



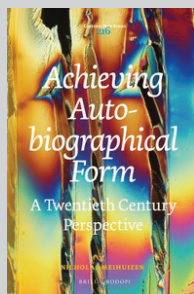
# The notion of autobiographical form redefined



## Book Title:

Achieving autobiographical form: A twentieth-century perspective

## Book Cover:



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## ISBN:

978-90-04-31103-9

## Publisher:

Brill, Leiden, the Netherlands, 2016, \$64.80\*

\*Book price at time of review

## Review Title:

The notion of autobiographical form redefined

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## How to cite this book review:

Snyman, E., 2017, 'The notion of autobiographical form redefined', *Literator* 38(1), a1437. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v38i1.1437>

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*Achieving Autobiographical Form* is a scholarly study of a selection of autobiographical works, published during the 20th and early 21st centuries, aiming to bring a new perspective on the carefully crafted nature of such texts. The authors under consideration are William Butler Yeats (Irish), Joseph Conrad, Martin Amis, Frank Kermode, Andrew Motion (all British), Richard Murphy (Anglo-Irish), Roy Campbell and J.M. Coetzee (both South African).

Meihuizen's reading of these works is informed by the main issues in contemporary theoretical debates on autobiographical forms of writing, such as the representation of the past versus the configuration of the past, the reflection of selfhood versus the creation of selfhood, the centred self versus the fragmented self and fact versus fiction.

The author emphasises the highly reflexive nature of these texts and convincingly argues that these are carefully crafted works of art of which the sum is always more than the parts. In other words, there is a Levinasian 'saying' that always exceeds the 'said'. This argument, one may add, is reminiscent of Roland Barthes's conviction about the multiplicity of meanings embedded in the structure of literary texts. Meihuizen, for his part, highlights the fact that every word in these texts is weighed and that their style also conveys a form of autobiographical truth.

The Introduction to *Achieving Autobiographical Form* defines the tenets of the author's concept of 'form' pertaining to autobiography. Meihuizen claims that the selected autobiographers, giving substance to their lives through writing, create works of art which have a 'formal significance peculiar to [themselves], differing from discursive prose, historical prose, or fiction, though [they] may contain elements of all of these' (p. 2). With this definition of autobiographical form, we are miles ahead of the conventional definition of the genre as the retrospective account a real person composes about the history of his or her own life in a form roughly based on that of conventional biography. Meihuizen's argument is that the unique form achieved by a carefully constructed autobiography is different from that of other genres, allowing a 'new form of being for the self' (p. 2).

The notion of purposeful crafting logically brings the author to the much debated issue of authorial sincerity and intention. Meihuizen accepts a degree of authorial intent which manifests itself in the artful shaping of a unique text which, he underscores, entertains complex relations to factual events. The author underlines that the 'saying' of the text can never be limited to fixed structures as it comprehends a dynamic, inexhaustible open-endedness (p. 17).

Chapter 1 offers a discussion on William Butler Yeats's *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, which starts off with the famous poet's 'nonchalant attitude towards fact' (p. 18). If factual correctness is less important, the emphasis is rather on the personal, subjective nature of Yeats's utterances regarding his childhood and specifically on the way they are presented in the text. The 'saying' overshadows and diminishes the importance of the 'said'.

What does the 'saying' involve? For Yeats, it means finding the correct way (style) to convey personal feeling in an authentic manner, devoid of conventions and clichés which would obscure the sincerity of feeling. Meihuizen explains that Yeats's stylisation of lived experience relies on an effort to render the past in an objective way through the use of, *inter alia*, Yeatsian masks or the self as an idea.

Finally, a sense of incompleteness characterises Yeats's sense of self, which also determines the form of his autobiographical writing. Consequently, the way he renders facts from his past is more revealing about the author than the facts themselves.

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Joseph Conrad's *A Personal Record* is treated in Chapter 2 of the book. It appears that Conrad is even less concerned about factual veracity than Yeats. '[W]here does the truth of a life lie?' (p. 51), asks Meihuizen in his defence of Conrad against his critics, especially as the writer deals with the facts of his life in an imaginative way, structured according to the principle of association. It seems to lie in a sort of inner truth and sincerity that reveals itself in the way the author builds out his selfhood during the process of writing, of which Meihuizen underlines the dynamic nature. As he puts it so strikingly:

I still maintain, however, that another focus for sincerity is present in [Conrad's] writing – a focus wherein the claims of truthful revelation are outweighed. It involves being sincere to the processes of memorial reconstruction that are based on association, which are in turn premised on an awareness of the heteroglossic nature of the 'saying'. (p. 61)

Thus, Philippe Lejeune's pact with the reader is altered: he or she must no more search for veracity in autobiographies, but rather appreciate the 'living personality' (p. 56) that emerges from the text, a text in which the author is indeed personally invested as far as the content and the form are concerned, albeit in a unconventional and unexpected way.

Meihuizen's reading of Martin Amis's *Experience* in Chapter 3 takes issue with other reviewers' critique of the work, namely, that Amis would be intentionally exploitative and self-promoting. Furthermore, he is accused of not being familiar enough with postmodernist techniques, a fact which allegedly reflects on his style. Meihuizen strives to refute these negative judgements on *Experience*. Yet again the accent falls on the conscious configuration of a life (as opposed to simply reflecting past experience), through 'parallels, mixed chronologies and juxtapositions' (p. 87) which are revelatory in themselves and, one must add, seem very understanding of postmodernist techniques.

As far as Amis's style is concerned, Meihuizen perceives of the book to be 'excitingly written, densely packed, intelligent and always alive' (p. 87). He argues that the heterogeneous material that forms part of the content of *Experience* ('quotations from other books, reported conversations, letters, footnotes, definitions from dictionaries, a Postscript, an Addendum, an Appendix' – p. 89) is carefully assembled. He adds that although these elements are 'complemented by Martin's own constructions' not altogether void of 'fictioneering' (p. 93 – a term coined by J.M. Coetzee), they nevertheless testify to a respect for truth as well as the intricate relationship between life and writing.

Frank Kermode's *Not Entitled: A Memoir* (discussed in Chapter 4) is another autobiographical text which, according to Meihuizen, achieves a unique form closely tied in with the author's life. The focus of the text seems conventional enough for an autobiography: it is about the author, his own

psychology, his consciousness, a confession of his own deep-seated feelings of inadequacy (of not being 'entitled'). The very sense of his own weaknesses coupled with a 'doubled awareness of the self' (p. 124) determines how he structures the account of his life and how he defines himself 'against others' (p. 121). Thus, it is not only the content that reveals aspects of the author's being: psychological reactions become part of what he selects to tell and how he patterns the content of his memoir. The structure of the text reveals a deep sense of being 'patterned' or determined as a person by feelings of inadequacy.

Chapter 5 deals with Andrew Motion's *In the Blood: A Memoir of My Childhood*. This text differs from the others already discussed in the book: Motion explicitly wants to represent his childhood, to transcribe his memories, to safeguard these in his memoir, as opposed to configuring them (p. 155). This is done through excellent writing, with a judicious choice of imagery that seems to come naturally to the author (p. 155) and never 'gives the lie to experience' (p. 159). According to Meihuizen, the quality of the writing could even bring the reader to suspend his disbelief and consider the point of 'literal truthfulness' as beside the point (p. 158). The author's fine reading of themes and passages in Motion's *Memoir of My Childhood* underscores that the writer's psychological confessions ring even more true than the content of the remembered events.

Chapter 6, the final chapter before the Conclusion, considers 'autobiographical moments' (p. 171) in the works of three authors who were or are either South African (Roy Campbell and J.M. Coetzee) or had connections with the country (Richard Murphy). In all three cases, the stylisation of the autobiographical matter reveals more about themselves than what they most likely are intended to share with their readers.

Meihuizen proposes a highly original reading of Roy Campbell's apparent disregard for factual truth. He draws on Lacan's notion of discourse components – which may also be conflicting – internalised by the subject, to explain the factual discrepancies in two accounts by Campbell of the same event. Should this argument be valid, then these contradictions might reveal conflicting psychological tendencies within Campbell's personality, rather than point to some sort of wilful deceit on his behalf.

As far as the last two authors are concerned, they both disclose something about themselves in an oblique way: Richard Murphy tellingly projects himself onto the philosopher Wittgenstein, whereas J.M. Coetzee's exploration of alternative personae of himself and Samuel Beckett and their hypothetical relationship testifies to the influence the real Beckett had on the real J.M. Coetzee (p. 210).

Meihuizen's concept of autobiographical form is indeed original. As he argues in the Introduction, each work he studied achieves a unique form, not by obeying to fixed generic conventions, but through highly artistic writing.



These forms are dynamic and 'emerge from within the complex of figurative and thematic demands of the works themselves, and are dependent on the predispositions of their various authors, who are themselves in a constant relation with the world around them and with the diverse pressures working on their ever-creative memories' (p. 1). The content of each chapter in *Achieving Autobiographical Form* illustrates the organic interplay of all the above elements in the individual works.

Moreover, the value of *Achieving Autobiographical Form* lies in the awareness that a careful reading of autobiographical texts is required from any reader and that autobiographical truth can be conveyed in many ways other than an effort to render the facts of an individual past in a truthful way. The author never fails to bring new insight to the works he analyses. His emphasis on the fact that good writing can also convey truth about an author is thought-provoking and well justified. Scholars of all forms of self-writing will benefit from these insights.