

The Examined Life: Re/search in Memoir

Maureen Stanton

Critics have considered the latter days of the twentieth century up through our current moment to be the age of memoir. Ben Yagoda, in *Memoir: A History*, notes that between 2004 and 2008 alone, sales of books classified as memoir increased by greater than 400% (7).¹ Called a memoir “craze” in 2008 by veteran literary agent Lynn Nesbit, who claimed it had “eaten away at fiction” (Ferrari-Adler, 75), the increase in the number of memoirs has attracted criticism, sometimes vehement. “Is there not something to be said for the unexamined life?” asks William Grimes in his *New York Times* article, “We All Have a Life. Must We All Write About It?” (2005). Other articles convey this sentiment even in their titles: “Read About Why I Love Me and How Much I’ve Suffered” (1997) by Michael Rust, who claims—without evidence—that “literary traditionalists [have] watched the memoir overtake the novel as the favored genre of American literati,” and “Me, Myself, and I” (1997) by James Walcott in *Vanity Fair*. “Never have so many shared so much of so little,” writes Walcott (213).

Contrary to the now hackneyed criticism that memoir is “self-obsessed” and “egoistic,” I believe that autobiographical writing (memoir and essays both) *seeks* community. Memoir can be a generous sharing of the self as we endeavor to understand our common humanness. As poet Lucy Larcom writes in the preface to her memoir, *A New England*

Girlhood (1889), “None of us can think of ourselves as entirely separate beings [. . .]. Indeed there may be more egotism in withdrawing mysteriously into one’s self, than in frankly unfolding one’s life-story, for better or worse” (6). Larcum likens the relationship between the writer and the reader as “that of mutual friendship” (7).

Memoir, autobiography, or by the simplest definition, true written accounts of one’s life (or a portion of it) have been written and read for centuries and will continue to be part of our literary tradition in spite of peaks and declines in *attention* to the genre. But as in any genre of writing, only a small number of works rise to the level of art; they transcend their moment and deserve to be read, taught, and re-read. Aside from brilliant prose and a compelling mind and voice at work, the best examples of memoir persevere—and enrich our lives—because they tell a story that is larger than the individual life or experience of the writer, a story that is “discovered” through the process of writing.

Memoir or essay writing is at its best about discovery, figuring out “what we didn’t know we knew,” as poet Sydney Lea writes (1999, 294). Or, as Milan Kundera states, “To be a writer does not mean to preach a truth, it means to discover a truth” (Carlisle 1985). It follows, then, that this discovery is preceded by a search, or more aptly for memoir, a re-search of one’s life. As we grow into adulthood, our lives are a search for identity, for vocation, for love, passion, home, family, and community. Memoir writing, by drawing from these experiences, re-searches one’s life—searches it *again*—this time seeking an expanded meaning, a broader context.

Writers trying to discover what they “didn’t know they knew” or a truth about themselves or their lives, (and by extension, others’ lives) can re-search in two ways. What I’ll call “internal research” is inherent to writing itself, the process of thinking and analyzing and intuiting that arises during the very act of writing, of mulling over memories, refracting the past through an analytical lens. Internal research is what we do inside our heads and hearts as a subject consumes us. “Like thinking itself,” essayist Bill Roorbach posits, “personal essay makes use of whatever is available among all those layers of mind” (2001, 191). Like essayists, memoirists, too, probe the layers of their own minds, seeking that elusive discovery, the prize of wisdom they offer to readers.

To embark on this journey of internal research is not to have a destination in mind; one is not simply attempting to chronicle events or corroborate memory, although certain witness accounts serve vital

purposes by doing just this, recording events into the historical record—Eli Wiesel’s *Night*, for example. Looking retrospectively at their experiences, memoirists typically wander down paths toward shadows of ideas, glimpsing meaning as they follows detours, arriving sometimes at dead ends, or like the Three Princes of Serendip, happening upon discovery by accident. Internal research is about picking up a scent and following its meandering trail, stopping along the way to observe and wonder and reflect. “Writing should itself be an act (or acts) of unanticipated discovery,” proposes Sydney Lea. “The death knell for any creative writing sounds whenever it knows too accurately where it is going” (1991, 334).

Internal research is about re-examining what we thought we knew—our own lives, our own intellects—to discover a kind of truth. In the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne coined the term “essais” from the French verb *essayer*, meaning “to try,” and famously wore a medallion he’d had inscribed with the words “Que sçay-je?” (What do I know?) (“Montaigne”). What did he *really* know about friendship, thumbs, smells, books, cruelty, presumption, liars or the many other topics he essayed? Montaigne’s “research” was a revisitation or inquiry into his own mind.

But how does this introspection and interrogation work? What is its aim? If we are mining our memories, sifting through our true-life experiences, don’t we already know the answers? Don’t we know how our story ends? The wonderful essayist Vivian Gornick articulates best the essence of memoir: “A memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under *obligation* to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom [. . .]. What happened to the writer,” she says, “is not what matters. What matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened” (2001, 13, italics mine).

In an excerpt from James Baldwin’s essay, “Notes of a Native Son,” we can see the writer beginning the process of re-searching his life: “I had inclined to be contemptuous of my father for the conditions of his life,” Baldwin writes, “for the conditions of our lives. When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own” (1955, 85–86). Here Baldwin gives us the occasion for his re-examination of his father’s life and his own. Later in the essay Baldwin writes,

I had told my mother that I did not want to see [my father] because I hated him. But this was not true. It was only that I *had* hated him and I wanted to hold onto this hatred [. . .]. I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.

(101)

Baldwin extracts from his experience what Gornick calls the “large sense.” In his reflections on his relationship with his father, he discovers something about the human heart, about one of our most powerful emotions—hate, and toward the end of his essay, its opposite, love.

Internal research involves combing the archives of your own biography, touring the library of memories in your mind, and interpreting like a guide what you discover within. But while self-interrogation can get at personal truths, research in the conventional sense—gathering information beyond one’s memories and experiences—can yield meaning as well. Traditional “external” research using databases, newspapers, journals, books, interviews, government documents, and statistical evidence—can connect personal experiences to the larger world and can allow autobiographical narratives to speak of and to a culture at large about identity, a particular historical moment, or other shaping events and circumstances. External research can aid in making the personal story a “universal” one.

Memoir and essays *should* be introspective, but there are occasions when inner research can be amplified by peering outside of the personal sphere to seek connection with a broad audience. Stepping beyond the realm of memory, meditation, and interiority, memoirists can see their lives as worthy of biographical research, which can lead them toward a transcendent “large sense” of their experience that connects the personal to the political, the sociocultural, or the historical. In “Notes of a Native Son,” James Baldwin’s rage at his father is set against the backdrop of racial tension in Harlem during World War II. By placing his narrative firmly in an historical context, Baldwin’s personal experience illuminates both a cultural story, as well as a universal truth about the human spirit. “Hatred,” he writes, “which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law” (1955, 113). By using the general term, “the man,” Baldwin seems to tell us something about himself and ourselves as well.

In another example of external research informing the personal, Scott Russell Sanders gracefully drops in a bit of “research” into his essay “Under the Influence,” which is about growing up with an alcoholic father. Sanders seamlessly connects his story to a broader sociological and medical phenomenon. “My father drank,” he begins his memoir, and then draws scenes of his life with his hopelessly alcoholic father (1994, 733). Later in the essay, Sanders states, “What had seemed to me a private grief is in fact a public scourge. In the United States, alone some ten or fifteen million people share this ailment, and behind the doors they slam in fury or disgrace, countless other children tremble” (734). Here, the personal story is magnified and connected to a larger framework by the use of statistics. Sanders uses facts to construct a bridge between the individual idiosyncratic life and common experience.

In his short lyrical autobiographical essay, “Two Hearts,” from *Leaping: Revelations and Epiphanies* (2003), his collection of such pieces, Brian Doyle writes of his recently born twin sons, Joseph, born one minute before Liam: “Joseph has a whole heart and Liam has half” (152). Doyle writes of listening to doctors explaining Liam’s condition in medicalese, which he poetically translates in the essay: “The heart is a railroad station where the trains are switched to different tracks. A normal heart switches trains flawlessly two billion times in a life; in an abnormal heart, like Liam’s, the trains crash and the station crumbles to dust” (152–53). This brief fact embedded into an extended metaphor for the heart draws the reader into the story; most readers will *not* have an experience like Doyle’s, but we suddenly pause to consider the quiet astonishing miracle of the heart, its seemingly indefatigable power at one with its frightening vulnerability, which we (must) forget each day as we go about our daily lives.

When one blends internal and external research together, scene, memory, and introspection collude with history, fact, and allegory to enrich the topic. Personal experience imbues flat facts with pathos; facts elevate individual experience to a greater realm, help us locate, as Gornick says, the “large sense” of our true stories. Memoirists become authorities of their own experience through internal research, but they can also borrow authority from our documented and tabulated and studied collective experience—the stored knowledge of ourselves, our culture, our history. Great essays and memoirs—those by Montaigne, Baldwin, Gornick, Sanders, Doyle—stand the test of time; they speak to us across decades or even centuries because by *re*-searching themselves

and their lives, memoirists can illuminate something about our own. As Montaigne wrote over 400 years ago, “Each man bears the complete stamp of the human condition.” (“Montaigne” 117).

Notes

1. Yagoda’s figures are taken from Nielsen BookScan, which he claims “tracks about 70 percent of US book sales [. . .].” He includes the following categories in his calculation: personal memoirs, childhood memoirs, and parental memoirs.

Works Cited

- Baldwin, James. 1955. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Carlisle, Olga. 1985. “A Talk with Milan Kundera.” http://www.kundera.de/english/Info-Point/Interview_Carlisle/interview_carlisle.html.
- Doyle, Brian. 2003. *Leaping: Revelations and Epiphanies*. Chicago: Loyola Press.
- Ferrari-Adler, Jofie. 2008. “Agents & Editors.” *Poets and Writers*, January/February, 69–75.
- Gornick, Vivian. 2001. “The Situation and the Story.” *Poets and Writers*, September/October, 12–17.
- Grimes, William. 2005. “We All Have a Life. Must We All Write About It?” *The New York Times*. March 25.
- Larcom, Lucy. 1889. *A New England Girlhood*. Boston, MA: Northeastern Univ. Press. 1986.
- Lea, Sydney. 1999. “What We Didn’t Know We Knew.” In *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*, ed. Robert L. Root and Michael Steinberg. 330–36. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- “Michel Eyquem de Montaigne.” 2004. *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. 2nd ed. Vol. 11, ed. Paula K. Byers. 116–17. Detroit, MI.: Gale Research.
- Roorbach, Bill. 2001. *The Art of Truth: Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Rust, Michael. 1997. “Read About Why I Love Me and How Much I’ve Suffered.” *Insight on the News*, 2 June, 19–20. LexisNexis Academic.

- Sanders, Scott Russell. 1994. "Under the Influence." In *The Art of the Personal Essay*, ed. Phillip Lopate. 733–44. New York: Anchor Books.
- Wolcott, James. 1997. "Me, Myself, and I." *Vanity Fair*, October, 213–18.
- Yagoda, Ben. 2009. *Memoir: A History*. New York: Riverhead Books.