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Memory in Memoir & Biography: Science, Place, and Agency

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MEMORY IN MEMOIR & BIOGRAPHY

SCIENCE, PLACE, AND AGENCY

by

JOHNATHAN E. LONGO

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018
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Johnathan E. Longo

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Memory in Memoir & Biography: Science, Place, and Agency

by

Johnathan E. Longo

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This thesis explores modern scientific understanding of memory in humans and how it affects works of life writing. Scientific research shows that memory is unreliable and often misunderstood by the general public, and this has implications for different forms of life writing. This paper uses biographies, memoirs, and hybrid forms of life writing to explore how memory, with all its limitations, is used in service of a life story. How do writers of these sub-genres use memory and why are those strategies different from one another? Questions of agency and authority over written and spoken material make the issues still more complicated. If memory is indeed unreliable, how can disagreements about the past be resolved? Who has the rights to the story of a life? The place of memory in life writing is fluid and complex.
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I - Introduction

For many, the first questions that come to mind when reading a biography or memoir concern the accuracy of the material. Did events truly unfold in the way that they were recounted by the author? How much is the author shaping the material to fit a narrative? How can readers determine the accuracy of the material? It is often difficult or impossible to ascertain the validity of statements made by an author within a memoir or biography. Without any documented proof, readers are left to decide for themselves whether an author’s account of events—or even a portrayal of a situation or person—is accurate. They are also tasked with then deciding on much larger questions of whether validity matters at all in such a text. Is the purpose of a biography to offer a strictly factual listing of the events of one’s life, or is there perhaps room for interpretation and opinion?

One question that does appear to be understood among readers is the question of whether an autobiographer may be objective about his or herself as a subject. Because authors of memoir cannot possibly be wholly objective about the story of their lives, it follows that memoir can never be expected to offer wholly accurate depictions of those lives. Memoirs instead offer a form of artistic expression in which people may present themselves in the way they see themselves. Such works are the manifestations of self-critiques. Biography functions in much the same way, affording writers the opportunity to provide their perceptions of another person or
people. It is thus important to commence with the understanding that all works of life writing exist only as the artistic testaments of their creators.

Studies of memoir and biography cannot hope to be successful without an understanding of the accuracy of human memory. The science on memory in human beings currently finds that memories do not serve as accurate accounts of past events, even from first person sources. Again, it is with this foundation in mind that deeper questions into what makes a work of life writing credible become open to exploration. More interesting and complex questions involve the cross section of memoir and biography. While it appears that the two forms of life writing are very different, it can also be surprising to find similarities when trying to reconcile the two as siblings within the broader category. An examination of how authors of biography write about their subjects compared with a similar examination of authors of memoir yields interesting results. To complicate matters even further, biographers often use their works on other subjects to explore parts of their own lives, in turn creating unique pieces of life writing that blur the line between biography and autobiography.

A final topic worth exploring within the genre of life writing and its construction is the issue of authority over the details of a life. In addition to the differences between those writing about themselves and those writing about others, differences can also be found between sanctioned and unsanctioned works. The complications of sanctioned and unsanctioned works usually arise over controversial subjects whose estates often have control over a deceased or incapacitated subject’s personal items. When such is the case, one biographer may be granted access to a trove of personal letters while another is denied. These cases raise the question of who has authority over the story of a life. Questions of who has the right to tell a life story become complex when conflicting accounts of events exist on a subject. Additionally, questions
of validity may appear over the biographies by authors who work closely with the estates of their subjects, or sometimes with the subjects themselves. The issue of authority over a life raises difficult questions about validity and voice in memoirs and biographies.

II – The Science of Memory

Oftentimes, the validity of a memory goes unchecked. It seems reasonable to assume that a person with no obvious motives to lie would indeed relay accurate information when asked to recall an event, detail, fact, etc., however, when the truth can be readily found, it is often the case that it is different from that person’s account. Attempts to recall information, even instances in which the subject has no personal stake, are often found to be incorrect, making claims of personally biased recollections even more suspect. It has been found in numerous studies over the course of several decades that human memory, both short term memory and especially long term memory, is unreliable. The inconsistencies between memory and the truth arise from a wide host of contributing factors, often creating memories that are not mere alterations of an event, but entirely fabricated events.

Research into the accuracy of personal memory has shown that not only are memories often inaccurate, but they can also be distorted, forgotten entirely, or even created. Widely considered one of the earliest works on the reliability of memory is Hermann Ebbinghaus’ *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology*. The work is based on memory retention tests performed in the 1870s and completed by 1880, with Ebbinghaus finally publishing his results in Germany in 1885. The experiment is of a single-subject design with Ebbinghaus himself as the subject, a method not altogether uncommon in memory studies. It entailed seven months of testing often with multiple sessions a day. Ebbinghaus experimented with several
methods including attempted memorization of numbers and words before settling on the use of unique made up syllables, a practice that has been replicated often in the field of memory psychology. The experiment resulted in his famous “Forgetting Curve,” detailed in his chart, shown below.

![Table 1. Results of Ebbinghaus’ experiment](image)

Ebbinghaus’ description of the chart is as follows:

One hour after the end of the learning, the forgetting had already progressed so far that one half of the amount of the original work had to be expended before the series could be reproduced again; after 8 hours the work to be made up amounted to two thirds of the first effort. Gradually, however, the process became slower so that even for rather long periods the additional loss could be ascertained only with difficulty. After 24 hours about one third was always remembered; after 6 days about one fourth, and after a whole month fully one fifth of the first work persisted in effect. The decrease of this after-effect in the latter intervals of time is evidently so slow that it is easy to predict that a complete vanishing of the effect of the first memorisation of these series would, if they had been left to themselves, have occurred only after an indefinitely long period of time.\(^2\)

The study found that Ebbinghaus almost immediately began to forget the test syllables, forgetting 50% after only one hour and creating his famous curve as time went on, testing up to one month of memory retention tests. The test was a breakthrough in research

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2 Ebbinghaus, 76.
methodology for memory psychology and marked a shift in scientific understanding of memory retention over time.

**Memory Distortion**

In a 1987 New York Times article on the subject, psychologist David Rubin stated that the malleability of memory is quite high. He notes that people have an ability to remember certain parts of their lives with greater accuracy than others. One interesting finding of Dr. Rubin is that the pattern of accuracy was uniform in his patients: “from middle age on, most people have more reminiscences from their youth and early adult years than for the most recent years of their lives.”³ This is particularly interesting because it suggests an internal system in which memory is prioritized in the mind according to one’s age, meaning that one’s age determines which memories of past events are most likely to be preserved accurately. One explanation for this peculiarity is the fact that for many, most life-changing events occur during their young adult lives. Major life events such as college, marriage, having children, and others occur at earlier points of people’s lives. This period is often marked by major and influential events that can provide memories deemed important in one’s self-conscious. By contrast, the later periods of one’s life often tend to include fewer life-changing events. A period of stability and normalcy will naturally result in patterns and routines that continue for years at a time. The lack of unique events in this period makes distinction and accurate memory harder to achieve for the obvious reason that days are harder to differentiate from one another when they are great in number and in similarity.

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Dr. William Brewer, a psychologist at the University of Illinois, conducted a study on memories of the mundane with students at the school. His findings, although attributed to young adults, bore results supporting the idea that non-major life events are easily forgotten when experienced in routine fashion. The study had the students carry beepers that would go off several times a day, at which point the students would write what they were thinking about at that moment. The students were then asked to recall what they remember thinking at those moments one week and two months later. The study found that after one week the students had forgotten 20% of those events, and 50% just two months after the study. Dr. Brewer’s study seems to confirm that mundane memories are forgotten at much higher rates than are significant memories while also supporting and explaining the claim that people generally remember more from their earlier years of life.

Perhaps less surprisingly, which periods of life were remembered accurately and which were either forgotten or altered is dependent on a person’s current situation in life. To illustrate this point, the article cites a study of 310 adults who had spent time in a guidance home as children, conducting the study around thirty years later. The study found a variance in memory between those adults deemed “well adjusted” and those deemed as “suffering from emotional problems,” finding that, “those who had adjusted well in adulthood had fewer memories of the painful events of childhood than did those who were currently suffering from emotional problems.” The memories forgotten in the well-adjusted adults included the reliance on welfare or time spent in homes for delinquent children.

Other studies cited in the article show supporting evidence for Dr. Rubin’s findings in similar groups of adults. These studies found that depressed people remembered sad events of

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4 Goleman, "In Memory."
5 Goleman, "In Memory."
their past more accurately, even in cases where differing groups of subjects included siblings who had experienced the same events growing up. This was found to be especially true of memories that are not easily factually verifiable. A study by Dr. Lee Robbins of Washington University of St. Louis found that sibling of no more than four apart in age agreed 71% of the time on memories of factual verifiability while only agreeing 47% of the time on memories based on opinion or perspective, such as questions about the frequency of fights between parents. The variance between the accounts of siblings is an especially compelling example of both the inaccuracy and the malleability of memory. The fact that two or more people who have experienced the same exact objective event may have such differences in their memories is further testament that memory is malleable and that self-bias, as I will discuss further in an analysis of biography and memoir, is unavoidable.

**Memory Supplementation**

While evidence shows that significant events are much more likely to be remembered accurately through the years, there is further academic work that shows even unique events in one’s life are subject to the formation of what scientists call false memory. False memory formation encapsulates various degrees of inaccuracy in memory, ranging from small details added to a memory, all the way to the creation and belief of entire events that never occurred in reality. One major factor that causes the formation of false memories is the use of framing questions. Framing questions represent suggestions delivered via questioning that encourage specific responses from test subjects concerning memories. The accuracy or even existence of the memories in question have often been found not to be a determining factor in the accuracy of

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6 Goleman, "In Memory."
the test subjects’ recollections. Several experiments have tested the reliability of memory with focus on different locations along the spectrum of false memories.

At one end of the false memory spectrum, experiments have found that memory can be distorted to produce a new memory that is slightly different than what truthfully occurred. In 1975, doctors Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer of the University of Wisconsin published the results of an experiment that sought to understand the effect that varied questioning might have on memory accuracy. Their report is titled “Reconstruction of Automobile Destruction: An Example of the Interaction between Language and Memory.” It details an experiment in which 150 subjects were shown videos of automobile accidents and then questioned on the events of the film. The question posed asked, “About how fast were the cars going when they smashed into each other?” Different subjects were asked the same question with related verbs taking the place of the word “smashed,” including “collided, bumped, contacted, and hit.” One week later, the subjects were asked if they remembered seeing any glass in the video. Loftus and Palmer found that participants questioned with the word “smash” in their questioning were more likely to give higher speed estimates for the cars. They also found that those same participants were more likely to respond affirmatively to the question of whether they remembered seeing broken glass in the video. The video did not show any broken glass.

Doctors Loftus and Palmer wrote that, “the results of this experiment indicate that the form of a question (in this case, changes in a single word) can markedly and systematically affect a witness’s answer to that question. The actual speed of the vehicles controlled little variance in

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subject reporting, while the phrasing of the question controlled considerable variance.\textsuperscript{8} This suggests that framing questions, defined by them as questions that, “either by [their] own form or content, suggest to the witness what answer is desired or leads him to the desired answer,”\textsuperscript{9} have the ability to alter a person’s perception of reality. Framing questions may have the power to rewrite the past in an individual’s memory.

Loftus and Palmer’s experiment is interesting in that the framing questioning found to have such influence over memory not only altered the memory of the participants, but also created the memory of the non-existing shattered glass. The creation of components in a memory was further studied in experiments at Rice University in 1995, conducted by doctors Henry Roediger III and Kathleen McDermitt, expanding upon a similar experiment conducted in 1959 by psychologist James Deese at the University of Virginia. Roediger and McDermitt’s experiments used simple lists of related words to test whether such lists might prompt the fabricated memory of a similar word as having appeared on said lists. In the first experiment, participants were presented with lists of 12 words all related to another word which was not included on those lists. For example, one list included the following words, all connected to the unrepresented word “girl;” “boy, dolls, female, young, dress, pretty, hair, niece, dance beautiful, cute, date aunt daughter, sister.” The subjects were then immediately asked to recall the words they had seen and to rate the confidence with which they were sure to have seen them. It was found that 40% of participants recalled seeing the unrepresented group words in the lists they were shown. The same experiment with expanded lists found that 55% of participants recalled

\textsuperscript{8} Loftus and Palmer, 586.
\textsuperscript{9} Loftus and Palmer, 586.
seeing the unrepresented group words, a significant increase in the percentage of inaccurate responses.\(^\text{10}\)

Roediger and McDermitt noted that the readiness and confidence with which subjects, described as “sophisticated…wily graduate students,” provided inaccurate answers displayed the power of illusion in memory.\(^\text{11}\) They state that the experiments prove that people can remember events that never happened: “that the illusion of remembering events that never occurred can happen quite readily. Therefore, as others have also pointed out, the fact that people may say they vividly remember details surrounding an event cannot, by itself, be taken as convincing evidence that the event actually occurred.”\(^\text{12}\) The implications of the study are particularly important in that they effectively discredit the accuracy of memory in confident and capable subjects.

**False Memory Formation**

In taking the findings of Roediger and McDermitt even further and demonstrating just how impressionable a mind may be concerning memory, Loftus and Jacqueline Pickrell conducted a study in 1995 that sought to create an entirely new memory in subjects. They begin their groundbreaking study by citing Dr. R.L. Greene in noting that memories do not exist solely in and of themselves, but instead are constantly disrupted “by things that we experienced earlier (proactive interference) or things that we experienced later (retroactive interference).”\(^\text{13}\) They


\(^{11}\) Roediger and McDermitt, Kathleen, 812.

\(^{12}\) Roediger and McDermitt, Kathleen, 812.

posit that memories simply cannot exist as pure and untainted artifacts of the mind; they exist instead as interpretations of events influenced by the entirety of a life. They cite the 1974 experiment with the car crash to illustrate the exceptional power of retroactive interference. The experiment then proceeds to test not a memory that has been changed, but one that has been invented.

The experiment began with a single subject, Chris, before being replicated with 24 adults aged 18-53. Chris was a fourteen-year-old boy who was given descriptions of four events from his childhood. Three of the events had actually occurred and one of them was completely fabricated by his mother and older brother. The made-up event detailed a situation in which Chris had gotten lost in a shopping mall in Spokane, Washington when he was five. He was crying when an elderly man found him and brought him back to his family: “Over the first 5 days, Chris remembered more and more about getting lost. He said that the man who had rescued him was ‘really cool.’ He remembered being scared that he would never see his family again. He remembered his mother scolding him.”

While it is surprising that Chris “remembered” the event, the first five days after the experiment yielded only these somewhat generalized answers. They represent what one might expect after being told of a memory and one could argue that his mind simply filled in the gaps with data that seemed reasonable. In the following weeks, however, he “remembered” the event in such detail that would lead the important conclusions drawn for the experiment.

Several weeks later, Chris was interviewed again and asked to rate the clarity of the four memories on a scale of 1-11, with one representing “not clear at all” and eleven representing “very, very clear.” His second highest rating, eight, was assigned to the false memory of being

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14 Loftus and Pickrell, 721.
lost in the mall. He provided many more details from the false memory, including details of the
toy store he was in, the type and color of shirt his rescuer wore, his hair and glasses, as well as
specific thoughts that Chris had while in the store. Chris was then told that one of the memories
was fabricated. When asked to identify the false memory he chose an actual memory, and when
told which was the fabricated memory, he did not believe that it was false. After replicating
the experiment with 24 adults, three men and twenty-one women, the results showed that the
core discovery of the experiment remained true, but the percentage with which false memories
could be implanted was variable as only five of the participants remembered the false memory as
having occurred.

Loftus and Pickrell’s experiment had shown that false memories could be implanted into
a person’s mind. Later experiments would alter the methods and materials of the experiment to
produce consistent results showing that adults could be manipulated into creating false
memories. Kimberly Wade and her colleagues at the University of Wellington in Zealand and
University of Victoria in Canada performed a similar experiment in which false stories were
replaced with doctored pictures that added the subjects, sometimes along with a family member,
added to an entirely different picture of an event they had never attended. Their findings were
startling. While recalled with average confidence of 47%, the false memories were believed to
be true by an astounding 50% of subjects. Wade and her colleagues acknowledge that the
experiment cannot explain the extent of influence exerted by the doctored pictures on the
subjects’ memories. They do make it clear, however, that the pictures do produce a higher rate
of false memory formation than had been produced in similar experiments using non-visual

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15 Loftus and Pickrell, 721.
16 Kimberley A. Wade et al., “A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Lies: Using False Photographs to
Create False Childhood Memories,” Psychonomic Bulletin & Review 9, no. 3 (September 1,
stimuli such as fabricated stories from relatives. This raises the question of why visual stimuli like pictures produce such high rates of false memory formation. What the question does answer is whether the ability of the mind to create entirely false memories based on fabricated events found to exist in earlier experiments does indeed exist consistently across experiments and subjects. The experiments of Loftus, Wade, and many other psychologists and doctors firmly established the existence of false memory formation.

**Implications**

Despite the large amount scientific of research that has been conducted on the subject of memory retention and psychology throughout the years, there remains a significant gap between public and scientific understanding of memory. In a 2013 article in *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience*, Joyce Lacey and Craig Stark compiled data from surveys of 1500 members of the general public and 64 psychologists, all surveyed by telephone, questioning the participants’ understanding of how memory functions with four different questions. The findings are represented in the chart below:
The results show a clear and marked difference of the understanding of memory between the two groups. Not only is a misplaced perception of the accuracy of memory present, but a lack of understanding of the basic way memory functions in human beings. The first question in the surveys shows that well over 50% of those surveyed believe that memory exists as an accurate record of events to be inspected at any given time in the future, much like a preserved video. This understanding of memory is fatally flawed and leads to the false premise that memory can be relied upon as an objective record of past events. A video does not leave room for interpretation of simple questions of existence, and for memory to be treated on the same way assumes that it too can used in the same way. This premise is far from the truths about memory brought to light in the aforementioned studies and has dangerous implications for society.

The dangers of society’s inability to recognize the unreliability of memory as found through academic experiments are widespread. From the courtroom to the voting booth, they are particularly dangerous in the internet-led age of dubious information and false accounts. Criminal investigations and trials often rely on eyewitness testimony for identification of defendants and accurate accounts of possible crimes. These accounts are often used in decisions that affect the lives of many. Writing about the dangers of public misperception of memory, Lacey and Stark write, “witnessing a potentially traumatic event does not produce an unbiased,

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indelible memory of the event. Memory is an adaptive process based on reconstruction. It works well for what it is intended — guiding current and future behaviour. However, it is not infallible, and therefore should not be treated as such.” Without a reckoning between the scientific community and the general public, tragedies such as wrongful convictions or unpunished crimes are more likely to occur.

Questions of memory seem especially important in the internet age of today, in which fake news stories are disseminated en masse and many media consumers have trouble determining what is real and what is fake. In 2015, a recycled claim by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump that Muslim community members in New Jersey were seen celebrating the event of September 11th, 2001, garnered national attention through several media outlets. His unfounded claim was thoroughly debunked by several newspapers. However, the suggestion that such an event had actually occurred prompted people to remember it. This, in turn, led to worry by state officials that riots and violence might break out in retaliation against Muslims. There is little doubt that such misinformation often finds itself in the largely unregulated annals of social media. A 2014 experiment published in *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* found that when presented with false information presented in similar forms to a Twitter feed, subjects were less confident in identifying that information from real information. When considering the nature of memory, the unregulated nature of social media, mixed with its power of influence in society,

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18 Lacy and Stark.
is making it very difficult for many people to determine what is accurate information and what is false information.

A less dire but equally complex quandary is what to make of memory in the genre of life writing. If memory has been proven to be inaccurate and malleable, what does that mean for works based purely on memory? To what degree should readers interpret biographies and autobiographies as works of historical record? If memory is understood as a scientist understands it, the line between fiction and non-fiction in life writing becomes blurred. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know when claims made by authors based solely on memory are accurate. With the premise of memory as a malleable interpretation of the past, biography and auto-biography must be examined for bias, accuracy, and whether those matter in such works of life writing.

II – Biography & Memoir

The limitations of memory hold important ramifications for forms of life writing. The scientific research discussed in the first chapter illustrate that one’s memory capabilities may range from mildly inaccurate to completely fabricated. This raises difficult question for life writing. At the most basic level are questions of empirical truth. With the knowledge of memory’s limitations, it becomes unclear exactly much or how little of a biography or memoir are true accounts of events. More intriguing questions begin with exploration of how to reconcile those limitations with the place of truth in such works. In questioning the importance of accuracy in a work relying on the recollection of a subject or subjects, the question of empirical accuracy becomes less important than one of classification. If the events of an autobiography cannot be trusted to be accurately recalled, does the work remain one of non-
fiction? To what degree can a person’s account of self be accepted as truth? If biography and
autobiography are indeed works of literature and not pure historical accounts, it becomes much
more difficult to determine how they should be read. These issues are products of the different
ways in which memory affects biography and self-writing.

**Biography**

Within the genre of life writing, biographies face a unique set of difficulties. After
deciding to examine a person’s life in agonizing detail, authors must immediately confront the
difficulties in writing of someone about whom other people may care deeply care, or in writing
of someone who is still living. Aside from the ethical dilemmas that may arise concerning issues
of privacy, matters of legality are often brought into question concerning the rights of subjects
over the matters of their own lives. This early question of authority will be discussed in depth in
chapter three of this paper. Another early decision a writer must make when telling the story of
another person’s life is whether to tell that story as an historian or as a biographer. In the realm
of historical books, facts are given, dates are certified, and the events of a life are reduced to a
long and monotonous stream of facts. The challenge of biography lies in making the story of
one’s life just that, a story. A story has a voice and presents decisions made by an author. Even
the most objective biographies can never be fully objective, for anything beyond the base facts
constitutes an interpretation of a life. It is then, through interpretation, that life writing becomes
a form of art, and as such, the subjects of those works are treated with respect. Writing the story
of a person’s time on earth carries a responsibility to treat the subjects, even those who may be
universally despised as terrible individuals, with the care that the complexity of humanity
dictates. Humanity as biography demands a higher set of standards in morality of representation.
In his seminal and irreverent 1918 work, *Eminent Victorians*, Lytton Strachey writes that “Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past. They have a value which is independent of any temporal processes—which is eternal, and must be felt for its own sake.”

Another difficult tightrope biographers must tread is that of the respecting the humanity of a subject while avoiding the creation of hagiography. In his extensive and sharp *Devil’s Dictionary*, created and revised in the early twentieth century, black humorist Ambrose Bierce, himself a fascinating and mystifying source of biographical potential, defined biography as “the literary tribute that a little man pays to a big one.” This tongue-in-cheek definition represents the perils that biographers face in works that appear light on criticisms of their subjects. It is of course natural that writers should want to write about subjects that interest them. It is no different with biographers, despite whether their subjects are living or deceased. The difficulty faced is often that those human subjects are too well liked by their biographers. Biographies that create lionized figures out of their subjects are justifiably vulnerable to concerns over the legitimacy and completeness of the materials presented in the work. Readers understand that everyone is subject to faults and an omission of any such faults will be met with skepticism. To show a perfect human can be interpreted as a falsehood, one which may prove disqualifying in a genre that people turn to, for better or worse, in search of unknown truths about a person they may or may not already know. While it is impossible to be entirely objective when writing biography, one can attempt to detach themselves from the subjects as best they can so that they might bring themselves closer to the meeting point that lies midway between hagiography and

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fictitious slander. Biographies that clearly favor their subjects may still survive criticism if they possess other qualities. Biographies by writers who love their subjects may find success by transforming themselves into hybrid works that blur the lines between biography and memoir. Such works will be explored in chapter three.

At the other end of the biographical spectrum lie writers who treat their subjects with such clear disdain, which ironically creates the same effect as that of a tribute piece or eulogy, one that then creates a sense of skepticism towards the work. It becomes evident early in a biography of such nature that the author has a clear bias against his or her subject. Through tone and perceived effort, audiences decide whether the author’s interpretation of a life has fit within the parameters of acceptable fairness; anything too far askew in either direction will cause disbelief. To mitigate this risk, authors in danger of an accusation of slander may employ innovative strategies. Lytton Strachey did just that in *Eminent Victorians*. Strachey was one of ten core members of the famous and esteemed Bloomsbury Group of English writers and intellectuals which began meeting in the early twentieth century. An outspoken anti-war activist, he felt that the Victorian style of life had created an evil system that led to the nations’ involvement in wars abroad. Writer Jenny Stratford notes, “a contributory fire was added by the fact that *Eminent Victorians* was written against the background of the First World War, which Lytton Strachey regarded as the natural consequence of dangerously misguided nineteenth-century attitudes.”23 Within his own field, he felt that the pretension of the Victorian age had eroded the quality of English biographies to the points of hagiography and panegyric. In the books preface, Strachey writes,

Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design? They are as familiar as the cortège of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism. One is tempted to suppose, of some of them, that they were composed by that functionary, as the final item of his job.24

The book is Strachey’s reaction to the Victorian age. It is an irreverent and sarcastic work in both form and content. Containing well under three hundred pages, the book covers four giants of the Victorian age in mere fractions of the page counts dedicated to them in works that represented the biographical conventions of the time. To afford such subjects so few pages was a slight that did not go unnoticed by members of the old guard. Even the title drips with sarcasm.

Despite the detractors within England’s old guard, *Eminent Victorians* was a huge success. It rewrote the rules for biography and offered a pathway to success and expression for people to write biographies on subjects that they may not like as people. Not only was it a rebuttal of the English biographical conventions, it was a model for bringing interpretations of lives that may have previously been dismissed as extreme to the center of that spectrum. It was a move away from the exaltation of pure (perceived) objectivity in life writing and a harbinger of future modes of interpretive representations of life writing.

With these understandings of biography and the challenges that its writers face, the challenges of memory in such works are more issues of content and less so of structure or form.

If memory cannot be trusted, it is almost impossible to know when accounts from sources related to a subject are accurate. Authors must make decisions over which stories they deem credible and applicable to their interpretations. One method of dealing with the pitfalls of memory is the use of framing questions. As was shown in the car crash video experiment conducted by Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer, slight variations in the wording of what were essentially the same questions resulted in different memories of the same video, with some subjects even remembering details that were not actually in the video. These findings make it easy to imagine scenarios in which a biographer conducting an interview might alter, intentionally or unintentionally, a subject’s memory. Memories of events long past are already subject to significant distortion and the addition of an element such as a framing question may be enough to significantly alter a memory. If an interviewer is not exceptionally deliberate in the wording of a question, the resulting recollection could potentially be a false memory that was born out of a particular word in the question that the subject subconsciously latched onto and created a new memory based off a similar one in their mind. This is particularly troublesome because even the most careful interviewer cannot possibly foresee the direction of a conversation and new questions may spring up in the middle of a talk, prompting an off-the-cuff question that could be framed in a way that might encourage false memory formation. More insidiously, a biographer with an agenda might intentionally frame questions in order to obtain answers thought to be more marketable in a new book. While difficult to mitigate the effects of leading questions in surveys, many of them are published with the questions posed to the subjects. Even popular polls often release the questions that yielded given results as a way for audiences to determine how much stock they are willing to place in the survey’s findings. It is much more difficult to determine the possible effects of framing questions in a biography. Most biographies do not
recount the exact details of interviews conducted as part of research done, and for good reason, as there is simply too much research to present in a way that would not bring the book to a point of tedium that most readers would find to be intolerable. Without documentation of the questions pose to the subject, responses may appear outside of the context in which the events occurred. The lack of clarity in interview questions and research techniques, coupled with the use of framing questions during interviews can have major effects on biography, with the possibilities of shifting entire narratives due to the word choice of those questions.

**Memoir**

While biography and autobiography initially appear very closely related, major differences can be found in the ways the two are separately approached. A starting point in the divergence of the genres can be found with the genre names themselves. Biographies have been called such with little change. While theoretical approaches and writing styles have varied greatly, the general concept of a biography as a story of another’s life has remained consistent. Autobiography, however, has seen a more complex evolution paralleling the evolution of society’s recognition of disenfranchised groups and their corresponding literatures and art forms. In their book, *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Second Edition*, authors Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson assert that the term “autobiography” is not inclusive of all works of self-writing, but instead originated from a specific time and place in which similar works were not recognized as valid or as deserving of recognition. They write that the term originated as a title of self-writings born out the period just before the Enlightenment in the Western world, when self-referential works were gaining popularity and respect among intellectuals. They note that post colonialists have declared the term exclusionary and therefore inadequate as a representation
of self-writing that existed and exists in different forms throughout different cultures and time periods. They then explain that the term “memoir” has emerged as a more inclusive term, effectively representing a much wider range of forms of self-writing. “The term memoir, then, seems more malleable than the term autobiography, foregrounding historical shifts and intersecting cultural formations; and so when a narrative emphasizes its mode as memoir, as in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, readers are invited to think about the significance of that choice and the kind of reading it invites.”

Because this paper is concerned with all types of self-writing, the term autobiography will henceforth be replaced with the term memoir, even in reference to works that may fit into the time and place defined by Smith and Watson as the originator of the term autobiography. The complexity found in the term memoir already serves a distinguishing feature in the larger genre of life writing, marking a clear separation from biography, a separation furthered with further examination of their relationships with memory.

It is clear that memoir is a complex form of life writing. The decisions to be made by writers are often different from those to be made by biographers and the challenges they face are likewise different. Smith and Watson point out a major departure of memoir from biography in recognizing that memoir is actually a study of two types of self. They cite Stephen Spender’s investigation of this phenomenon and write of the two selves,

One is the self that others see— the social, historical person, with achievements, personal appearance, social relationships. These are “real” attributes of a person living in the world. But there is also the self experienced only by that person, the

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26 Smith and Watson, 4.
self felt from the inside that the writer can never get “outside of.” The “inside,” or personally experienced, self has a history. While it may not be meaningful as an objective “history of the times,” it is a record of self-observation, not a history observed by others.27

The idea that memoirists write about two separate selves is intriguing in that it highlights the separation one makes between the mind and the outside world. No one can possibly verbalize all the thoughts that come to mind in a single day let alone a lifetime. Instead, human beings naturally create subconscious filtering systems that determine which thoughts are fit for verbalization and which ones are better kept internalized. People are constantly running thoughts through these filters throughout each daily interaction. Of course, these internal filtering systems vary from person to person, accounting for the seemingly infinite variations of interactions between people across the world. The variances are results of the different tolerance levels people have for statements that may make a conversation uncomfortable or even hostile. This filtration creates a systematic approach to outward representation of the self. People determine how they would like to be viewed by others and adjust their internal filters to produce those results as best they can. In daily interactions, this process becomes so streamlined that is rarely dwelled upon, instead, it becomes part of a template of behavior to which individuals adhere in order to develop and maintain their intended projection of self. When undertaking a work of memoir, those systems that usually function subconsciously are forcibly made visible as each word must be carefully and deliberately chosen.

In his collection of essays, *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self Narrative*, Ulric Neisser notes that human beings are not only affected by past events, but that

27 Smith and Watson, 6.
they also uniquely reconstruct the past events of their lives. He writes, “if the remembered event seems to have played a significant part in the life of the rememberer, it becomes an example of autobiographical memory and may form part of a life narrative. Life narratives are significant because they are one way of defining the self.”

This description supports the existence of multiple selves in memoir and strengthens the idea of the form as a unique mode of self-projection in the world. The way in which a person sees oneself in his or her own mind is the internal self while the described self within the boundaries of the memoir represent the outward or projected self.

The position that there are multiple selves in memoir is taken a step further by Craig Barclay. In his essay on the topic, he posits that because there is no single self because the image of the self is the product of a selected number of memories and their corresponding versions. He claims that the reconstruction of memory that occurs in the mind is a self-serving mechanism that allows people to fill their personal needs of self-image and societal belonging. He writes, “My position is that the self is not remembered because the self does not exist as something to be remembered. I make this claim for reasons derived from two basic commitments: The self is not an entity whose existence becomes separate from and controlling of the dynamics of perception, interpersonal relationships, and cognition; and remembering is an adaptive process through which the constructed and reconstructed past serves present psychosocial and cultural needs.”

This is to say that the memories presented in memoirs are not recollections of the facts, but rather improvised reconstructions of memory fragments deliberately fashioned to create a desired image of self. The selective nature of this process is

strong support for the multiple selves theory because it illustrates an internal self passing judgement on previous selves from one’s life. The choosing of certain events and the subsequent choice to mold them into a narrative is clear evidence of multiple selves in memoir.

Jerome Bruner furthers the case of the multiple selves theory in his argument that selective memory retrieval is just one tool utilized in the construction of the self. He argues that there are several processes by which a person may create a version of his or her self. Bruner lists agency and victimicy as processes that supplement the process of remembering. In these processes, one is able to view past behavior as the results of circumstance instead of choices made or simple personality. He notes that people often claim personal responsibility for the outcomes of past events. This agency is a manipulation of the past that seeks to support the persona of one whom is in control of one’s life. Conversely, those individuals will also admit to certain events being the result of unavoidable circumstance, and Bruner notes the usage of victimicy is often used to describe some sort or personal shortcoming perceived to be out of character. Bruner theorizes that the tools of agency and victimicy are used by people as ways of reconciling the outcomes of past events and the self of those memories with their perceived current selves. They are ways of explaining away the inconvenient portions of personal history. He writes, “What we remember from the past is what is necessary to keep that story satisfactorily well formed. When new circumstances make the maintenance of that well-formedness sufficiently difficult, we undergo turning points that clarify or “debug” the narrative in an effort to achieve a clearer meaning. This form of continual revision in self narrative is a form of self-preservation that represents the struggle between the self of the past and the self of the present.

31 Bruner, 53.
An intriguing suggestion for successful memoir is discussed by Kenneth Gergen as he expands upon the discussion of multiple selves in memoir and memory. Gergen cites Harvard philosopher W.V.O. Quine’s view that telling the entire truth of story would be too tedious to be enjoyable, and that it is more important to get the general point of the story across in its telling. Gergen calls this process psychological essentialism and says that, “for the psychological essentialist, memory is fundamentally a mental process, or more formally, the mental capacity of retaining and reviving impressions, or of recalling or recognizing previous experiences. Although psychological essentialism is embodied within the common folklore – or Western ethnopsychology – its most sophisticated adherents are to be found in experimental psychology.”

Of note in this passage is the reference to folklore. Gergen asserts that while the most complex aspects of the process are psychological, its core remains one of folklore. This is to say that the process of psychological essentialism is one that places value on the quality of the story rather than on accuracy and factual support. Western folklore is built on the idea of the tall tale, a form based on hyperbole and improvisation. In assigning the process of psychological essentialism to writers of memoir, it must be assumed that they too are encouraged to use the facts only in as much as they might provide a foundation upon which a more compelling story may be created. For memoirists of this school, interpretation is the most useful tool because it lends itself to an engrossing narrative.

Interestingly, traditional Western folklore’s reliance on psychological essentialism supports claims that memoir is born, in part, of societal influences. The performative nature of folklore is a result of the desire to impress and captivate. A hyperbolic telling of what could

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otherwise be a straightforward story will be entertaining to large groups of people. The needs of an audience motivate the manipulation of facts. This process is the same for memoirists; writers strip down memories to their barest and then build upon them with varying degrees of sensationalism and novelization until the memory serves merely as the core of a much wider story and performance. Memories thus become wishes of a sort, made to fulfill the desires of others for something extraordinary.33 They form a new type of truth that Greg Neimeyer and April Metzler note as narrative truth (as opposed to historical truth): “This narrative truth may serve the general integrity of the past while at the same time supporting the perceived continuity and coherence of the self.”34 Because any published memoir is meant to be consumed by others, it is in the interest of writers to present the best narrative possible. This pursuit proves societal influences on memoir.

The theories of a plurality of selves suggest that there are several selves concurrently present at any given moment. Those selves include the personae that are presented to others in the world as well as the interior self that exists in one’s mind. John Paul Eakin readily accepts the existence of multiple selves, but he argues that only one self is present at a given moment. Eakin uses a description by John Updike to describe memoir by saying that as we age we also leave behind dead versions of ourselves that we can never truly recover. He writes, “In this sense, the selves we have been may seem to us as discrete and separate as the other persons with whom we live our relational lives. This experimental truth points to the fact that our sense of

33 Gergen, 89.
continuous identity is a fiction, the primary fiction of all self-narration.” 35 This new take on the selves posits that each self exists only before it dies and is replaced by a newer self, updated for the present. These newer selves then look back upon their former iterations and often claim a continuous self. Eakin says that in fact there is no continuous self and that the “I” of the present can never be the same as the “I” of the past. Those “I’s” do represent multiple versions of the same person, however, that person cannot embody them simultaneously. Thus, the evolution of the self requires the shedding of past iterations of that self, relegating them to the past as different states of existence. “‘You’ and ‘I’ and ‘she’ and ‘he’ and ‘we’ – the dialogic play of pronouns in these texts tracks the unfolding of relational identity in many registers, in discourse with others and within ourselves. The lesson these identity narratives are teaching, again and again, is that the self is dynamic, changing and plural.” 36

The effects of memory on biography and memoir are numerous and notoriously difficult to study. It is impossible to know either what is in the mind of a writer or what has actually happened in the past. For biographers, the fallibility of memory means that writers can never know the truth of the past. Instead, they must interpret the lives of those they hope to chronicle and tell their stories in meaningful and compelling ways. Although the state of memory sometimes makes it harder for biographers to document the past accurately, it also frees them from the strict adherence to factual evidence that is required of historians. As interpretations of lives, biographies have the freedom of opinion. That opinion can be used well or it can be used heavy handedly to produce works of either slander or hagiography. It is thus that the fallibility of memory is a vehicle by which biography becomes art.

36 Eakin, 98.
Like biography, memoir is molded by the limitations of memory. The consensus among most scholars is that there is no single self in life writing, but rather multiple selves. While the existence of selves is almost universally accepted, the nature of these selves remains a point of contention. Theories range from the existence of several selves existing simultaneously to a life made up of numerous selves that exist only in their current times and places. Memory is particularly difficult to study within memoir because the form is almost entirely internal. The spectrum of slander to hagiography that exists in biography is not applicable in a form in which the subject is the self. The complex role of memory in memoir manifests itself most evidently in the questions concerning the state of the self and the selves.

III – Memoir from Biography

The most common forms of life writing are biography, autobiography, and memoir. These forms are familiar to most readers and the conventions of each have become common knowledge, so much so that most would be able to identify a form simply by examining the text of a book. This is not to say that such works are formulaic, for many memoirs and biographies are wonderfully innovative and original. Even within the structure of what seems to be a strict set of requirements to qualify as a work of these forms, many of them are examples of how language, presentation, or cultural input may elevate them to genius. There are also some such works that manage to defy a neat classification as either memoir or biography. These pieces of life writing are a sort of hybrid within the genre, existing somewhere in between the two forms and borrowing the customs and conventions of both. One such form is the biography that becomes memoir, a class of its own within life writing that does not have its own title and yet exists in not insignificant numbers. If life writing can be thought of as another spectrum with
biography at one end and memoir at the opposite end, works of this type would appear in the center.

Biographical memoirs begin as biographies before undergoing a transformation. Whether intended from the outset of a biographical venture, the decision of an author to incorporate him or herself into the narrative is just that, a decision. That decision is an important one because it takes the biography outside of its appointed boundaries. If a biography begins incorporating the voice of the writer, it runs the risk of being perceived as an overt opinion piece. Readers of biography do not seek out the genre for overt opinion; they want an interpretation of a life, but one that does not seem like an opinion piece. To insert oneself into a biography risks dismissal. While the gamble is dangerous, its rewards can be marvelous. Such is the case with A. J. A. Symons extraordinary book *The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography* (1934).

*The Quest for Corvo* is unique in several ways, as can be expected from the subtitle alone. Firstly, Symons begins his book in the first person, beginning with the origin story for the creation of said book. He makes the deliberate choice to begin the book with a story from his own life rather than a story from the life of his subject. Traditional, and perhaps tired, biographies begin with the beginning of a subject. The general format of traditional biography follows the life of a person from birth to death, offering the remaining details of a life to an author so that he or she may proceed in whatever style of biography is preferred. This framework can often seem overused, but it is accepted because it offers a neatly packages product with a clearly defined beginning and end. When this framework is discarded, it can be jarring to audiences. In beginning *Corvo* with a story about himself, Symons indicates that his experiment will not adhere to the tenets of traditional biography.
In another departure from most biographies, Symons makes immediately clear his admiration and fascination for his subject, Frederick Rolfe. After explaining how he came to know of Rolfe through a respected friend and lover of obscure writers, he details his first interaction with Rolfe’s writing on the novel Hadrian the Seventh. Of the book he writes, “I felt that interior stir with which we all recognize a transforming new experience. As soon as I finished the story I read it through again, only to find my first impression enhanced. It seemed to me then, it seems to me still, one of the most extraordinary achievements in English literature: a minor achievement, doubtless, but nevertheless a feat of writing difficult to parallel; original, witty, obviously the work of a born man of letters, full of masterly phrases and scenes, almost flabbergasting in its revelation of a vivid and profoundly unusual personality.”

This gushing review appears on page six of Symons book. Any semblance of objectivity is immediately thrown aside and the book is able to succeed precisely because of that discarding. Biographies that feign objectivity and are found to be subjective can be discredited, but a biography in which the author makes known his or opinion circumvents that issue. Admission of bias allows a biography to be read within the established confines of that bias and, as such, it can make statements that might otherwise be looked upon with suspicion. Establishing a bias early on can actually be liberating for biographers.

Symons goes on to describe his quest for the details of Rolfe’s life (Rolfe asserted that he had been granted the title of Baron Corvo), offering a biography of the man interlaced with the author’s methods of procurement of those biographical facts. The book progresses in much the way a detective novel progresses through mysteries and problems. The chapters are themselves seemingly out of a mystery novel with titles such as “The Problem,” “The Clues,” “The End of

the Quest,” and more of the like. Symons’ chapters alternate between focus on Rolfe’s life and Symons’ own journey in procuring those stories. The differences in Symons’ style between these two focus points is clear and serves as a study on how memory affects writing. *The Quest for Corvo* is an especially interesting case study for memory in life writing because it contains elements of both biography and memoir. The differences between Symons’ stylistic choices for biographical writing and memoir writing can be found in the text. His biographical notes are full of what seems to be hyperbolic reviews of character and circumstances revolving around Rolfe.

As mentioned earlier, Symons’ favorable opinion of Rolfe is evident and shines through in his frequent defense of Rolfe’s life as that of a genius, eccentric, and affable scoundrel. He clearly delights in the ordeals of the search for such an interesting and complex figure, a delight which is reflected in the style of biographical writing. Symons’ memoir writing has a slightly more clinical style in which he lays out his methods of discovery in a manner reminiscent of a detective novel. This is unsurprising as the book details the “quest” of its title, but it is highly unusual in a biography. Despite the unorthodox approach, the mystery style of writing creates a sense of narrative that compels the reader to continue on after each chapter. It is remarkable how a shift towards narrative tone may affect a genre that can often become bogged down in tedium and bland prose. A more subtle underlying shift is one from focusing on the memories of a subject to focusing on those of the biographer. In making the work equal parts biography and memoir and incorporating the pacing of a mystery novel, Symons cleverly subverts the need for accuracy in the accounts of his subject. With the focus shifted to the more compelling mystery component of the work, the memory requirements lie within the portion of text that has already been accepted as a work of opinion. It is an ingenious method of manipulating the use of memory through subversion of genre forms. Symons’ inventive use of his memoir elevates the
text from a simple exploration of a lesser known writer into an exploration of biography. *The Quest for Corvo* is an important text in the canon of life writing.

A similarly unique piece of life writing is Art Spiegelman’s groundbreaking graphic novel *Maus* (1986). The basic form of *Maus* is very similar to that of *Corvo*; it is a biography that also incorporates the memoirs of the author. The first surprise of the *Maus* is that the graphic novel genre itself contains the term novel, a form of narrative fiction, and Spiegelman’s publication, graphic novels were almost always fictional stories. *Maus* is a non-fiction biography of Spiegelman’s father Vladek and his experiences as a Jewish prisoner of the Nazis during World War II. To create such a work within a genre not only known for fictitious narrative but also one based on visual art was unprecedented and marked a shift in the way life writing could be presented. The visuals of the book are arresting as Spiegelman depicts Jews as mice, Poles as pigs, and Nazis as cats. It is a striking method of representation. While the use of the graphic novel form for biography is unique, it serves the same function as the mystery aspects of *Corvo*. The visuals offer another unique component where readers may place their focus. This too creates a compelling readability in the story.

The memoir component of *Maus* is especially unconventional for life writing in that the author is not only heard through the text, but is visually present on the page. The presence of a biographer through text can sometimes be hard to distinguish from the text applied to the book’s subject. Successful biographers are able to create distinctive tones for their own voice within a work about another person. Interestingly, Spiegelman illustrates the interactions with his father in the same way he illustrates his father’s memories. He does use alterations of his father’s words when depicting their shared scenes to note which story is taking place at the moment, but he does not use any method of visual differentiation between the two stories; Spiegelman is
depicted as a mouse just like his father and there is no color present. The lack of visual
differentiation is significant in that it serves as a binding agent between the separate stories. He
memories of two people are united through visual representation. In an article about history and
memory in *Maus*, Lisa Costello discusses the shared nature of memory in the text in a discussion
over concerns of Holocaust amnesia due to prevalence in popular culture. Of the Holocaust and
its place in modern thought she writes that *Maus*, “recontextualizes this history by addressing
such limits of representation, functioning as a unique form of Holocaust memorialization, which
elicits what I term ‘performative memorialization.’ Performative memorialization is a layered
memorial activity that performs in every Holocaust genre to create a temporally fluid, Bakhtinian
dialogic between the author and the subject (memory) and the event and the audience (history)
combating tendencies toward collective amnesia or foreclosure.”38 This is to say that the shared
memory format in *Maus* is a way of promoting collective remembrance. The visual bridges
created between the two stories in the graphic novel make it especially compelling and difficult
to forget.

The common questions regarding memory in life writing, concerning accuracy and bias,
are less urgent in *Maus* because of its circumvention of those question through its employment of
life writing genre hybridization. Its performative nature allows it to explore difficult memories
of the past and the memories formed extracting them from a subject simultaneously. Coupled
with the visualization of those stories via the tenets of the graphic novel genre, *Maus* is an
important and unique work that reestablishes the role of memory in life writing.

38 Lisa A. Costello, “History and Memory in a Dialogic of ‘Performative Memorialization’ in Art
Spiegelman’s ‘Maus: A Survivor’s Tale,’” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language
Life writing can be a uniquely difficult form of literature as it has complications that pertain exclusively to the genre, namely the issue of agency. The question of who has agency over the story of a life is a complex question exacerbated by numerous factors. Perhaps the biggest factor concerns the status of the subject of a story. Is the person about whom a story is to be told the exclusive owner of his or her memories? Does that person have the right to bar details of his or her life from publication? These questions center on the issue of ownership, but with item in question is as intangible as a memory there are no clear answers. Related questions that focus less on ownership instead center back on the issue associated with memory and validity. In cases of conflict, which memories are more valid, those found by a biographer or those of the subject? The science behind human memory clearly shows that memories of the past are highly subject to distortion and falsification. Memories of the self are especially prone to bias. In light of these truths, conflicting accounts of a similar memory become difficult to reconcile. Readers must therefore make choices on which story they deem most credible, or which one they find more entertaining to read and believe.

To delve into the subject of agency, *Maus* is again a fitting piece for examination. As mentioned earlier, it is the story of Vladek Spiegelman as told through his son Art Spiegelman. Because of the personal and intense nature of the story, one can easily wonder whether Vladek is comfortable sharing his story. Holocaust survivors sometimes do not wish to share their stories as they can be too painful. It can be uncomfortable for readers is such a situation because it often feels like an intrusion into someone’s private memory. That feeling is present in *Maus* but, uniquely, it is a concern that Spiegelman addresses directly in the graphic novel. Much of the memoir sections of the graphic novel are filled with depictions of Spiegelman trying to get more
stories from his father, who oftentimes seems hesitant to share. Spiegelman recognizes the discomfort created by that dynamic and instead of hiding or masking the situation, he includes it in the story.

An example can be found in an exchange between Spiegelman and his father not about the Holocaust, but one in which Vladek has just told his son about a situation he had with an old girlfriend while still in Poland. After telling the story he asks his son not to publish it in the following exchange: “‘But this what I just told you – about Lucia and so – I don’t think you should write this in your book.’ ‘WHAT? Why not?’ ‘It had nothing to do with Hitler, with the Holocaust!’ ‘But Pop – it’s great material. It makes everything more real – more human. I want to tell your story, the way it really happened.’ ‘But this isn’t so proper, so respectful… I can tell you other stories, but such private things, I don’t want you should mention.’ ‘Okay, okay – I promise.’”

Much in the way that Symons alleviates the problems of bias through explicit admission of bias, Spiegelman hopes to alleviate the problem of agency by explicitly showing that his father wished him not to publish certain stories and yet he did anyway. His hope is that despite any misgiving the audience may have about the intrusion into Vladek’s personal memories, readers will share his view that the story is worth the transgression. Spiegelman is placing the success of his graphic novel on the assumption that readers will choose story over agency and accept that it is necessary to go against Vladek’s wishes.

The discussion of Maus leads neatly into questions of sanctioned and unsanctioned biographies. Historically, famous men and women are written about after their deaths. In the modern era, biographies are written about people living and dead. In his book Testamentary Acts, Michael Millgate notes that modern biographies of living persons are often written about

those who have been seemingly forgotten by the culture at large, only to have a resurgence in popularity in their later years of life. He writes, “there can be no doubt that simple survival can, in certain circumstances, create a public interest in those who might otherwise be found uninteresting – that obscure or forgotten figures, once ‘discovered’ to still be alive, can receive in old age an attention unprecedented during their earlier years. But if longevity can bring with it a new availability to fame, it can also – as [Thomas] Hardy himself remarked – provide some writers the opportunity to ‘finish their job.’”

The comment by Thomas Hardy posits that the rediscovery of writers in old age often prompts them to achieve new heights as they embrace a new style in their old age. It is during that time that many authors begin compilations of their work or, if of the foresight and desire, begin the search for a preferred and official biographer.

While it appears reasonable that sanctioned biographies should occur before a person’s death, the estate of a person often sanctions the work and hires an official biographer. Sanctioned biographies are interesting because the authors are often given preferential treatment regarding source material. Exclusive access to materials allows selected biographers to form a more complete profile of an individual, but the special access may not be entirely beneficial to the work. In selecting an official biographer, an individual or an estate is in control of the available materials. The owner of the materials may not have the ability to control the tone of a biography, but is able to control the flow of information to the writer. An estate may decide that certain documents would not be flattering to a subject and choose to withhold them from a biographer, instead providing materials that could paint that person in an altogether different light. In this way subjects are able to indirectly shape the biography. While unsanctioned biographers may not have access to all available materials on a subject, they would be in control

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of the information they did possess and could theoretically shape the work in any way they deemed best. This reality again forces to the fore questions of memory. The fact that memories may be carefully selected for presentation and distribution in order to cultivate a particular image devalues the importance of those memories. It is in this way that ignorance of some facts may actually offer more insights into a mind or a more creative examination of a life than the so-called exclusive access of sanctioned biographers.

There are some biographers who run into several hindrances in pursuit of a subject. Many of these cases are born from difficulties with subjects, especially those alive at the time of the writing or publication. Ian Hamilton attempted a biography of the reclusive American author J.D. Salinger. There had been several earlier attempts by respected biographers and publishers to publish his story, all unsuccessful in their attempts to woo Salinger into cooperation. Hamilton, however, did not have a conventional biography in mind. On the second page of what would eventually be the result of a years-long ordeal, he describes a calculated pursuit of Salinger that would result in a memoir biography hybrid. “I had it in mind not to attempt a conventional biography—that would have been impossible—but a kind of *Quest for Corvo*, with Salinger as quarry. According to my outline, the rebuffs I experienced would be as much a part of the action as the triumphs—indeed, it would not matter much if there were no triumphs. The idea—or one of the ideas—as to see what would happen if orthodox biographical procedures were to be applied to a subject who actively set himself to resist, and even to forestall, them.”

He went on to say, “It would be a biography, yes, but it would also be a semispoof in which the biographer would play a leading, sometimes comic, role.” Citing *The Quest for Corvo*, Hamilton immediately declares his initial ambitions toward an unconventional biography. He realized that

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42 Hamilton, 4.
the compelling components of such a book would be the sections that focused on the pursuit of a popular and mysterious figure, failings and all. He recognized that the desirable aspects of life writing reside not in memories themselves, but rather the pursuit and ensuing consequences of the pursuit.

After years of a very public dispute with Salinger, Hamilton was forced to omit material from Salinger’s personal letters that the writer had copyrighted upon learning of Hamilton’s intention to use them in his book. In the end, Hamilton published an account of his attempted biography memoir hybrid and ensuing legal battle with Salinger called *In Search of J.D. Salinger*. Once again, the issue of agency is the one with which the audience must grapple when deciding if the book will be accepted for what it is or rejected as an invasion of a life that wishes to be left undisturbed. Salinger had been known to feel that his biography be written only after his death and Hamilton disagreed, playing out a much larger debate about the rights to memories. The feud between Hamilton and Salinger is further proof that there is no way to settle that debate, save for audiences to judge for themselves which side they will take. The issues of agency in life writing are wide-ranging and complex, offering few answers or certainties. It is solely the reader who may determine who has agency over a life.

**Conclusions**

The unifying core of this paper is the state of human memory and its place in life writing. The science of memory has reached consensus in several fields of study on the matter and yet the disparity between scientific and general understanding remain greatly mismatched. With this lack of understanding serving as the baseline for a majority of people, the resulting ramifications for the literary genre of life writing are wide ranging. The place of memory in the genre is
exceedingly complex even when the current scientific state of memory is understood. With the knowledge of memory’s high levels of fallibility, the very questions of what makes a biography a biography or a memoir a memoir become difficult to answer. If memories cannot be trusted, are readers simply to take all works within the field as narratives that may or may not contain truths? And what to make of even more complicated sub genres within the field? Life writing hybrids circumvent certain problems that memory poses through clever and innovative techniques as seen in works such as *The Quest for Corvo* and *Maus*, but they do not solve them. All of these difficulties are magnified yet again when the rights of the people involved in the stories come into question. It is easy to forget the authors and subjects of these entertaining and exciting stories are individuals just as anyone else, with a multitude of motivations and desires from the genre. People must set their own priorities when reading life writing; they must decide if their rights and needs as a reading audience in search of meaningful literature outweigh those of the individuals in question. Agency is not universally agreed upon and can only be defined by oneself. People must decide who owns memories and how they may be utilized. This pursuit of the role of memory in life writing is perhaps a futile one, for it seems to have raised as many questions or more than it has answered, leading me to the final conclusion that to understand the role of memory in life writing is to understand that it cannot be defined.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


