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THOMAS MCCONNELL

WRITING IT UP, WRITING IT DOWN

Abstract

The current trend in autobiography that is making ours an age of memoir has long historical roots. The trend presents a potential difficulty for contemporary literature as writers increasingly turn from the writing of fiction to the writing of memoir; we risk, as Milan Kundera puts it, “an age of universal deafness and lack of understanding” in this proliferation of voices competing for a limited audience of readers. This essay presents no solutions to that potentiality but it does explore some of the motives for autobiography.

Key words

Memoir; fiction; Milan Kundera; essay; autobiography; graphomania; eulogy

Not too many years ago a fellow writer, a colleague from graduate school days, drafted a novel that through a chain of friends made its way to a respected author from the southern United States who registered her opinion: In an age of memoir, the doyenne wondered, why fictionalize your experience? Why not write the real story as it happened to you? The younger writer considered, eventually took the advice. The subsequent memoir went on to be published to some acclaim.

We could frame my acquaintance’s choice this way: was it better to write the events up into fiction, as she did originally, or to write them down into memoir, as she ultimately did?

In the US writers seem more and more frequently to take this second option, which is how ours now qualifies as an age of memoir. The tendency is not confined to North America and has been going on for some time, as no less an expert in the examined life than Milan Kundera discerned more than a generation ago. In the midst of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* he uses a prompt from Goethe to meditate on the phenomenon Kundera calls “mass graphomania”:

“Is one man alive when others are alive?” Deep within Goethe’s query lies the secret of the writer’s creed. By writing books, the individual becomes a universe (we speak of the universe of Balzac, the universe of Chekhov, the universe of Kafka, do we not?). And since the principal quality of a universe is its uniqueness, the existence of another universe constitutes a threat to its very essence.

Two shoemakers can live together in perfect harmony (provided their shops are not on the same block). But once they start writing books on the lot of the shoemaker, they will begin to get in each other’s way; they will start to wonder, Is one shoemaker alive when others are alive? [...]

A person who writes books is either all (a single universe for himself and everyone else) or nothing. And since *all* will never be given to anyone, every one of us who writes books is *nothing*. Ignored, jealous, deeply wounded, we wish the death of our fellow man. In that respect we are all alike. [...]

The proliferation of mass graphomania among politicians, cab drivers, women on the delivery table, mistresses, murderers, criminals, prostitutes, police chiefs, doctors, and patients proves to me that every individual without exception bears a potential writer within himself and that all mankind has every right to rush out into the streets with a cry of “We are all writers!”

The reason is that everyone has trouble accepting the fact he will disappear unheard of and unnoticed in an indifferent universe, and everyone wants to make himself into a universe of words before it’s too late.

Once the writer in every individual comes to life (and that time is not far off), we are in for an age of universal deafness and lack of understanding.

(Kundera 105–106)

The close of Kundera’s diagnosis we can parse into its three interesting constituents. First, whether politician or cabbie we all have “every right” to proclaim ourselves writers. Second, the cause of this outpouring is inevitable mortality and subsequent oblivion, “the fact that he will disappear unheard of and unnoticed in an indifferent universe.” And third, once everyone begins rushing into the streets proclaiming not just his right to be a writer but shouting out his story too, when the potential writer in each of us becomes actual, the consequence is less communication, not more: “we are in for an age of universal deafness and lack of understanding.” In the age of memoir we work to erect a Tower of Babel.

I doubt Kundera foresaw Twitter but certainly he foreknew that technology would make raising the volume of our individual – and competitive – voices easier. With the internet and a laptop weighing half a kilo, or a palm device weighing far less, anyone can now foist his existence onto the rest of humanity through blogs, instant messaging, Facebook. MySpace impinges on and becomes everyone’s space. YouTube is actually more about Me. All because we want to be heard. We exist – and we don’t want to die. Or at least not die without notice.

None of this, however modern we believe it, is of course unprecedented. We are and have long been Kilroys proclaiming we are here. Graffiti reaching back

into antiquity is an example, for what is microblogging but a species of graffiti, a tweet but scratchings on a virtual wall?

This yearning for acknowledgment arises from an impulse toward the transcendent. Kundera's shoemakers turn to reflect on the lot of the shoemaker because they recognize their existence surmounts the shop of cobbled soles. Billions of women have given birth but the act of giving expression to the experience may just outlast the offspring delivered. The murderers and the doctors, the patients and the prostitutes all long to get somehow beyond the surround of their own skulls, outside the pen of the rib cage, to say what life is like behind a particular set of bones, the walls that hem the spirit that asks – and then attempts to answer – What does it mean to be me and human?

Only art can do this. The sciences that measure and dissect these phenomena aren't on speaking terms with spirit. Little wonder then that criminals and police chiefs aspire to the condition of artists, a perfect parallel to Walter Pater's famous claim that "All art aspires to the condition of music." Music reaches transcendently beyond our mental faculties to strum emotional chords. Listening to music is as close to the pulse in another's rhythmic heart as cell membranes allow, studying a painting as close as we can get to seeing through another person's eyes, reading as close as we will ever come to thinking with another's mind.

All this art provides.

I began a recent essay meditating on this notion, seeking to put down some historical foundation before I began a recollection summoned by old family pictures, an essay titled "Four Photographs":

The art of our most ancient ancestors, our first human art, seems to have been directed toward the future, not the past: their hunt scenes propitiate invisible presiding forces that the next harvest of flesh be bountiful. Bison, mammoth, horse, hunter: they included the stick-figure human but always facelessly. All the world's famous caves bear not a single portrait on their dark and sooted walls and so because they lived without portraiture our forebears trusted their pasts to their minds, to their stories when they ultimately came to stories.

Imagine then how faces faded, died to the world when they died from memory. Think of that last survivor trying to build again from a realm long past all light the features of a lost family – chins, noses, brows and smiles in the flickering cavern fire. Voices and veined hands, mother's dark eye and the play of siblings a shadow on the wall and then no longer even a shadow.

The first of the world's portraiture, so art historians tell us, arrived with a group of sculpted heads in Jericho dating from 7000 BCE. They're actually human skulls with faces reconstructed in molded plaster, tinted, with seashells to supply the color of the eyes. The individuals have distinct features, suggesting that they're meant to capture the unique faces of living people, or rather people who once lived, whose spirits were apparently

thought to operate inside those skulls. These Neolithic heads were displayed above ground while the bodies were buried beneath the house floor. Perhaps this preservation captured the spirits of honored ancestors and was meant to ask their continued blessing. In any case they are also the equivalent of family pictures, bearing the flame of family memory from one generation to the next. They precede much more famous Sumerian and Egyptian funerary portrait statues by at least three thousand years. They precede our own aide-memoir, photography, by nearly nine thousand.

I confess I have been an aider and abettor of mass graphomania for some time. I teach classes in the writing of autobiography and coerce students not just to examine their lives but to chronicle them. And I confess I have done more: I have not been merely an accessory: I have been a perpetrator and show some symptoms (the foregoing passage and the essay you're reading now, for instance) of continuing the predilection.

Living in an age of memoir, breathing that atmosphere, I was infected with the virus. Though I count myself a writer of fiction I have over the last few years pivoted some narratives toward the essay. Seeing so much of it being done perhaps the experimenter in me (or the imitator) inevitably felt the tug at the wrist to try a hand at the form. In drawing on memory, my usual course, I have discovered, and a very typical one, is to make memoir into a kind of memorial, a work of conservation, serving the same ancient function as those skulls of Jericho; enshrining the lost; elegy. We all inescapably know loss. Lost loves, lost time, lost articles. Perhaps next worst of all lost fragments of memory that frustrate memoir and the act of preservation.

With the essay I believe I try, admittedly in a patently personal – not a universal – way, to lift a rampart against the galloping marauders of Time, to delay death's card turning up from the deck just now. We have our choice of metaphors for the calendar's scythe. I took issue with one of the oldest at the beginning of another recent essay, "Memory's River":

Despite the longstanding tradition, Time is less a river than a fire. It burns up all it touches more or less quickly and the wind conjured in the passing storm blows all the cipherable ashes away. An oak may last five hundred years. The picnic smile beneath it endures for seconds. One is no less real than the other and no less gone when it decays.

It is not Time that is the river then: it is Memory. And Memory's river flows north against the proper pull of Time's gravity, the critical mass spinning at its fiery heart that drags us inexorably from this second to the next, toward our last. Memory bears us in the other direction, through a landscape shaped in time but separate from it, forested or desolate, our progress slow now as a canal, then white with rapids. Sometimes we ease into an eddy and the light breaks over a clearing of the growth: gliding past we see the yesterday we spent on this shore so vividly we might reach to put our fin-

gers through the hair of the child kneeling before us, concentrating on the toy yellow car in his hand. Other times the trees overhead, with dark leaves they never seem to lose, shade out all but glimpses: a gesture from the bank, a bare arm, a white dress moving in the deepening shadow like a gown in a benighted house of nightmares. But whatever our view we're borne back fitfully toward that blank waterfall that we cannot see to cross again, the cataract that is our first memory. ...

In the family tree of our language *memory* and *mourn* hang from the same bough. Each reaches back, the first through Old French and Latin, the second through Middle and Old English, to an Indo-European root that means "to remember, to recall, to think of." In the minds of some of our remotest speaking ancestors, in the very movements of their tongues, remembered image and sorrowing loss were enwrapped, at one time lived inside something like the same word. Naturally enough: memory is a stay against loss; loss prompts memory. Time's fire and memory's river collide and in the vapor that rises like a breath from the collision are the words we use to speak of the catastrophe.

The greatest catastrophe – following Kundera again, our disappearance "unheard of and unnoticed in an indifferent universe" (106) – is death, the annihilation of time, memory, the past altogether. Though not for the survivors, temporary as survival may be. To date I am a survivor and have found myself in the essay doing the work of the survivor, composing eulogies for the dead (and prematurely, anticipatorily, the living), lighting candles for the lost and the leaving, not so that they can find their way back to me, an absurd impossibility, but so that I can remember my way back to them. Perhaps then in one guise such words are the modern equivalent of mythology's journey to the underworld, calling on and paying respects to the dead. So in addition to writing about the times when the lives of others intersect my own I have written about the moments when their deaths do. In many respects I have been engaged not so much in life writing as death writing, as in this essay, "Eulogy for My Father," here in its entirety:

The truth is this: when Mama told me I should begin to think about a eulogy, I had already started one. Months before the end finally came – and it was nearly a year coming – I had known that she would ask, and so in that space behind the eyes where the voices live that we call the mind, a voice was already at work for you. One morning while I was making that long drive to see you again, it spoke.

Until X, my father was a survivor. As this world goes, that's no small feat.

That was to be the beginning. Like a dutiful newspaper clerk charged with composing obituaries in advance, I would replace the X, when the time came, with the time that had come.

Eulogy: from the Greek, *eu-* plus *logos*, meaning "good word" then. I had

long thought of eulogies as occasions when the living perjure themselves on behalf of the dead, and I was determined not to be guilty. I tried to make a fair job of it. Most of it, of course, I wrote only after it became necessary, in the day I had at home after the day I watched you die. I sat with my fragments of thought and blank paper and the virtual page with its two narrow sentences on the monitor while beyond the window your grandson, my limber little boy of eight, capered through the grass in his backyard.

I had a good idea what I was to say. I told some stories to describe the man I'd known for more than forty years. I made nothing up. I tried to be whole. But there was much of you I left out in my ten minutes. They sat there expectant, more than two hundred gathered along the pews. I told them how you had known the lacks of the Great Depression and the rationing of the war that followed. How when cancer claimed the other, you survived a quarter century with one kidney. I told them you met your end with your eyes open. And I told them despite such determination you couldn't live a week into your seventy-sixth year.

I didn't tell them that dying was hard work.

I didn't tell them how when I was young you tried to make a scientist of me but we both failed. From that time I did learn though that looking through a telescope or a microscope amounted to the same experience – gazing into the infinite. I didn't know that looking at you, I had the same experience. You inhabited whole worlds outside the Depression, before the war and after, that I would never know. I saw you on your deathbed journey to yet another.

I hinted that we had the tensions of every parent and every child, the tensions of centrifugal force like those between the home planet and the satellite moon straining at its orbit. I knew from my childish picture books what happened at Saturn when the strain became too great: the beautiful rainbow rings, the dust of destruction. Now I was about to find out something the books never told me: What happens to the moon when the planet explodes?

This little story I didn't tell them. We were the only two in the car. I don't recall where we were going, but I can direct anyone how to get to that intersection. We were climbing a hill to a stop sign at a T-junction. I don't know what the problems were then. There were always problems. The neglected eaves spilled rainwater and fell down around the ears of the house. Probably a car wouldn't run. There was always a car that wouldn't run, that needed tires or transmission work or brakes, just like the three children who always needed glasses or ballet shoes, braces or cleats or shots. It is a common story and it included all of us in its telling.

As we creaked to a stop you said, "Don't ever be poor, son." And that was about the only piece of general advice I remember you ever giving me.

Like so many human conditions (like so much of the human condition) what seemed to be killing you quickest had a name but no cure. Your bones

wouldn't make the right stuff. The shot you took in the belly every Monday to bring your red cells back to their proper life, its efficiency faded, over time, as the doctor said it would. Your corpuscles deserted you, like so much else. I didn't tell the people in the pews that, while your nerve never failed you, your nerves did and so that last twelve months you never dropped a tear but the last eight you kept to a catheter because your bladder gave up voiding.

The procedures mounted. They feared for your gall bladder and took it before it went hot. They cut your neck at the throat to scrape your spine that you might walk again, but you never did. Your cord was freed from its spurs of bone but your legs didn't respond with any strength. And in delirious curiosity at this new appendage you pulled the feeding tube all the way out. Your throat too parched to swallow, too swollen to admit the tube again, you lived the last seventy-odd days without one bite of food or one sip of water. So they bored into your belly with a new one, you who'd always liked nothing better than meat in slabs and solid corn all your toothsome life. And all this meant that the last three days the richest blue green algae bubbled from your stomach through the tube into another bag you now wore.

By then you were in hospice care. Hospice care really means that no matter how soft the fingertips that press for the decayed waves of your pulse, no matter how gentle the words that tell you to lift or turn or open, no matter how easy the hired and adjustable hospital bed, beneath the mattress the pyre is steadily building and waits only for the torch to be passed to it. But I didn't tell them this either.

I didn't tell them all our secret grievance: that we each inhabit death row with an indefinite reprieve. We don't know our executioner but the thought that he might turn up tomorrow – the purpled tumor, the gorged heart, blood dripping down a car window or fanning across a floor – is too nauseatingly hurtful to bring a picture to our minds. I learned that in the right circumstances it is no easier to imagine another's death than my own.

I had not imagined your death, you see. Or I had not imagined it recently.

We all imagine, when we are honest with ourselves, the death of our loved ones, even those closest to us. Especially those. We need no psychologists to tell us this. Perhaps we do it to prepare for the real thing, as close to a dress rehearsal for loss and grief as propriety will grant us. So my imaginings of your death, which I know must have occurred though I don't recall any in particular, had abandoned me as your real death came on – just when I needed them most. I did not imagine your death and so on no level, not even the frigidly rational one, could I see its actually happening. And not only could I not see your dying but I couldn't see me witnessing your dying.

The past should have been some help. In museums I have seen the carvings on Greek tombstones from Asia Minor. The dead and the bereaved shake hands. With several figures, it is impossible to know who is dead and

who living. Their white stone heads bowed, they appear equally grieved. Chiseled over the door of a Capuchin crypt runs this Latin: *Tu Fui Ego Eris*: I was You will be. Beyond the grate in the door, through the gloom, the monks lie together as they have for centuries, on the dirt floor, gray bones in brown robes. Their hollow sockets staring out at the living who come to gape through the bars, their wrist points mingle, chapfallen every one. I have seen an eighteenth-century engraving of a dying man, his bed surrounded by half a dozen formal friends, one a doctor marked by his instruments. The man himself is propped with pillows so he sits against the headboard. I would have wondered why, before. Now I know. That is the only posture in which the truly dying can still breathe.

As a boy I heard other boys say *croak*. I thought they used it to describe the death of frogs they captured. Or some other distant creature. What happened to his dog, a boy in the neighborhood might ask. Oh, he croaked. Or it might be an uncle or a movie villain, the same response: Oh, he croaked. Now I know what it means and why we say it. The dictionary tells me we have been using it this way since at least 1812. A terrible gargle from the throat's abyss, the harsh choke of the whole system grating to a stop, that's why we say "He croaked." That's the last sound you made in life, the only sound you made in dying. I don't think I'll ever use the word again.

The most horrid thought is not that someday I'll be propped like this, drowning in my lungs, but that my own long-lashed boy will come to this end. The dread view of that future prompts me to wonder: is it because I failed to imagine your death that I am condemned now to revisit it so often in memory?

Your eyes were open and almost unglazed. But if they saw anything beyond their own lenses there was no sign to us. If there was pain, the morphine kept it at bay, I hope. As it had nearly twenty-eight thousand times before, in the east all along the seaboard the tired old sun climbed out of the black Atlantic and spread another dawn for you, your last, but the rays hadn't yet reached where we kept watch. The birds must have been singing, as they had been all night. I don't know. All I heard came from your throat, and then silence. I rested my arms on your borrowed bed. I laid my head there too and cried with a force I could not abandon.

Until that moment, you understand, the last moment, I had never believed that you were ever going to die. For the only creatures on the planet with a sense of history we human beings forget the lessons of the past with remarkable ease and thoroughness. Whole civilizations can misplace the most basic and significant details. We had calculated the earth was round long before Columbus, but somehow we forgot. That there was a continent westward between Europe and Asia we knew at least once, but somehow Christendom lost a whole land somewhere along the way to Cathay.

I simply didn't remember that you were going to die. Somehow I had silently told myself, without words, without even shadows of words, that

death was far off, even while I talked with Mama about whether you could know the end was only weeks at most away. And so when that lost horrid gargle tore up from the corrupted mucous of your lungs and then you were perfectly still, even your eyes and lids completely unmoved, I put down my head and sobbed.

On Tuesday afternoon you had smiled at me for the last time. You couldn't speak, but it wasn't from joy. All joy was long gone. Thursday night you didn't know me when I got to the bedside after midnight. Your eyes roved a little before sinking. That was all. Mama dropped the amber sleep in your cheek every fifteen minutes. The window was still dark Friday morning when your eyes opened wide on the end and then that harshest gasp for any breath. I reached to feel but there was no more pulse, I said, I can't find a pulse. And in fifteen minutes you went nearly as cold as you were two days later when I bent into the coffin to kiss your forehead for the very last time. We were both turned to stone.

I had looked at the digital clock standing on the dresser, the big one I'd given you for Christmas because knowing the time had always been important to you. Friday, June 3, 5:08 a.m. Before they couldn't see anymore my wet eyes squinted to remember. The disregarded future had come all the same and it gave me no good word but only the time necessary to replace my X.

Maybe an exhibition like "Eulogy for My Father" serves as much as memento mori as memoir, an alert to seize the day, an alarm that death awaits and should therefore be kept close in mind to add zest to what life remains. I was not conscious of this in the writing; I did not set out to prod myself or any reader to live more fully. I proposed only to write as well as I could of the death I witnessed and its effect on me in as many respects as I could muster, to testify to a human agony.

Certainly I did not intend to carry stones to Babel.

That's an interesting story, Babel and its ambitious citizenry, in Genesis's eleventh chapter: "Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.'" The remainder of the chapter recounts how God, displeased with the builders' intent, came down and confounded their (until then single) language and scattered the people over all the earth.

The cosmic irony cannot be missed here: the builders' aspiration to make fame for themselves, precisely to avoid being "scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" is precisely the end to which their striving leads. Its anticipation by several millennia of Kundera's dire fear: once we're all able to scale the heights of silence and each give tongue to our own story no one will be able to understand us.

Perhaps the age of memoir was a natural and ineluctable result of the leveling of society with the ascendance of democracy on the one hand and the enlighten-

ing of society through the increase of literacy on the other. Now we have arrived at the time during which we feel both entitled to speak and empowered to do so, during which we feel we need no interpreters of our experience because we may express our own interpretations, that every life lived is worthy of a life written and a pen in every hand is capable of making that record. Does that make us richer or poorer? The answer I suppose is both, though I am not sure that more lives put into more words translates into more memory. In the last paragraph of my essay inspired by family pictures, especially the four photographs of the title that were portraits of my maternal grandfather, I pondered this irony.

My grandfather never made fame. He traded cattle, dug ditches during the Depression for seventy-five cents a day and was glad to have the work, ran a country store and forgave boxes of debt to dusty customers with holes in their overalls. He never raised his voice, never raised a hand against his children, never cheated a partner or lied or liked going to church. And yet I know already that I will be among the last survivors to remember him, that when I am gone he too will disappear, a shadow flickering on the wall in a cave of my brain and then no more. That brain of mine that cannot help but wonder: What might I do to be worthy of a story? What can I – what can any of us – do to earn remembrance? We yearn for it and yet we know that all the pictures in the world are but a temporary stay of execution.

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THOMAS MCCONNELL'S work has appeared in the *Connecticut Review*, the *Cortland Review*, *Calabash*, *Yemassee*, the *Emrys Journal*, the *Charleston Post & Courier*, *Crossroads: A Southern Annual* and *Writing Macao*, among other publications, and won prizes in the Porter Fleming Awards for Fiction, Essay, and Drama, the South Carolina Fiction Project, the H.E. Francis Award, and the Hardagree Award for Fiction.

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