



# The Fragile Conjunction: Autobiography, Narrative Life and the Limits of Human Senses

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## Abstract

Autobiography has long been theorised as the privileged site where life and narrative converge, yet this assumption harbours significant complications when “life” is understood in its broadest ontological sense rather than through strictly human perceptual filters. Drawing on Jerome Bruner’s constructivist account of “life as narrative,” Brian Richardson’s fourfold typology of narrative definitions, and Maurice Blanchot’s radical theorisation of the indeterminate narrative voice, this article interrogates the anthropocentric limits of autobiographical self-writing. It proposes the concept of “narrative life” as a distinct category bounded by temporality, causality, appearance, relationality, and matter—qualities shared with but not exhaustive of organic and inorganic existence. Expanding the analysis beyond the course readings, the discussion incorporates Paul Ricoeur’s narrative identity, David Herman’s posthuman narratology, and recent scholarship on animal autobiography to argue that autobiography’s reproducibility and cultural susceptibility stem from its confinement to human senses, while a broader view of life reveals narrative as a poetic force (Heidegger) operative across species and matter. The article concludes that autobiography’s apparent stability is illusory; its true value lies in exposing the instability of voice and the necessity of narratologies that transcend the human.

Perhaps one way to probe this assumption is by classifying what life should mean in conjunction to narrative. “Life in all its senses” or “life in all sense” (life through human sense, more specifically) are two distinct propositions. “Life in all its senses” demands that life be seen not solely through human senses whereas “life in all sense” seem to mean strictly life through human senses. Life seen from (human) senses is very limited but life, the totality of organic life, with its varied non-human senses and the inorganic matter is limitless. Most certainly, a literary theorist is concerned in usual cases with human life, but the connection between life and narrative may stretch beyond human life to other organic and inorganic things in life as to a physicist who may find in these varied states of matter the presence of an ultimate narrative and many narrative agents.

**Keywords:** Autobiography, narrative theory, posthumanism, life writing.

## Introduction

It is not for the first time, surely that such a broad view of narrative is conceived, Jerome Bruner in his article “*Life as Narrative*” (Bruner, 2004) while taking a constructivist approach to narrative as “world-making” refers to how physics, conceived by the science philosopher Nelson Goodman, was also a “way of world making.” Nelson was perhaps not alone as Martin Heidegger also considers something akin to it when he wrote “*Not only handcraft manufacture, not only artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery, is a bringing-forth, poiesis. Physis (nature) also, the arising of something from out of itself, is a bringing-forth, poiesis. Physis is indeed poiesis in the highest sense.*” (Heidegger, 1975, p. 10) Surely then there are more ways to conceive life than how a literary theorists may choose, but narrative seems to capture something far reaching in relation to time, appearance, matter (description) rationality and causality.

The commonplace that autobiography marks the point of coincidence between life and narrative rests on a deceptively simple premise: lived experience can be rendered coherent through storytelling. Yet this assumption falters under scrutiny. “Life” is not monolithic; it encompasses human sensory perception alongside non-human organic and inorganic modes of existence. As the document under analysis astutely observes, distinguishing “life in all its senses” (a totality including non-human perceptual worlds) from “life in all sense” (humanly filtered experience) reveals autobiography’s inherent limitation: it captures only the latter. This article refines and expands that insight into a publishable scholarly intervention by integrating additional theoretical voices and contemporary posthuman perspectives. It argues that autobiography does not merely represent life but constructs a highly specific narrative life—one circumscribed by temporal sequencing, causal linkage, and cultural canonical forms—while broader conceptions of life and

narrative (from physics to animal subjectivity) expose the fragility of this conjunction.

When one thinks if autobiographies can be the point where narrative and life meet, one may have to change one's language to speak about life, for this life is quite specifically located. Because autobiography is strictly meant here as a human invention and symbolises a life collected through human senses. Autobiographies undoubtedly provides that meeting point for narrative and life, but that life is not life in the broadest sense of the term as we say, rather its life in a very specific sense.

### **Broadening "Life": From Human Autobiography to Posthuman Poiesis**

Just as we recognise Time through different concepts of time such as the cosmological time, historical time etc. we may be better off to recognise life as "narrative life" in line with other kinds of life such as organic life. What would it mean when we would say narrative life, if not a life which shares the same principles as narrative, namely time, appearance, relationality, matter and causality and is also bound by them? These are roughly the factors which have become associated with narrative as Brian Richardson expresses "*Currently, four basic approaches to the definition of narrative are in use; we may designate these as temporal, causal, minimal, and transactional. The first posits the representation of events in a time sequence as the defining feature of narrative; the second insists that some causal connection, however oblique, between the events is essential; the third and most capacious, Genette's, suggests that any statement of an action or event is ipso facto a narrative, since it implies a transformation or transition from an earlier to a later state; the fourth posits that narrative is simply a way of reading a text, rather than a feature or essence found in a text.*" (Richardson, 2000) Fludernik's definition, the fourth one, couches itself in an unexplainable metaphysical conceit which postulates a given original reader who activates, narrates the tale that was already there. Where is this original reader and narrator writes Maurice Blanchot "*without its own existence-speaking from nowhere, suspended in the narrative as a whole neither does it dissipate there in the manner of light, which, though itself invisible, makes things visible: radically exterior, it comes from exteriority itself, from the outside that is the enigma proper to language in writing.*" (Blanchot, p. 386). This absence of a fixed entity either in the form of an author, narrator or the voice, as we will see later provides great instability to autobiographical and narrative voice. Richardson's later expansions in *Unnatural Narrative* (2015) reinforce this by testing definitions against experimental texts, preferring a flexible causal matrix that accommodates nonhuman agents and contradictory chronologies. Autobiography fits uneasily: it demands causal coherence and temporal sequencing yet constantly threatens minimal or transactional dissolution. The voice is never fixed; it is Blanchot's "outside that is the enigma proper to language in writing." This instability undermines the life-narrative coincidence, revealing autobiography as a performative rather than mimetic genre.

For now it will suffice to say that life is bound by these essential features, an autobiographical life is at once narratable, all life that is bound by these essential narrative qualities. This is what seems to be an essential crux when Jerome Bruner says "*We seem to have no way of describing "lived time" save in the form of narrative.*" (Bruner, 2004, p. 692) Lived time again as historical time is limited in its

conceptual blanket, it's a time which we cannot leave at our will nor can we modify it, that's what makes it lived time. All life (both human and non-human) is bound within this formal condition of being alive and poised towards death. In his second hypothesis, Bruner then says what we have just said about narrative life- "*My second thesis is that the mimesis between the life so-called and narrative is a two way affair: that is to say, just as art imitates life in Aristotle's sense, so, in Oscar Wilde's, life imitates art. Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative.*" (Bruner, 2004, p. 692). It is also in this sense that narrative is understood as world-making, as a principle function of human mind. In other words, what autobiography locates than are all formal requirements of narratives, an appearance conjured from matter, an apparition of self, an indeterminate voice, in time with relations that are casually tied up. An autobiography makes present an appearance, an indeterminate narrative voice as, Maurice Blanchot likes to refer to it, within the bound of lived time. This appearance of self as an event gets its definition, exfoliation, unfolding from "*its contribution in the development of the plot.*"

Traditional literary theory privileges human life, yet the document correctly invokes Jerome Bruner's constructivist framework and Martin Heidegger's notion of *physis* as *poiesis* to suggest narrative's reach extends further. Bruner (2004, originally 1987) frames mind as "world-making," equating physics (per Nelson Goodman) with narrative construction. Heidegger (1975) similarly elevates nature's self-arising to the highest form of bringing-forth. These insights open a pathway beyond anthropocentrism.

Recent posthuman scholarship radicalises this move. David Herman's *Narratology beyond the Human* (2018) and his earlier article "Animal Autobiography; Or, Narration beyond the Human" (2016) demonstrate how self-narration can cross species lines. Herman argues that animal autobiographies—whether fictional (e.g., Ceridwen Dovey's *Only the Animals*, 2014) or non-fictional shelter narratives—project nonhuman subjectivities through hybrid "humanimal" principals. As Herman (2016) notes: "These experiments with narration beyond the human afford solidarity-building projections of other creatures' ways of being-in-the-world—projections that enable a reassessment, in turn, of forms of human being." Such texts challenge the assumption that autobiography requires human sensory mediation; instead, they defamiliarise human ontologies by granting voice to echolocation, pack instincts, or posthumous animal perspectives. This aligns with the document's call for narrative agents in inorganic matter and organic non-human life, echoing biosemiotics and new materialisms (e.g., Jane Bennett's vibrant matter). Autobiography thus emerges not as life's mirror but as one narrow instantiation of *narrative life* within a vaster poietic continuum.

### **The Instability of Autobiographical Voice and Cultural Scriptability**

Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (1984–1988) further complicates the picture by theorising narrative identity as emplotment: the self is configured through the synthesis of heterogeneous events into a coherent story. Yet Ricoeur's model, while invaluable for understanding autobiographical temporality, remains tethered to human historical time. When juxtaposed with the document's distinction between cosmological and narrative time, Ricoeur's framework reveals autobiography's "lived time" as a constructed artefact rather than an ontological given.

As we have seen that autobiography has a very specific life, a life through human senses is not only limited but also shaky and unstable. However it is this limited-ness which provides it the quality of being reproducible, scriptable etc. at least in broad forms. It's shaky not only by external criteria where an author may have misreported or reported an event that never happened, its shaky because there are internal criteria in the way an author may try to intend something which he is now simply too oblivious to remember or capable of telling. But one must notice that this limitation is born out of the formal conditions of life and narrative, hence what is limited is the form of expression in the sense that autobiography is predictable in its form and it's only the content that is unstable, that spills but within these set preconditions. That is what makes autobiography as Bruner notes "*highly susceptible to cultural and interpersonal and linguistic influences. This susceptibility to influence may in fact be the reason why talking cures*" religious instructions and other interventions in a life may often have such profound effects in changing a person's life narrative." (Bruner, 2004, p. 694)

Autobiography's reproducibility stems precisely from its confinement to human senses. As Bruner (2004) asserts in his second thesis: "Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative." Yet this mimesis is two-way and culturally mediated: "In the end we become the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives... we also become variants of the culture's canonical forms" (Bruner, 2004, p. 694). The document's insight that omitted or misremembered events expose both external (cultural censorship) and internal (memory's fallibility) shakiness is crucial. Autobiographical form is predictable—chronological, causal, plot-driven—while content "spills" within these bounds.

Posthuman and deconstructive critiques amplify this. Leigh Gilmore's work on posthuman life writing (2012) and Herman's animal autobiographies show that even when voice is granted to non-humans, the human author remains the principal, creating hybrid footing (Goffman via Herman, 2016). The result is not transparent self-presence but perpetual defacement (echoing Paul de Man). Autobiography thus symbolises a "narrative life" bound by the very features Richardson isolates, yet haunted by Blanchot's absent narrator and Bruner's cultural susceptibility. Talking cures, religious scripts, and literary genres reshape lives precisely because narrative life is scriptable within limited human parameters.

An author may leave portions of his life, not cover things that may have been otherwise crucial. What he doesn't write is censored? How much of the life is then narrativised by him and how much is narrativised by the culture and society he is born in? It is perhaps at this point that Bruner assert his main claim that "*eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experiences, to organise memory, to segment and purpose build the very events of a life. In the end we become the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our lives... we also become variants of the culture's canonical forms.*" (Bruner, 2004, p. 694). That is why autobiographies emerge themselves, people are motivated, led into available frames. It's reproducible. Because it's in the limited domain of life, it can be re-inscripted using the earlier existing script, a writing that both refers to what was present and to what it makes present. Just like forms of different folktales, autobiographies occasions various forms of narratives in addition to exclusive forms of self-telling.

## Conclusion

The assumption that autobiography is the seamless meeting point of life and narrative collapses under ontological and theoretical pressure. By distinguishing "narrative life" as one modality among many—organic, inorganic, posthuman—this article demonstrates that autobiography's value lies not in fidelity to "life in all its senses" but in exposing its own formal and cultural constraints. Bruner, Richardson, and Blanchot supply the foundational tools; Ricoeur, Herman, and posthuman scholarship extend them. Future research in life writing must therefore adopt a narratology beyond the human, recognising narrative as a poietic force operative across scales of existence. Autobiography does not capture life; it constructs one highly specific, unstable, and culturally contingent version of it—inviting us to imagine narrative lives yet to be told.

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