigm of "overcoming," which some readers see as exemplified by *The Diving Bell*. As Savarese puts it, commenting on James Overboe's "Narrating the Unspeakable: Interdisciplinary Readings of Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*," Overboe "distinguishes himself from his nondisabled co-authors by constantly calling attention to the way that physiological distinctiveness comes packaged in pity—packaged by the viewer's eyes. Heroic overcoming, however brief, is the only option for someone with locked-in syndrome, or so people believe. Whereas his coauthors interpret the memoir's poetic flare as an escape from the body, a way to move effortlessly in words, he interprets it as a rich adjustment to new circumstances."
6. See Spolsky's *Gaps in Nature* for a related discussion of the evolution of literary genres.

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