

Losing Ourselves

The Burden of Consciousness in the writings of Jenny Diski

By Doris McIlwain

Abstract

It is not only Adam Phillips, as contemporary philosopher of happiness who thinks the unexamined life has its appeal. Jenny Diski's recent fiction and autobiography are dark celebrations of a retreat from connection to others and from conscious awareness. Yet the ambivalence about finding out more and a twining of the pain and impossibility of 'truth' belie her fearless approach to a personal past. In her fiction she brings a monstrous tenderness out from the shadows in her yearning for the inanimate, and in the longing for a romantic implosion in nature or in tortured relationships. A sense of personal monstrosity arises in her repudiation of all connection with the body of her mother borne in the personal, though fictional vision of bearing a decorticate child. Her autobiography takes a more measured approach to losing oneself, through an evocation of an alignment of consciousness awareness, precluding regret and anticipation in the immersion in the sensory experience of the moment. The way in which this autobiographical work amasses themes repeated and prominent in the fictional writings provides an opportunity for us to explore the different kinds of tellings of the past represented by autobiography and psychoanalysis. The way that autobiography detours the past through the body of another, namely the reader is compared to the psychoanalytic telling of the past where the analyst is a more 'catastrophic reader', alert to the possibility that a seamless narrative may in fact function as a defensive screen for darker possibilities. Though it hard to imagine darker possibilities than those Diski presents us with in her writings, Adam Phillips suggests that there is some kind of reading which the autobiographer is trying to avoid. I suggest that there is inevitably some kind of reading awry to be countenanced in detouring one's past or insights through the body of another, reader or analyst. Diski's flight to Antarctica, to whiteness, blank and void, when the possibility emerges of her mother's existence intruding into her life again, makes me read an urgency into her lack of knowledge regarding her mother's existence; makes me read against the grain of her expressed delight and contentment at such unknowingness. Perhaps we risk only the tellings and readings we can bear.

Jenny Diski is an author, journalist and regular contributor to the *London Review of Books*. She was born in 1947.

'out of whose womb came the ice?

The Book of Job (Skating to Antarctica, 1997 p139)

Two beginnings

Two beginnings, why not, we can have as many as we like in telling stories.

Whiteness, stillness, the unobserved and the unwitnessed. This is avowedly what Diski wants. And yet she takes us with her, even there, through her autobiographical novel, *Skating to Antarctica*.

An image rises up within me of this Frankensteinian creature taking flight across the white wastes because those who bore it could not accord it proper feeling or humanity, because perhaps, they were uncertain of the basis for their own.

Proper feelings and Monstrous humanity

Of her mother in *Skating to Antarctica* Diski says; 'I know that she thought that having a child guaranteed that she would be loved. That was what she found so unnatural and unsatisfactory about me....she would sometimes say 'I have to love you, you are my daughter' (1997, pg205). Over the past 30 years when asked about her parents, Jenny Diski says she would say; my father died in 1966, and I haven't seen my mother since then.

[In her words]

'Often, incongruously to my mind, they would subsequently ask if she is still alive. "I don't know" I would reply, because I didn't.'

'But don't you want to know?'

'No.'

'You must,'...

'You must find it very disturbing.'

'No, I find it delightful.' (1997, pp20-21)

Finding no 'seismic vault' waiting to open up, rather a contentment with her lack of contact with her mother, she notes psychoanalysis' ready answer to this - how could she investigate her own unconscious..."How can I possibly know what I don't know I know? There's no argument against this one, " (p21).

When her teenage daughter Chloe asks if she can discover whether the Mother is alive or dead, Diski says "yes'and takes a short cruise, to Antarctica and takes us with her.

There is a disjunction between avowed emotion and action here. The delight and contentment of not knowing has a telling urgency. She actively desires the continuance of not knowing and this is expressed in her flight to a geographic oblivion. Yet the negation of any affect other than the mildly positive concerning her ignorance of her mother's existence has left her (and us) with many clues as to the masked intensity of her feelings. There are many ways of coming to know what one does not currently know that one knows. There is evidence which can be sought, not merely a cozy and unassailable unfalsifiability, which she alleges to characterize psychoanalysis regarding the causal influence of processes which nonetheless escape introspective awareness.

One aim of this paper is to explore autobiography and psychoanalysis as alternate ways of approaching recollection of the past, and more informally to look at the forms of repetition in Diski's writings which condense fictional characters and themes with more autobiographical concerns. Most notably she takes us on an exploration of characters with an almost monstrous absence of feeling, many of whom are engaged

in a search for such order and stimulation-free environments as to provide an oblivion of the present. For many characters the interpersonal world is fracas of terror, where compelling desires stray and entangle them but offer little connection.

Two major themes relevant to consciousness emerge and are explored: interpersonally shared conscious recollection is embraced as a way of halting the repetition of past conflicts, of freeing oneself of the tediously familiar troubles of the past which re-erupt in ever-new, ever-similar guises, and secondly, the desirability of practising 'conscious alignment' (Epstein, 1995) as a way of inhabiting fully the present moment, of precluding anticipation, regret and consciousness of self-as-knower. These themes link to psychoanalytic endeavour broadly, and Buddhist practices of 'bare attention' respectively. Tracing links between these two traditions is beyond the scope of this paper.

The autobiographical portrayal of the signature themes demands a certain kind of reading, in that, unlike the fictional works, it includes powerful attempts at verification of the truth of the memories as veridical recollections of real events. The demand addressed to the reader to read a personal account as compellingly true is at odds with portrayals in her works of a quite sophisticated, constructivist theory of memory and of a fashionably relativized notion 'truth' and an insistence on the truth of fiction. I read this as a strong attempt to preclude a catastrophic reading of her autobiography, that is, a reading which views her story as a motivated account, as a personal narrative that functions as 'a protective screen' (Kris, 1956, p 653). Diski, it seems, needs allies against the past, and eschews psychoanalysis as an option for the transformation of experience.

Remembering to forget

Psychoanalysis is a kind of remembering that makes forgetting possible, says Adam Phillips (1994). But what of autobiography? What kind of remembering is this?

I remember exhibits from a burial mound in the British Museum, from somewhere Arctic, the Ur collection. The permafrost had been let in by a thief which meant that even the most fragile of substances; hair and fragments of fabric, had survived centuries.

As with novels, autobiography has a life of its own. The book becomes a public persona which marks one more deeply with the events of the past. The nature of its reception cannot be controlled. Diski's writing, while perhaps an attempt to distance her from the pain of the past, and tell a 'proper story' (1997, p154) that encapsulates all that occurred so that she can in a sense forget it, ironically leads to a form of preservation of the past. Under the guise of fiction, Diski steals from her own past to give us the fragile bodies of her characters, their pain and the very evident defensive toughness against that pain. They have a mantle of self-sufficiency in isolation that is always undone by the intrusion of more or less symptomatic others, and by the terror of desire and need. She peoples her books with split off fragments of herself and the links between her fiction and her autobiography are so powerful as to leave the reader with a sense of *deja vu* far stronger than with Duras' *The Lover*.. It is more than intertextual reference that Diski practices. It is as if the characters are not only kin, but inbred, and the claustrophobia builds like a projective identification as we read her fiction, until, in her autobiography we are told of the interminable time she spent locked by her mother in the dark cupboard under the stairs, told of the mother's intrusion; 'surely its alright for me to fondle my little girl', whispered as the mother abuses her. Finally the 'real' Diski, and the many fictional characters who enact this aspect of her past, have to sever contact; jettison the stone that would have drowned them. Yet, despite the eloquent contextualization and justification of this break, via

the repetition and the repeated justification, there is a sense of personal monstrosity that comes through in her writings testifying to the felt extremity of this cut off.

What do **you** think she seems to say? Would you have stayed? How could you?

She is inescapably still a daughter, granted one without a sense of obligation to the mother; neither gratitude nor reparation. Yet her negation of the connection to her mother fails because the rupture of that desire has left her with so much work to do; in part to understand how she could have survived when what she experienced had been hardly good enough, and to convince us that, really, there is no feeling left.

Peopling a world with the Monstrously unfeeling

One senses from her extremely equanimous characters what it does to the range of emotions we can feel when we've been damaged by events. Her characters, while explicitly monstrously limited in their capacity for empathy, are nonetheless able to sense the needs of others, the better to exploit them it seems, in truly charming Machiavellian fashion. But do the characters truly grasp the mentality of others? Is Diski aware of and comfortable with individual mental difference, or does the clone-like repetition of self that one sees in her characters hint at a kind of social autism? How safe was it for the young Jennifer to come to know the mental states of others, to form a theory of mind of others, when part of those states entailed a hostile condemnation of her, as well as at times a complete overlooking of her? She was the electron which fired across the synaptic gap between the two parents as they grasped her quim and sent her scurrying back, to and fro, like a pinball in a perverse triangle that had collapsed to a line, excluding the possibility of her as desiring subject, all the while stirring her desire, (see Diski, 1997).

Diski turned me into fake analyst. I listened to her voices, sifted and held, and many themes emerged, intertextually linked, the worlds of her books all interconnected, but the characters nonetheless estranged, despairing and hauntingly similar from book to book. All her characters jar with the ordinary assumptions in us, with the taken-for-granted of our epoch. Her difference is monstrous, and she knowingly visits it upon us.

There is a celebration of the machine-like, oblivion, a sinking into the inanimate - precision as a way of focusing the mind elsewhere. In *'Like Mother'* she describes a dancer...her immobile body...her impassive face...

"It was if she had stripped away her skin to expose the mechanism of movement itself...the workings of the machine. She presented a force of energy in a way that none of the other dancers had, but there was nothing human in her dance. Her eyes were open, but blind to the external world. They stared ahead of her but the sight was focussed inwards, perceiving only her internal balance. When she arrived at a motionless body she moved with the natural malevolence of pure energy. There was none of the childlike triumph of life that the other dancers conveyed, only pure movement vanquishing stillness. When her own stillness returned there was no sense of loss, no illogical sorrow, as there had been with the others when they sank back into their deathlike trance. Her return to stillness was shocking for its coldness, nothing more than an abstract contradiction of movement. There was no loss, only transformation from one condition to its antithesis," (1988, p148-149).

There is a death drive towards a state where memory is impossible. This 'sublime of forgetting' (Phillips, 1994) is a constant presence in Diski's novels. Whiteness and a lack of stimulation are deeply desired. Of penguins in Antarctica Diski notes:

'this timeless standing, unwitnessed, unwitnessing, that we were interrupting, though only barely...Antarctica...unseen, unwitnessed, cycling through its two seasons' (1997, pg 169).

There are two notions here. One is of a state where memory is impossible, which is a reversion to an inanimate or insentient state. The other is of a precision of consciousness as a way of focussing the mind, or of aligning consciousness to exclude past, future, and self as knower(s). In the latter state, one is conscious only of the object present to the senses; consciousness becomes a way of losing ourselves, (see fig 1). Epstein (1995) notes "As difficult as remembering the forgotten past might be, it is more difficult to align our awareness with our actual present-tense experience." (p166)

Diski embraces, at times, what many have opted for in preference to psychoanalysis, the kind of meditative 'bare attention' that in Eastern spiritual traditions is seen as conducive to enlightenment. Her characters' focus on whiteness and order in her earlier novels is portrayed by her as symptomatic escape. There is something more released and meditative in her portrayal of her own viewing of the horizon and the whiteness of the icebergs on the way to Antarctica. It is as if Diski seeks and at times glimpses a conscious appreciation of the present, which excludes regret and apprehension. The way she faces the thoughts about her mother and the emotions that arise are reminiscent of Epstein's portrayal of bare attention: "the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us at successive moments of perception" (p110). This kind of attention, Epstein suggests obviates self-consciousness "allowing things to speak for themselves as if seen for the first time...". Within the Tibetan tradition he notes that this is referred to as the 'spy consciousness' that observes from the corners of the mind' (pg 123).

A cultivation of present-centred awareness and a celebration of the inanimate, the unobserving and unobserved are both portrayed by Diski as desirable and as ways of losing the burdens of oneself and of consciousness.

Stilling the reader

In approaching her writing it is we as readers who are fixed and stilled by the scenarios she parades before us. There is a desire for perspectivelessness: no drives to do the knowing, no desire present to render partial and motivated one's picture of things, none of the perspective of a motivated account, none of the pain of sentience, of the external world impinging.

She tells of a decorticate baby willingly borne by a full-knowing mother. The child has water where the cerebral hemispheres should be. The child is an embodied but unconscious narrator - a voice of the vatic, with a supernatural rightness- called Nony (for nonentity). The title: *Like Mother*.

"The consultant switched on a torch. Frances didn't move a muscle. The beam from the torch glowed through the baby's translucent skull and lit up the limpid, sightless blue eyes like a Hallowe'en pumpkin...from the eyes poured cold bright beams as the light that was trapped and softened inside the watery skull found an exit." (p12)

Later Frances whispers conspiratorially to her "blind, deaf and terminal baby. We're very lucky, you and I. We won't ever be a disappointment to each other' (p15).

Her longing for the inanimate state, for a lack of sentience results at times in an almost Buddhist vision of the interconnectedness of all things, more, a panpsychism. If as human I can be as desireless as the inanimate, then why can say, a house, not sigh and cry with the burden of the tears of its occupants?

In '*Happily Ever After*' there is a scene between a 6 year old, Divya (living with her mother who is so despairing as to offer only use and neglect) and the dotty out-of-print 68 year old writer, Daphne Drummond, who has just found an inordinate measure of the most unlikely happiness in life. The two are making tea in the morning:

"Divya shrugged

'I don't like the crying'

'Who? Your mother?' Daphne asked cautiously.

'No, the house.'....

Being pursued on the topic, the character Daphne speaks of her repeated and prolonged enclosure in that very cupboard under the stairs by her depressed mother. She has by chance come back to live in the same house where she lived with her own neglectful mother. Daphne cautiously suggests the origin of the ghostly crying: 'Perhaps things soak up very strong feelings from people.' (p164-165).

The monstrosity that Diski portrays hinges on her characters' failure to show proper feelings, and certain unlikely continuances in courses of action (like the pregnancy in '*Like Mother*'). The sado-masochistic relationship endures in *Nothing Natural*, despite Karen's knowledge that the man does in fact go outside of the S & M relationship to rape a child. This is understood by Karen who notes:

"The fatal flaw in sado-masochism, in dominance and submission plays, lies in the willingness of the victim. The last thing a sadist needs is a masochist; the one person who cannot rape a masochist is the chosen sadist. They can collude in the pretence that one is wholly dominant, the other submissive, but the permission each gives the other denies the simplicity of their roles...her willingness to be beaten and overwhelmed gave her, paradoxically a power over Joshua....her acceptance of him denied him what he really wanted - to give real pain, to destroy."

Desire is portrayed as a dangerous thing. In a portrayal of a Gothic, drug-filled period of a character's life, the woman describes being taught by others to treat sex like a cup of poison. In *Rainforest* the same sadistic man (it seems) from *Nothing Natural*, Jo, comes to the jungle and questions the mental order of the scientist's sampling of vegetation until she degenerates into obsessive replotting of the transects, never being sure that she has covered everything, is giving a true representation of the welter of steamy life. And this we sense is the plight of the autobiographer, and our plight too.

Having it boths ways concerning truth and realism

It's odd to find here, in Diski's fictional writings and in her autobiography an obsession with truth, albeit linked with a complicated conception of the same. Daphne Drummond(a character in *Happily Ever After*) says - 'fiction, always fiction, how else can I tell the truth'? Diski also has a sophisticated, contemporary notion of memory. It isn't localized, is constructed and interesting in its unreliability. Neither of these positions regarding truth and memory expounded in her writing are permitted to us as readers of her autobiography.

Memory for Diski is either dotted all over the brain, or it doesn't reside anywhere, except in the remembering itself, when it is recreated from the bits of experience stored around the brain. It is continually created, a story told and retold. It's utterly unreliable because of the jigsaw like assembly, but it is not false in the sense of wilfully bad just 'excitingly corrupt in its inclination to make a proper story of the past'. But a photo she says has something essential gone, making the experience more rather than less remote. And this is odd given her delight in a perspectiveless rendering.

The Catastrophic Reader

Diski turned me into a fake analyst because in *Skating to Antarctica* I find a woman autobiographically obsessed, drawing disconcertingly from her past the themes which, as reader, I had distilled from her fiction. It is too easy. I am left with the question, is it then, a screen? And this seems to be her biggest fear, that as readers we will not take her at her word. We will not share her view of her mother as intolerable. We will say, 'Snap out of it! It wasn't so bad'. Or perhaps that we will say, 'Well if your mother's depression and wierdness did all this to you, what chance has Chloe? (her daughter)" Adam Phillip's says we might ask of autobiography 'who is its implied, ideal reader and what is the catastrophic reading it is trying to avert?' (Phillips, 1994, p71).

Diski's ideal reader is one who is a realist about the past, and has a veridical theory of memory, who believes in the teller, the tale as told, and 'not in the truth of the untold tale' (Phillipa, 1994). She wishes us to believe in the truth of her autobiography and of the suffering evocatively portrayed in her fiction. Her insistence on the truth of her construction of her own past is revealed in her attempts to revisit the real events. She seeks out and interviews in a group her childhood neighbours, verifying that little Jennifer had suffered the intolerable, had existed, was sweet. She cannot consciously access that part of herself she says. All this verification set in motion because her own daughter has decided that she wants to find Jenny's mother; at least to establish her death. And Diski says, yes, and goes to Antarctica.

So the initial satisfaction of finding an answering emphasis on the themes derived from my reading evaporated into a confusion of the nature of her account: I was left with this problem of the screen and the paradox of intense analysis of the past, of taking oneself as one's own object of inquiry, when it is oblivion that is coveted, and a detailed baring of pain to a wide audience when the break that she has made from her mother has already made her feel monstrous, ashamed and exposed.

The analyst as catastrophic reader

Adam Phillips (1994) suggests that those who want to continue misleading themselves about the past write autobiographies. He describes the screen memory as a 'waking dream of the past', a 'disguised representation of unconscious desire', a 'memory both dream and symptom'. He says that psychoanalysis can't put us closer to the truth, but by expanding our genres of self-telling, it can add to our ways of thinking about the past, by looking at a more incoherent fluency, by making gaps as much as links, by 'becoming a bad story teller and making nonsense of one's life'. For Phillips, it is not psychoanalysis but autobiography which traps us in never knowing what we don't know. Phillips suggests that analysis is central to 'making recovery of the past possible, the past that is frozen in repetition' (p69). Without psychoanalytic interpretation there is no personal history, he says, only its concealment.

Diski wants to do it by herself. Her novels, certainly, are filled with repetitive themes and characters. Her past is a frozen past. Yet Diski has a vision of a freedom from repetition portrayed at the end of *Happily Ever After* in her description of the irrepressible, aged novelist Daphne Drummond:

"A small miracle had occurred in Daphne, her long unhappiness and fear had, against all the odds, uncoupled themselves from the moving engine of her life and been left behind on the tracks...Their nature had not changed; they were what they were - unhappiness and fear - but it was no longer necessary to travel inside them....If there was trouble up ahead, it would be new trouble, not simple repetition of the old" (p188-189).

Through her writing we see the pain of sentience, the wish for thinking to cease, as well as the impossibility of this, and anyway she notes, it is not desirable. We see both the burden of consciousness and sense the release it makes possible. Whether autobiography can match psychoanalysis as a process of detouring the past through another's body is an issue I raise, and leave each to choose the reader they can bear.

Recollection and refeeeling: the open window

If forgetting is a pretending to oneself that the past has no future, (Phillips, 1994) then consciously to remember in a way that permits forgetting is, yes, to bring things back into time again, to allow decay and change to kill off the past. Phillips puts his trust in psychoanalysis to achieve this. This 'killing off' of the past is a byproduct of conscious recollection which inevitably brings with it a recontextualization, through the articulation of the past with other, more recent events, and the fact that it is known by a knower changed by all that has been since. So, whether or not we include a reader or another person in our recollection, conscious reflection entails a looking askance and awry at the past. In this way, one can come to know what one does not know that one knows.

To know something consciously is not to change the original moment of knowing, (as Daphne notes, 'they were what they were'), but to change the effect it has on us now. Nothing is added to the original act of knowing, but something new is added to us. In this way, psychoanalysis comes down on the side of those contemporary cognitive scientists (see O'Brien & Opie, in press) who do not see consciousness as an epiphenomenon, but something that has causal impact, that changes the system in which it arises.

To change the past literally, as any good time travel sci fi buff knows, changes the present (what Terminator I gets right and the sequels fail on). This is a kind of reverse nachtraglichkeit. This literal change is not required (which is just as well when you think of it). The past can be left intact, and yet its finality altered by the *form* of its conscious recollection. One can therefore be both a realist about the past

(as Freud was) and yet allow that there are many tellings of that past which are possible (as Phillips does, and Freud, and many others like Mills, 1940). That there are many possible tellings is part of the picture if, as psychoanalysis does, we posit the knower as a unique, motivated, multiply knowing subject embedded in history and culture. One can also embrace the possibility that some tellings are more transformative than others.

That is why it is important to underscore the fact that there is more than conscious recollection required for the kind of forgetting that Adam Phillips has in mind, namely for escape from repetition and anguish. One needs a catastrophic reader, who will read against the grain of one's own narrative, who will undo the proper story by returning it to the author changed by the insights and bodily resonances the tale evokes. That's something I wish to explore more fully here. But before moving on, let's look more closely at conscious recollection.

While there are many ways for it to occur and nothing inevitable about its occurrence, the core of consciousness, for me, is that we do not merely know but know **that** we know. We can know that we know that we know, and so on into a non-vicious regress, limited only by our clarity to house the levels of knowing, (see fig. 2). And each time we are further removed from ourselves as we were in that brute relation of knowing. We as knowers are the subject term and we stand in relation to an object that consists in the parts of the world before us rendered salient by our desires which are current at the time, and our psychohistory, thus knowing is a relation; subject term to salience-structured object. Consciousness entails taking that first knowing as the object of a further knowing. As Freud put it: 'Consciousness as sense-organ for the perception of psychical qualities' (Freud, 1900, p776). We can either focus on the object, and lose ourselves as we were as knowers at that earlier Time 1, or focus on ourselves as knowers-at-time-1 and achieve a kind of self-consciousness.

Conscious perception or recollection thus permits us to reflect differently on the object of perception or memory, but also to reflect on the other term of the knowing relationship, namely ourselves as knowers. So, in these terms, self-consciousness and conscious reflection on a state of affairs both operate at the same level (which is a position adopted by Sartre). This begs the question of what determines the direction of attention, a small telos which even Freud allowed himself (Freud, 1900).

What consciousness adds to us as persons, and what leads many people to think erroneously that it entails some kind of free will, is that a gap opens in what must be, in what is past, like a freedom glancing in with Sisyphus's ironic stance. From having to feel only the feelings we had then (and perhaps couldn't afford to express then) we suddenly look askance at the past and at our embedded person in that knowing moment. This brings the possibility of opening a window on that fusty finality, and of seeing and feeling afresh. The possibility of new emotions are a concomitant of consciousness, not constitutive of it. Is this the something more than conscious reflection which brings about the kind of remembering that allows us to forget? Conscious reflection on the past permits a triangulation of knowers; we as knower then in our past, and we as knowers now, holding in awareness that other knower. We can apprehend knower and event, holding the experience with different feelings now and the feelings that were or could not be then. The glancing light in is the possibility simultaneously to explore the feeling then in the context of the feeling now. But perhaps for the most transformative recollection there is more to it than that. It also requires another.

What struck me about Diski's writings when I first found them was the paradox of a woman writing deeply and with excoriating clarity about issues that she patently wanted to escape and forget. Certainly they were memories that she wanted to have

depleted of their power so that 'the buck stops here', so that the damage she was sensitive to and endured at the hands of her mother was something that was not passed on. To understand it, and speak it and share it, and explore it was almost intrinsic to stopping the buck - stopping the repetition that is prevalent in her fiction. Rather she sought to replace fictional repetition with a story contextualized in the past and addressed to another who could hold her story. Why the sharing of autobiography rather than analysis?

Detouring the past through another's body: demand and the reader of autobiography

Diski wanted those memories deprived of their power. However, especially in published autobiographical remembering the past has a future, most definitely, in that events and characters are set free within the readers. It is to detour the past through another body, much as we might become conscious of the occurrence of a repressed thought by being able to access proprioceptively the bodily responses that are part of it. The effects of it run out through the periphery of our body and we come to know that we know. In the case of autobiography (and analysis) the periphery includes others. It is a reaching out to others. It is an assimilation perhaps of another to one's own projects in relation to the past, and to the expansion of one's subjectivity.

Autobiography escapes the relationship of analysis, and the memories escape that form of interpretation. I don't think this is accidental for Diski. Perhaps it is in autobiography that she hopes to detour her vision of herself through us the readers, and to receive back somehow in the telling a grasp of what she has been.

What do you think she seems to say? Would you have stayed? How could you? We are stilled and constrained as readers. We know well what would be a catastrophic reading for the writer. The seams visible in this proper story, the embracing of memory as construction on the one hand, and the quest for verification on the other do not necessarily mean the story is a screen, but they do point the way to what she doesn't know she knows. Perhaps annal-like details can be verified, but the narrative, the 'account' given of the past can change depending on where we are standing (Bruner, 1993). Australian painter Charles Blackman said drawing is the courage to throw a line round our dreams. Perhaps autobiography is like that, and for some people the most transformative stories are where they can become authors of their own lives.

Consciousness has been both marker of our humanity and epiphenomenon. It places us precariously and spry in time. We move around our many pasts, and anticipate things that may never be, and some take this relation to time that consciousness affords us as what sets us apart from the animals. Animals can anticipate the next meal or a sleek caress, but they don't give evidence that we at least can read, of regret. Viewed as epiphenomenon, as it was by some philosophers in Freud's time and in some of contemporary cognitive science (albeit reluctantly) consciousness is nothing but an acausal piece of flummery. Yes it may allow new qualities to emerge, but revel in these qualia-like byproducts as we may, they are seen as nothing more than acausal byproducts of the running off of a programme of embodied neural pathways of facilitation or inhibition, structured by experience.

For me, the core of consciousness is that we do not merely know but know that we know. In conscious awareness the past and we ourselves are determined but less determinate. For what is added via that [conscious] reflection on the past is all that has been since, where we as knowers house a vast new landscape of desire, with the certainty that we survived.

Acknowledgements:

Warm thanks to Maria Hynes and to John Sutton for his rigorous enthusiasm.

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Fig 1 Bare attention or conscious awareness of the present

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Fig 2: Conscious Reflection (which may be of the past)

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