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Autobiography, Biography & Memoir Conference

Partisan Review

CZESLAW MILOSZ
Milosz's ABC's

KIRSTEN OLSON LANIER
Conference Comment

EDITH KURZWEIL
New York Film Festival 2000

TERRY TEACHOUT
Dance Chronicle

Jon Westling

Edith Kurzweil

Jeffrey Meyers

Michal Govrin

André Aciman

Norman Manea

Leonard Michaels

Stanley Crouch

Jay Martin

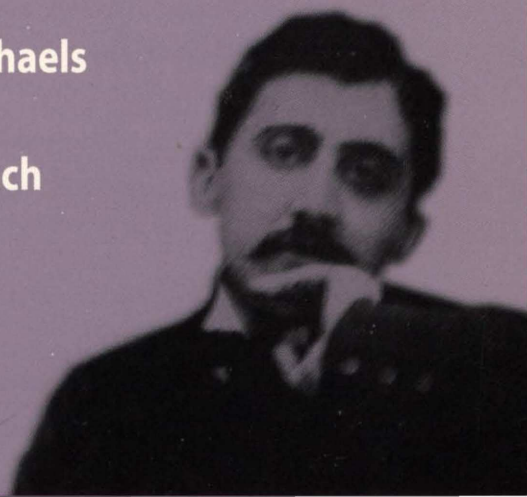
Conor Cruise O'Brien

Geoffrey Hartman

Francine du Plessix Gray

Hilary Spurling

Denis Donoghue



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WINTER 2001

Volume LXVIII, Number 1

CONTENTS

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Comment

We are saddened by the death of Robert H. Montgomery, Jr., our attorney, a trustee of the magazine, and loyal friend. He was sweet and sharp—a rare combination for an attorney. Not only the leading entertainment lawyer in the country, he was also always alert to the needs of *Partisan Review*. He was calm, persistent, knowledgeable, devoted. We will miss him terribly.

It is a literary scandal that Doris Lessing has not been awarded a Nobel Prize for literature. Doris Lessing's quality and output reminds one of Balzac and Trollope. She has published more than forty books—novels, memoirs, collections of short stories, plays, and even an opera. One can only speculate that the failure of the Nobel committee to recognize Doris Lessing is either personal or political, or both. We hope the committee will eventually make amends.

WP

Editor's Note: We apologize for being so late with this issue. Over Christmas our offices were burglarized; several items were stolen—including our computer. After that, we had to reconstruct much of the conference you are about to read, along with everything else. We're sorry, but glad that, finally, the first issue of this year's *Partisan Review* is in your hands.

Autobiography, Biography & Memoir Conference

INTRODUCTION

Jon Westling: It's a great pleasure for me as president of Boston University to welcome all of you to this conference on "Autobiography, Biography & Memoir" sponsored by *Partisan Review* and Boston University. *Partisan Review* has a long and illustrious history of recognizing and nurturing intelligent young writers who later became celebrated authors. It's a journal that has woven itself into the biographies of many of today's notable novelists, essayists, and cultural critics. Having helped to launch many a writer on his or her life's journey, it now seems only fitting that *Partisan Review* has asked some writers to share the logs of their voyages and their efforts to recover the trajectories of other lives.

Partisan Review, of course, has also entered the biography of Boston University. The journal has been published at and substantially underwritten by the university since the late 1970s under the continual editorship of its founder, William Phillips, and his associate, Edith Kurzweil. The relationship between *Partisan Review* and BU might be described as an exogamous marriage. The journal has its own deep roots in New York City, where William and Edith live, but it is edited and produced in a Bay State Road brownstone here in the Back Bay, and in consequence, I think its New York edges have acquired over the years a little of Boston's reserve—even occasionally a bit of a Boston accent.

New England, though, it seems to me, has been perhaps somewhat less fertile soil for autobiography, biography, and memoir than other parts of this country. Our reticence to speak on our own behalf has after all been legendary ever since Priscilla Mullen's rebuke of John Olden for approaching her on Miles Standish's behalf: "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?" Ben Franklin, our nation's first great autobiographer, had to hie himself down to Philadelphia to find enough self-confidence to tell his own story. It's only with Thoreau that the New England individualist begins to find a way to sing a song of himself.

I mention these historical bearings because they point to the exceptional circumstance that confronts us today. The arts of autobiography, biography, and memoir now have unprecedented popularity. They are clearly not new arts, indeed they are very old ones, though now often

turned to distinctly modern purposes. Their immense popularity at this moment does, however, raise the question of "Why now?" Is it that we suffer from, as Christopher Lasch memorably phrased it, a culture of narcissism? I wouldn't rule out some element of fatuousness and self-aggrandizement in some contemporary autobiography and memoir, but I think that explanation clearly does not bear on the current popularity, say, of extravagantly long and detailed biography, particularly of literary figures. I suspect rather that the explosion in biography reflects a kind of longing for a human center that the reading public finds missing in many other genres these days. The under-imagined solipsistic novel, the literary critic infatuated with his own domain and oblivious to the strivings of the original, the work that underlies the criticism, the works of history decentered into accounts of farm tools and anonymous masses have left, I conjecture, a great unanswered need. We turn to biography now in great part to understand how real men and women lived their lives by confronting hard choices and making important decisions. So, along with the popularity of biography, we have interestingly an undercurrent of academic disdain for it. Some academicians whose self-infatuation has taken the form of transforming every other subject into a species of disguised autobiography rather resent the success of biography plain and simple. But I offer these thoughts merely as opening conjectures. Today and tomorrow we are going to be hearing from a really remarkable group of original biographers and autobiographers reflecting on their own craft. It should be a couple of days that are rich in substance and rewarding to attend. I welcome you all most heartily.

Edith Kurzweil: I am Edith Kurzweil, the editor of *Partisan Review*. First of all, I want to thank Jon Westling, not only for the wonderful introduction, but also for being so hospitable to the magazine and cooperating with us for all these years. In addition to BU, I want especially to thank Joanna and Dan Rose for supporting this conference and so many other events we have had. Also, thanks to the staff, small as it is, who have worked diligently. Welcome to all of you, and to the panelists in the audience whom you are going to meet up here for what promises to be another memorable conference.

Before we begin, I want to bring you greetings from William Phillips, who is terribly sorry he couldn't join us; he has difficulty traveling. Moreover, and sadly, Saul Bellow isn't here. He wanted me to tell you all that he was in the hospital last weekend, and is recuperating. It's not serious, but it's tedious. We are all sorry.

Now, I want to say a few words about this conference. I thought long and hard about how to shape it, whom to invite, and how to balance the panels. In order to attract the best writers, and to engage them in interesting discussions amongst themselves and with our audience, I had to think of questions they would want to address, and that would stimulate them to talk about all aspects of the writing of autobiography, biography, and memoir. As you can see from the program, I succeeded in luring a stellar cast. I have no doubt that all of you will be spellbound by what they have to tell us. The challenging questions by a friend helped me to focus some more. "How do you distinguish between autobiography and memoir?" she asked me when I invited her to this conference. "For the most part," I answered, "an autobiography more or less tells a life story, while a memoir focuses on some specific periods of one's life, although ultimately it may well cover a good part of it. But that's a topic that will come up during the conference."

"I notice that you invited just a few panelists who wrote about famous figures, such as Matisse and Sade," my friend went on, "some who have written memoirs, and others who have created fictions based on their experiences. How are you putting all this together?" she kept asking.

I thought some more about ways to play off the genres against one another, and how to stimulate debates with what I expected to be a sophisticated audience—who has also thought about these issues. But because I personally find it difficult to explain complex issues in a casual telephone conversation, I quoted Cynthia Ozick's essay on Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein*. "A novel," Ozick had stated categorically, "even when it is autobiographical, is not an autobiography. . . .Fiction is subterranean, not terrestrial. It carries us off into the strangeness of an unknown planet." In part, she was answering some critics who were faulting Bellow for having outed Allan Bloom, for *not* having spelled out just *how* good a teacher he had been, and *how* he had inspired his students. The fictionalization, of course, kept readers guessing to what extent Ravelstein might or might not be Bloom. However, most readers ended up being engrossed in the story, and were fascinated by Bellow's narrator, the disingenuous Chick. Yet others have been intrigued by the philosophical issues they raise, by the sartorial shops on the rue Faubourg Saint Honoré, or by French cuisine. In any case, Bellow's inventions distinguish *Ravelstein* from the memoir Bellow might have written of his friendship with Bloom. By the same token, I assume that Stanley Crouch, instead of writing his novel, *Don't the Moon Look Lonesome*, might as easily have produced a memoir about the makings of a jazz

musician, and the lives of a few of his *confrères*. But mostly, a memoir is bound to be fragmentary and partial; it is based on specific circumstances, on the strength of the perceptions imprinted in the author's mind, and what he or she wants to convey, usually at that moment.

I chose a picture of Marcel Proust for the poster, because I consider *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which has been translated as *Lost Time*, as *In Search of Lost Time*, as *Remembrance of Things Past*, parts of it as *The Past Recaptured*, and in the case of the recent film as *Time Regained*, the most difficult and rewarding fiction of Proust's time—probably of all time. It is based, recognizably, on Proust's own life and experiences. These three thousand pages, contained in seven volumes, took Proust fifteen years to write and were unfinished when he died; they are not only about the characters of Marcel, Swann, the families Verdurin, Guermantes, etc., but offer the most complex observations on Proust's era, thus throwing much light on the changes and social upheavals in *fin-de-siècle* France. Proust's comments on that society, from the lowliest levels in the streets and brothels, to the highest aristocratic ones, and their evolving interactions and pretensions, are clear and incisive—despite his allusive, indirect, and seemingly hesitant style.

To Gilles Deleuze, Proust's story "is not an expectation of involuntary memory, but the narrative of an apprenticeship" of a man of letters. In *Marcel Proust: A Life*, William Carter focuses on Proust's intimate experiences, his aesthetic sense and passionate devotion to his craft. Roger Shattuck, in his "Field Guide" to the novel, states that "reading Proust bears many resemblances to visiting a zoo" whose specimens "amaze and amuse us in their variety."

Proust's Paris, at least in part, is the one Hilary Spurling had to peruse for her biography of Matisse, as did Francine du Plessix Gray for her work on the Marquis de Sade and Frederick Brown in his opus on Zola. Because Paris around the turn of that century was alive with inventions in all the arts, and ever since then has inspired writers and painters, sculptors and composers, it keeps attracting all those who seek inspiration. I doubt that there is anyone in this room who doesn't have fond memories of Paris.

I think of letters and diaries by gifted writers as sort of "instant" memoirs. Edmund Wilson's diaries, for instance, reconfirm that he was a keen observer of his surroundings as well as an indefatigable and brilliant critic and novelist. Although he edited these diaries to some extent, he ordered his executors to publish them without changing a word. According to his biographer, Jeffrey Meyers, Wilson believed that "records of genius are one of the only ways we have of finding out how

life was really lived in any given time or place," and that by being absolutely honest he might well enhance his reputation beyond the grave. It did. Undoubtedly, these diaries left some of his surviving contemporaries hurt, angry, and wounded—without the chance to reply or to confront him. Leonard Michaels's diaries, *Time Out of Mind*, are also honest, and may upset some of his friends—since they depict the preoccupations of *his* generation, that is, our own.

It would seem that serious biographers, when choosing subjects who are dead and cannot respond, have an easier time. (Biographers who write about politicians or movie idols usually have an agenda, and I chose to stay with the lives of writers and artists alone.) However, chances are that the reconstructions of their subjects' experiences and relationships are in sync with some of their own convictions, or with some newly discovered archives or other materials. I assume that Jay Martin and Jeffrey Meyers may tell us about some of the differences in unearthing untapped material about living rather than dead subjects; and how to avoid falling into traps. Of course, the more renowned the biographer's subject, the greater the chances are that other biographies exist, or even academic societies of followers whose careers to some extent have been based on the study of that individual, be it Proust, Doris Lessing, Edmund Wilson, Emile Zola, or Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Under the circumstances, it is likely that some details of a subject's life are focused and enlarged on, which often entails specific views, and thus engenders controversies. As do *parti pris* positions that could be grounded in politics, on historical facts, interpretations, or methodological presuppositions. As you all know, in recent years much has been added to what we knew about women writers, and minority writers. In her "Epilogue" to George Eliot's biography, Kathryn Hughes notes that "within ten years of her death, no one was reading her, that by the 1890s she was being portrayed as a Victorian rather than as a woman whose scandalous, unconventional life had shocked her contemporaries." But Frederick Karl stresses that in her case the contradictions, tensions, and polarities that constituted her own personality and needs, and nourished her fiction, were particularly intense, "inasmuch as she helped pioneer a new path for women at the same time [as] she had to preserve a semblance of social coherence," while circumventing the strict morality of her day. To ask whether Judith Thurman's Colette was able to thumb her nose at her contemporaries' mores because she was braver than George Eliot, or because she was bred in France rather than in an Anglo-Saxon environment, is a moot question.

Clearly, the country and the period of history a subject has lived in are important factors in the writing and the life, as is their circle of friends. André Aciman, who came *Out of Egypt*, finds that all writers have a "hidden nerve" that "stirs their prose and. . .makes it tick," a nerve that they uncover when writing about themselves, even as they try to disguise it, often even *from* themselves. Aciman does this by exploring specific places, which then remind him of other places, events, and history. Conor Cruise O'Brien, on the other hand, shows how his life has been shaped by his involvement in his country's history. Denis Donoghue, another Irishman, puts more stress on his early family life and personal predispositions as determining the thrust of his career and perceptions. Clearly, those of our panelists who, due to the last century's persecutions had to flee—as I did from Vienna to Belgium, France and Portugal, as Geoffrey Hartman did, from Berlin to England—still retain some residue of these traumatic experiences in their thinking and writing, although they probably run less deep than Norman Manea's, who could not possibly wipe away his childhood in a concentration camp. Even writers whose main work is in other areas, such as Michal Govrin's, who was born in Jerusalem to a German mother, at some point have felt impelled to delve into their backgrounds—not just to tell to the world, but to make sense of their own lives, to see themselves through others' eyes.

Over the next two days we will listen to our panelists and to their debates and comments on each other. We will ask questions in order to learn more about the pros and cons of writing fictionalized or so-called realistic lives—their own, those of famous and not-so-famous subjects, and episodic remembrances.

Each of the panelists will talk for about twenty minutes; then they will have the opportunity to briefly respond to one another. After that, the conversation will be turned over to the audience. I encourage you all to ask questions and to offer relevant comments. As in the past, the edited proceedings of this conference will be published in *Partisan Review*. Thank you.

Session I: How True to Life is Biography?

Edith Kurzweil: Jeffrey Meyers has written thirty-nine books so far, most of them biographies of twentieth-century writers—among them Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Frost, Wyndham Lewis, and Edmund Wilson. He has also written about the art of biography. His most recent book is *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation*. Jeffrey's talk is titled "Writing Orwell's Biography: The Mystery of the Real."

Jeffrey Meyers: Thank you, Edith. The impulse to write literary biography begins in fascination with an artist's character, mind, and art. George Orwell—a distinguished contributor to *Partisan Review*—had interested me since 1968, when I went to read his unpublished letters and manuscripts at University College in London. Unwittingly, I came up against a classic stumbling block: the obstructive literary widow. The curator had given me written permission, but Sonia Orwell had abruptly closed the Archive to scholars. Orwell had left instructions that no biography was to be written, and she was furious that Peter Stansky and William Abrahams had deceptively used the Archive for that purpose. To get even with them, Sonia impulsively asked Bernard Crick, a professor of politics, to write an official biography. When Crick's book, a dry compendium of facts that ignored Orwell's inner or emotional life, appeared in 1980, she naturally disliked it. The four-volume edition of Orwell's essays, diaries, and letters which Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus had brought out in 1968, together with Crick's biography, remained for some years the definitive word on Orwell. In 1991 Michael Shelden published a third biography, authorized this time by the Orwell estate.

Orwell's life and works, then, had been thoroughly researched, but my fascination with the complex personality behind the lucid prose had lasted. For thirty years I'd been teaching and thinking about Orwell, and I disagreed with all three biographies in matters of fact, emphasis, and meaning. So I took up the challenge to find new material and to write a better book than the previous ones. A biographer begins by asking questions. That's the essence of research. You ask questions of the novels, essays, and letters; you look questioningly at a landscape and at a house where he lived, as well as at the friends and family who've survived him. What was he like? How did he look? What did he say? How did he laugh? What did he eat? Why did he go to Burma and not to Cambridge? Why did he leave Burma? What sort of socialist was he? Was he as

gloomy and pessimistic as his last novel? How often we read a voluminous book that leaves us with no clear impression of its subject. We may get to know in excruciating detail everything he did on a certain day, in a certain city, but nothing of how he felt or what he thought.

In 1998 Peter Davison published a monumental, brilliantly annotated, twenty-volume, 8,500-page edition of Orwell's *Complete Works*, which contained a great deal of new information, including several moving letters from his first wife, Eileen O'Shaughnessy, written just before (really minutes before) her unexpected death. The existence of new material spurred me on. Peter Davison himself proved a marvelous resource. A passionate researcher and generous colleague, he couldn't quite let go of Orwell and helped me answer many questions. He even trekked out to the British Newspaper Library to search for unsigned articles by Orwell in the *Rangoon Gazette*. He didn't find any because Orwell couldn't publish under his own name, but he did find another case of shooting an elephant, which showed that it wasn't all that rare in Burma at that time.

The intervening years had brought new books, articles, memoirs, interviews, oral history, radio and television material. The Orwell Archive had grown, and family members and friends were still alive. Though dead for fifty years, Orwell's language and ideas still permeate the culture. Vivid phrases like "Big Brother is Watching You," "thought police," "vaporized," and "unperson" uncannily expressed the thoughts and feelings of people forced to live in totalitarian societies.

Other new documents had surfaced as a result of political changes. The Soviet Secret Police report on Orwell, dated July 7, 1937, is now in the Central Party Archives in Moscow. This NKVD report shows that he was well known to the Communists and had played an active role in the Barcelona battles between the factions on the Left. By labeling him a Trotskyist, the Communists signed his death warrant. Orwell was wounded and on the run. If they'd caught him before he escaped into France, they would have certainly executed him to prevent him from telling the truth about the Communists' destruction of their former allies in Spain—a major cause of their defeat in the Spanish Civil War.

Orwell's was the dominant voice of his age, and his moral and literary influence has outlasted the political context of the 1930s and 1940s. John le Carré, in response to my query about what Orwell meant to him, summed up how Orwell's life and works have fused into a noble ideal:

> Orwell meant and means a great deal to me. *Burmese Days* still stands as a splendid cameo of colonial corruption. Orwell's commitment to the hard life is a lesson to all of us. I taught at Eton. It

> always amused me that Blair-Orwell [Blair was his real surname], who had been to Eton, took great pains to disown the place, while Evelyn Waugh, who hadn't been to Eton, took similar pains to pretend he had. Orwell's hatred of greed, cant, and the "me" society is as much needed today as it was in his own time—probably more so. He remains an ideal for me—of clarity, anger and perfectly aimed irony.

I realized that this image of Orwell the man and writer had attracted me to him in the first place: the "wintry conscience" Orwell, the volunteer in the Spanish Civil War, the austere figure with a quirky sense of humor. But what intrigued me most was the inner man. I wanted to ask different sorts of questions, to get closer to this enigmatic personality, to hear the private voice as well as the public one.

One crux of Orwell's biography is the account he gives of his prep school days at St. Cyprian's in a justly famous essay, "Such, Such Were the Joys." Is it an embroidered Dickensian tale or deadly accurate satire? Previous researchers had interviewed the headmistress, who claimed it was wildly exaggerated. I consulted the memoirs of other distinguished Old Boys—the photographer Cecil Beaton, the nature writer Gavin Maxwell, the advertising man David Ogilvy, and the golfing expert Henry Longhurst—as points of comparison. They all corroborated Orwell's account. At breakfast the young Orwell was "repelled by the encrusted strips of cold porridge under the rims of the pewter bowls." For poor Henry Longhurst it was much worse: after getting sick into his bowl he was forced to stand up in front of the school and gobble down the nauseous mixture—that's the sort of school it was.

I wanted to define Orwell by putting him into his social context. Who were his friends and what did they say about him? I now made frequent discoveries in the Orwell Archive: details seemed to jump out at me and fit into the pattern of the book I was conceiving. The best things were unpublished memoirs about Orwell and Eileen, letters to him, and television documentaries that had many interviews with people who knew him. One poignant tape of long-dead friends, Cyril Connolly and Malcolm Muggeridge, showed them lying on the summer grass of the Sussex Downs and reminiscing about "gloomy George."

Some of this material, of course, has been read over and over again by other people. But if you look at documents in a new way, you can find new connections. I found a fascinating letter, which no one else had noticed, from his older married patron, Mabel Fierz, who'd encouraged Orwell at the start of his career and helped him get published. In the

summer of 1932 Mabel, planning an outdoor excursion, gushingly wrote: "Take your costume in case we find a suitable place. I hate the usual swimming bath. Will also take tea. It *will* be nice. Not as you say a *decent walk*. I prefer the opposite!" Was this a love letter? To me it suggested a clandestine affair. It changed the whole nature of Orwell's relations with this woman.

I remembered that twenty years earlier, when writing my life of Katherine Mansfield, I'd visited her old school, Queen's College in London, and met the headmistress, Stefanie Fierz. When I asked her: "Doesn't your family have something to do with Orwell?" she replied: "You *are* a clever young man." She invited me home to taste the same greengage jam her mother-in-law, Mabel, had made for Orwell.

In 1998 I got back in touch with Stefanie and her husband Adrian Fierz, and went to see them again. Orwell, in his mid-twenties, had been a friend and mentor to the schoolboy Adrian. I hesitated to ask about his mother's possible affair with Orwell, but need not have worried. Adrian said that he'd guessed the truth about their relationship early on, and when he'd questioned his mother late in her life (she lived to be a hundred years old) about her affair with Orwell, she confessed: "Yes, you could say so. He was my lover."

Evidence of sexual relationships is rarely as clear as this—the biographer seldom finds a letter that says: "You were wonderful in bed last night!" So he has to weigh the evidence carefully and make his judgment. In this case, I had gotten to know a lot more about Mabel. She was a bohemian literary type who not only encouraged Orwell to write, and placed his first book with an agent, but also adored and worshipped him. Back from Burma, lonely and hard up, Orwell was glad to sleep with his patron, as he did with several other women in London and Southwold (on the east coast of England), where his parents had retired, and where he was temporarily living.

I found several printed sources unknown to previous biographers. One example is *A Russian's England* by Elizaveta Fen, whose real name was Lydia Jackson. A Russian émigrée, she was a close friend of Orwell's wife Eileen, and knew Orwell for several years in the late 1930s. At Eileen's urging she visited him when he was recuperating from a flare-up of tuberculosis in a sanatorium in Gloucestershire. Her memoir reveals that Orwell was a lonely, sexually needy man. She felt so sorry for him she allowed him to kiss her. Her kindness encouraged his hopes of becoming her lover and he sent her love letters when he spent a winter in Morocco. When he returned in 1939 he planned to seduce her. Lydia, who loved Eileen and valued her friendship, was mortified

by his conduct, but understood his desperate desire to assert his masculinity as his body began to betray him.

Eileen shared Orwell's need to suffer, but his masochism sometimes became too much—even for her. One unnerving letter she wrote to him, influenced by fear of her impending operation, conveys her horror of urban life during World War II and foreshadows the grimmer passages of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> I don't think you understand what a nightmare the London life is to me. . . .I can't stand having people all over the place, every meal makes me feel sick because every food has been handled by twenty dirty hands. . . .I can't breathe the air, I can't think any more clearly than one would expect to in the moment of being smothered.

After her death Orwell felt guilt-ridden for having neglected her. Eileen's letter is desperately sad, but my sympathy for her led me to understand rather than criticize Orwell. With tuberculosis hanging over his head, he had a bleak future. People in London during the blitz were under great stress and tended to be promiscuous. Sex was an escape from a hard life of long hours and insufficient food, like the boiled cod and bitter turnip tops in the BBC canteen. To me his human weaknesses made his courage and achievement more remarkable.

Many of my interviews, the most pleasurable part of the research, took place in bizarre circumstances: in freezing English houses where my breath was visible in the sitting room, in convents, in insane asylums, and on deathbeds. I've introduced people to brothers and sisters they'd never known about. I found and held in my hands the brain of Wyndham Lewis. Nothing is more riveting than talking to sympathetic and intelligent people about a subject in which you're passionately interested. This brings you as close as you will ever get to the character you're trying to recreate. Two of the most interesting meetings were with women who'd known Orwell, under unusual circumstances, in the mid-1940s.

After Eileen's sudden death during an operation at the age of thirty-nine, Orwell, lonely, sick, and left with an adopted baby he refused to give up, was desperate for a wife. He impulsively proposed to several young women—including the exceptionally beautiful and charming Celia Paget, whose twin sister Mamaine was married to Orwell's close friend Arthur Koestler. Though Celia was many years younger, Koestler implored her to marry Orwell. She liked him and enjoyed his sardonic humor, but to her he seemed old and ill. She emphasized that Orwell "expressed great concern for my happiness. He always seemed to feel

that he wasn't a good bet for me, both because he was quite a lot older and because of his poor health." When she sat on Orwell's lap in a crowded taxi, he confessed he was so excited by embracing her that the passion went through him like an electric shock.

Orwell also proposed to Anne Popham, a young art student he scarcely knew. (She later married Quentin Bell and edited Virginia Woolf's diaries.) She told me about this bizarre episode. Orwell invited her to tea, dismissed his son Richard and the nanny with "Go along, now," and then told Anne: "Come and sit here. It will be more comfortable on the bed in the corner." Coming directly to the point, he kissed and embraced her, and asked: "Do you think you could care for me?" Since there was absolutely no courtship, wooing, or getting to know him, Anne was deeply embarrassed and shocked by his proposal, which seemed both precipitate and calculating. Feeling intensely uncomfortable, yet aware of his loneliness, she wriggled out of his arms and gently rejected his offer. Neither of these young, pretty women saw themselves as widowed stepmothers.

Orwell's relations with Sonia Brownell, who became his second wife, developed in this context of desperation and fear of death. David Astor, editor of *The Observer* and a loyal friend who'd helped Orwell in innumerable ways, told me about his deathbed marriage to Sonia—a blooming Renoir beauty with a gaunt El Greco saint. I asked a number of Sonia's friends to describe her role in Orwell's life. The moribund Orwell was deeply in love with the gorgeous Sonia. But why did she agree to marry him in 1949 after rejecting him in 1945? Was she a devoted Florence Nightingale or a mercenary Kate Croy? Sonia herself was perplexed about her motives and said: "The reasons why George married me are perfectly clear. What aren't clear are the reasons why I married George." Part of the complex answer must be that in 1949 he was a rich and world-famous author who made no sexual demands and would soon be dead.

Up to now I've always visited every place where my subjects lived and traveled, believing that places have a magic influence on people's lives. Since I'd spent several years in London in the 1970s, I felt I knew Orwell's London quite well. At the end of a trip in November 1998, with a day to spare, I decided to go to Eton, which I'd not seen for many years. Orwell's Eton years had been well documented, and I was just going to pick up some local color. But my visit turned out to be a perfect example of how places, people, and documents all come together in unpredictable ways.

On that beautiful fall day, I found the librarian, Michael Meredith, who gave me a whirlwind tour of the College. He showed me the young

Orwell's copy of G. K. Chesterton's book of comic verse, *Greybeards at Play* (1900), with his pen-and-ink bookplate, "Eric Blair—His Book," and his drawing of a rocky, Middle Eastern landscape, with palm trees, domed mosque, and fortified castle. The beauty of the College, its atmosphere of learning and privilege, were overwhelming. As we talked about Orwell we got on to the subject of his fateful choice, at the age of eighteen, to go to Burma instead of to Oxford or Cambridge.

The week before I had been to Scotland to see the ninety-five-year-old Sir Steven Runciman—the great scholar of Byzantium and the Crusades, who'd been to Eton with Orwell. (On the telephone he'd said: "I'd be delighted to talk to you, Professor Mayers, about Eric Blair. But I must warn you that I've not seen him for seventy-seven years!") Attended by two devoted retainers, Runciman lived alone in a huge castle on the Scottish border ("I'm a younger son and had to buy this place myself," he told me.) He still had vivid memories of their days at Eton and of their old tutor, Andrew Gow, a friend of A. E. Housman and, later on, Runciman's irritating colleague at Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1969 Gow had written me that Orwell "could not go to University unless he got a scholarship. . .that there was not the faintest hope of his getting one and that it would be a waste of time to try." "Not true," said Runciman, who told me that Gow particularly resented someone like Orwell, who was capable of doing well in classics but was bored by the subject. I now realized that Orwell *could* have gone to university if he had wanted to. He was very good at exams, and as Michael Meredith assured me, could have walked into Oxbridge from Eton—which had generous scholarships for boys who couldn't pay their own way. He simply chose not to go, and in his teens took on the grave responsibilities of a colonial policeman.

But Burma, where Orwell spent his crucial early adult years, was out of reach to me. Since travel was restricted to the area between Rangoon and Mandalay, I would not be able to visit Moulmein (southeast of Rangoon), where Orwell shot the elephant, or Katha (north of Mandalay), his last post and the setting of *Burmese Days*. Apart from his own writing, very little is known about Orwell's years there, and colonial police records were either transferred to London or destroyed in the war. I studied maps and gazetteers of India and Burma to recreate the atmosphere of his obscure birthplace—Motihari, India—not in the province of Bengal, but in Bihar (a tiny fact which I corrected), and placed Orwell's role as policeman in the context of colonial history. Once again, memoirs of other administrators and visitors, including Somerset Maugham, helped to flesh out the picture of conditions there. (This past August, I did get to Burma. I lectured on an Orient Express cruise up the Irrawaddy from Mandalay

to Bhamo, near the Chinese border, and with a month's visa was able to visit nearly all the places where Orwell had lived and worked.)

One obscure source, May Hearsey's privately published memoir of Burma, *Land of Chindits and Rubies* (1982), gave an interesting view of Orwell as a policeman. She provides a telling snapshot of his kindness to a young Irish officer who had just been posted to Moulmein. When the new man confessed that he didn't know Burmese well enough to take on his new job, Orwell was sympathetic and advised him to transfer to the River Police, where the language was not essential. Decent and kind himself, he was very different from the type of martinet officer he satirized in *Burmese Days*.

The journey to Orwell's house on Jura—in the Inner Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland, where he lived in the late 1940s and wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—is almost as difficult as getting to Burma. The train from London to Glasgow, bus to the coast, boat to the Kintyre peninsula, bus across Kintyre, boat to Jura, and taxi from Craighouse to Ardlussa still takes forty-eight hours. The last seven miles—along a grueling, badly rutted cart track, full of enormous potholes—has to be negotiated on foot. His old house, Barnhill—a cross between Wuthering Heights and Cold Comfort Farm—is closed up and there's nothing else to see when you finally get there. Since I went to Britain in November and December, when Jura is sometimes cut off from the mainland for weeks by stormy seas, I abandoned the idea and based my descriptions of Jura on travel books, Orwell's diary, and accounts of friends who visited him there.

Susan Watson, who as a young woman worked as a nanny for Orwell's adopted son, recounted her bitter quarrels on Jura with Orwell's sister, Avril, about who would control his household. I went to visit David Holbrook, now a Cambridge don but in the late 1940s a young writer and, for a time, Susan's boyfriend. Holbrook made the trek to visit Susan on Jura, where Orwell and Avril, suspecting he was a Communist spy, treated him as an unwelcome guest. Holbrook gave me his unpublished novel, with an account of his visit he assured me was based on reality. I had always felt that Orwell's decision to live on damp and dreary Jura virtually killed him. Talking to Susan, Holbrook, David Astor (who had first told him about the island), to Orwell's family, who'd spent summers there, and to two of his doctors, confirmed this belief (this is one of my long-running quarrels with Crick).

The important questions were: why did he go there? what was it like? why was he so reluctant to leave, despite the acute discomfort, the cold, and the impossibility of getting any secretarial help when he was working on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? Jura is still unspoiled, very much as it was

when Orwell lived there. He idealized the place, and gave it up reluctantly. He was not a very social person, and sought austerity and isolation. He was fleeing London, the grime and destruction of the blitz, and the struggle of life in the postwar years. The setting of Jura must have heightened the dark images of London that filled his mind when he was writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Details of behavior, dress, and speech help build the central character and the atmosphere surrounding him. His former pupil, Geoffrey Stevens, told me how Orwell, a conscientious teacher, would prod the boys' stomachs with a ruler while urging them to respond to his queries. His nieces and nephew—Jane, Lucy, and Henry Dakin—visited Orwell on Jura. Lucy remembered her uncle's dour response when she first arrived at the house, exhausted after the rail journey, the ferry, and the miles of rutted dirt track. "Ah, there you are, Lu," he said, as if she had just come back from a shop round the corner. Lucy and Henry were with him when he misread the tidal tables, steered his twelve-foot dinghy into one of the most perilous whirlpools in Europe, and came very close to drowning them all. After their boating accident he infuriated them by refusing their rescuer's offer to drop them off at Barnhill, and casually remarked, "That's all right. We'll walk back." They had lost their shoes in the whirlpool and had to go barefoot over three miles of rough country.

Orwell made idiosyncratic remarks that people remembered all their lives. Connolly remembered him saying at prep school: "Whoever wins this war, we shall emerge a second-rate nation." William Empson heard Orwell, when he worked in the wartime BBC, arguing with an Indian colleague. In a self-consciously cockney accent he desperately tried to transcend racial differences and exclaimed through the thin partition of his office: "The FACK that you're black. . .and that I'm white, has *nuddin whatever to do wiv it*." When Susan Watson prepared a particularly appetizing dish, Orwell, like the schoolboy he once was, would turn to baby Richard and remark: "Gosh, boys, this looks good!" David Astor captured the atmosphere of their weekly London lunches during the war. He recalled Cyril Connolly (alluding to a British general and their mutual friend Tosco Fyvel and imitating Arthur Koestler's strong Hungarian accent) asking: "The great kvestion iss: 'Who vill vin ze desert var? Wavell, Fyvel, or Orvell?'"

Orwell—like Samuel Johnson and Anton Chekhov—was a great-hearted and admirable man. But he had his human failings. He yearned to be rich, handsome, and a devil with the ladies. Women were always important to him, and his weird proposals to Celia Paget and Anne

Popham revealed the hopelessly romantic side of his character. His desperate longing for love—a theme in all his novels—lies at the core of his life and work, and was responsible for his deathbed marriage to Sonia, the model for Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (and for Molly, by the way, in *Animal Farm*). The Orwell who emerges from my book is darker than the legendary figure. He had a noble character, but was also violent, capable of cruelty, tormented by guilt, masochistically self-punishing, and sometimes suicidal.

Edith Kurzweil: Our next speaker is Michal Govrin, an Israeli writer, poet, and theater director. She has published six books of fiction and poetry, and many essays on the theater, the Holocaust, and contemporary Jewish theology. Her novel, *The Name*, received the 1997 Kugel Literary Prize and was nominated for the year 2000 Koret Jewish Book Award. Her talk is entitled "The Case of the Jewish Biography."

Michal Govrin: Thank you, Edith, for the invitation to come all the way from Jerusalem via New Jersey for these fascinating two days. I'm going to share with you some thoughts and questions set by our topic, in the impressionistic mode of an oral delivery.

Coming from Israel, where the genre of biography is much less popular, almost nonexistent, in comparison with the phenomenon in the United States, I feel that my role in this conference is to raise some suspicion concerning the validity, autonomy, or originality of these genres. This suspicion is especially important at a time when biographies have become a modern form of hagiography. Biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs are perceived as "exemplary" stories with which both the writer and the reader are supposed to identify. Stories that arouse envy or awe of "remarkable" lives that transcend or transgress the ordinary and anonymous. Lessons of how to lead a life by certain power, by certain achievement—moral, spiritual, material—as revealed through the life stories of literary figures, celebrities, criminals, or tycoons. Even a television advertisement for Coca-Cola is a mini-biography, a hagiography of those beautiful modern saints on the screen. They show us what "the taste of life" is, and we are called to believe them and consume their advertised promise. This power of exemplary "life stories" that teach us, that tell us "how to live," is an ancient tool in propagating power systems—religious, ideological, political, or commercial—systems that demand our suspicion and resistance.

Therefore, I'll put forward some questions about biography, asking what is written first—the "bio" or the "graph"? Does life precede the

writing of the life story? Or does the story precede life, shape it in advance, and dictate it? And who writes, who creates the story—the person who lives it, the one who writes it? Or perhaps the story writes us all. In other words, life is replete with all the incongruity of messy details and phenomena, and writing is a shaping skill with its laws and considerations. When we write a biography, an autobiography, or a fictional auto-bio-graphy, according to what laws do we fashion it, do we carve it? And what is its "plot"? For me the plot is the bones' X-ray of the life story, the hidden vein that feeds both the biographer and the subject of the biography. Is the plot unique, original, or is there a preexisting plot, dominating the way a life story is both lived and told?

I've chosen an extreme case of biography to share my point with you. It might be a little unusual to call it "biography"; but from my point of view, not only does it meet the requirements of the genre, but this "generic" biography also shapes the basic plot underlying the Western story. The case I refer to is what I would name the Jewish Case, or the Jewish Biography, with its extreme forms of plot and personification, its singular timeline, and its unique modes of self-suspicion, up to the questioning of the whole status of the story. Today I'll limit my reading to the overt, literal level.

The "Jewish Biography" starts and is projected into the future by the power of God's Promise to Abraham. God chooses and extracts Abraham out of his life, sending him on a journey towards a new life, and a new place; a journey which is at once private and communal, unfolding and shaping through history. A projected biography that embraces, in advance, all future Jewish lives.

In fact, a Jew is born into an already articulated biography. In the traditional context of Halacha—the Jewish Law (which until two hundred years ago was the only way a Jew could define him- or herself)—a Jew's life is codified to a unique extent. From rising in the morning to the moment of falling asleep at night, from birth to death and burial, the myriad of gestures, thoughts, and even intentions is pre-articulated, forming a specific mold into which the particular life is poured. The private life in a given historical moment is a personal variation on that generic mold; always seemingly only a re-enactment—not an "invention"—of a preexisting role in an ongoing plot that started with Abraham, the first Jew, and is still unfolding.

The beginning of such a long and complex story could not be a trifling move. And actually, the delivering of God's choice and promise required a few drafts, and a number of new starts, clearly seen in the biblical text. As if the Torah, like later the Talmud, the Midrash, and the

rabbinical interpretations, were not only writing this Biography, but were exposing, from within, its difficulty of being, its fragility and explosiveness. In Genesis, God's Promise is delivered a few times. Reality does not seem to follow it. In Genesis 15, three full chapters after the initial choice and Promise, nothing happens according to the projected plot. After arriving in Canaan, Abraham and Sarah are still childless, and they have already endured a war and a first exile. They are far from being settled as the ancestors of a promised nation in a Promised Land.

Why doesn't life play out according to promised biography? Was the Promise flawed? Are these hardships a secret feature of this singular promise? Jewish commentators linger on these questions. But we can see that at this point, when Abraham himself starts to have doubts, a dramatic gesture is needed in order to straighten things out and save the Biography. In a highly theatrical, almost Hollywood scene with lavish use of special effects, God repeats his promise of the "covenant between the pieces." A big show with fire and smoke and the bloody corpses of cut animals is displayed, night and fire descend, and Abraham falls asleep. At that moment God renews His promise—this time with many more details. In a way, He delivers to Abraham the Jewish Biography *in capsula*:

> And He brought him abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and He said unto him, So shall thy seed be. . . .And He said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. . . .In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river of Euphrates. (Gen. 15, 4–18)

Now, we—God, the redactor, the involved characters, and the future Jewish people—are bound within a written-in-advance biography, with many obligatory stages, involving other nations and disputed borders. Amid some more complications, the story is going to follow this outlined plot, which can raise fresh suspicion: Was the Promise edited later, according to future events, by the redactor of the Bible and spliced here, in a way that reality will seem to fulfill it? Or does God's promise impose its trenchant rules on the complexity of reality and human passions? Is this extreme—almost manic—case of Biography projected by a promise,

a prison, an inescapable destiny? One of the great lessons this case teaches us is the subversive ways in which the Jewish tradition reads the Promise. This is a unique mixture of reverence and irony, of belief and resistance, and, above all, of an extraordinary human freedom; the freedom to participate in the creation of the story—an outrageous humanistic attitude that runs under much rabbinical thought, and is enacted through the re-articulation of the story. This, for me, is an essential feature of the Jewish Biography.

Let us stay with the unfolding of the Biography, through the selection of its designated lineage. After the late birth of Isaac (and there will be a lot to say about Sarah's, as well as the other matriarchs' initial sterility), the traumatic expulsion of Hagar and her son Ishmael follows. Isaac's life, and with it the survival of the whole future Jewish Biography, is on the brink of extinction in the "binding of Isaac" (and the traditional commentators insist on the fragility and ambiguity of all the protagonists in this scene, including God and Satan). Yet, in the next generation, the choice of the lineage is even more dubious, as we have only one matriarch, Rebecca, who conceives twins. Bewildered, she reads God's promise as a singular biography with only one inheritor, without any place for sharing, for plurality—a monotheistic story, with one God and one nation, immediately opening the abyss of jealousy and hatred, of dispute and fraternal conflicts.

> And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels: and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger. (Gen. 25, 22-23)

Yet, in the generation of the twelve sons of Jacob the continuity of the Jewish "biography" is no less uncertain. Meanwhile, Jacob has been nominated "Israel," so all of his descendants are part of the chosen nation-protagonist. No one can be excluded. Still, out of the twelve, the Jewish Biography follows Joseph's fate. So, how is life going to follow it "naturally"? How will the family-nation be led into Egypt, "a land that is not theirs" for "four hundred years," as God promised to Abraham?

Here the Midrash Tanchuma (Genesis, Va-Yeshev) gives a strikingly ironic reading. The Midrash starts by quoting a verse from Psalm 66-5: *El norah alilah al b'nei Adam*. Or, "In his work He is awesome toward the children of men, oh God." And here we encounter a Hebrew word,

which is a key word for me: *alilah*, meaning "deed" and "work," but also "plot." We can then read this verse: "In His plotting He is awesome toward the children of men, oh God." Now, the term *norah* means "awesome" and "terrible" or "awful" so the verse can also be read: "In His plotting He is awful toward the children of men, oh God." And echoing the Yom Kippur liturgy based on this verse: *El norah alilah*, I suggest it may be read "Oh, God of awesome plotting," or even "Oh, God of awful plotting." Following the verse, the Midrash interprets the outcome of Joseph's story as the crude plotting of God. It is God who makes Joseph the hated sibling of his brothers, who finally plan to kill him, but alter their scheme at the last moment. They throw him in a well full of snakes and later sell him to a company of Ishmaelites, who carry Joseph along with them to Egypt. The Midrash compares God's plotting to a husband who wants to divorce his wife. He comes home and tells her: "Serve me some tea." She serves the tea. But, before even sipping it, the husband shouts: "This tea is lukewarm! How dare you serve me lukewarm tea. I'm going to divorce you." And the wife argues: "You came home with a written divorce in your hands. So, why did you taunt me with this tea business?" Joseph's prearranged exile is further compared in the Midrash to a farmer who wants his cow to plow a faraway field, but the cow doesn't want to go out there. The farmer takes her calf and puts it in that distant field. The calf starts to cry, calling his mother. And, sure enough, the cow, hearing her calf, rushes to calm and feed him. Once the cow is there, she'll plow that part of the field, as the farmer wished.

In a later part of the same section, the Midrash Tanchuma reminds us how strict the boundaries of the plotted story are. One step out of them and you are out of the story altogether. Joseph himself was at risk when his descent into Egypt went too far, according to the following Midrashic scene. At the moment he was being seduced by Potiphar's wife, his father Jacob appeared before his eyes. Jacob showed him the twelve shining stones on the High Priest's breastplate and said: "Do you see these twelve stones? They are for you and your brothers, and they are plated on the holiest of objects. If you are going to sleep with this woman, you are not going to have your stone among the twelve. You'll be out of the story!" And the Midrash tells how, in fear of being left out of the story's future boundaries, Joseph, who already had an erection, was poking his fingers into the ground, trying with all his might to hold himself back, to overcome his desire—an emblematic junction, characterizing both the imposing power of the story, and the power of its protagonist to choose to stay on within the promised Biography. Stepping

out of it, either into oblivion or into another "heretic," "deviating," "truer" unfolding, is always possible, as it was in the case of Christianity, Islam, or other sects. I will not deal here with these "external" stories. I'll just say briefly that not only the details of their "plots," but the very status and nature of their story differ from the Jewish Biography.

Let us have another look at the term *alilah*, "plot." In Hebrew as well as in English or in French (*intrigue*) the term means both the line of related events and a complot. In Hebrew, with its way of opening a thick field of contradicting subconscious meanings around the same root, *alilah* means "work of creation," "deed," "plot," but also "slander" and "defamation." The Hebrew expression *alilat dam*, literally "blood plotting," means "blood libel." Here language emphasizes the double-edged quality of any plot. It seemingly represents what happened, but in fact, we will never know what "really happened." The subversive reading of the term "plot" in the Midrash reminds us that every story is the product of interested manipulation, that the very same "objective" data—facts, photographs, events, told with a different accent, can be turned into slander, defamation, a false accusation. It is precisely this abyss between controversial plots that dominates the history of tensions between the three monotheistic religions.

I am not going to tell you the full Jewish Biography with all its lavish scenes right now. For that we will have to sit here for a whole Passover Seder. So, I'll skip a few thousand years and immediately zoom into the twentieth century. What happens to the plot and promise once the community distances itself from the purely religious terms? Does the Jewish Biography vanish, or is it articulated in other, secular forms? Who replaces God, "the plotter"? And how are the boundaries of the story redefined? I'll follow the lives of my parents, representing two major trajectories of recent Jewish Biography.

My father's family lived the Zionist story. Four generations went from the Ukraine to Palestine during the 1920s, all carried by another variation of the Zionist ideal, and with a deep belief that this constitutes the right and true unfolding of the Jewish Biography. My great-grandfather, Izik Hajies, was a pious Hassid, part of the group of "the mourners of Zion," who on Sabbath afternoons would gather in the shtetl to lament the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. He immigrated to Jerusalem, to the ultra-orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim, carried by his mystical messianic longing. My grandfather, Mordechai Globman, was an enlightened orthodox Jew, who founded a modern Hebrew school in the shtetl, and was affiliated with the political movement of "Hovevei Zion" (the lovers of Zion). He settled in the center of

Jerusalem, and was involved with the Zionist orthodox community. My father, Pinchas Govrin, his brothers, and his nephew, were secular "Poalei Zion" (the workers of Zion), pioneers, members of the "regiment of work" (*gdud avodah*) involved in the founding of kibbutzim, of drying the swamps in the Valley of Jesreel. In spite of their different lifestyles, the four generations kept mutual respect and dialogue, united by a common dream. Inhabited with a deep sense of history, both my grandfather and father felt a responsibility to write their memoirs. My grandfather, whom I never met, started to write on his sixtieth birthday, in 1934: "Today is my birthday. I am sixty years old. Ten years ago, when I was fifty years old, I arrived in Palestine." And then immediately, he moves into mythic language, saying: "I came down from the ship that carried me to Zion on my fiftieth birthday. And, as it is written 'in the year of this Jubilee, ye shall return every man unto his possession' so I, too, came back to my possession, on my fiftieth birthday, my Jubilee year." Private biography is intimately lived through mythical terms. The personal and the collective persona are mingled in what he believed is the true, ancient biography. "These memoirs are a commemoration of our shtetl and the whole district of Wohlyn in the Ukraine, where Jewish life abounded." He later gives a wonderful account of this life in the second half of the nineteenth century. "During these years the great move of immigration started. Most of our brethren went to the Goldene Medina [America] where there is no difference between a Jew and a Gentile, where there are only citizens, and one can live a private life. A small group chose to follow the promise of the prophets, and to go to Palestine. I will tell their story."

Forty years later, in Tel Aviv, my father wrote his memoirs and was also interviewed at length for the Labor Movement's archives. At the conclusion of his interview he says: "If I had the choice to live my life again, I would live it in the same way, but with even greater intensity. We were all carried, leaders and simpletons, by the same great feeling of building a home for the Jewish nation. This has been the greatest creation of my whole life." Once again, the private life, with its sorrows and joys, with the richness of details and events is lived as the fulfillment of a passionately expected culmination of the Jewish Biography.

Today, the Zionist chapter of the Jewish Biography could, certainly, gain from self-criticism and re-articulation, worthy of the Jewish tradition of multiple writing. Yet, the Zionist case also poignantly reminds us of how thin the line is between plot and slander, how much Biographies can arouse fascination and threat, jealousy, projection, and rejection. The perverted re-reading of Zionism by its opponents—labeling it

"racism," "colonialism," etc.—is clearly a modern avatar of classical anti-Semitism, and its method of turning the Jewish Biography into narratives of heresy, blood libels, or complots of international conspiracy.

My mother's story was shattered by the Holocaust. Many of my writings originate from her story. I'll only briefly point to some of the questions the Holocaust poses for the Jewish Biography and to the genre of biography in general. My father's family chose to be part of the Zionist story. The Holocaust demonstrates that there is not always a choice. It reminds us of the cases when there is no escape from the persecutions haunting the Jewish Biography; the cases when a Jewish identity is imposed by what Sartre called *le regard de l'autre*, the view of the other. You can convert, you can assimilate, you can deny any affiliation with this incredible *meshugenah* story, and then there is an event like the Holocaust. Three generations who already believed they were out of it, were caught and pushed back into the confines of the story, to their torture and death within the imposed ghetto of a "final" plot.

My mother, who lost her first husband and only son, survived the death camps. After the war she was a volunteer for the Zionist network working among displaced persons in Europe, and in 1948 she reached Palestine, accompanying a transport of children. She chose to articulate her private trauma as part of a national plot, leading from destruction to reconstruction and revival. On arrival she had cosmetic surgery to remove the number tattooed on her arm. Soon after she met my father, and they started a new life. Her decision—at least overtly, and for the first years—was to extract from her identity any trace of victimhood, any remnant of a former death camp inmate. Holocaust survivors who went to America, being out of a national Jewish story, sometimes took the Holocaust as the main event shaping their lives. Their children embraced the identity of "second-generation survivors" much earlier than their peers, of my generation, in Israel.

But the Holocaust raises questions about biographies beyond the Jewish arena. It reminds us of the alluring power of a story to attract, to seduce, like extraordinary biographies or hagiographies. It reminds us how the readers of such biographies are compelled to identify themselves with the protagonists, villains, saints, or martyrs. The fascinating and obscene spell of the Holocaust can arouse the desire to usurp this "irresistible" biography, to make it yours, to leave your ordinary life and to be "elevated" by this life of "saintly suffering." Here I am referring to the case of Wilkomirski, and his less-known equals. The beatification of Edith Stein by the Roman Catholic church basically falls into the same category as a theological usurpation of the Holocaust story;

usurpations which are no less ambiguous than the desire to reincarnate the Nazi "Satanic violence."

In what plot should the Holocaust be told, be remembered? And how can its narrative be freed from its imposed, pre-written, obscene plot? And as for the Jewish Bio-Graphy, can it integrate this trauma without exploding? Can it re-articulate a mythical-theological story capable of addressing this event, of portraying its protagonists (including God)?

The last case from the Jewish Biography I discuss with trepidation, because of the recent political events in the Middle East. When I prepared this talk, I thought it would be just a thought-provoking example, but, in our region, the thin veil between the "bio" and the "graph" often disappears, and the events are quicker than their writing. The case is Jerusalem, a city that has been personified, and was given a biography—with a beginning, middle, and an aspired end. The problem is that the three monotheistic religions have articulated conflicting biographies of the same city, and that these disputing narratives are not confined to the fictional-mythical realm, but burst out into reality.

In 1990, Edith Kurzweil called me in Jerusalem and said, "Why don't you write for *Partisan Review* about the first international poetry festival held in Jerusalem." "Okay," I said, and went out to the landscape, to see whether the place and the poetry can work off each other, deconstruct each other, give some breath to each other. I went with my own preconceived Jerusalem, like Paul Celan, like all of those pilgrims—Flaubert, Chateaubriand, Twain. Everyone comes to Jerusalem with a preconceived story of the city, which is a part of his or her cultural biography. Flaubert came to fuck Jerusalem, with a transgressional rage. Paul Celan experienced one of his only instants of erotic plenitude, just to lose it a moment later, falling into deception and tragic despair. Jerusalem, God's bride, His place of desire, is always an erotic place, the place of masculine desire. Jerusalem is the biggest harlot of all places. The world's cunt exposed on all the television screens, in an ongoing peep show, day and night. And yet, in the classical paradox of desire, everyone has his own Jerusalem, virginal and pure, defiled only by the others' abusive and defamatory biographies of her.

I walked around the walls, climbing the Mount of Olives, where my great-grandfather is buried. According to my father, at my great-grandfather's funeral my grandfather debated with the Chevra Kadisha, the mortuary people, until they reached an agreement and the funeral went on. Later my father asked him, "What were you arguing about?" His father said,

> You knew your grandfather, the pious Hassid. He wanted his grave to be directly facing the Gate of Mercy. Because when the Messiah will come he will enter Jerusalem through the Gate of Mercy. At that moment there will be so much havoc around, with all these people coming out of their graves. Your grandfather doesn't want to be bothered with any of that. He just wants to stand up and walk directly to the Gate of Mercy. And as the mountain was turning here a little, I argued with the Chevra Kadisha that they dig the grave in a diagonal.

The plot of my great-grandfather's biography was continuing after his death, and with a clear direction, so concrete that immediate arrangements could not be postponed.

The Gate of Mercy at the eastern side of the Temple Mount (Haram Al-Sharif), facing the Mount of Olives, has been blocked since the twelfth century, and for very similar reasons. The Muslims knew about the belief that the Messiah will enter Jerusalem through the Gate of Mercy. They took it very seriously, because legends, myths, projected biographies are the name of the game in Jerusalem. If there is a plot that the Messiah will enter through the Gate of Mercy, he is certainly going to do so, and very soon. It's not a "Messianic" dream, it's an imminent reality. He can come any moment. One can already hear his footfalls coming down from the Mount of Olives. So the gate should be blocked with stones immediately. And for extra safety a Muslim graveyard was installed in front of it, because graveyards are considered impure by Jewish law, and therefore forbidden for priests.

Are these stories debated on the lawn of the White House? I'm afraid not. And what about the Christian, the Catholic, the Protestant, the American, the European biographies of Jerusalem? When will they be seen seriously as interested parties in the conflict, articulating the future of Jerusalem not only according to "objective," "democratic," "ethical" terminology, but through their own deeply rooted biographies of Jerusalem, with their own desired plots?

And what about the still-unheard female voice, the voice of Jerusalem? In writing about Jerusalem I wanted to destabilize the traditional male voices, and their image of Jerusalem as the desired bride, the holy harlot, an image that has its root in the Bible and which is so embedded in Western culture up to nineteenth-century melodrama and literature. In my recent book *The Name*, in a subversive rewriting of a harsh accusation of Jerusalem delivered by Ezekiel (reclaiming this rabbinical gesture), I tried to give voice to Jerusalem, the tortured woman,

the victim of slander, of false accusations. By an ironic perforation of the prophetic delirium, I tried to infiltrate the possibility of another plot, another multiple Biography.

Biographies exert a spell on their readers. They call for constant suspicion and breaking loose. This is how I understand the way Jewish tradition developed its unique techniques of writing and reading of the Jewish Biography; narrative techniques that are linear and nonlinear, an ongoing, multi-vocal debate which is palpable in the Talmud page, from its intimate texture to its layout—as if the Jewish textual legacy were saying: "Yes, there is one plot of one biography. Yet, there are so many ways it can and should be heard." These interpreting, rewriting voices can be extreme, they can shatter the Biography, tear it apart, keep an ironic distance from it. Yet, in a paradoxical way, fidelity was deepened through this overt betrayal. And, by the inventive power of controversy, the complexity of meaning and of Text was renewed and multiplied. I'll claim that this testifies to a distinct, original, subversive poetics. It balances human freedom—with its unreverential chutzpah—against "God the plotter," in the ongoing writing of the Jewish Biography. This Jewish way reminds me of a joke about the Jew who was found on a deserted island after he was shipwrecked. Very proudly he showed his rescuers what he constructed: his hut, his oven, his shower. And then, he pointed to two additional small huts: "Here is a synagogue," he said, "and here is another one." The rescuers asked him, "Why do you need two synagogues?" And he answered, "This is the synagogue where I go to pray. And in that one, I'll never set foot!"

Arguing, even within one's self. In this sense I find a correlation between the Jewish poetic strategies and some of the great narrative devices. They are all writing and un-writing the plot, leaving the reader with a freedom of sight, untangling him from the hold of a hagiographic, fictional spell. I'm thinking of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* with its exposed waves of "new starts" brought about by the explosions of fresh, crucial intuitions. Beckett, who was a great student of Proust, shows in his early book, *Proust*, how, along this fictional autobiography, the plot is torn seven times, exposing the "backstage" of the present moment of writing, and providing a unique meditation on the incommensurable tension between life and plot. I think about Don DeLillo's technique in *Underworld*, with his way of tearing apart and reconstructing the American Biography. These and other techniques provide us, I believe, with an indispensable, critical suspicion for writing or reading biographies, autobiographies, or fictional autobiographies.

I'll conclude with a few lines from *The Name*, a novel or "fictional autobiography" of a second-generation Holocaust survivor. The main character and narrator, Amalia, is haunted by the biography of her father's first wife, who died in the Holocaust, and who chases her like a dybbuk. Amalia and Jerusalem are juxtaposed in this novel, imprisoned in preconceived biographies, in historical or ritual plots. Through the last pages of *The Name* the narrative, the narrator, and Jerusalem are in a motion of opening, of ripening acceptance:

> As if a barrier was removed from the eye. The destruction exposed on the slopes, caustic, uncovered, as if this is the Covenant, and also the consolation. For there is no repair for the break. And there is no instant repentance. Only acceptance. What will be and what is and what was. Death here is consolation. The break hidden between us, King Who causes death and restores life. . . .
> Sabbath.

Ending *The Name* with the word Sabbath was for me a secret conversation with the poetic autobiography of Paul Celan. His last posthumous poem ends with the word Sabbath. Written during the six months after his only visit to Israel and Jerusalem, and before his suicide, this excruciating last cycle of poems echoes the sites of Jerusalem, trying to write his own poetic autobiography into the place and its biography. The attempt did not rescue Celan from his final despair. In an intimate whisper to Celan, *The Name* ends with Sabbath in a feminine voice, and in Jerusalem. And with hope, I hope. Thank you.

Edith Kurzweil: Thank you, Michal. The last speaker this morning is André Aciman. He was born in Alexandria and raised in Egypt, Italy, and France. Educated at Harvard, he teaches at Bard College and lives in Manhattan. His memoir *Out of Egypt*, published in 1994, was received with great critical acclaim. His presentation is titled "Temporizing."

André Aciman: The Latinate word *cunctation* is traditionally attributed to the Roman general, consul, and dictator Fabius Maximus Verrucosis. It was appended to his name, which has come down to us as Fabius Maximus Cunctator. Following the disastrous defeat of Roman troops at Cannae—one of the bloodiest battles in ancient history—Fabius's dilatory strategy of dogging the enemy without ever confronting him in Italy proved successful in wearing down Hannibal's forces, ultimately making possible Scipio's bolder move which put an end to the Second Punic War

with the invasion of Carthage. Until this very day, Fabius Maximus is known in most schoolbooks as *the temporizer*—the more usual translation of *cunctator*—which means: he who waits out his enemy, who makes time, who, to use a more current and pedestrian term, gives the enemy time. It is also the first thing I learned when I was taught angling as a boy. Let your adversary think he's safe, draw him in, cut him slack, lure him until you've got him well and tight, then. . .yank as hard as you can. It is ironic that the victim of this strategy should himself have floundered because of it: *Hannibal ante portas*. Hannibal stops before the gates of Rome and puts off certain victory until. . .another time.

To "give time" is also a strategy by which the person put in an inferior position tries to contend with a superior force. You would never temporize with a weakling; you pommel a weakling, but you tire out a giant. Here the endangered and threatened temporizer "waits his time," "bides his time," "plays for time," "gains time," "marks time." To temporize means to do what is necessary to tide you over until a more favorable time comes. To temporize means to step out of time's continuum, to put time on hold, to stop time from happening, to open an epochal space. You find a dimple in time and you burrow and hide in it and let real time—or what others call real time—slide by you. You are, as one does with modern watches, operating on two, perhaps more, time zones.

A temporizer procrastinates. He forfeits the present. He moves elsewhere in time. Let me repeat these two definitions which I would like to propose at this time. *He forfeits the present* and *he moves elsewhere in time*. He moves from the present to the future, from the past to the present, from the present to the past, or, as I've already suggested in my essay "Arbitrage," he "firms up the present by experiencing it from the future as a moment in the past."

I come to the verb *to temporize* in two ways, and both are indissolubly fused to my life as a scholar of the seventeenth century and as a memoirist of our times. The third way, the one I'd like to explore here is, as you will doubtless see, a direct extrapolation of the first two.

First of all, I immediately latched onto the word because, as one says of the children of Holocaust survivors, I am a child of temporizers. I was born in Egypt in a Jewish family whose members saw the writing on the wall but decided to wait out their foes. Don't do anything rash, put off risking what you have for what you may never get, above all lie low—all these are the mantras of congenital temporizers. They reflect a fear of acting typical of those who are either temperamentally or materially conditioned to prefer speculating rather than acting. It's the ruse of the possum: if you do nothing, and danger sees you doing nothing, danger

will go away. Ultimately, what it really says is this: if I kill myself a tiny bit each day before you do, won't this obviate your need for killing me? If I stop my watch won't history stop its own? Like a submarine that wants to appear hit, you leave a slick behind you. It may cost you dearly, but everyone knows that what you leave for others to see is not really vital; it is the slough you molted, the carapace, dead tissue, sepia, decoy stuff. Time, however, has gone in hibernation—or, in the case of crustaceans, in aestivation. Live tissue, live time is happening elsewhere.

That I am a descendant of Marranos, who temporized in Spain at the time of the Inquisition invokes the second meaning of the word. This time I came across it in, among others, Carlo Ginzburg's book on Nicodemism. Originally, I had looked into Nicodemism because I was interested in the Counter-Reformation and its manifold handbooks on the art of prudence and was pleased to discover that Christians too practiced their own variegated brands of Marranism. Among the books quoted by Professor Ginzburg was one published in England, which I also found in the OED as a citation from 1555: "The Temporisour (that is to say: the Observer of Tyme, or he that changeth with Tyme)." Which suggests the other meaning of temporizing. To temporize not only means to wait out something, but to compromise, to parley, to delay taking a position; it means to waver, to adapt, to conform, to evade, to shift, to fudge, to trim. To temporize is what you do when you don't want to act, or when you can't act, or when you don't know how to act, or when you are forced to act (or speak) in ways that are not your own; you become evasive, deceptive. You trim. A trimmer is a timeserver. One is of course reminded of George Savile's brilliant *Portrait of the Trimmer* in the seventeenth century. A timeserver temporizes. A timeserver is a double-dealer, a two-timer. A timeserver serves two masters. A timeserver trims with time. The suggestion of deception is inscribed in the very verb itself. As all sixteenth- and seventeenth-century moralists knew so well, from Torquato Accetto in Italy, to Baltasar Gracián in Spain, to Daniel Dyke in England (whose book was widely read in La Rochefoucauld's circle), a temporizer was in essence a hypocrite, an opportunist. A temporizer, like a trimmer, a schemer, or an equivocator, is one who puts his true feelings, thoughts, religion, or true identity aside while a storm is raging. If you cannot step elsewhere, you go under, you turn the coat.

It would take no great stretch of the imagination to draw intimate parallels between the two meanings of "temporizing" and apply them in the most superficial manner to my life. In Egypt, my family could easily see the storm brewing and hoped to wait it out, as Jews have always

done throughout history; but like the Marranos in Spain, to win time, members of my family decided to convert to Christianity; others stopped going to temple. Unable or unwilling to leave, they too went under.

I am tempted to call Marranism temporizing because what I want to lay bare here is not so much the unavoidable connection between the two but what one could tentatively call a form of "Marranism of time." A Marrano, after all, is someone who practices two faiths simultaneously: one in secret, another in the open. Similarly, an exile is a person who is always in one place but elsewhere as well. An ironist is someone who says one thing but means another. A hypocrite is someone who upholds one thing but practices another. An arbitrageur is someone who buys in one market and sells in another. A temporizer is someone who exists in two time zones but who, for this very reason, does not exist in either. He has stepped out of time. The temporizer lives like others, with others, perhaps better than others—except that, like the Marranos in Spanish churches or like me in Egypt saluting the Egyptian flag every morning at school, knowing it represented anti-Semitism in its foulest manifestation, the temporizer lets time happen without being part of it. He is not touched—or hurt—by time. He lives in abeyance.

Now, temporizing may be a historical necessity and of interest to intellectual historians, even to those interested in the fate of the Jews of the Middle East, but it is not what I'm really after. What I am trying to explore is not the historical temporizer, but for want of a better term, the psychological temporizer—who defers, denies, disperses the present, who accesses time—life, if you wish—so obliquely and in such roundabout ways and gives the present so provisional and tenuous a status that the present, insofar as such a thing is conceivable, ceases to exist, or, to be more accurate, does not count. It is unavailable. He is out of sync with it. By abstracting himself from the present, by downgrading it what he gets in exchange is an illusory promise of security away from pain, sorrow, danger, loss. He forfeits the present because it's not what he wants it to be, because he may not know what to do with it, because he wants something else, because he is working or holding out for something better. In effect, he wants to alter, reorganize, and reconfigure his own life and, by so doing, forestall those things he fears most.

This, in fact, is what one does when one burrows in a cork-lined room all day for days, for months, for years, re-inventing a life for oneself. By so doing, one renounces time, transcends time, aetherealizes time. For all he knows, such a person, such a writer, may have been fending off the present all his life, so that a retelling of that life, however altered the

account may be, constitutes not only a temporizing act—it will keep the author so busy that he won't be able to leave his room—but it itself is a narrative about a psychological temporizer. Proust's novel is about a man who looks back to a time when all he did was look forward to better times. To rephrase this somewhat: he looks back to a time when what he looked forward to was perhaps nothing more than sitting down and writing. . .and therefore looking back.

What gives meaning to a life so clearly inscribed in temporizing is not someone's ability to confront pain, sorrow, or loss, but rather someone's ability *to craft ways around pain, sorrow, loss*. It is the craft that makes life meaningful, not the life itself. This, clearly, is a bookish concern and a bookish solution. Yet, it is only by removing life from the present, or from what Proust called the *tyrannie du particulier*, from the tyranny of day-to-day, hard-and-fast, here-and-now, nuts-and-bolts facts that by a sort of detour the temporizer will access time and experience. What stands between him and life is not his fear of the present; it is the present. I could mention Proust again but it is the poet Leopardi who comes most vividly to mind: his moments of true happiness were not in "lived" life. That was never given to him, since Leopardi's life was, as he saw it, a tissue of undiminished sorrows. It was in remembering these self-same sorrows, or rather in crafting elaborate ways back to them, that Leopardi the poet came upon his only source of joy.

Temporizing, in this context, is not just a strategy for material or psychological survival in a world perceived as hostile but it becomes a form of consciousness. And by consciousness I don't even mean what kind of good or bad conscience do temporizers have, or how can one go on being who one is and at the same time temporize and be, as the saying goes, "not altogether there." Rather, the question I would like to address here—and, here, let me broach the third "way" to which I alluded earlier: *Is temporizing an aesthetic move? Can one speak of an aesthetics of temporizing?* A temporizer may very well be a hypocrite with a good conscience or a sincere man with a bad one; his face and the mask he wears are not identical, or his face could very well be the only mask he or others will ever see. Either way, a temporizer has a consciousness of being other, of not being in sync with who he is or with who others think he is. He is other than who he is because his "timing" is not like everyone else's.

Everything about him is shifty. The place he calls home could easily stop being his, just as his possessions could easily be taken away. Those he loves are other than who he thinks they are, and what people swear to seldom holds over time. One could push this description further: the

temporizer even treats those closest to him already as people whom he will unavoidably lose. To buffer the blow he knows must come, he rehearses and steels himself to their loss while they're still very much in his life. He looks at his grandmother and sees the dead woman she is likely to be soon; he looks at his mistress and already sees his "sweet cheat gone." He is taking a distance that life itself has by no means made necessary. He is mourning someone who is still quite alive, the way he'll find ways to feel jealous of someone who has already died. He regrets what he hasn't lost or, for that matter, isn't even in possession of to worry he might lose.

I am, of course, thinking of Proust. And yet this is the irony with Proust. Marcel always wishes he could have anticipated losing someone; for then, he thinks, he would have suffered less. Similarly, he always wishes his mind could catch up with his wishes when they're about to be realized, for then, so he thinks, he would maximize his pleasure. These, however, are merely strategies for managing the unmanageable intensity of the present, for rehearsing, for "scripting" the present. Caught unprepared, Proust's protagonist is either totally disabled or totally devastated. When Albertine is finally willing to offer herself to Marcel, Marcel prefers to take a rain check instead. When Marcel has finally overcome what seemed like mild grief over his grandmother's death, he is suddenly caught by a spasm so violent as he bends down to tie his shoelaces that he bursts out crying.

Everything in Proust's universe aims to prevent similar outpourings. His temporizing antics aim to diffuse experience, to make experience unavailable, to thwart experience in the real world unless it has first passed through what one could call a literary time filter. His whole life is spent crafting that filter. One can see this even in his sentences, which are prototypically crafted to do one thing best of all: to temporize. They throw their net ever wider, waiting, never rushing in, prodding, teasing, coaxing, luring, angling, as if something far greater, but whose character or profile the author still ignores and is certainly not about to disturb or risk losing by reaching too soon for it, is waiting for him at the end of the line in some hitherto unknown illuminated point in the future which, once we get to it, will—as is so typical of the span of each of Proust's sentences—"illuminate retrospectively all that preceded it."

Despite Proust's shrewd and fretful comings and goings from one time zone to the other, Marcel, the character, is never prepared *in time*. He is always surprised by the unexpected, as though Proust were always reminding himself that no matter how cautiously Marcel shields himself and defers contact with the cruel world, the way Oedipus tried to avert

his own fate, that world has an insidious way of slipping back in. Proust has made being clumsy or getting caught off guard—call it the Proustian slip—a veritable art form, a privileged moment indeed, because it is only inadvertently, by slipping, that Marcel encounters the present and, as he himself knows, life itself—with its pleasures, its dangers, and sorrows. And yet, the one thing Marcel wishes desperately to learn to do is precisely how to filter pleasure from its attendant dangers and sorrows. He should learn how to distrust more, take his distance, never be so hasty or so zealous in wanting things now and only now. The lesson he should learn is simple enough—and he's made it an art form as well: *what is* should always be turned into a *what seems*; *what seems* must become *what isn't*, and *what isn't*, *what was*. This is how things acquire meaning—not vis-à-vis the real present, but before the higher court of something I'd like to call the imperfect-conditional-anterior-preterit: *what was perhaps and might have been* has more meaning than *what just is*. This is where Proust wishes to lodge all experience, and this is where *la vraie vie* occurs. Memory and wishful thinking are filters through which he registers, processes, and understands present experience. With temporizers, experience is meaningless—it is not even experience—unless it comes as the memory of experience, or—which amounts to the same—as the memory of unrealized experience. For Proust, it is only retrospectively, long after the present has slipped away, that one finally sees the bigger picture. It is only when it's too late that one comes to understand how close one came to bliss. . .or how needless our sorrows were when they drove us to despair. The following is by Emily Dickinson:

> Except the heaven had come so near,
> So seemed to choose my door,
> The distance would not haunt me so;
> I had not hoped before.
>
> But just to hear the grace depart
> I never thought to see,
> Afflicts me with a double loss;
> 'Tis lost, and lost to me.

Proust's job is to throw experience back into the past and from there—let me use a verb I introduced earlier—yank it back from the future, *retro-prospectively*. This is what gives that unmistakable span to his sentences. And it's not just a span, it is a spread. In that spread, past and future, and by implication, present exist at the same exact time.

Temporizing comes to the present the long way around, the way some people come to love, counterintuitively. Some seize today on condition they'll come back to it tomorrow. Some reach out for what life throws their way provided they come close enough to lose it. And some elegize the past, knowing that what they truly love is not the past they've lost or the things they elegize and learn to think they love, but their ability to speak their love for it, a love which may never have even been there but which is none other than the child of their ability to craft their way into some sort of imperfect-conditional-anterior-preterit. Writing, they seem to say, works. Writing will get you there. Burrowing in a cork-lined room re-inventing your life is life, is the present.

And when you have doubts, simply saying how frail is our hold on the present can become a gratifying act. Therein lies the true aesthetic of temporizing: by admitting, by showing that we do not know how to live in the present and may never learn to do so, or how thoroughly unsuited and unprepared we are to live our own lives, we do not necessarily make up for this inability; but we uncover a hitherto unsuspected surrogate pleasure: in making the realization of this unsuitability become a redemptive testimonial. Playing with the disconnect between all the possibilities implicit to the imperfect-conditional-anterior-preterit may be a highly dysfunctional move, and is only destined to backfire each time, but it also gives us our life back as. . .fiction.

Indeed, the disconnect, the hiatus, the tiny synapse, call it once again the spread between us and time, between who we are and wish we might have been is all we have to understand our place in life. By the time I was forty I was ready to dare things I was unprepared for at twenty; at fifty I was finally eager to live my thirties. At twenty-five, I longed to meet the girls I'd known at sixteen. At sixteen, of course, I couldn't wait to be twenty. At twenty, thirty seemed the ideal age. At sixty, seventy, eighty, there will be plenty of time for new beginnings.

One measures time not in units of experience, but in units of hope and of anticipated regret.

One reason why I think I make a terrible travel journalist is that, as soon as I visit a place, I am totally unable to write about it. Not that I need to let things "simmer down" (as we say) but that I need to feel that such-and-such a place has lost its presence, that it has become unavailable, or that I might never see it again. I am walking its streets and yet, for the purposes of the article I have been sent to write and have promised to submit as soon as I return to the United States, I must pretend I am no longer on these very same streets. If I want to write I must pretend to remember. Writing outside of loss leaves me at a loss. . . .

In all this, I realize, as Nietzsche says, that I have been giving you the moral before telling you the tale. So let me give you a very brief tale.

In a sentence from *Out of Egypt* I describe the sound of my deaf mother's shriek, saying that it reminded me of the screech of tires coming to a sudden halt. Big tires. Bus tires.

> This, [my father] would find out one day, was the howl of the deaf, when the deaf are in pain, when the deaf quarrel, when they scream, when words fail them and nothing comes out but this sputter of shrieks that sounded more like a fleet of busses screeching to a halt on a quiet beachday Sunday than like the voice of the woman he had married.

The part I would like to focus on for a second is not the yell itself but the "quiet beachday Sunday" with which it is contrasted. Translators never get it right because it is untranslatable, because in principle it doesn't even exist or make sense: what is a "quiet beachday Sunday"?

And yet if those quiet beachday Sundays mean anything to me today and if, as so many Alexandrians who've written to me after reading *Out of Egypt*, the idea of a quiet moment on Sundays just before crowds begin to head out to the beaches captures the very essence of life in Alexandria in very late spring or early summer, when summer beaches have not quite become the congested bedlam they invariably turn into by July but still retain the promise of magic to come in the weeks ahead, if all this means anything to me today, it is because it has far less to do with Alexandria than it does with how I've imposed Egypt on my present life in America. For this impression of a quiet beachday Sunday was born, not in Egypt, but in America one morning when I was walking with my father on Riverside Drive during our first year here and, seeing a group of twenty-year-olds sunbathing on a grassy incline off 98th Street, turned to him and said, "This is a beachday, isn't it?"

I devoted about twenty pages of *Out of Egypt* to the description of an early Sunday morning at the beach. Then I closed that segment by relating how I frequently remembered these beach mornings with a friend in graduate school in Cambridge many years later. This memory, however, was born in New York City, was then shipped to Cambridge, then brought back to New York, where, many years later still, I eventually wrote *Out of Egypt* and, by so doing, finally dispatched this entire *entassement* of cities to an imagined Alexandria.

Cooks do this when they cut a hard-boiled egg in half, remove the yoke, blend it with paprika, and then carefully spread the yellow paste

back into the albumen cavity of the original egg. The process is called deviling. The same is done with mushrooms: you remove the stem, spoon out most of the contents of the head, mince it, spice it, cook it, then place it back into the shell whence it was removed. It's still the same egg and the same mushroom—but the time schemes are all warped. The egg, like the mushroom, is not dead, but no more alive than someone on a respirator.

Egypt is just the grid, the matrix, the cavity into which I "devil" my life long after leaving Egypt. My present is meaningless unless it is *bedeviled* with Egypt. One could say that all of my impressions of Egypt are no more than scattered pieces of my life out of Egypt strung together and *bedeviled* into a narrative thread I've decided to call Egypt. Seeing Egypt, not America, is how I see America. I see the present provided it's like the past, becomes the past. When I went back to visit Egypt after publishing *Out of Egypt*, all I could think of, or kept trying to think of, was New York—a place that used to loom like a distant future for me when I was a boy but that had suddenly become my present only when I wasn't present in it! Egypt, however, the Egypt I had for so many decades dreamed of, was not once before me.

My impulse when I see something beautiful or moving or even something I desire in the here-and-now is to throw it back to Egypt, to see if it fits back there, if it isn't yet another one of those myriad missing pieces that belongs there or that should be brought back there, or that should be made to seem to have originated there, as though for something to make sense to me it has to have roots that go all the way back to Egypt, as though the act of piecing Egypt back together, of reconstructing and restoring be it even on imaginary Egypt out of this scatter of impressions in New York were an interminable restoration project whose purpose, among others, is to prevent all contact with the present, so that anything I encounter that strikes me must, in one way or another, correspond to something Egyptian, have an Egyptian algorithm—or else mean absolutely nothing. Things that do not have an Egyptian analog do not register, have no narrative. Things that happen in the present without echoing, be it even an imaginary past, do not register either. They cease to exist. They do not count. There are interminable stretches of New York that do not exist for me: they don't have Egypt, they have no past, they mean nothing. Unless I can forge an Egyptian fiction around them, be it even in the form of a mood I recognize as Egyptian, they are as dead to me as I am dead to them.

Egypt is my catalyst; I break down life in Egyptian units, the way archaeologists cut up the temple of Dendur in numbered blocks to be put together. . .anywhere else.

Perhaps it was to ease the feeling of loneliness and estrangement on Riverside Drive that morning with my father that I imagined a similar scene on the beaches of Alexandria during that magical Sunday hour in the morning.

I so envied these people on the grassy incline who probably lived nearby and who kept bringing iced tea from their homes in the surrounding prewar buildings, who knew who they were, and who they were likely to become, and who seemed so thoroughly grounded in the present. I wanted nothing more than to be lifted from where I stood and be one of them, leave my time scheme and join theirs. Instead, I took these people on the grassy incline and brought them back with me to my imaginary Egypt, made them my friends, and drank cold lemonade with them on the beaches of my teens and with them walked along the sand dunes, and to drive the point home, I even had one of them turn to me and say, as I'd told my father that day, "This is a perfect beachday morning, isn't it?"

Ultimately, what I remembered while writing *Out of Egypt* was not our life at the beach, but the fiction I had invented that day of our life at the beach.

Indeed, the parts of *Out of Egypt* that matter to me the most are not those set in Egypt, but those where the solitary, awkward, inadequate narrator goes looking in Europe and America for the remains of Egypt. He yearns for Egypt, but he doesn't even yearn for it the way those who enjoyed life in Egypt sometimes miss Egypt. They almost never long for the past; they deride the very notion of remembrances of things past. They've always been anchored in life, in the things of the here-and-now, and now that they are elsewhere, this is where they claim and have staked their lives. The narrator of *Out of Egypt*, on the other hand, has a liquid and unsteady foothold. It is not even Egypt or the things he remembers that he loves; what he loves is just remembering, because remembering insures that the present won't ever prevail. Remembering is merely a posture that turns its head away and, in the process, even when there is nothing to remember, is shrewd enough to make up memories, surrogate, stand-by memories, if only to justify not having to look straight at the present.

Alexandria, as Lawrence Durrell once wrote, may very well be the capital of memory. But Alexandria wouldn't exist if memory hadn't invented it.

Edith Kurzweil: Thank you, André Aciman. I am sure that the people in the audience, who have their own memories, and who are bedeviled, maybe not by Alexandria, but by some other place, are going to want to ask questions or make comments.

Leslie Epstein: When Mr. Aciman was speaking, I could not help—especially when he was speaking of Proust—of thinking of Kafka, perhaps the greatest temporizer of the last century, who I think once said that there was no such thing as a pleasant surprise. What occurred to me was that the way out of that dimple and into life for both Proust and Kafka was the exercise of imagination. But what separated them was that for Proust that exercise was through memory, and for Kafka it was through a kind of forethought or apprehension, lest some kind of surprise fall upon him. I wondered if you had any kind of comment, perhaps, on the relationship of Kafka and Proust.

André Aciman: It's a brilliant question. Proust had, I think, an easier time of it, considering the fact that, among other things, he shared with Kafka many health problems. I think Proust had an easier time of it because, to use Michal Govrin's term, he "usurped" or borrowed an existing form—the nineteenth-century novel. He borrowed that form tailored it to his memories and his narrative, to suit a particular mold. This might eventually become his biggest challenge; as time moves on, we will not find him obsolete, but we will find that the genre of the nineteenth-century novel, which he was clearly reacting to, but was also deeply inscribed in, may stand in our way of digesting Proust.

In parentheses, I want to state that I think the greatest writers we've had in the West have in one way or another invented or discovered the form that was ideal for them. I don't think you can have a great writer who hasn't in a sense innovated form, or come to grips with form. You can't just say, "I am going to become a great writer and write a novel," it doesn't work. I have to say—and you may disagree with me—that Kafka (and you can say the same thing about Walter Benjamin) could never quite find the form that was right for him. In other words, the vision, powerful and compelling as it is, has never quite found its most appropriate form. This is a totally personal, almost biographical way of looking at it. Kafka for me will always be an author who is *almost* very great, but not quite, because the form is not up to the task.

Now, I'm going to make an even worse statement. If you look at Virginia Woolf as a novelist, she is totally secondary; but her diaries are

brilliant. And I think the letters of Lord Byron are probably the most fabulous letters of the whole nineteenth century.

Michal Govrin: Let me just start a little argument here with André. I think that we may have a contradiction between two traditions of form. The nineteenth-century form, which Proust breaks like an egg and puts back into the shell with mayonnaise, like something served in a decadent restaurant, is still easily digestible. Kafka on the other hand, leaves us with an unfinished, torn form. This might be precisely his goal: to point to the inherent impossibility of pretending that form can be deviled back into an egg. Its openness may be prophetic for what was going to happen in this century, more than Proust's memory. Looking back at the century after the Holocaust, I think that the form that touches the chord of horror and of the unspeakable, is, perhaps, the form of the letters, diaries, and unfinished novels of Kafka.

André Aciman: I disagree with you because I think of every form that it is the right form. I find it difficult to believe that the fragmentary form, which is meant to express our fragmentary century, is the appropriate form. I don't think it works that way. And I don't think it should work this way. An author should find something that rises above even such a terrible thing as the Holocaust, and maybe even turn his back to it. Art has to create its own form, and our crazy century—and I think all centuries have been crazy—is not a justification for it. It's not a way to read Kafka. Yes, he died a couple decades before the Holocaust, but I don't think we should read him that way.

Michal Govrin: Vive la différence.

Rita Kramer: This is a question for Jeffrey Meyers, and it's about the writing of biography, by which I simply mean writing a life in its time and place. I went back recently to read a biography I had written some years ago, hoping to read it as a stranger, or at least with the perspective one is supposed to have gained with the years. And I found it—to continue with what seems to be the informing metaphor of the morning—a bit of a vicar's egg, which is a reference to a British anecdote about a young vicar invited to breakfast with the bishop, who served an egg that had gone bad. When the bishop apologized, the vicar said, "Well, parts of it were very good."

The less-good parts of my own egg seemed to me to have been the consequences of something I would call the narcissism of discovery, the

inability that I had at that time (and that Jeffrey Meyers certainly does not have) to leave out anything that one had found that had never been mentioned before. It could be a third grade report card, or the full menu—every course—of a dinner with Friedrich Nietzsche. And I wanted to ask—it would be practical to know in case I still have time to write another biography—how you deal with this issue? Do you make a choice about eliminating certain details, or is it a matter of how you incorporate them into the context?

Jeffrey Meyers: I'm going to use that question as an excuse to say something I didn't have time to speak of, which I think might be provocative: the twelve principles of literary biography, which include an answer to your specific question. This is how I think lives should be written and what they ought to achieve. I feel this could be helpful to biographers:

1. Read everything in print and follow up every lead.
2. Be persistent and see everyone who'll talk to you.
3. Weigh all the evidence like a lawyer. A biographer is "an artist on oath."
4. Get the subject born in the first five pages; nothing is duller than genealogy.
5. Describe the subject's personal habits and tastes.
6. Portray the minor characters as fully as possible.
7. Illuminate the recurrent patterns of the life—that is, look at the big picture, not the small details.
8. Keep up the dramatic narrative, employing the same techniques as the novelist, and concentrate on your readers' interests rather than your own obsessions.
9. Don't focus on the events of the life, but on what they *mean*.
10. Be selective rather than exhaustive, analytical rather than descriptive. Aim for four hundred pages and remember that a shorter book is much harder to write than a long one.
11. Complete the book in a few years, at most, or you'll begin to hate the subject for eating up *your* life.
12. Always remember the responsibility of the biographer to do justice to his subjects.

Rita Kramer: That is a wonderful recipe. Thank you.

Sidra Ezrahi: I want to thank all three of you for a wonderful spectrum of evocative presentations. Referring primarily to Michal's presentation, I want to thank her for having done what she says needed doing, which

is to put a female voice into the literature of Jerusalem. I would actually like to complicate the Jewish story Michal presented by suggesting that it is always the detours and the digressions and the deferrals, even in the master plot, that engage our attention. That is certainly true of the Biblical story and all its elaborations. And I think that even if you take those instances you mentioned as stepping out of the story, whether it's Ishmael or Esau or the Holocaust, the erased episode was the way I think you talked about your mother's story, the way in which, to the extent that they are erased, they come back to haunt us is at least as interesting as the way in which they've been erased from the story.

There is another version of the Jewish story, which doesn't only involve erasures (and here I would bring in André's presentation) the story of exile, or the story of the Diaspora; the story of the culture that is performed at a distance from the epic story, and from the sacred center. Maybe we could say that the story of exile is the story of the temporizer. I don't want to paraphrase all his wonderful metaphors, but André said something about his writing not being touched by time. I would add that it might not be touched by time because of the Promise Michal has talked about as being part of the epic Jewish story. But it's not just the Promise, it's the deferral of the Promise that the Jews have always lived in, in a state of exile, in a diasporic state. I think that's where the other story happens. They are obviously connected stories, but they are not the same.

One final comment. I thought it was very illuminating that Michal referred to what we used to call the Temple Mount, or Ha-Habait, by its Arab name, Haram Al-Sharif. I think that's already a sign, if I may add a political statement, of the extent to which Jews who understand the need to share the story have already relinquished a certain amount of sovereignty over that part of the holy city.

Michal Govrin: Thank you. I agree that sidetracking and footnotes are much more important than the main story, but they have this extraordinary dialectical tension between them, so that the most outrageous departure from the story might find an unexpected prophetic echo in one of the forgotten folds of the story or of the tradition. This is a huge quilt, or patchwork, or archaeological site, or if you want, a Talmud page. The differences are gathered into the changing tableau, where everything finally sticks back, from the center of the page to the margins, and back. The Talmud is an extraordinary form of what an exploded plot might be like. It stands in contrast with the tradition of

Western plot. The age of the Web, with its instant cutting in of so many stories, brings us closer to this Talmudic poetics.

I've been obsessed with the question of erasure, of trying to run away, to repress. I've even coined for myself a term: "hidden voices"—voices inside the tradition that do not resonate with whatever is on the agenda of the dominating group. Those hidden voices bursting out are the central forces in renewing mythos and integrating catastrophes. For example, the expulsion from Spain was addressed by an extraordinary image of the breaking of the vessels, by a mythology that starts with big failure and brokenness in the Godhead, in the divinity. The only way the Jewish people could go on living with this crazy God after all the catastrophes and still believe in Him was by agreeing that God is not perfect either—nor is the story. In a way, the story retold itself once and again, with these amendments, pretending it's still the same story. This is another form of "Jewish schizophrenia," which is another way of living in different stories, in different promises, and in different plots at the same time.

Exile as a form of temporizing the Jewish story, is an extraordinary element of a constant deferral inside a Messianic tradition. There is a wonderful joke about Abraham, the simpleton of the village, who could never get a job. Someone comes to the village and sees him standing on top of a mountain, and he is glowing with happiness. The person asks him, "Abraham, what happened?" and Abraham answers, "Finally, I have a stable job." "What is your job?" "I stand here in order to announce to the people when the Messiah will come." This is the stable job. The irony of the stable waiting, of which deferral is a part. An example for such repressed voice are the extraordinary Halachic laws—the Jubilee year, the Sabbatical year (the Shmita)—that introduce the possibility of giving up the possession of the place as a condition of possession. There are so many more hidden voices in this complex story that can inspire us to invent outrageous new waves of the story, and that will still be linked to the ongoing Biography, resonate within it.

Victor Kestenbaum: I am a professor of philosophy and education here at Boston University. My question is simple but has ramifications. To what is imagination responsible? I ask because if one were to ask what answer has been offered to the title of this session, "How True to Life is Biography?" one might say, on the basis of the papers, not very, or not necessarily. That is, it depends on the thrust, the verve, the aspirations, of the imagining faculty.

Kant, perhaps, would be happy. Wittgenstein would worry about Mr. Meyers, of course, asking him who is the inner person, what inner

person? Husserl (or Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty) would be happy with Mr. Aciman's magnificent reflection on the phenomenology of time. And Ms. Govrin reveals the beautiful fissures in stories. But. And here I confess I may have spent too many hours with Christopher Ricks. Christopher is fond of asking how one can distinguish between making a point and making a mistake without a consistent respect for what is the case. Now, with respect to imagination, how does one know when you are making a point or making a mistake?

Jeffrey Meyers: I think the imagination is responsible to truth.

Victor Kestenbaum: Yes, many do say that truth is at stake. That response identifies you, in certain philosophical respects. You would find yourself in agreement with Roger Shattuck, who talks about imagination as a loop, a loop road, which is only a temporary delay from getting back to the real, to the truth. And the real, one might argue, is carefully dealt with in your treatment of it. That is, how things acquire meaning. The point is: philosophically, must meaning aspire to truth?

André Aciman: To quote another philosopher, "Must we mean what we say?" There are two answers. The beginning of one is very simple: it doesn't matter. That's the answer to your question.

Of course, this is totally flippant, and I don't want to be that. The other answer is that in the genre itself, it's not quite the events that matter, but how we try to string them together or lace them together so that they give us back the meaning we thought was hidden and which we couldn't quite articulate. We already know what we will find, and we're just going to fish for fish that we know we've already thrown into the pond, if not baited and hooked.

I'm speaking in metaphors. But it's the most honest answer I can give because we're not really looking for a story, we're looking for a meaning, and that is the catch-term here. Sometimes the exercise is to pretend to go after a story. It's not the story but the exercise that makes the story meaningful.

Michal Govrin: I will echo what André just said, quoting not philosophers, but the master director Konstantin Stanislavsky, who said that to be true to the character is simply the work of the imagination. It's a total act of imagination and creation on the part of the actor to portray a true-to-life character. The profound aspiration of Stanislavsky, which he puts in almost theological terms, was the reincarnation of a character by

the power of imagination. And the magic "as if" that he used appears in a very shocking way, in one of the most profound and famous interpretations of the episode of the binding of Isaac by Abraham—wrongly called the sacrifice of Isaac. In this interpretation, the eleventh-century Rashi describes Abraham *as if* he bound Isaac, *as if* he was going to stab him. Was it or wasn't it true? This question for Rashi is beside the point. The truth is not the question, the *as if* is. The *as if* happened in Abraham's psyche, and it created a real reality, and with the same power like a blessing that "magically" creates the world. Which is the status given to a blessing in the Jewish tradition. Truth is not far from human will.

Victor Kestenbaum: It's a fine, nearly compelling response, but in its putting aside reality and truth, how do we measure the success of the putting aside? Reality cannot simply be a foil for imagination, and so it's not yet clear how one should appreciate imagination's movement in and out of reality. Mr. Meyers, I would like to hear if this is closer to your view: that reality still matters and you must get it right; you cannot simply say, "It's beside the point."

Edith Kurzweil: I think we'll have to ponder this one.

Ellen Birnbaum: I'd like to borrow a concept mentioned by Michal Govrin to ask André Aciman a question. The Jewish biography has a very important chapter, namely the enslavement in Egypt and the memory of the Exodus from Egypt. Egypt is a symbol of a place that Jews left behind, and in the Bible it mentions a number of times that it's a place Jews or the Israelites are not to return to. I wondered if you could tell us whether this memory from the Jewish biography resonated for you when you were living in Egypt. What was it like to have a Seder in Egypt, recalling the Exodus from a place where you found yourself? Now that you're no longer there, when you long for it or think about it, does the memory from the Jewish biography have any resonance in your thinking about it as a foundation for your current ways of thinking?

André Aciman: I have to tell you a little story. I've never liked Passover. I've grown to hate it more every year, and the more I hate it, the more people want to invite me to prove to me that their Seder is different. And it's always a catastrophe. There's always one question I ask myself at a Passover: "What am I doing here?" My next thoughts are: "How do I get out fast," and "I wish it would stop now."

The point is that we had Seders at home every year, and by the time I had my last Seder, when I was fourteen, I knew instantly that this was a hoax. I usually like to refer to Marx quoting this magical moment in Hegel, "The first time things happen as tragedy, the second time as parody." I was fully conscious that this was ridiculous. There we were, about to leave Egypt, and we didn't even want to leave Egypt, we were happy in Egypt, so what were we doing celebrating Passover?

There are two things you can do. You can neutralize this series of paradoxes and say, "Well, that's part of the Jewish tradition. To be a Jew also means having to wonder why you're Jewish in the first place." The more I resist Judaism, the more I'm told "That's fine, we all do that." It's like telling a psychoanalyst that Freud was totally mistaken, that the subconscious does not exist. "But that's why you need therapy." So there are certain things you cannot get out of, and I do resent, in a sort of joking paradoxical fashion, the fact that the more I resist Jewish tropes or Jewish biographisms, the more they are thrust on me, and the more the resistance is construed as just a manifestation and a confirmation of the very thing I don't want. I have always stepped outside of the Jewish tradition, knowing all along that stepping outside of it in that fashion ultimately makes me very Jewish. I toy with this paradox. But I don't practice my religion. It has very little meaning for me.

When I went to Jerusalem and I stood on the Mount of Olives, just to be perverse, I was thinking of, and I made myself go to, Gethsemane in order to think of Christ there—when he is sweating drops of blood, anticipating the worst. I just wanted it this way because that is the way it would make sense to me, rejecting one thing, embracing another I don't particularly like either, just to confuse myself.

But by and large I stay away from it, and if there's anything that makes any sense to me, it's that I have a spiritual biography. It is very Western in its tradition, the Western poets always come back, and I think at the end of *Out of Egypt* there is a moment that almost quotes verbatim Matthew Arnold and Wordsworth—the idea that "I will think of this moment in years to come." Of course, as soon as I said this, I said, "Oh God, I can just see everyone telling me that I'm being so Jewish," because what does one do at Passover? What is the most important night? This one. And so on Passover I was doing a very Jewish thing inscribed in Gentile books, and I can't get out of one and I don't want to repudiate the other, so I'm caught.

Justine de Lacy: This is a question for Mr. Aciman. I'm currently writing and transforming into memoir a book I started a long time ago on

the contemporary history of Paris, where I lived for thirty years. The parallel between you and Alexandria is amazingly similar to that between myself and Paris.

I spent eight years of my life in a rainy garret trying to write a contemporary history of Paris. Parts of it were "me" flashes, I quoted *Le Monde* extensively and did a lot of research, etc. Everyone who read it said, "The good parts are you."

I'm now trying to reshape it all, and I find I'm only able to do that since two things happened: I left my rent-controlled apartment on the Seine, and for the first time, Paris is in the past and I can frame it. I used to say I felt like a rat writing about my cage. Now that I'm trying to reinject myself into a lot of the stories, I can't get to myself except through *her*, through a third person. I wondered if that is diluting it.

André Aciman: No, it might get better, and I can tell you why. I think that there are many things going on. One of them is that many writers are prone to memoir. In fact, most critics, when writing about another person are really writing about themselves. You're writing about yourself, but you can't, because there's a time lag: you are in the present, and you're writing about a you that is also in the present, which doesn't work. Basically, now that your garret, that ugly rainy garret, is out of the picture, you miss it. Now it has meaning, because you're going to go looking for it in your imagination, and that works.

I remember one assignment in which I was sent to Paris. I had to have a text ready when I was back off the plane. There was no way I could do that, but I had to do it, and so my only trick was to say "I am in Paris, but I can't write about present-day Paris, I need to miss it, I need to have lost it." You need to have grown older, to look back at a younger self. You need some kind of disruption through time. Proust had figured it out brilliantly: you need to telescope that thing, to put it out of the picture, make it distant. Once I've been able to do so I can write about it, and I have written about that Paris, the idea that when you walk the streets of Paris, you say, "I'm not here, I'm in New York remembering this walk I'm having in Paris." That's the only way I can describe this walk, because otherwise you have to describe Paris, and frankly I'm not a journalist and I'm not a reporter, and I don't know how to write that way.

That's what I mean by not being prone. Some people are not prone to deal with and handle and absorb the present. It's out, it has to be out, and so you have to manufacture ways in which you can put it out of the picture, you need to lose what you don't even care for in order to write about it.

Jeffrey Meyers: I'd like to say a word about writing about a biographical subject and writing about yourself. When you're writing about a biographical subject, you have to try to identify with the person. When I did *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis*, a friend said, "You'll never finish this book, because you'll get to hate him so much that you'll just drop it." In fact, in some perverse way I then began to identify strongly with Wyndham Lewis, and found that I liked writing about nasty people much better than nice people, that writers most of the time aren't very nice, and that Hemingway and D. H. Lawrence and Lewis and Edmund Wilson appeal to me a lot more than somebody like, say, Archibald MacLeish, who's nice but may be dull.

I published a memoir a couple of weeks ago called *Privileged Moments*, which is a Proustian term, and has to do with law and with priesthood and with the friendships I had with eight contemporary writers. The problem was not how to present them, but how to present myself. Some people might say: "Well who are you to be friends with the great, and how did you worm your way into their confidence and their homes and their correspondence and to their dining-room tables?" So you have to be, on the one hand, somewhat modest and self-effacing, and on the other really honest and show what kind of person you are and what it was that attracted Iris Murdoch or V. S. Naipaul or J. F. Powers or Arthur Miller or Allen Ginsberg or James Dickey to develop a friendship with you.

So I really had to write the separate chapters before I realized it was a book. Some chapters weren't as strong as others, so I took them out of the book. Then I tried to see what the themes were, looking back at the eight chapters I had left. Some of them had to do with a sort of paternal-filial relation I had with most of these writers who, on the whole, were twenty years older than I.

Another thing that happened accidentally between the time I finished the book and published it was that three of these writers died—Jim Powers, Iris Murdoch, and Ed Dorn. This gives the book a kind of elegiac feeling I didn't originally intend. I hadn't seen Dorn since I left my last teaching position in 1992, and I didn't even know that he was ill until somebody told me. I called him up and we had one last conversation. So writing about yourself means looking at the self you've created in your own writing, and seeing what sort of self that is, whether it's a true self and whether it's you.

Most readers don't realize there's a great deal of work to be done by the author *after* the book is written. It used to take nine months to bring out a book, but in our high-tech age W. W. Norton needed sixteen

months to bring out *Orwell*. During that time, I had to respond to suggestions of the editor and copy editor, check and revise the index, correct the proofs and revised proofs, and clear the permissions for the photographs and quoted words, which is very laborious and very expensive. If you are getting a contract for a biography, make sure you get money from the publisher to pay permissions, otherwise it's going to come right out of your pocket. You have to obtain the photos, you have to write the captions, you have to compose the copy for the dust jacket. That's important because you'll see those words reappearing in reviews by people who didn't have time to read the whole book. I once had a whole review based on just Chapter 1 of my big life of Hemingway, which is the longest book I ever wrote. You have to fill out a long publicity form, you have to contact friends who might provide blurbs, you have to suggest how the book should be promoted, and you have to go on a book tour. Even though I took full responsibility for all these matters, and to do otherwise would be to invite disaster, there were bitter quarrels about the design of the dust jacket, which I won, and now is a thousand times better than the hideous thing they tried to force on me in the first place. But we also had a big fight about the photos, which I lost, because I had two on each page, and the two were joined in a kind of thematic unity, and sort of told the story in a way that structured the whole book. They just destroyed that by changing the order and putting four on each page instead of two, and putting it on matte paper instead of glossy. Having won the first battle, I didn't have anything left to win the second one. All this is going on, of course, while I'm working on my next book. So the amazing thing about writing is that you start alone, with a head full of ideas and a blank page, and when the book is completed, it involves editors, printers, binders, designers, publicists, salesmen, distributors, bookstore clerks, reviewers, interviewers, and if you are lucky, readers.

Jeffrey Mehlman: I teach here, and had to miss the last hour's proceedings because I was teaching Mallarmé, who was proud not to have had a life. I want to remind André Aciman that there is no deeper Hebraic or Biblical tradition than the murmurings of the Hebrews about what an awful mistake it was to have left the fleshpots of Egypt, though it doesn't get much play in the Haggaddah. My question is for Jeffrey Meyers, and it's inspired by Edith Kurzweil's statement that there is not a person in the room who doesn't have a pleasant association with the city of Paris. I would like to ask about what is surely an *un*pleasant association. I recall that when Milan Kundera decided he was a French

writer, one of the first things he did in a book called *Les Testaments trahis* was to come up with a list of benign villains of the Western tradition, of whom I can recall three: Adorno, Max Brod, and you. My question is: would you care to review for us his case against you, and respond to it?

Jeffrey Meyers: Yes. In a way it was an honor to have a whole chapter in a book by Kundera, who is an important writer, though not one of my favorites—even less so now that he's attacked me. But still, I remember I was in Boston then, by chance, and the friend I was staying with said, "Oh, there's an attack on you." And I thought, "Oh, good fun," because I like attacks, and I like responding in print.

By the way, if somebody attacks you in a review, most of the time it's better not to answer, because they always get the last word, and you get the worst of it, unless they really have distorted the facts in a way that you can pin them down. What annoyed me about Kundera is that he thought he knew more about Hemingway than I did. I've written three books on Hemingway, and I am American, and I know most of the people in the Hemingway family. I've been teaching his works my whole life, and I've been to all the places where Hemingway was.

The disagreement had to do with the interpretation of a short story, and I'm not absolutely sure what it was, but it might have been "Indian Camp." Kundera sort of made fun of my interpretation. Fair enough. But he annoyed me by never coming up with an interpretation of his own. "Indian Camp" is a very tricky Hemingway story, and it has to do with an Indian woman in childbirth in the woods. In the story, Hemingway's doctor-father delivers the child, using fishing equipment as his surgical instruments: the knife, the thread, and the hook. The experience of the birth and the surgery afterwards in this crude but essential way makes the husband, who was there the whole time, commit suicide. So the question is, why, if the husband couldn't bear it, did he stay there and experience the whole thing, instead of just saying "I can't take this, I'm leaving, I'll come back when it's all over"? Because as a result, the child is born healthy and survives, and the father dies. I wrote a kind of satirical article about this, showing all the different interpretations of the story, all of which I thought were foolish. In fact Phillip Young, a very clever Hemingway scholar, said the reason he killed himself is because the uncle in the story hands out cigars to everybody, but he forgot to give one to the husband, and that's why he kills himself. That interpretation wasn't any more ridiculous than a lot of the others. Well, I remembered from anthropological reading a concept called *couvade*,

which in primitive societies is a kind of husband-partaking in the childbirth experience by sort of vicariously experiencing the same pain as the woman, and that was why the husband stayed in there, to help his wife. In fact, his sacrifice in a way was necessary to allow her to survive. I was rather pleased with myself with that interpretation. I thought it was pretty damn good compared to all the other interpretations I made fun of in my article. So, I was pleased in a way to get that kind of attention from a big shot like Kundera, but I felt he really didn't know what he was talking about, and that it was arrogant of him to think that he knew more about Hemingway than Hemingway's biographer.

Lauren Groff: I'm doing a thesis on autobiography right now. Just by definition, biography is based upon memories and the past. But in the old recitals of life, there is also a pressure of the future on it, which has not yet been addressed. I would like to know what all three of you think when you are writing, and whether you feel the pressures of the future.

Michal Govrin: I can try to answer that from the point of view of a writer of fiction and not of biography. I was happy and impressed to find in my recent reading of Norman Manea's prose a technique which I use as well, of shifting from the first-person pronoun to the third-person pronoun. When you write, you are not sure of your distance from the story; there is a fluctuation in how you situate yourself and the narrator in relation to the experience which is told. Through this rhetorical subtlety of shifting pronouns, you can somehow portray the fluctuation of your own instability and the instability of a character, and the emergence of a character from a biography.

About the future: when you start creating a character, which is a he or a she who does not yet have a future or an end, there is that startling moment when suddenly the character stands there, with his or her own life and his or her own logic. This is an extraordinary moment. In my own writing I experience the feeling of the whole story written in a flash, quickly, and then spend the rest of the time, and usually it takes a long time, understanding and rebelling against this first story, when the story was simple and could be seen at a glance. During this re-writing, the character takes hold of the plot and its end, in a way which was unperceptible from a distance. Through the writing itself, we come back to the question of truth—the truth of the moment of writing, of revealing another reality, not the reality which was observed from outside, but the reality which is constantly discovered through the work of memory and of imagination combined together. And then there is the reality of

the reader. In this rebellion against your own projected plot, I see the responsibility to the reader and to the future. Because plots might have a dictatorial, imposing power on us. Exposing this hold of the plots—cultural, historical, ideological, etc.—either by the structure of the novel, or by the characters' or the narrator's consciousness is, I believe, an act of responsibility for a future lived not as a predestination, but rather with freedom.

Jeffrey Meyers: Well, the pressure of the future to me, in a biography, means two things. First, the immediate effect of what you say about the people involved. Most of the time I try to ignore that. It's axiomatic that the family won't like what you say because they have their idea, and your idea will never match theirs. So, you really have to repay some people who helped you a lot with a certain amount of tact and discretion that you might not otherwise show if they hadn't been kind to you. Conversely, people who have been nasty and uncooperative let themselves open to a more brutal honesty than perhaps you would have given them in the first place.

Some of the most interesting things that ever happen in writing a biography are the letters you get afterwards. I'll just cite one incident, which I found particularly interesting. The big discovery in my Robert Frost book was the fact that he had had a mistress for the last twenty-five years of his life, which nobody knew about, and nobody mentioned. To me it was really a spectacular discovery, which changed the whole notion of the last part of Frost's life, and especially the first book of poetry he published after that very passionate love affair began.

I had a lot of trouble seeing the daughter of the mistress, Kay Morrison. When eventually I went to see her two things happened. One, as I walked in the door, she said, "I've been waiting my whole life for somebody like you to come. This story, that has been held in since I was a child, can now be told, because you are the one who is anointed to receive this." In the course of talking, I asked her about the husband she was married to at that time, and she dismissed it, "Oh, he doesn't know anything," or "I hate him." It was so difficult getting things out of her that I let that go. The book was published, and I got a letter from her husband. And he said, "I was on the scene, and I was there with Ted and with Kay, the husband and wife, and I was there with Robert Frost, and I was watching it every day, and I knew that something was going on, and I never understood until I read your book what was actually happening." I then thought, that's really great stuff. I got it right.

The second part of the answer goes back to my twelfth principle of biography: always remember the responsibility of the biographer to do justice to your subject, because a literary reputation is not only based on the writings of a writer, it's based on what the biographer and critics have to say. If I'm the only one so far who has written a life of Wyndham Lewis or Edmund Wilson, then most people studying or reading or trying to understand those people will be very influenced by what I have to say. So that's your responsibility to the future. And I think you should never write a biography when you want to do someone down. You really have to have admiration for your subject, and that will fire you with the energy to get through a very laborious project.

When I went around trying to see all these friends of Wyndham Lewis, Geoffrey Grigson, who is a very fierce and feared person, but who was in fact wonderful to me, said, "Well, do you like Lewis, or what?" and I said, "Oh, yes, I really think Lewis is. . . ." And once I persuaded Grigson that I wasn't going to do Lewis down, as everybody had always been doing, then he wanted to cooperate with me. I went for the interview, and I stayed for tea, and I stayed for dinner, and I was politely getting up and offering to go, and finally we were out in the Wiltshire countryside, and there is no electricity outside the house, so he takes his lantern and he leads me to the car, and he wipes off the windshield himself, to guide me out of the Wiltshire fog. And he gives me this kind of—not religious but paternal—blessing, like, do a good job, be worthy of the subject, admire and see what genius is there. It was a terrific shot in the arm—to have won his esteem.

Edith Kurzweil: I want to thank you all. But it's time to close now. We'll continue to talk about these issues after lunch.

Session II: Ways of Writing About Oneself

Geoffrey Hartman: Good afternoon. This is the second act of our conference. We have again three speakers, even though you only see two at the podium. Stanley Crouch is expected any moment, and the order will be Norman Manea, Leonard Michaels, and Stanley Crouch.

Norman Manea is Writer-in-Residence and Professor of European Studies and Culture at Bard College. He has written many interesting critical pieces, but is mainly known for his fiction, including the volume *October, Eight O'Clock*, which is autobiographical, or if you wish, semi-autobiographical fiction. So Norman, if you are ready, will you come up and talk to us?

Norman Manea: It's a way of saying that I'm ready. I wonder if I will be able to add a lot to what was debated this morning. I would have preferred we go on with that session—I think it was a very interesting one. I will speak from notes rather than from a paper. I hoped I could enter the debate more easily in that way.

Had I prepared a subject, it would have been called "Biography as Language." I am a writer in exile, a writer who lost his language and, in a way, lost his biography with the language. However, I took the language, my home, with me, of course, just as a snail does. The Snail's Home. . . .You probably would have recognized that in what I would have had to say, a perspective of a snail in his home, and going out of his home to play the American alien.

I think that the topic we are debating here was not chosen by chance by *Partisan Review*. Today we face an abundance of memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies in the cultural market. I'm not speaking about biographies written by professionals—some are certainly very good, challenging, useful—but about the current popularity of this type of writing produced by the public itself. It is probably an expression of popular democracy and popular culture, where everybody feels entitled not only to vote, or to acknowledge his or her rights in the public arena, but also to display his or her private persona in public. Unfortunately, at least in my view, this doesn't bring the most acute and interesting human issues of today to the forum. Rather, it's a way of providing raw and light reading material of accessible mass culture for the purpose of entertainment, even absentmindedness—too similar to the products of today's greatest trivializers, the TV and movie industry.

Responding to the need for amusement, gossip, and cheap melodrama, this huge and ubiquitous production of books works also, not surprisingly, against higher culture, despite the efforts many writers and publishers are still making to resist the overwhelming commercial pressure. This quite often goes hand in hand with a change in cultural journalism. We see in newspapers how brutal simplification of the traditional literary aesthetic arises, how literary analysis is replaced by restrictive ideological or social-political criteria. We are told again and again by more or less improvised reviewers, and by the mass media, that the literary work is simply a transcription of daily reality, a sort of *roman à clef*, in which the guilty party, the author of course, has codified his sins, his misbehavior, and frustrations.

It seems useless to repeat, even to ourselves, that never was a good piece of literary writing a simple report on reality; the reviewers keep doing their job, a kind of detective search for the hidden criminal—the author—engaged in publicly uncovering his mischief, in order to put him on the literal and not on the literary trial. This is certainly a way, and a very popular one, unfortunately, of lowering the standards of writing and reading fiction, of producing and debating art. We sometimes have the feeling that nothing anymore is perceptible in the public arena if it is not scandalous, and nothing is scandalous enough to be memorable.

I apologize that I have to state such banalities after the very interesting session of this morning. Banality may be useful, however, to emphasize some main questions we are dealing with in our daily environment.

I still hope that what I said is rather an exaggeration by an exiled writer, and that the real picture of the current American culture is actually more balanced and moderate. Some years ago, I taught a course at Bard called "Danube: A Literary Journey," which included such writers as Kafka, Ionesco, Danilo Kiš, and so on. I was surprised not to have as many candidates for this class as for other classes, and I discussed the issue with some colleagues. One of them tried to wake me up to reality: "Your mistake is in the title: Danube—who knows anything about Danube? You should have called this class 'Kafka Killed His Father'." Another colleague added, "No, I think you should have called it 'Kafka *Also* Killed His Father'." Even after this experience I didn't yet dare to go to such an extreme. I am just now teaching a class called "Kafka and His Neighbors," which includes Schulz, Musil, Ionesco, Joseph Roth, and others, and I have many students. So, there is still hope.

Because we are at a writers' gathering, I think we should concentrate on the literary approach to the topic of our conference. In literature, every real writer invents his own rules, and then he, or his successors,

breaks those rules. So, I don't think that we have to see literature as a competition in which Proust is better than Kafka or vice versa, or that it is our business to decree here that fiction is better than memoir and diary is better than novel. We know that writing depends on the writer, his talent, his artistic intentions and originality. We certainly have important works in the genre of autobiographical literature—the memoirs by Saint-Simon, the diaries of Jules Renard and Gombrowicz, the autobiography by Canetti, Cioran's notebooks, Kafka's letters to Felice and Milena, and many other works. We also cannot forget very important nonfiction works about the Holocaust and the Gulag written by Primo Levi and Stephen Hermlin, Borowski and Solzhenitsyn, and Alexander Wat. I cannot avoid mentioning the recent publication in the United States of *The Journal* by the Romanian-Jewish writer Mihail Sebastian, an unusual intellectual document on the obscene European decay (1935–1944) and its dark consequences on some brilliant writers and thinkers.

Speaking about autobiographical writing, I think we should mention that even in the specific case of a certain writer, it's not easy to compare directly and indirectly autobiographical texts. Kafka was mentioned this morning. You may know the book by Canetti called *Kafka's Other Trial* in which he demonstrates that *The Trial*, Kafka's famous novel, has a deep connection to his relationship with Felice Bauer and with the so-called "trial," which he was obliged to face when confronted by her and her friend, Grete Bloch.

I'm not at all sure how our topic may help illuminate even the comparison of two pieces of writing by the same Kafka. Let's take the *Metamorphosis* and *Letter to His Father*, each of which can be read through the other, and with the help of the other.

The *Letter* was not meant to be published, and was never meant for the post office. It's not a letter to be put in an envelope (not even in a black envelope); it's a literary text rooted in the trauma of a sensitive and vulnerable artist facing the conspiracy of the grown-ups, represented by his father, the symbol of family and society, facing his ferocious self-confidence and strong, opaque respectability. Reading this text can be a good way of approaching the *Metamorphosis*, a metaphor of alienation, regression, and liberation, embodied by the insect-son. We should not forget that while reading this horrifying story Kafka sometimes laughed; he denied that the hero's name codifies his own name, or that the story is a confession. "No, it's not a confession," he said, adding in his very Kafkaesque way, "it's rather, in a sense, an indiscretion. . .a dream," he explained, "which reveals the reality." That is, a piece of literature—a literary masterpiece, pure and simple.

Whatever the models for a story or a novel or an epic work of literature may be, the author's life is nobody's business. Even autobiographical writing isn't autobiography.

As I said, I don't think that Kafka should be opposed to Proust. I am not sure that Proust's very ample novel is more shaped than Kafka's dry, condensed, and codified form—each is probably another artistic expression of our centrifugal modernity. Both of them, for me, are very important, even if they are, or especially because they are, different types of writers—great writers. I do think that Kafka is in a way a more modern writer, and his "unformed" form of narrative is specific and important for the entire evolution of modern literature.

Still, Proust remains unavoidable. . . .Proust said, "A book is a product of a different self from the one we manifest in our habits, our social life, and our vices." His superb novel—rather, a narrative cycle—is not a memoir. In his *Remembrance of Things Past*, he succeeded in transforming and transcending the frivolous experience of daily life, of biography, into a great essential interrogation of the human soul, of memory and loss, of the past, and of the redeeming remembrance. In his famous essay, *Against Sainte-Beuve*, he focuses on the drastic difference between the social self and the creative self. He claims that our deep self, our *moi profonde*, is in eclipse during the daily commerce with society, but left alone, it finds itself, and proves genuine creativity. He also compares the language of literature with the language of conversation, of "chat" (*causerie*), which brings literature down to the level of gossip—exactly what happens quite often today in too many books of memoirs, biography, autobiography, as well as in reports on such books that are feeding the market. "In actual fact, what one gives to the public is what one has written when alone, for one's self. It is very often the work of one's self," said Proust. "What one gives to sociability, that is, to conversation. . .is the work of a far more external self." As we know, the famous "I" in Proust's vast narrative, and even the equally famous Marcel in the same work, is the product of a very different self from the social person named Marcel Proust, manifested in his habits or vices. The writer's fear of rats, for instance, had nothing to do with the construction of his masterpiece, and with the incomparable voice of the narrator. "Had Proust been psychoanalyzed," writes a recent French biographer, "the psychoanalysis would no doubt furnish an explanation of it, linking it to anality and masochism." Certainly this would have been the right stimulation for the vulgar routine of reading and discussing books in today's public arena.

Finally, I should probably say something about myself. My prose has always had a starting point in a personal experience, but it was never

biography or autobiography. I wrote about communism and the Holocaust in a fictionalized, codified way, not only because I lived in a society where it was difficult to do it otherwise. Borges said at some point that censorship is the mother of metaphor. Yet I wrote in an indirect, sometimes oblique way because it fit my literary temperament and vision. Despite this, I put my entire fiction work there, novels and short stories, many among them not at all connected to my life, under the title *Variations to a Self-Portrait*, considering it a literary body, my spiritual being, transformed in letters, words, pages. Living in a closed society under the rule of censorship may have been one reason why I didn't trust autobiography or memoirs. Another reason probably was due to my admiration of Proust and Kafka. And perhaps Latin literary tradition as well made me more skeptical about this type of writing. Still more important was to find the right literary expression for my very inner self.

We should never be too condescending, however, about what we don't know and never tried. I wouldn't have spoken today at this conference if, in the end, I hadn't sinned myself.

Coming to the States, I was asked to write about my experience in a communist society, and I started to publish cultural and political essays about the communist past in Eastern Europe, particularly in Romania, in the postwar decades. As a writer, it was not easy to go from an almost underground life to the life on the stage. Even on this stage, I must say. . . .It was difficult, also, to go from a codified way of writing to the rhetoric of confession, from the rules of fiction to the rules of framed social-political comments.

Predictably, I found myself dealing step by step with direct autobiographical writing and I was pushed to try even the genre of memoir. A very uncomfortable, even scary experience—also a daring feat of self-exposure in today's cannibalistic cultural atmosphere. However, it turned into an unavoidable way of scrutinizing the tense relations between me and my homeland, Romania—my confused and shattered sense of belonging to a place and a history, during the Holocaust, during the Byzantine communist nationalistic dictatorship, and even in the post-communist decade—as a blamed and defamed exile in his native country.

It was not at all easy to face the limitations and the difficulties of dealing with memory, with the rigor and approximation of remembering, with reconstructing the crossroads of a biography, with real names and real personalities (still alive), real conflicts and contradictions. Yet, the greatest difficulty, from my point of view, was to avoid the posture of victim transformed into prosecutor, to be able to scrutinize myself

with the same acidity and skepticism as I tried to do with my fellow countrymen.

I was very receptive this morning to what André Aciman said about his Alexandria. My case is different, despite some similarities, complementary in many ways to his. I left Romania at an almost old age and my homeland didn't stay with me, as a faraway imaginary country of childhood—but rather as a tense and disturbing biographical obsession. On the other hand, speaking about my East European roots, I cannot claim any noble Jewish heritage, any aristocratic or religious great connection to Jewish history. I am rather a second-rate heir and second-rate by-product of several generations of what is called the shtetl, a kind of comparable, symmetrical side of the Greek *agora*. The shtetl created civilization on its own, destroyed by the Holocaust and ravaged by communists. Living in Romania after the war, I had to choose between communism and Jewishness. Quite early, in my teens, I chose a much more ambiguous solution without solution—literature. You may remember that Freud asked himself what remains of a Jew when he is not religious or nationalistic and doesn't even know the language of the Bible. The very assimilated Austrian Jew answered, "a lot," but never explained what he meant. We should probably accept the generous vagueness of such a statement.

The book I was writing during the last years, called *The Return of the Hooligan*, combines an autobiographical part, called "Past as Fiction," with a second part, reporting on my trip back to Romania in 1997, called "Posterity." This second and complementary part of the book seemed to me an honest way of diverting the risk of imprecise memory, or retrospective, self-serving speculation. The dialogue between these two parts, one related to the past, and one related to the present, may in the end give the correct assessment of my relationship with the beloved and hated homeland, and the liberating and oppressive exile.

I certainly know now more about autobiographical writing, which I used to avoid in my Romanian years. America, in the end, pushed me into it, and therefore I also decided to come here to this conference.

Geoffrey Hartman: Thank you, Norman. The writer Leonard Michaels, long a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley, is the author of *The Men's Club*, *Sylvia: A Fictional Memoir*, *Time Out of Mind: The Diaries of Leonard Michaels, 1961–1995*, and most recently, *A Girl With a Monkey*. He was also co-editor of *The State of Language*.

Leonard Michaels: I'm afraid that what I'm going to say will be repeating a little bit what you heard early this morning. I must also say I was somewhat distressed listening to what was said, for the reason that it was something like what I had to say, and also because it was so very good. In any event, I am going to begin by saying that the title of this little talk is "The Personal and the Individual."

Nothing should be easier than talking about ways in which I write about myself, but I find it isn't easy at all. Indeed, I want to say before anything else that a great problem for me, in writing about myself, is how not to write *merely* about myself. I think the problem is very common among writers even if they are unaware of it. Basic elements of writing—diction, grammar, tone, imagery, the patterns of sound made by your sentences—will say a good deal about you (whether you are conscious of it or not) so that it is possible for you to be writing about yourself before you even know you are writing about yourself. Regardless of your subject, these basic elements, as well as countless and immeasurable qualities of mind, are at play in your writing and will make your presence felt to a reader as palpably as your handwriting. You virtually write your name, as it were, before you literally sign your name, every time you write.

Spinoza wrote his *Ethics* in Latin, a language nobody spoke anymore, using a severely logical method of argument. The last thing he wanted was to make his presence felt, or to write about himself. The way he wrote his *Ethics* was rather like the way he lived—determined to remain obscure, uncompromised by a recognizable personal identity in the public world. The impersonal purity of his *Ethics*, then, couldn't have been more self-expressive. The book wasn't published in his lifetime partly because it would have been recognized as his book. He was, in his obscurity, too well known.

Shakespeare isn't discoverable in a personal way in anything he wrote, and yet it is generally agreed that we know what Shakespeare personally wrote, or what only he is likely to have written. His sonnets, which are among the most personal poems ever written, are remarkably artificial in their quatrains, couplets, puns, and paradoxes—devices that are manifestly impersonal. It is curiously relevant that, in Shakespeare's various signatures, he never spelled his name the same way twice, rather as if he thought his personal identity had very little to do with any particular way of spelling his name. A particular way, always the same, would simply be individual.

Montaigne said of his own essays, "I have no more made this book than this book has made me." I think he meant his writing revealed him

to himself, and the revelations weren't always consciously intended. Again and again in his essays he seems to discover himself inadvertently, though he says he wrote his essays for his family to help them remember him as he was in life. All this is to say only that your radically personal identity, with or without your consent, is made evident in your writing. Like a fingerprint. Or what is even more personally telling, a face print—according to experts there are eighty places in the human face that can be used to identify a person.

One rainy night many years ago, I went with a friend to a jazz club called Basin Street in Greenwich Village to hear a Miles Davis quartet. There was a small, sophisticated crowd. You could tell the crowd was sophisticated because it applauded in the right places. At a certain point Miles Davis began turning his back to the crowd whenever he played a solo. I don't know what he thought he was doing, but the effect was to absent himself from the tune, as though he were saying, "Don't look at me. I'm not here. Listen to it." He gave us a lesson in music appreciation, or the appreciation of any art. With Davis's back turned, the music seemed to become more personal.

A professor of mathematics at Berkeley told me that, while reading a newspaper article about the Unabomber, he suddenly realized the man had been his student. The professor then went to his files, pulled out the Unabomber's math papers and reviewed them. He said, "B/B+." Mathematics couldn't be further from the kinds of self-presentation and self-revelation to which all of us are constantly susceptible, but even in the absolutely neutral language of equations, the Unabomber had declared his identity. From the point of view of a mathematician, B/B+ was the man.

I think we name ourselves, more or less, whenever we write, and we always tend to write about ourselves. When people ask if you write by hand or use a typewriter or a computer, they are interested to know how personal your writing is. But even now in the age of electronic writing, when the immediate revelations of handwriting have become rare, a ghostly electronic residue of persons remains faintly discernible in words and sentence structure. A more familiar example of what I'm getting at is phone calls. Imagine answering the phone and hearing a voice you haven't heard in years, a voice that says only your name or even only hello, and you say instantly, "Aunt Molly, it's been so long since you phoned." There's a joke that touches on this experience: The phone rings, Molly says, "Hello," and a man's voice says, "Molly, I know you and I know what you want. I'm coming over there and I'm going to throw you on the floor and do every dirty thing to you." Molly says, "You know all this from hello?"

In another kind of personal revelation, you see a painting you've never seen before and you say: "Hokusai," or "Guercino," or "Cranach." With the names you announce that you have recognized a unique presence or personal being. The existence of any human being or personal presence tends to be an announcement, virtually a name, and this is just as true of my uncelebrated and obscure Aunt Molly as the very great and famous Hokusai. Adam was required to name the animals, but how could he have done that unless their names were already implicit in their individual being? "Obviously, this beast is Lion, and this can only be Pig." In regard to animals, the case is more individual than personal, as far as we know. If an animal could spell its name, it would be spelled the same way every time. Existence moves in the direction of names.

Diction, grammar, imagery, the sound of a person's voice on the phone, the way an animal looks—if a thing has any sort of sensational existence, a name is being announced, and this is true even if it goes unrecognized. It is only God who can say "I am that I am" and remain nameless, accessible only through the *via negativa*. As Spinoza puts it, substance is conceived only in and through itself; that is, only in terms of itself. As for us folks, or any other finite individual entity, we are among the modes of substance and, ultimately, "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course with rocks and stones and trees." This mournful line is from Wordsworth's profoundly personal poem "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" about a woman who is never named. In fact, what makes the poem so haunting in its desperation is that it is almost entirely about Wordsworth himself. Inevitably, we are names. To say Henry IV or John Smith III is to say a name that precedes the being it names—the fourth Henry, the third John Smith.

In a story I wrote long ago, I quoted a freshman paper that had been submitted to my class. The student wrote: "Karl Marx, for that was his name. . . ." It's as if Marx's father had said to his wife, "I've decided to name our boy Karl," and his wife said, "No, no, anything but Karl," and the father said, "I'm afraid I have no choice, for that is his name."

For reasons I understand very imperfectly, though I suppose they might be obvious to anyone else by this point, it has always been more difficult for me to write about myself than any other subject. What I know for sure is that writing about myself always entails writing about other people, and there is a chance someone will be embarrassed or hurt even if my intentions are innocent.

One of my brightest and most likeable students was named Canterbury. He wanted me to direct his dissertation. I told him that wasn't a good idea, and that he ought to ask one of my colleagues who is well

known as a scholar and critic, and has clout and will be able to help him get a job. No. Canterbury wanted me to be the director. Finally, I agreed. Canterbury wrote a brilliant prospectus, and then became amazingly casual about the prospect of writing anymore. Upon graduation he left for West Virginia (his home state) where he made a name for himself in politics. It was as if, like Miles Davis, he'd turned his back on the audience—which was me. Canterbury had to escape individual distinction, in my eyes, to achieve the personal. Before he left for West Virginia, I asked if he would try to find a certain kind of old handmade tool, an adze, and bring it to me when he visited California. About six months later, he visited California and presented me with a handmade adze from West Virginia—the tool used to make the coffin in *As I Lay Dying*. I was very touched. Nothing remained of our former relationship of professor and student. We had become purely friends.

When I was writing my novel *The Men's Club*, it occurred to me that Canterbury was the right name for one of the characters in my novel. The character looked nothing like the real Canterbury, and his personality couldn't be more different, but my friend, the real Canterbury, was shocked. How could I have done this to him? "So that's what you think about me," he said. He went on and on reminding me of what I had done to him. I couldn't tell if he were serious or joking.

Usually, when writing about myself, I will disguise the people I talk about and never use their real names. Occasionally, when I want to say something innocuous or affectionate, I'll ask permission to use their real name. One of my writer friends, also a former student, found it mysteriously impossible not to use real names when writing about herself, though it could make no difference to the quality or the sales of her book. She simply couldn't bring herself to change the names. As a result, people were hurt and family relations were irreparably damaged. There is something horrific about seeing your name in print. For some of us, it's almost as disturbing as a photograph. Even when writing only about myself, I'm very reluctant to use my name in a sentence, I do it only when I have no choice. It gives me the creeps to write "Leonard" or "Lenny."

I think I know why my student couldn't help using real names despite the consequences for her family relations. From my experience when writing about myself, the moment I begin making up names for the real people in my life, there seems to be a loss of seriousness, and then I can't get rid of the feeling and everything begins to seem like a lie even if everything—except for a few names—is entirely true. The impulse toward truth is built into our existence just as the shape of our eyes is built into our genes, and the truth, like murder, wants out. Of course

there are different kinds of truth. My friend should have changed the real names of the people in her book, but she couldn't do it. She was possessed by a sort of demonic righteousness. "I'm writing the truth and nothing but. These are the true names." People often say when accused of slanderous gossip, "But it's the truth," as if that were a justification. The truth is in the heart of the speaker.

Another reason I have trouble writing about myself, aside from what it entails in regard to other people, has to do with the essential nature of writing. According to Freud, "Writing is the record of an absent person." This is a condensation of what Socrates said about not writing. He said, if you have something to say, you ought to be present to answer questions from your audience, because truth lies only in the practice of the dialectic, which is a very difficult thing to arrive at, or to experience. When it happens it is like a sudden flame. In Plato's *Seventh Letter*, he goes on about the frivolousness that is inevitable in writing, and says that any man who tries to write the absolute truth, as it is known to himself, must be insane. There is no better definition of insanity.

Freud's way of restating Socrates's point, "the record of an absent person," is very suggestive. If you are absent when you write, you must be absent to the second power when you write about yourself. It's time for me to confess that I'm trying to reconcile the idea of presence in one's writing with the idea of absence, which is what I intend to do, finally, in talking about how I write about myself. First, I'd like to tell a joke that touches on this complexity of simultaneous presence and absence:

> The king and his court are out hunting elk in the royal forest. A poacher sees them coming and becomes terrified. He leaps from behind a bush and cries, "I am not an elk." Immediately, the king shoots him. One of the courtiers says, "But your majesty, he said, 'I am not an elk.'" The king slaps his forehead and says, "I thought he said 'I am an elk.'"

Whenever I write anything, my presence and absence are in constant tension—especially when writing about myself. What makes things worse for me is that because of this excruciating tension, I always feel very much out of fashion, since it is now very common for writers to be more than usually present—even outrageously present—in their writing, whether or not they are writing about themselves. Some writers don't know how to be otherwise than fully present. There has never been such extraordinary directness and candor. The effect is comparable to pornography, not because of explicit sexual content, but rather because

the directness and candor tend to be shockingly impersonal. The way I write about myself or anything else is, I'm afraid, personal or it's nothing. This means I must always find some appropriate form. One relation of being personal and finding an appropriate form can be seen in Hamlet's famous soliloquy where he thinks about suicide. He says, "That it should come to this." As opposed to Hamlet, a contemporary in the same situation would say, "Incredible," or some version of incredible, which is a cry of me-feeling.

The difference between the contemporary speaker and Hamlet isn't simply in the loss of the subjunctive mood, but rather the loss of a significant intervening form between speaker and audience. When Hamlet says "That it should come to this," he is noticing the convergence of terrific forces outside himself. One force is justice. The other is necessity. A grammatical form, the subjunctive mood, makes it possible for the reader and Hamlet to convene in the understanding of his personal situation. This convening is the experience of the personal. In order for it to have happened, Hamlet absents himself in the sentence as definitively as Miles Davis turning his back to the audience.

You might argue that Hamlet isn't using the subjunctive. He is stating a fact; so his comment has indicative force. I'm not a grammarian, but insofar as what Hamlet says implies that it could have come to something other than this, he is using the subjunctive in a peculiarly delicate and personal way.

When the contemporary says "Incredible," we are forbidden to convene in any understanding and obliged merely to notice a figure of emotion, all of which emotion is locked within his cry, "Incredible." This kind of expression in which all meaning and feeling are at once sensationally apparent and completely unavailable to you, which I take to be emblematic of contemporary writing and much else that is contemporary, resembles greed. It's probably somehow related to the culture of capitalism, where we are constantly assaulted by images that demand attention to what we can't have, mainly beautiful faces and bodies, but also a lot of other things—vast fortunes, celebrity, power, love—almost anything you might suppose people want.

The haiku, a poem of three lines and seventeen syllables, which is usually about nature, offers a form in which writer and reader personally convene. I can't write haiku, but when writing about myself, I feel the impulse to write in that terse and essentializing way. This should be apparent in my book, *Time Out of Mind*, a selection of journal entries made over thirty years. In these entries I say more about myself personally than in any other place. I also say less since the entries contain far

more implication than explication. For example, I wrote an entry on December 12, 1993, in Hawaii, that reads:

> Birdcalls wake me, a sound like names, like
> the trees repeating themselves in the dawn mist, each
> holding its place, awaiting recognition, like names.

The context for this entry is omitted. A reader could figure it out from things said in other entries, though many autobiographical details that might seem relevant to a biographer or a gossip aren't given. In this entry I don't say that I had awakened lying beside my girlfriend and that we had been together for almost three years. Not long after this moment she would leave me. I don't say that I knew she would leave me, and I don't mention the fact that she was twenty-seven years younger than me. I don't say that I knew the age difference was of concern to her, or that it somehow hadn't yet troubled me as much. I don't say our backgrounds and interests were nothing alike. I don't say that she didn't enjoy lectures given by visiting scholars at Berkeley where we lived during our three years together, or that she hated Berkeley dinner parties with academic or literary celebrities. I don't say that I was crazy about her. I don't say that I would have happily not gone to lectures and dinner parties and stayed home with her and watched Monday Night Football, or, if she insisted, I'd even have gone bowling. I don't say that what she found interesting—running small businesses, investment banking, managing the finances and personnel of an office—didn't much interest me. I don't say that I tried to be interested, and I would ask her questions about her work, but I would end up feeling more intrusive than properly engaged. The innerness of business life, and the whole realm of action and money were never accessible to my brain. I don't say that once, after a lecture in Berkeley given by the chairman of the Harvard English department, she said, "We're basically different. You listened to the lecture and I wondered how much it cost the university for the lighting and janitorial service that made the lecture possible. Now you want to talk about the lecture, but I'm still wondering about the maintenance of the building. All that glass had to be washed, the floors polished. Someone had to take care of the garden outside, the landscaping." I don't say that I woke up beside my girlfriend who was twenty-seven years younger than I was and would soon leave me, which I knew, though I didn't know she would leave me for a businessman.

My girlfriend and I had gone to Hawaii, the Puna coast of the Big Island. We were staying in one room of a primitive but elegant shack in

an artist colony. The shack had no windows. You could sense the magnificent luxuriance and vitality outside, the trees, the weather, the light, the ocean. In the other room of the shack, there were three men. One of them coughed all night. He had AIDS and so did several other men at the colony. The wall between our rooms was a thin sheet of wood. Listening to him cough, and knowing my girlfriend would leave me, are elements in the journal entry, and a reader might get a sense of them from other entries, but they aren't emphasized. I don't say that her youth didn't make me feel young, but rather the opposite, and I don't say that the coughing all night was heartbreaking and that it intensified the heartbreak I'd begun to feel, knowing I was much closer to the end than my girlfriend and knowing she would soon leave me. I don't say that in the beginning of our love affair she said she would never leave me. I don't say that I didn't pity myself. I felt an overwhelming melancholy. I don't know a word for it in English. In German, I think it is called *Weltschmerz*. I say only that the birdcalls and the trees were like names. I watched the trees emerging in the mist, and I listened to the birdcalls. I was struck by the repetition of things and by the pathos there is in the way individual being is always emerging and calling its name as if to distinguish itself amid the mindless proliferation and density of life in general. I don't say much of this in the journal. When writing about myself, I find that I am interested in the expressive value of form and its relation to the personal more than I am interested in particular revelations of my individual life.

Geoffrey Hartman: We heard Socrates's definition of writing as the record of an absence. We are very happy that we have a presence here and that we can ask questions of them. So, since Stanley Crouch has not yet arrived, I open the session to questions.

Jeffrey Meyers: The last section of Lenny's talk seemed to be an aesthetic statement about how much could be gained by leaving out, rather than putting in. Could you say more about that?

Leonard Michaels: What is gained is access to what I call a form. The more I put in, the less access I have to the form, and the more my sentences move in the direction of the novelistic. I am not instinctively a novelist, and what happens when I begin to elaborate and begin to accumulate a lot of details is that I begin to hear my own voice as if I were talking, rather than writing, and as soon as I hear the sound of talk in my own writing, I find it very discouraging. It's not what I should be

doing. It's one of the reasons I like jokes. They are swift, and take advantage of expressive possibilities of the form better than almost anything else. I'm not trying to generalize, and I'm not trying to say that a novel is a lesser art form. There are great writers who are novelists and I'm perfectly aware of that. I haven't taken a position of the large aesthetic kind.

Jeffrey Mehlman: I have a question for Norman Manea. Specifically, it has to do with the reference to *Against Sainte-Beuve* by Proust, whose argument is that between the writer and the man who lives the life there is an essential distinction. It strikes me that Proust's essay is part of a tradition whose most recent exemplar just happens to be the Eastern European book I referred to this morning, *Testaments Betrayed*, by Milan Kundera, which, as I recall, is really a book opposing literary biography. Interestingly, it is a very Eastern European book, though written in French, because Kundera's sense is that literary biography is really part and parcel of the mindset that gave us the Eastern European secret police. You let these guys go to work, and they will end up doing what the secret police did to us in Eastern Europe, which is understandable from Kundera's point of view. However, in the case of Proust, I wonder whether one doesn't risk an important misunderstanding by buying into the argument of *Against Sainte-Beuve*. And specifically, in the novel itself, there is a major distinction between life—a man's life, which is essentially awful—and art, which is essentially wonderful and redeems that life. If you look more closely, the principal metaphor for the work of art is the French cathedral. And the principal problem with life is that, in the case of the two great passions, snobbery and love, they face disaster. In the case of love, the disaster has everything to do with homosexuality, which Deleuze says is the hidden truth of love in Proust; and in the case of snobbery—it would take time to demonstrate this—it has everything to do with a certain Jewishness. The Jews are excluded: Bloch, who dreams of himself as a baron, is a quintessential snob (*sine nobilitate*) in Proust. Where Proust's novel is resonant with the argument of *Against Sainte-Beuve*, you have the same notion of pure French art which is to be protected from contamination by Judeo-homosexual life. That being the case, I would say there is good reason not to rally too quickly to the argument of *Against Sainte-Beuve*. I don't know if that's clear, but I would like to hear your comment.

Norman Manea: I don't think we can avoid misunderstandings, whatever we say or do. And I don't think that misunderstanding, if it is there, is always counterproductive. In the climate of today's literary debate, however, I still feel the need to emphasize the independence of art. As

we know, it's impossible for any artist not to have a transport, a mutual exchange between his vulgar, trivial, social persona and the more profound self. The writer is inspired and fed by his daily life. So there isn't a wall there that separates this totally. Proust's essay deserves to be honestly debated today. What you said about this combination between a pure French kind of tradition—I am not sure that it is so pure—and the more savage or trivial Judeo-homosexual or even Judeo-Christian homosexual mixture is quite interesting. It's also about the elitist position of the writer, which doesn't seem more possible in today's social climate. I'm not arguing for a total separation between art and life, but I am arguing for the right criteria to judge or debate a piece of literary work. I think misunderstandings will always be there.

Susan Suleiman: I was struck by Leonard's very interesting rhetorical structure. You begin by saying, "I never write about myself, really, except everything I write reveals me." Then you say, "Here is this diary entry, and it doesn't say all these things." Then, wonderfully, you give us all of the very personal and painful and autobiographical facts that surrounded that entry. You are asserting that you are not going to give us autobiography, and then in the very structure of your talk you give us the autobiography which you say you did not do in the diary. So, even if you didn't do it in the diary, you certainly did it today—in what André might refer to as a temporizing way, that is, some sort of ambivalent way of "I am" and "I am not" writing autobiography. And then I thought that Norman's talk had a similar structure, because you begin by saying, "The only thing I really treasure is fiction," or at least that's what I thought you were saying in the beginning; that even when you were writing in Eastern Europe, you really spoke about your reality, but in some roundabout way that was ultimately fictional, and you never really wanted to write in a direct, autobiographical way. And then, when you came to the U.S., after a number of years you were forced to commit the sin, as you put it, and you began to tell us a little bit about your latest book, which is a memoir, without telling us a whole lot. But in a curious way, this is not exactly the same thing. You seem both to be denying the need for autobiography and giving in to it, but in a temporizing or indirect way. Is it that one doesn't want to say things directly? Or that nowadays, there are too many memoirs, so no writer worth his salt wants to say, "This is the truth." Or is it that you don't believe in generic distinctions?

Leonard Michaels: First of all, if I heard it correctly, you said that I said that I don't write about myself. But all I said was that I find it

very difficult to write about how I write, and so on. I am one step back from that. Second of all, the whole performance, as it were, is based on a kind of paradox that haunts all writers, because people generally do not acknowledge the degree to which they are immediately personally present in their writing. If they are going to write, if they are going to use language, if they are going to use diction, if they are going to have any sort of grammar at their disposal, they are going to reveal themselves, because they are not going to use it the way everybody else uses it. It will be instantly revealing—if not instantly, then ultimately. How often has it been the case that you've read a book, a story, or what have you, and you've come away with a very distinct sense of the person who wrote it, and remember nothing about the story. That has certainly been my case. Maybe other people have never had that experience.

I think the last point you made had to do with these minimal personal entries of mine. My feeling was that I was after this thing that I keep referring to as the expressive value of form in relation to the personal. I think that while my book does have a considerable amount of autobiographical matter, you can read it for story value if you like. The achievement of the book has to do with the achievement of this expressive form. What comes through in the book is this personal essence; that's what I was after, and that's what I was interested in. And the reason I ended my paper with all that autobiographical material, which I'm sure has a certain kind of human interest—and I am sure was indiscreet—was used in order to make my point, to establish a contrast between that and what I say about the trees and the birds and the fact that existence moves toward a name. Am I making sense?

Susan Suleiman: Yes, but, and I don't know whether other people feel the same way, I was very interested in what you were doing in the end. That is, it seemed to have its own very particular kind of poetic rhetoric. And I was wondering whether your autobiography wasn't based on a curious denial of the interest of the autobiographical.

Leonard Michaels: No.

Susan Suleiman: That is, you were saying that it's the form that matters, "I write about myself only when I'm not writing about myself." The personal reveals itself in every sentence, but of course one must never talk about what actually happened to one's self because that would be too gross, or too direct. But yet, in a curious way, that's

exactly what you accomplished in a highly effective way, and I was very interested in what you had to say about this love affair.

Leonard Michaels: I gave you a lot of facts; well, not that many. But if I were to ask you questions about the girl, I bet you could not really say all that much. I revealed just enough to make my point. Maybe I didn't. Maybe I really said too much. My point was, it establishes contrast, and justifies my having written the entries the way I wrote them, or published them. You live altogether differently from what you put down on the page, and what you put down is only representative of an aspect of the life that you have lived. And I tried to go after the formal phenomenon that I find enormously interesting. That's where my passion is, which I try to separate from what I take to be the work of a novelist.

For example, after reading *Anna Karenina*, I know that the book will stay with me for the rest of my life. I know that I feel as if I can walk around in the rooms in St. Petersburg, even though Tolstoy doesn't describe them. And I know that I will remember these characters forever; I know they exist very much like people. This is the work of a very great novelist, and I want to write like that, I want to write in that mode. If in a story I can't put some essentializing fact about a character down on the page pretty quickly, I am in trouble. I achieve it not so much by description of the character or not so much by what the character says, but by several other things, and most particularly by the form that drives the whole story. If I am in touch with that, the characters will live without me having to impose personality on them, impose life upon them. They will seem to have freedom the way they have in real life. Now, I am trying to stick close to this one point about expressive form, and I compared it to a number of things. I compared it to grammar, I talked about the subjunctive mood, and I talk about this guy bringing me an adze, and all of a sudden the teacher-student thing was gone. We were friends at that moment. I don't know how to get closer to this idea. In fact, I was asked not long ago by a good friend who is a molecular biologist: "What do you mean by form?" I think I keep saying what I mean by form. I think if the joke works, you've experienced the form. There is a certain amount of material in a joke, of course, but you know you can take the same joke and change the material a thousand different ways, and it would still be the same joke because the form lives, and that's what's funny. I think that's how I write, and that's what I am concerned about.

Norman Manea: You are right, I am still ambiguous about my memoir project. I didn't really give in for money or for fame. I gave in to this

project as a way of trying a new adventure in writing, hoping that something interesting may come out if I am forced to do something that I don't like to do. But I had a tough time with the limitations of any direct autobiographical writing. I don't see any reason to write such a book, if you don't reveal, in a very cruel way, everything—or at least the essential. I would say you need a certain amount of indecency. Now, indecency today is not as rare as it was fifty or sixty years ago. So, you enter another type of cliché. I already told you a little about the book. The first part, which is called "The Past as Fiction" is a search for my roots. For this you have to use imagination because I don't have all the documents and information and memory about the past. The second part of the book is a straight type of narrative, which is concrete and related to going back to the place; I thought this combination might benefit each part and their interaction. Among many other problems, I also faced the question of style, of strategy of the narrative. I remember I had a discussion a few years ago with an American writer, and she told me, "Look, I cannot read more Central European literature. It's too claustrophobic for me." Maybe she was right. Maybe we were formed in a way of elliptic, oblique writing, which we thought and believed to be more powerful. Who knows what form is more powerful? . . .Probably the one that fits you as a writer. The one in which your inner self finds and imposes its own expression, its own form. Flaubert said about Madame Bovary, "*C'est moi.*" He put everything in; he put himself in. He didn't need to write an autobiography. And Proust didn't write an autobiography, despite the fact that he might have been very good at it. It's, again, the problem of the temper and talent of the writer; nothing more than that.

Sanford Pinsker: I have a question for Mr. Manea. We are awash in contemporary American culture, with everything on the cheap. Religion on the cheap, political analysis on the cheap, and certainly memoir on the cheap. I wanted to give you an occasion to rant about how hard it must be to write a serious memoir in an age when the presiding critic, the tastemaker, long ago ceased to be T. S. Eliot, who talked about the escape from personality as being necessary. Now it's necessary to be awash in your personality, awash for everyone to see, and the tastemaker of our time is Oprah—even though the *Partisan Review* crowd might not want to admit that. Each week's daytime TV shows are trumped by next week's scandalous revelations. There is absolutely nothing you can't reveal. And the sad mark of this is that even Philip Roth has been outscooped by the people on *Oprah*. In that world, what chance does a serious writer have to write a serious memoir that serious readers could take seriously?

Norman Manea: As I said, I was not adjusted to this type of autobiographical writing. But I don't think that it's more difficult to write serious memoirs than it is to write serious literature. If you are serious, you are serious in whatever you write, whatever it is, whatever genre you try. Of course, it's a different situation now—on a global scale—and it may get rapidly worse, but I don't think that the writer has many choices. He is who and as he is. He is acting his own very peculiar, distinct role. In my case, the writer is writing in a foreign language—the language of the birds. But he knew from the start that he would not be awarded with flowers or with money, even in his own place and culture. So the writer has to continue whatever he does. I am flattered that you consider me a serious writer. I can only say that I try to be.

André Aciman: This is for Leonard. There is a jazz term which I learned because I have a very good friend who plays the trumpet, and he said something to me, which I am going to use on you. We were listening to your lecture, which I liked, and then you read the piece from the diary entry, which I thought was very terse, very oblique, evasive, and elusive—all those things that we are taught to achieve. Then, to come to the jazz term, you began to wail. It was really magnificent. You began on that highly rhetorical note, "I will not say, I will not say," which reminded me of *King Lear* when one of the daughters says, "I will not tell you how much I love you." She never tells him how much she loves him, but she tells him how much. So, although this was all a wonderful, primitive moment, I don't even think I will remember the diary entry. What I will remember is the fact that we got the story, we got the character of the woman, we got your character, we got your voice, we got the whole thing excellently portrayed in those repeated things—we got a form.

You think there is a question coming, don't you? Let me try to manufacture one for the notes, as it were. Writing in fact is total discipline, and we say that the sonnet is fourteen lines, has *x* number of structures, and then, to make our students feel good about it, we say, "however strict it seems, it's quite liberating." Actually I think writing is not liberating. It is not a free thing, it's total discipline, it's sort of shackled, and I was trying to get you to compare the terse thing that you gave us at the beginning, and that highly rich, munificent, and rhetorical thing, which was quite baroque—which I liked. I was just wondering about your reaction to this.

Leonard Michaels: What you say is so good that I thought you were going to put me on the spot, and then you just beautifully curved back and answered the question that you might have put earlier, when you

were describing the autobiographical material. Now, in the second part of your statement, you are emphasizing the rhetorical phenomenon, and you are saying that that in itself has a kind of magnificence. Is that it?

André Aciman: Yes.

Leonard Michaels: And the magnificence of the rhetorical phenomenon, insofar as you can separate it from what you might call the personal, can be said to be the achievement, as it were. The value of the piece lies in that, and the beauty of the music, of the arrangement, the structure, and all of these things. You know, it's like when I heard someone talking about *War and Peace*, and he said that—I'll move you to a much larger, grosser form if you like—he said there is all this historical theorizing in *War and Peace*, he says they are faults, but the book wouldn't be what it is without it. The book achieves its magnificence against this other thing, this form of history, this idea of passage, and so on. Is that something like an answer? That there is a tension between the two?

André Aciman: Yes, I think there is, and thank you. It's an impossible question. This was not a trick question, but it was because it baffled me, because what I will remember in two weeks was you, standing there and doing this thing, which you kind of pooh-poohed.

Leonard Michaels: Well, you said it was a form, and I want to stick with what you said.

Geoffrey Hartman: Let me intervene. I want to ask Lenny about this, "I did not say" or "I do not say that." I understood it, and it was very moving. But you gave us an example where personal essence and expressive form, these are your two terms, came together, and I think they did come together. Could you really have conveyed what you said you did not say in any other way? The suggestion was that perhaps your diary entry could have said much more in the form of the more objectifying? But as you said it, not only was this a rhetorical form I recognize as *praeteritio*, the technical name you give to the rhetorical form you used—that's not so very important—but I was moved by what you did not say, and also did not say to the girl you lost. That is, there was a sense of the limits of speech, or the kind of aphasia that entered into your very recital, which could have gone on a long time, so that the negativity of the form was part of the form. It had something to do with the record of an absence.

Leonard Michaels: That is exactly correct in regard to my life and in regard to the way I wrote the entries, and also in regard to what I did in preparation for this talk, which was written long after the entry. What is left out is very old—but I'm not going to repeat what you said.

Victor Kestenbaum: Just a thought about self-consciousness in writing about oneself. Certainly, since the time of Socrates, it's been considered a good thing to seek self-knowledge, but we tend to be impatient with elaborate displays of self-consciousness. Maybe both of you, or all three of you, could talk about how one attends to oneself, or makes an object of oneself to oneself, without being self-indulgent.

Leonard Michaels: Kafka is probably my favorite modern writer. I can think of no writer in prose who is a greater genius in regard to form. A brief example, a quote, and I hope I get it right: "A cage went in search of a bird." That's one sentence. You can talk about that sentence forever. Is there something more profoundly self-conscious in any other writer in the modern age? If there is, I don't know where it is, and it's just the form. There isn't a load of factual matter associated with it. I know it sounds like nothing, but think about it for a while, and you'll see it's a remarkable statement and says a great deal about Kafka, his way of being, his life, and so on, and it also says something about his death, I think.

Other people must know these terse and remarkable bits of writing. I don't want to argue. I would just like to suggest that I don't think I presented a position that has a lot of important implications beyond my personal case. This is how I feel, and I can cite examples from a writer like Kafka, or an American writer like Flannery O'Connor, who to me is also a genius. This thing that I am so interested in, which I call the expressive angular form, is salient.

Norman Manea: I will very briefly answer your question about self-indulgence. I think it's a very important question, especially when you write a memoir. Following up on what Leonard said about Kafka, I will refer to another quote from Kafka, in which he says: In the fight, in the struggle with the world, always take the side of the world against you. Now, it's difficult to avoid self-indulgence when you are under siege. Experiencing, unfortunately, again and again, another type of siege, it was my feeling when I rewrote the story that I have to struggle for detachment, to try to avoid the posture of victim and prosecutor. One way out may be irony, self-irony, which always helps.

Josh Gidding: This is a question for Professor Hartman. I think there is a missing master here in our discussion—Wordsworth. We've been talking about two great autobiographical artists of the twentieth century—Kafka and Proust. Lenny quoted from "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" so it seems to me that we should also talk and think about Wordsworth and his expansive formlessness (in which he anticipated Proust by a hundred years!), and Wordsworth's fifty-year struggle, in "The Prelude," to achieve an imaginative form that would be compatible with autobiographical truth (whatever that is!) Now, it has always seemed to me that *Remembrance of Things Past*, regardless of its artistic intentions, is lacking a coherent form. Or rather, that it takes on so many forms in its odyssey—novel, autobiography, criticism, meditation—that this is maybe the same as having no form. With regard to Wordsworth, it also seems to me that "The Prelude" is lacking, or perhaps struggling towards a form that it never achieves; and this struggle with form is part of its greatness—perhaps its greatest feature. And Kafka, it seems to me, was a failed novelist—perhaps one of the great novelists, despite his failed quest for an appropriate long form. I'd like to hear your thoughts.

Geoffrey Hartman: I'm glad to hear the question of form has been raised by Lenny, and now by you, but I don't think I should take time to answer it now because Stanley Crouch has just arrived. Perhaps there will be another opportunity. If you had any doubt that Stanley Crouch would appear, that doubt has now definitely been dispelled.

Stanley Crouch is a jazz critic and social commentator for *The New Republic* and a columnist for the *Daily News*; his most recent collection of essays is *Always in Pursuit: Fresh American Perspectives. Don't the Moon Look Lonesome* is his groundbreaking novel.

Stanley Crouch: Today I would like to discuss a variation on my ongoing theme, no matter the domestic topic, which is "Blues for America." The subjects for this afternoon are certain works written by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and Ernest Hemingway, who is everybody's favorite, either as influence of epic proportions or as all-purpose whipping boy. What these men have in common is the blues as an aesthetic vision. What I mean is not necessarily uses of the blues in a literal way, as with Ellison and Murray, but surely in terms of sensibility, which is how Hemingway and Wright get there. They are all connected, as well, by what I call tragic optimism. Tragic optimism is recognition of the terrible ways in which the world often works, but it is also an equal recognition of the fact that we, as human beings, can do a fairly good job

of battling with the demons both within and outside of ourselves. Since nearly everyone from the deeply religious to those deeply steeped in disbelief has some idea of how things could work better, it is always of interest to see what highly talented and original artistic types think about when they either explain the world or dream of one. In this sense, each of these writers wants to talk about the weapons of sensibility that allow humanity a chance to defend itself, to ennoble itself, to move as close as possible to not a sentimental ideal of paradise regained but to a better situation from which human qualities can lift up in flight to the heights necessary to achieve themselves. That flight, of course, is doomed somewhere along the way, but if it is daring and substantial enough, such a flight will leave the patterns of its wings painted on the air of culture, and it will be breathed in and out even beyond memory. So what these writers have in mind is a discovery of the indomitable, which is not our flesh, of course, but our spirits, our minds, our designs, our ways of measuring the transcendent elements of humanity when we encounter them.

To get where they want to go, the Hemingway of *A Moveable Feast*, the Wright of *American Hunger* (which was truncated in 1944 to a book about his experiences in the South and put out as *Black Boy*), the Ellison of various autobiographically informed essays, and the Murray of *South to a Very Old Place* introduce into areas of great universal concern a certain kind of American sensibility and certain kinds of American issues that we often think of as removed from that bigger world. To do so, however, these writers bring along what they know of nature, of various class backgrounds, of popular culture, of technology, of fashion, and whatever else will allow them to clarify what they think some of the answers might be to the ongoing riddle of the protean sphinx. Hemingway decided, or seems to have decided, to make his book another kind of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* while fusing it with a singing and jaunty literary version of the much lighter spirit that inhabits *An American in Paris*, that paean to youth and self-discovery, and finding out how to put a personal stamp on an idiom. Wright, Ellison, and Murray express in their separate ways something that I wrote to introduce a section on books in my collection, *Always in Pursuit*:

> Familial, religious, military, and class conflicts drive many works of classic literature, no matter where or when they were written. In our own country, contrary to certain opinions, writing that focuses on color needn't be less good than any other. The challenge staring down at any writer who uses color conflict in our American context is how close he or she can get to the standards set by writers

> such as Homer and Shakespeare, two champions who were never unwilling to narrate a fight, blow by blow, nuance by nuance.

These black men do not duck, at least from their personal perspectives, the issues brought to any discussion of American experience by the facts of color. They realize what those who have a dismissive attitude toward the discussion of race miss out on, which is an additional complexity that crosses the sweep of the nation's history, its institutions, its laws, its classes, its religion, its conception of what constitutes an appropriate suitor, its humor, its sports, its arts, and its entertainments.

While what Wright, Ellison, and Murray have to say is personal, filled with childhood or memories of youth, and may also look into the underlying things that attracted each one of them to the art of writing, the intricacies of the all-American skin game, the conflicts and misunderstood troubles and dimensions of color, make their work very different from *A Moveable Feast*. Wright, Ellison, and Murray have in common the intention of reinterpreting the meanings of American life beyond racial stereotypes. Hemingway was thinking about something else altogether. He was looking back on a grand period in his early life from the perspective of one who had fallen far short of what he had hoped to do. His mind and health had been given terrible whippings from dissipation and devastating accidents, the falling ceilings, collisions, brawls, and plane crashes so often resulted in blows to the head that he was somewhat punch-drunk delusional in his later years. Hemingway was at an end when he wrote his book, while the others were in the heat of a battle that never let up, though many, many victories had been achieved against the kind of world that Wright recalled and that Ellison and Murray either agreed with, extended upon, or argued with through another set of ideas altogether. Yet there is always something outside of simple categories that arrives when we are talking about talent of a certain stature. For all their individuality, the books I will discuss are connected in ways that are never addressed. Ellison's *Invisible Man* comes out of Wright's *Black Boy*, and Murray's memoir is close in spirit to Hemingway's, for all the differences in specific reference.

There has long been that secret about *Invisible Man*, which is that it is a profoundly sly set of variations by Ellison on Wright. Ellison decided, it seems to me, to take the form of *American Hunger* and embroider it with thematic extensions of every kind that would fit his own ambition. He chose to marvelously orchestrate a memoir written by a friend whom he admired and whose story was then the most powerful update of the slave narrative genre that had come into being a century earlier. Ellison

was steeped in American history and culture across the lines of race, class, and religion, and both he and Wright had been impressed by the European grand masters of the novel form. But Wright was one who chose to create his fireworks, both in fiction and nonfiction, through the events themselves, assuming that the sheer lunacy that came into being through institutionalized bigotry and the assumptions of entitlement as well as the futility of overt resistance created a social surrealism. Ellison took that surrealism into the arena of literary style, as but one of his approaches, and made a book in which different states of being and consciousness were reflected in the way the words themselves were organized for narrative. Wright depicted himself as a boy and as a young man whose questioning often drew violent responses, which quite literally made his life into one taken through the school of hard knocks. Ellison's famously naive narrator, who is embittered and cynical when we meet him, often finds himself in a violent situation because he follows the surfaces of words and the claims that he is being told the facts, not the meanings that exist beneath them, which is also the underground metaphor that drives the book. So the discovery of the differences between what one is told and what one is experiencing give propulsion, drama, disillusionment, and discovery to both books. Ellison has also made some very famous literary moments from instances in *American Hunger*. Both have a grandfather figure who fought in the Civil War and is cheated at the hands of whites. There is a conflict in Wright between the narrator and a high school principal who explains to him that he must always tell whites what they want to hear and that Wright the boy must allow the principal to write his speech or the school administrator will doom his future educational chances. Wright refuses. He is finished at school, will not return and will not be given a place on the faculty. That school principal becomes the Southern Negro college president, Dr. Bledsoe, in the section where Ellison's narrator is expelled for taking one of the white trustees into the disruptive wilds of local Negro poverty, stupidly giving the white man what he actually asks for instead of what he wants, which is an idyllic picture of rural Negroes. When he goes north to New York for the summer, Ellison's hero doesn't discover that he is finished at the school until one of the white men to whom he has been given a letter of introduction by Dr. Bledsoe lets him read it. Carrying around a letter that attacks the carrier and shuts him off from any respect the receiver might have for him seems to be a variation on the story that Wright tells of selling a newspaper he never read while a kid in Jackson, Mississippi. It was published by white racists who depicted black men as burdens and tastelessly dressed loafers lusting after white women. There

is also a battle royal in Wright, but it is laid out on a much smaller scale than the moment of grand drama Ellison makes of it.

The destruction of individual personality, the imposition of a role that will be played or else, whether North or South, is also at the center of *Invisible Man*. But Ellison is quite different from Wright in that his vision of life is not as dark as the older writer's. Ellison, while confronting the bigoted distortions, the violence, the exploitation, the imposed subservience, the underlying violence that might break out at any time, does not create a man much like Wright, who was, as observed earlier, alienated from nearly everyone and nearly everything, taking no solace in Negro humor, religion, music, dance, or any of the other things that not only gave meaning to life but provided a rich body of material that could be lifted into artistic expression as welcoming and feisty as it might be capable of detailing the tragic circumstances wrought by racism but not only that. So there is a grandeur that Ellison apprehends in Negro life that Wright did not, primarily because his sense of life was much more informed by tragic optimism than Wright's. There is also the transposition of gallows humor into a combative form that Wright experiences and recites in *American Hunger* but does not make of what Ellison did. Wright is told by a young Negro who warns him to keep his feelings toward whites secret, and actually believes the same thing once heard in a song by a black drunk: "All these white folks dressed so fine / Their ass-holes smell just like mine."

While Wright laughs uneasily within the context of his memoir, he does not even vaguely comprehend, for all the clarity brought to thirty years of thinking back, that it was out of such simple rhymes that the blues sprang and a great music with it, one that offered not merely solace to Negroes who were oppressed by whites but told universal truths that were to be given progressively complex artistic form by people such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, and Lester Young. There is also the fact that Ellison says over and over, whether through the senior characters in *Invisible Man* or in his own essays, that the Negro is at the center of American civilization—its laws, its labor, its politics, its music, its humor, its dance, its improvisational attitude toward life—meaning that the white person who does not know or acknowledge Afro-American influence does not truly know himself or herself. That is why in the beginning of Chapter 9 in *Invisible Man* we meet another of Ellison's variations on the older male figures, this one the bummish pushcart man who is pushing a stack of blueprints and singing a Jimmy Rushing blues. Quite surprised, but equally pleased, Ellison told me in a phone conversation that I was correct in observing that the blueprints were the Declaration of

Independence and the Constitution. The pushcart bum tells Ellison's narrator that "I asked the man why they getting rid of all this stuff and he said they get in the way so every once in a while they have to throw them out to make place for the new plans. Plenty of these ain't never been used, you know." As we know, the central battle on the terrain of race was to make those documents apply to everyone, regardless of color. What Ellison is saying, however, is quite complex because out there in the streets of Harlem that his alienated hero is beginning to learn, with dusty pants like Charlie Chaplin's, is a man who has a grip on the whole story. Those blueprints should provide the architecture of American democracy but they have been handed over to him, which he pushes down the street accompanying himself with a jaunty love song that is a blues full of surrealistic images. He speaks to the narrator in street slang, in normal words, and in chants that take the hero of the novel back to his folk beginnings. His very being encompasses all of the possibilities of Negro culture; we recognize through the symbols everything from its multi-layered meanings and its flexibilities to its willingness to hold on to something that the most ruthless and cynical have either made a mockery of or discarded. Such a figure in Wright's cosmos would probably have been an example of how close to lunacy certain Negroes had been driven by racism and how shallow bigotry had made this particular man's mind, so much so that he actually believed there was value to some blueprints thrown out by white architects who had no use for them. Wright might also have added that the only reason such a Negro would put any value on some unused blue paper that he could make neither heads nor tails of was because white people had once considered them useful. In Ellison's view, that would be another example of how Negroes took discarded things like hog guts and ears and transformed them into cuisine, or scraped the sentimentality away from popular songs and jazzed them into works of art, so often making things work in new ways through improvisation. It was not that Wright failed to recognize certain vital aspects of Negro American culture but that his focus on social change and his reading of experience through sociology limited the aesthetic grasp of his analysis.

The oppositional conceptions of Wright and Ellison do not date either book because there is an epic sense of life in each work and because each is so well written. The theme of discovering the freedom within the individual mind, soul, and heart while accepting and rejecting ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that arrive from near and from far is a universal one. In our time, of course, the two versions of the loss of faith that Wright and Ellison give remain important, first the loss of belief in the strategies of living under segregation in the South, then the

disillusionment with the Communist Party in the North. After all, bigotry is as much an ideology as anything based on the thoughts of Karl Marx, and communism is equally bigoted against the individual.

Wright's memoir shows him learning this in Chicago and Ellison's novel sets the tale in New York. Each of the writers does a marvelous job of showing how wrongheaded and patronizing the white communists were, but I think Wright's picture is more telling in certain ways because of the brilliance with which he assesses what they saw and what they did and why his expressions of individuality estranged him from his fellow radicals. One of the most horrifying moments is when he sees a man confess to crimes that he did not commit because he had completely given his consciousness over to the Party, which allowed Wright to understand the confessions made by certain Russians during Stalin's purges in the 1930s. Yet we cannot fail to miss the power with which Ellison brings his version of ideological bigotry to the surface as he discovers, over and over, that the Communist leadership does not see him any more clearly than those Southern whites who refused to acknowledge black humanity. Each book, *American Hunger* and *Invisible Man*, end with the narrator committed to going forward and making his voice heard. Ellison has his narrator say, after all of his adventures have been lived, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" Wright, having decided to leave the Communist Party and seek his freedom as a writer, concludes with an allusion to Tennyson's "Ulysses": "I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if that echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human."

Ellison never finished another novel, which is one of the great tragedies of American literature. Had he been able to put three or four more novels out here on the level of *Invisible Man*, he might well have provided an influential alternative to our condition of literary segregation in which ethnicity, color, sex, class, religion, and region are parcelled off franchises devoted to avoiding the epic complexities of the many kinds of interplay that give our society its dimensions, its blues, and its hope. He might have gotten the Nobel Prize and his model vision of American life and ethnic culture would stand in opposition to what glowers before us. But he did write two books of essays, *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*, in which he spoke with great eloquence of the interwoven nature and history of American life, offering something far richer than the narrow cultural obsessions and sexual politics that have had such bad effects on our universities and thinking about each other.

In my essay collection, *Always in Pursuit*, I had written about Albert Murray at far greater length, and with more thorough specific literary analysis than anyone else of whom I am aware. For this occasion, I will say that the freshness of Albert Murray's vision has been best served by his nonfiction but his overall output since he began publishing books in 1970 has been quite impressive. None of his books is more impressive than *South to a Very Old Place*, which was the first book entirely written in the second person and so high-handedly uses memories sparked by visits to familiar places in the South that Murray considers the book a novel. Whatever its category and however narcissistic, it is a very important work, one that offers a perspective resulting from his own life, which included growing up in Mobile, Alabama, going to Tuskegee University, and developing himself as an aspirant intellectual and writer within the context of that Southern Negro College.

What Murray was after was a complete rejection of the Richard Wright picture of Afro-American life in the South. What he wanted to say was this: yes, there was segregation, yes, there were rednecks, yes, the South was not the fairest place on planet Earth, but there were also football games, beautiful girls, family dinners, clothing stores that the college boys shop in so as to get themselves dapper, there were also magnificent dances at which the great genius Louis Armstrong played, leading Murray to ask, who even in Tolstoy had a musician as great to perform at those Russian balls as we who heard the young Armstrong filling the night with those golden notes? Murray was not saying, by any means, that everything was okay. What he was saying was something we always discover, which is that if people are given a certain amount of latitude, they create the same thing that they would have a little bit more of if they weren't held back somewhat. And so what Murray's great contribution has been, is that he makes us see this thing in people that refuses to be destroyed, that refuses to buy a very narrow or even hollow version of itself, no matter how much the people outside of the group tend to think about it. That's the substance of *South to a Very Old Place*. That's what Albert Murray is after. And he does it in many different ways. In *South to a Very Old Place* we get this shockingly original take on the way things were, because we have not been told to expect these sorts of things from people of his background.

Here is a passage from *South to a Very Old Place*. It is a perfect example of Murray's rhythms and of how these guys at Tuskegee were. We get something here that is totally different from anything written about Negro American life at that time. In the following passage he is talking about how these guys are getting ready to deal with this very

demanding teacher named Morteza the Sprague, who was also an intellectual mentor to Ralph Ellison and Jug Hamilton. Murray says:

> Morteza Drexel Sprague expected you to proceed in terms of the highest standards of formal scholarship, among other things, not because he wanted you to become a carbon copy of any white man who ever lived, not excepting Shakespeare and even Leonardo da Vinci. But because to him you were the very special vehicle through which contemporary man, and not just contemporary black man even, could inherit the experience and insights of all recorded or decipherable time. Because to him (as to everyone else on that all-black faculty), your political commitment to specific social causes of your own people went without saying. What after all were the immediate political implications of *Beowulf* and of all epic heroism? Nor was the true commitment ever a matter of chauvinism or of xenophobia. . . commitment involves such epical exploits as penetrating frontiers and thereby expanding your people's horizons of aspirations.

That's Albert Murray.

Now, everyone's favorite, Ernest Hemingway. *A Moveable Feast*, though a marvelous work, is often reviled as self-serving, as dishonest, as an attempt to reduce his contemporaries and elevate himself. I don't know if that's actually true. The reason I like *A Moveable Feast*, is that it has an innocent quality to it that's not corny. Hemingway was capable, late in his life, of recapturing the feeling that he had as a young man when he was in Paris. Hemingway, as we know, crashed and burned much like his friend F. Scott Fitzgerald, and it's very ironic when one looks at the letters, because nearly the same thing got Hemingway—the alcohol was one, but the others were all of those accidents, such as a roof falling on his head, automobile accidents, a guy hitting him over the head with a bottle, etc. I think that that in combination with the alcohol began to have a very terrible effect on him as he went into his forties. I believe this because I discovered, hanging around with some boxers many years ago, that people who take a number of blows to the head begin to have problems in middle age. And as we know, he didn't really produce much between *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and his suicide in 1961. I don't mean that he wasn't writing, but I'm saying he didn't produce finished works on the order of what he had hoped to write.

After Hemingway died, and *A Moveable Feast* came out, some of Hemingway's biographers said, this isn't really the book that Hemingway wrote. But I would say it has many things in it that are extraordinarily beautiful, and I think that the Hemingway sense sings and rings

off the page in this book as well as it does in any. And I think we also get an incredible sense of Hemingway—the artist—coming into being. As I said earlier, this book should be considered Hemingway's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* because we do see him dealing with people like Gertrude Stein, like Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and others, and we begin to understand how his mind works.

I'm going to read a passage from Hemingway and then I shall seat myself and see what you all have made of it. Here Hemingway is simply talking about sitting and writing, and we get a sense of his process:

> The waiter brought it [he ordered coffee], and I took out a notebook from the pocket of the coat and the pencil, and started to write. I was writing about up in Michigan, and since it was a wild, cold, blowing day, it was that sort of day in the story. I had already seen the end of fall come through boyhood, youth, and young manhood, and in one place you could write about it better than in another. That was called transplanting yourself, I thought. And it could be as necessary with people as with other sorts of growing things. But in the story the boys were drinking, and this made me thirsty, and I ordered a rum St. James. This tasted wonderful on a cold day, and I kept on writing, feeling very well and feeling the good Martinique rum warm me all through my body and my spirit. A girl came in the café and sat by herself at a table near the window. She was very pretty, with her face fresh as a newly minted coin, if they minted coins in smooth flesh with rain-freshened skin, and her hair was black as a crow's wing and cut sharply and diagonally across her cheek. I looked at her, and she just stared at me and made me very excited. I wished I could put her in the story, or anywhere, but she had placed herself so she could watch the street, in the entry, and I knew she was waiting for someone, so I went on writing. The story I was writing was writing itself, and I was having a hard time keeping up with it. I ordered another rum St. James, and I watched the girl whenever I looked up, or when I sharpened the pencil with a pencil sharpener with the shavings curling into the saucer under my drink. I've seen your beauty, and you belong to me now, whoever you are waiting for, and if I never see you again, I thought, you belong to me and all Paris belongs to me, and I belong to this notebook and to this pencil.

Thank you.

Geoffrey Hartman: We have to cut this discussion period fairly short, because it is after five o'clock.

Anne Cherry: It seems to me that a writer who is writing about anything, really, but in particular himself or herself, is inventing or reinventing or rediscovering or being a philosopher through language. But, if this is the case, isn't it almost beside the point to talk about the philosophical self in reality when that's what writers do?

Stanley Crouch: I think you are asking whether or not the writing process itself automatically brings in philosophy, self-recognition, recognition of the internal world, the interplay between the internal and external world, all of those things. Is that what you were going after?

Anne Cherry: Yes.

Stanley Crouch: A writer is always using everything he or she knows, which is why we, as readers, are never fully aware of the influence someone—intimate or not—has on a writer. All of these people who pass through or roost in the lives of writers show up. Their mannerisms, sensibilities, figures of speech, facial expressions, tastes in clothes, and so on are part of the kitchen of the imagination, where different seasonings and recipes, most invented on the spot or refined in the process of writing, form the artistic event.

The mind is so enormous. Thomas Mann says at the beginning of *Joseph and His Brothers*, "deep is the well of the past." But he could have added that the past inside the individual is itself extraordinary. Even the most attentive writer discovers meaning in his or her older work that went by even when supposedly knowing interviews were given out. You can have been interviewed into daffiness about something and later be surprised to discover that where it really came from escaped even you. Anyone who has written a great deal can tell you of reading something and saying, "Oh, now I see, that's from 'The Girl With the Golden Eyes,' that Balzac story I read a bunch of times when I was sixteen or seventeen. I guess it never left." It was hiding out in that deep well of your past and came up hidden in a bucket you drank from. You might wish you had remembered that when you were being interviewed and made your own inadequate proclamations about intent and source, but that doesn't really matter. From that well came something valuable, which is part of the greatness of writing.

But perhaps the greatest aspect of writing is that it is not only itself, but it seems to have set the pace for many of the advances in contemporary technology that we do not associate with the experience of reading and the choices it provides. In my novel, where I'm trying to take on

some of the intellectual kinds of observations characters have in Thomas Mann but we do not expect or get much of in American fiction, some people are talking about the fact that different kinds of technology try to imitate what the writer can do. They give the user of that technology a freedom close to that of reading. What one of the characters observes is that the CD player allows a musician to program six or seven seconds so that it can play over and over until the musician can hear all of the notes, where they fit in the meter and how the accents work and so on. The electronics people are trying to give you technological access to the same thing that happens when you read a passage in a book over and over again, either because you love it, because you are attempting to memorize it, or get deeper into it.

Now, when a person wants to be a filmmaker, he can take a VCR and rewind a scene, and look at it over and over again, and come to understand the lighting, the camera position, etc. Now everybody sitting here and everybody in this room who's written has experienced the magic of the repetition of a passage in Shakespeare. I think therefore that the reading and writing experience anticipates many of the things we see in the world of technology. I was on a panel on the *Charlie Rose Show*, and a woman was talking about the great leap that had been made in technology that allows a director to use computers to create more people in a scene, and to make a building bigger, as the guy did in the movie *Gladiator*. And I said, "The writer was already there." Five thousand people come to the Coliseum on that Sunday, and then the writer says, "No, that's not enough." So he writes, "Ten thousand people came to the Coliseum that day." "No, that's not enough either." So he writes, "So many people were excited by the contest to the death that was to take place on that Sunday that the entire city and the surrounding communities all converged on the Coliseum. Even they who could not get in were thrilled to be close enough to hear the roar of the crowd inside."

What people are doing with computers right now writers have always been doing. Five thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand, a million—however many you want. So we're always ahead of everybody else, I'd say, and that's just how it is. As they say, they'll never catch us.

Norman Manea: One note to what Stanley said. In this very rapid evolution of technology I see only one hope: the difference between the human brain and the most sophisticated computer is that the computer cannot be imprecise. I am relieved sometimes, to take imprecision as a chance.

Geoffrey Hartman: Thank you all very much for coming.

Session III: How to Recapture Selective Memories

Jeffrey Meyers: The first speaker is Jay Martin, who presently has the title of the Dai Ho Chun Distinguished Visiting Chair of Wisdom at the University of Hawaii. He is a biographer of Henry Miller, Nathanael West, and is now completing a biography of John Dewey. He has just finished *Journey to Heavenly Mountain*, a memoir of his experiences in China as a Buddhist monk. He will speak on "(Re)constructing Biography."

Jay Martin: Thank you. Last weekend I closed the red spiral notebook in which I was writing my biography of John Dewey, removed it from the middle of my desk, and placed a black spiral notebook in the center, proposing in that notebook to tell you about how I have been engaged in writing a biography of John Dewey, transforming some million pages of personal manuscripts, including fourteen thousand letters, into a narrative of meaningful remembrance that would become *my* life of *his* life. But when I opened this fresh black notebook, its blank pages refused to be filled with John Dewey. Instead, an entirely different lecture on biography started to write itself, with its own choice of length and a new title. So settle in and listen to this other talk entitled "Biographers with Blue Guitars: How to Remember a Political Leader—Two Exemplary Spectacles."

We are now in the midst of an election, and so we are being subjected, daily, to the most intense possible display of imaginative fictions, exuberant creations (and re-creations) of fictive autobiographies and biographies, and the customary sensational construction of political life—spectacles. Even as we sit here trying to make headway in understanding the nature of life-writing, its "truthfulness" or ficticity as expressed through various genres, we have but to step outside this hall, glance at a newspaper, click "Power" on our TV remote, or snap on the radio, to find that we are being engulfed by an astonishing, massive display of political life-invention that has as one of its main objects to muddle our every effort at clarity.

The history of biography started with lives of statesmen. Today, biography has returned with full force to political life as its main source. Samuel Johnson quipped long ago that the Fleet Street biographers had added a new terror to the grave. Today, the person who makes even his or her first political speech must wish to look over his or her shoulder to see if a biographer, like Poe's raven, is sitting on the podium, taking

notes, so regularly and with such portentous weight do political biographies fall from the presses.

My subject today is how biographers remember and represent the political personality in our time. For forty years the political scientist Murray Edelman has taken political fictions or "constructions" as his subject for investigation. He writes, in *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (1989):

> I treat people who engage in political actions as constructions in two senses. First, their actions and their language create their subjectivity, their sense [and our sense] of who they are. Second, people involved in politics are symbols to other observers: they stand for ideologies, values, or moral stances and they become role models, benchmarks, or symbols. . . .

Political persons are, for him, "continually evolving constructions," not beings, but fictions of beings; their lives are interpretations of fictions, and, we could add, their biographies are the recreated spectacles of these constructions.

Saul Bellow captured the same fictive condition in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1979). As Dante in the netherworld saw not persons, but spirits, representations of persons, stream before him, so Sammler walks down Broadway and sees a river of imitative fictions: "the barbarian, Redskin, or Fiji, the dandy, the buffalo hunter, the prospector, troubadours, guerrilla, Che Guevara, the new Thomas à Becket. . . .One could not be the thing itself—reality. One must be satisfied with the symbol."

Placing Bellow's general observations concerning the prevalence of fictive personalities side by side with Edelman's analysis of political constructions prompts us to suspect what political biographers know with particular keenness, even if only in their bones—that the lives of political figures are so thoroughly suffused with ficticity that to read their autobiographies or memoirs accurately, and, above all, fully, or to compose biographies about them, requires our willing suspension of insistence upon fact or "truthful" memories, and a happy immersion into a stream of fictions. Before he became a psychoanalyst, the art historian Ernst Kris wrote an instructive little book about the lives of artists, showing that additional accounts are composed of conventions; an artist's life is written not as it was, but as it should have been. This is true of saints' lives as well. But it is especially true of political lives: they must be rendered as fictions, because the political figures created themselves as fictions, necessary ones. And this is especially true today, when

through electronic media, true fictions pour from politicians; they *are* true because they *should* be true. The political biographer's model is not "What happened, what REALLY happened? And how can I represent it realistically?" But, "What fictions were dispensed by these political folk, and how can I represent a political life true to its inventions?"

In this election season, then, we are being treated to the spectacle of a campaign between two major novels titled *Gore* and *Bush*, two short stories titled "Nader" and "Buchanan," and an anthology of short short stories titled "Hagelin," "Browne," and "Phillips," all competing for our attention.

It has always been this way. Plato's constructed memory of Socrates occurs episodically in an Odyssey-like epic, which Plato retitled "The Apology of Socrates," *The Republic*, and so on. In "The Apology" Socrates is a hero who would rather die than give up philosophy; dying, he lives on as a political hero. Plutarch's Marcus Cato is an exemplary tale of the heroic richness of simplicity. To be sure, Plato and Plutarch concealed their fictions. Machiavelli was explicit about them. He assumes that men judge superficially, and therefore asserts that the qualities of a political figure must *seem* rather than *be*: "a ruler need not have all the positive qualities I listed earlier; but he must seem to have them. . . .If you merely seem to have them, they will benefit you." It is enough to be "supposed to be" good or wicked, when either is necessary for staying in power; *being* good or wicked is irrelevant: fictions are all. Had Archibald MacLeish been writing *The Prince*, he would have said: "A political leader must not be / But seem."

A political leader is by nature a maker of fictions; his life consists of the fictions he makes. (In a superb and outrageous fiction, Milosevic said this morning, "I thank the people of Yugoslavia for taking the burden from my shoulders, and allowing me to spend more time with my grandchildren.") It's dangerous for a political figure to offer himself as a fiction; Machiavelli's book was meant for private eyes. It is better for the biographer, Parson Weems in this case, to tell us that George Washington "could not tell a lie" than for Washington himself to have invented the cherry tree tale. A biographer constructs the true spectacle of a politician's inventions. To paraphrase the title of a Kurt Vonnegut story, the question is, "Who Am I This Time?"—and the answer: "Whoever I need to be."

Machiavelli writes of the ruler's necessity to create public spectacles; he recommended hangings. Today we have ceased to hang people in public; we do the next best thing—compose biographies as spectacles, speculums of their political power. If the biographer is good enough, he or she is never faced with the question posed in Stevens's poem:

> They said to the man with the blue guitar,
> "You do not play things as they are."
> The man replied, "Things as they are
> Are changed upon the blue guitar."

The biographer, or before him, the politician, who can invent well enough to make seeming real simply asserts: "Things as they are, are the fictions I play on the blue guitar."

Two recent biographies of political figures, Edmund Morris's *Dutch* (on Ronald Reagan) and Bill Turque's *Inventing Al Gore*, make that assertion by writing spectacles of political fictions of being and becoming. If we are to remember these political persons, we need, most of all, to follow in the wake of the fictions they made, or, in the instance of Gore, continue to make.

I have, of course, no way of knowing what literary models Edmund Morris had in mind in his construction and re-construction of Ronald Reagan's life. In several interviews which he gave between 1992 and 1999, while he wrote his book, he often touched on the subject of ficticity. "Ronald Reagan," he said, "was totally interior. He lived inside his head, in the proscenium arch of his own imagination. He was not a deliberate deceiver. . . ."

These remarks alert us to a lot: first, Reagan's "real" life was hidden, "totally interior"; second, his reality consisted of his imagination and was enacted—acted—in the theater of his mind; and third, while he did (in some sense) deceive others, and even himself, it was not by calculation but by nature and habit which became a talent, because the outer man was a continuous, natural creation of the inner one. Not a "man without qualities," but one for whom his qualities were fictive.

In order to give a "good enough" portrait of Reagan, therefore, Morris concluded that the subject determines the narrative style; "I wrote that way because *Reagan* was that way": the history or life-account of a fiction must be recounted *by* a fiction. And so Morris created a narrator, neither Morris himself nor an omniscient observer, but a wholly new invented being whose own "real" fictive meaning is, like Reagan's, "wholly interior." He tells us what Melville called an "inside narrative"—a story, from his own inner being, of Reagan's hidden life of the imagination, whose derivative was the complex web of his documented activities. Morris described the narrator this way:

> All I have done in the way of fictionalizing myself. . .is to make myself Reagan's contemporary, in effect extending. . .closeness of

> observation. . .vividly and honestly. And all I ask of my reader is to accept my presence as unquestionably as we accept that of any truthful storyteller who acts as an intermediary between what he knows and what we want to know.

(I would rephrase Morris's "truthful storyteller" to "narrative constructor of fictive truths," and modulate his final phrase into "what he has selected for us to know, and what he teaches us to want to know.")

When we go to Morris's book itself, my reformulation is already present. Let us start with the dust jacket. The title, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* evokes, first, Reagan's ability to take on another name and role—not Reagan himself but the parts he enacted. Morris suggests that his nickname, his pseudonym, is really himself, a fictive identity for a player of parts. "Memoir"—the book is not a Morris biography, but a fiction of remembrance. . . .

Below the title is the striking jacket photo by Pete Souza—reproduced as a frontispiece. Reagan is hurrying away from us, his face hidden, escaping our inspection. Is he waving "Hello" or "Good-bye"? Does he want us to follow him? We can't tell. Fluid, moving, caught in a balletic position, he dances away, all motion; by contrast, the door, the fan window, the piers, and the shadows are all fixed and geometric. If in the book we are to catch up with him and try to look him in the face, it cannot be done directly; he is too fast, too chameleon. He gives us only his back. But we must gain insight into him by being as fictive as he is. We must, to see him, get inside the book which this dust jacket wraps. Whitman said of *Leaves of Grass* that the book is the man; in *Dutch* the man is the book!

Then the blurb. In it Morris continues to give us fictive cues and clues. He tells us he had "complete interpretative freedom" in giving us the inside narrative of the "inscrutable" president and of the characters in his drama—"the book's enormous dramatic personae." The biographer went on a "pilgrimage" to uncover the "mystery" of the president, as Bunyan progressed toward the "Shining City," Reagan's country of the blue. But instead of the Shining City, Morris found himself "in an odd Dantesque reversal of roles. . . .as if I were now the leader rather than the led." For thirteen years of research and writing, Morris lived, he says, "a *doppelgänger* life" that issued into "a literary technique" in which "Morris's biographical mind becomes in effect another character in the narrative," recording early events in Reagan's life from the same point of view "as he later [employs to describe]. . .the great dramas of Reagan's presidency, and the tragedy of a noble life now darkened by dementia." Reagan is deemed to be a "character," about whom Morris's

"new biographical style" offers us "revelations." This is to say, Reagan himself constructed, willy-nilly, a fictive life, and Morris, in this political spectacle of an authorized presidential biography, composed a character for himself through which to render Reagan's self-constructions authentically. His language is full of the vocabulary of the theater. Not a character searching for an author, but a play about a movie.

The whole conception, to my mind, brilliantly parallels in biographical form Edelman's analysis of political spectacle. That Morris and Edelman worked without awareness of each other's writings nicely confirms the insightfulness of both analyses. "News about politics," Edelman writes, "encourages a focus upon leaders, enemies, and problems as sources of hope and of fear, obscuring the sense in which they are creations of discourse, perpetuators of ideologies, and facets of a. . .transaction." A strategy for analyzing politics as spectacle, Edelman concludes, "must begin with language that highlights the controversial perspectives inherent in these terms and calls attention to the formations they conceal." Morris gives the reader a signal that he is going behind the usual focus upon actions and motions to seize, instead, upon creations and constructions, lighting up the obscure, exposing his fictive discourse, and refocusing upon the transaction between signified and signifier in any biographical enterprise, but especially in this eminently political one.

If Morris's "biographical style" is new, and if it makes unprecedented admissions about the object of political biography, what he is doing is merely more explicit about what other political biographers have done, but denied doing. Except for such books as A. J. A. Symons's *The Quest for Corvo*, his models are not primarily biographical, but, inevitably, works mixing memoir, biography, autobiography, and fiction. Such books as Henry James's *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, and John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* most aptly show us his way with *Dutch*.

In both of his late books, James asserts that he cannot speak directly about others in his life—his dead brother William chief of all—unless he invents himself through a point of view. What he writes about William is not *William*, but his own perception of William; his perception consists of his writing about his writing about William. Like James's, Morris's method is intensely visual—James called his the "scenic method." Morris's narrator, too, gazes and gazes at Reagan, focused by the Reagan enigma. Morris's narrator looks and looks—for 674 pages. Always troubled by extremely poor eyesight, Reagan developed an extraordinary capacity (since he could not see well) for being looked at, through others' better eyes; and Morris, who is himself

endowed with a penetrating gaze, makes the most of looking at the Reagan who loved to be looked at. Morris's fictive narrator writes of Reagan with Jane Wyman: "He never really looked at her, only at us looking at them." *He knew how to be looked at.* Morris is a great mirrorer, seeing reality through all its mirrors—reversed, backwards, and, as in a telescope, upside down—and thus right side up for Reagan. Like James, he knows that to see truly, you have to look obliquely. To tell the truth, Emily Dickinson observed, you have to "tell it slant."

Like Proust's, Morris's narrator, Morris's pseudo-Morris, is a searcher and researcher into lost times. These cannot be found, but only re-found, re-constructed, and revived. There is a strong urgency in the narrative to preserve what otherwise will be lost. Lost it is already to Reagan himself, doomed to lose his way in Alzheimer's disease. But Morris's still vital and grasping narrator seizes every detail before it slips into the numbed zone of an archive, becoming dead letters and lifeless notes or interviews, stuffed into locked file cabinets. Look at the chapter titles: "The Land of Lost Things," "A Dark Form Half Hidden," "Inside Story," or "The Unexplored Mystery." All focus on the power of the re-covering and re-constructing imagination, holding a researcher's candle at the margin of dark forgetfulness. For every fiction he created, Walt Whitman insisted: "I was the man, I suffered, I was there." So with Morris. By constituting himself as a fiction, he *was* there, because he should have been there—Reagan's age, one who notices Dutch from an early time, and finally, becomes Reagan's see-er and seer. In the moving elegy for Reagan that concludes the book, Morris remembers for Reagan, who now lives "where madness, life, and death collide." Morris's narrator remembers Reagan's life for him. That is how memories are remembered, even after remembering forgets.

Norman Mailer observed that while Dos Passos is not numbered among the three or four greatest American novelists of the century, in *U.S.A.* he wrote the greatest political novel. The trilogy employs a multiplicity of perspectives, mixing one with the other—documents, autobiographies, biographies, and fictions. Did Dos Passos write a work of fiction grounded in a score of short biographies of the exemplary political figures of his time? Or an autobiography embedded in historicity? Or a biography exemplified and ultimately expanded by fictive intentions? He called his books novels. Morris's fictive narrator has retitled Morris's biography a memoir. But whose memoir? Reagan's? Or the narrator's? Perhaps both—a "Dutch treat" in which Reagan and his fictive *doppelgänger* will treat each the other to recovered inventions of memory. In any case, *U.S.A.* and *Dutch* proceed by assemblages of genres that turn

the prism of perception until each facet gleams with its own special revelations. Far more than Dos Passos's trilogy, Morris's narrative displays and discloses Reagan through a boundless proliferation of genres—romances, Horatio Alger and Frank Merriwell success stories, adventures, mysteries, poetry, one-act plays, film scripts, documents, samples of penmanship, drawings, news clippings, movie posters, woodblocks, a scholar's notes, letters, headlines, examples of typing, diaries, cables, transcriptions of tape recordings, and invitations to parties. The photographs are part of the text, not set-aside illustrations of it. Thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird? Rather say thirteen times thirteen! To get at Reagan's simple reality you have to construct a vast web of fictive complexity. Morris mentions that an early possible title for the book was *Searching for Jupiter*—an obscure planet. The fictive narrator suggests the title to the actual screenwriter, Philip Dunne. "How so?" Dunne asks. "Well, it's an attempt to fix on a large, diffuse, amorphous object with a huge gravitational force." That's Reagan. Another genre—an astronomy lesson. Perhaps Reagan could be seen right side up only by an astronomer, in a telescope's upside down lens.

Dos Passos sought to write novels that would give us political reality. Morris simply turns this around; through the materials of political reality, he discloses the true fiction that was our president. Did Ronald Reagan dream that he was president? Or did the presidency dream him?

True biography is "informed artifice," Edmund Morris recently remarked. The artifice must be suited to its subject. Morris's biography of Teddy Roosevelt is composed in the form of the traditional biography of sight followed by insight; it is a book driven by curiosity in which Roosevelt is the most treasured curio. When in 1981 Morris was first approached to write the Reagan biography, he was not curious:

> If I'd been as curious about Reagan [as about T. R.] in 1981, I might have written the orthodox biography people were expecting. But it would have been as unrevealing as any other, because he simply *deflected* scrutiny. Not until I understood a few years later, that he was *reflective* rather than deflective—i.e., actively reflecting us rather than himself, did I become intrigued, and felt "that little click. . .which makes the solitude of scholarship tolerable."

Dutch is a very American book, and our best portrait of the political personality in the age of electronic media.

Bill Turque understands Al Gore to be "one of Washington's inscrutable men," and his title, *Inventing Al Gore*, points to the dual

directions essential to unraveling his mystery. Did Al Gore invent himself and then continually re-invent his identity? Did Al Gore's mother and father invent him as "one-who-must-be-president"? Or is it Bill Turque who is doing the inventing of Al Gore?

To write a biography of a political person, does Turque need to invent a fiction parallel to the fictive Al Gore that Al Gore and his parents created? Morris mirrors. Turque "unmasks." Morris refracts. Turque "uncovers." The photo on Turque's dust jacket shows a young Gore, about ten years old, who was already always himself, a politician winning a race. His arms are thrown up as in victory, just beneath a sign that is cut in half. "Albert Gore" is only half readable on the campaign's poster: it signifies, of course, his father's victory. But in the sign system of this book the half-poster means the half-formed, "half-pint" boy who will aspire to go beyond his father by becoming a president for him.

For Turque, Gore is one person in private, another in public. He is intelligent, moral, and idealistic; and also "is repeatedly prone to prevarication, exaggeration, and avoidance of hard issues." Will the "real" Al Gore stand up? Or are both Gores fictions of ambitious parents who wanted their son to occupy a role rather than to become a person? A father's fiction disguised and walking around as if he were a person, like the nose in Gogol's story? Both Gores are inventions, and mysteries.

Novelistically, Turque begins in the present, October 6, 1999, when Al Gore proclaimed a "new day" and transformed himself without so much as one "Shazam!" Turque is writing about the Gore "twins." Gore One is the man of the dark blue business suits, the occupant of the White House, partner of Bill Clinton. Now he changes in a flash to Gore Two and dons a new costume—earth tones, khakis, and cowboy boots. No longer does he stand stiff and unyielding before a lectern; he loafs or lounges on a stool, or strides about the astonished audience poking a wireless microphone at them like a laser. He has left Washington. He is back in Nashville. Has he gone home to Tennessee where Gore Two was born? Or did he leave the home of Gore One, Washington D.C., where he was raised in a hotel penthouse and educated at St. Albans? Both. The Al Gore twins had separate childhoods. Now, in Nashville, Gore One's massive issue book molders in a back room, as Gore Two dusts off his autobiography, real and imagined: his father, his mother, his dead sister, his service in Vietnam. . . .He spins affectionate stories about these. Gore Two goes farther. He is a hero, on a heroic quest. He confesses that he and Tipper were Erich Segal's models for *Love Story*; he acknowledges that he discovered and unearthed the tragedy at Love Canal; he admits that he was there when the legislation for the Strategic

Petroleum Reserve was drafted; he learned to love the workers—"the union was in my bones"—because his mother lullabied him to sleep with union songs. Before October 6, he had seemed as stiff and unyielding as if he were tied to a rock. Now, his advisors proclaimed, the "real" Al Gore has come to the party. He had been a chained Prometheus. Now, one of his aides whispers in rapt awe, he is "Prometheus unbound!"

Each Gore twin is a fictive mirror of the other. One hates the Vietnam war; the other volunteers for it. One wants to study theology and practice journalism; the other buys a farm in his father's old congressional district and leaps at the first chance he has to dump the other's plans and run for Congress. One begs his disgraced father not to campaign for him; the other solicits his father's counsel and takes as much money from his father's friend, Armand Hammer, as he can get. One proclaims a radical environmentalist message and denounces the internal combustion engine; the other, Turque writes, "cozied up to a notorious polluter for support." After the defeat of Gore One in the presidential primary of 1988, Gore Two periodically re-emerged. Mocking politicians as the usual suspects and trumpeting again his old messianic environmentalism as "the new central organizing principle of civilization," he wrote *Earth in the Balance*. But even the twins did not provide an adequate supply of fictions. Midway through the 2000 campaign, he confided to Roger Simon of *U.S. News and World Report* that Simon should "stay tuned" for "the emergence of the new Al Gore." But, Turque remarks, "The new Gore sounded suspiciously like the old new Gores." Gore himself summed up his doubleness succinctly. During the Senate hearings over Clarence Thomas's confirmation, he said, "There is, quite simply, a public and a personal truth"—two Gores, each of whom disguises the other.

Early in his account of how Al Gore was invented, Turque encounters Gore's assertion to Wolf Blitzer that "during my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet." Turque asks: "Why does Gore tell such whoppers?" His answer is:

> because it is how his mother and father would have cast the story. Albert and Pauline Gore made choices for their son with an eye to how each one would fit into a compelling pre-presidential narrative, and important aspects of Gore's early years were routinely embroidered for public consumption. . .[during a time when] public figures could frame their images more or less as they wanted. Getting the story just right was especially important in the Gore family, and the Vice President had vivid early lessons in how to adjust reality if it didn't play properly.

Little Albert's parents were clearly masterful creators of their son-as-candidate, able to become anyone or anything at all, creating each fictive Al Gore that was politically needed, naturally and easily. He *is* this or that way because he *should* be that way. He should have been with James Witt in Texas at the time of the fires—so he was. He created the Internet or exposed the Love Canal scandal because that is what a pre-president should do. He must have worked miracles because that is what a political saint should do. Al One, Al Two, and their successors continued the parents' earliest fictions, as Al kept on inventing a new self whenever the need arose. Gore said during one presidential debate, "I want you to look at me for who I am"; but we need to remember to complete the title of Vonnegut's famous story, and to add two words, "Who I am—This Time!"

Reflections on these two biographies lead me to a further conclusion, crucially important to our own understanding of the political personality in our time. In my book, *Who Am I This Time: Uncovering the Fictive Personality*, I assembled a loose taxonomy of the vigorous growth in contemporary America of ficticity, especially as accelerated by the dominance of electronic media. Pathological identifications with fictive characters, such as John Hinckley's identification with Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*; calculated projections of grandiose fictions of power-and-victimization adopted by terrorists; individual incorporations of fictions as desperate personal defenses against internal nothingness; imitators of fictions, from fictive Don Quixote and Werther to real Marilyn Monroe "be-alikes," who commit suicide because Marilyn did; children's identifications with video games and TV and movie characters—these, along with the normal processes of personality growth through imitation of helpful psychological transferences, were my subjects in that book.

What I did not see then, but now can glimpse as these two exemplary biographies light up other mysteries, is that the political personality itself, especially in our time, is the chief example of the adaptive usefulness of fictive processes within the personality. Neither pathological nor normal, these fictive processes in the political person offer a special case of adaptation to the bewilderingly complex politics in the electronic age. "Leadership" as a concept has been an important subject for political investigators only during the last thirty years. Political elites and what characterizes them have been studied theoretically by such early political sociologists as Vilifred Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, and later by Kenneth Prewitt, George E. Marcus, Moshe Czudnowski, Roderic Camp, and Ilya Harik, among others. Scholarly focus has fallen on how political interests are generated in candidates, why some people are candidates for political recruitment, what characterizes the entry

requirements for political aspirants or the "gatekeepers" who bar or admit candidates, and how stratification occurs among the pool of aspirants. Hypotheses concerning social stratification, personality types—most notably in the work of Harold Lasswell—power stimuli, the pluralist limits of elites, screening structures, opportunity, promotion variables, sponsorship functions, and networks have provided the basic tools for research. The purpose of recruitment studies, Camp writes, is to "explain those processes that distinguish political elites both from the masses and from other elites."

The study of political elites has coincided with the investigation, of the "charismatic" or "visionary" personality. In his *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Max Weber was the first to describe the charismatic aspects of leadership. Today, Warren Bennis is perhaps our best known investigator of charismatic vision in business enterprise. "Charismatic leaders," Jane Howell and Bruce J. Avolio wrote in 1992,

> are celebrated as the heroes of management. . .as the magic elixir. . . to change the course of organizational events. Charismatic leaders achieve these heroic feats by powerfully communicating a compelling vision, relentlessly promoting their beliefs. . .and expressing confidence in followers' abilities to achieve high standards.

Despite the abundance of studies of elites and charisma, the concept of charisma has not been effectively applied to political leaders; and the investigators of elites have ignored the ultimate question of how political persons who have passed through the gate of the pool of aspirants pass out of the opposite gate into actual elite leadership.

Morris's and Turque's biographies combine elite theory with the concept of charisma, and apply this fused concept to the understanding of highly successful political leaders. The ability to pass easily from one fiction to another is clearly a core capacity of the successful political leader in our day. Political charisma flows from the ability to adopt a suitable fiction, not as a calculation, but as naturally as a flower turns to the sun or a chameleon changes color with each environment—a stressless, evolutionarily adaptive strategy achieved with apparent pleasure; here, Machiavelli's "seeming" has become being, seem-less, and seamless in action. Ronald Reagan and Albert Gore, among others, possess this ficticity to a high degree. It is not personal duplicity or loyalty to a person or a cause that allows a political leader to support school vouchers at one moment and oppose them the next, or to castigate Hollywood violence

while convincingly soliciting Hollywood money—it is the political personality in operation, as it moves from one fictive identity to another.

Consider what happens to political leaders when that ability fails. Senator Edmund Muskie's bid to become the Democratic nominee for president crashed when he broke into tears on the platform over an attack upon his wife—he got stuck in a domestic identity unsuitable for that moment. The same was true when, in a presidential debate, Michael Dukakis was asked if he would change his mind about the death penalty if his wife, Kitty, were raped and murdered. When he coolly answered "no," unable to move away from a merely technical political identity, he lost the election.

In confessing some of his heroic achievements, Gore has gotten into trouble because these emerge too unguardedly in the older fictive rhetorical mode of his father, who did not have to face a media so driven by the compulsion to expose fictions (even as, of course, the media creates its own concealed fictions).

Both Gore and Reagan mastered the fictive adaptations necessary to the political personality. Both have always seemed to understand that in an electronic age, mastery of newspapers, radio, television, movies—adaptation to the camera's gaze—and finally attunement to the Internet, is essential. Fictions offer the route to mastery and leadership dominance. This political self is like P. T. Barnum's circus and museum: if one item does not please, be patient—another is on its way. What is at stake is not moral fidelity or personal authenticity, but political spectacle, not just acts but enactments—theater, strategic vision, the truth of effects. When Gore tells a tale of the transforming origin of his heroic vision, it is true because it should be true of the Man-Who-Would-Be-President. When Reagan declares the Soviet state to be an "evil empire," it is true because it must be true. It *becomes* true. These are not, nor are they meant to be, truth statements; they are performative. They are what Hans Vaihinger called "as if" concepts, and Nietzsche termed *ficta*—true because we need them to be true, not because we can confirm them. Such ideas as "justice," "equality," or "progress" are *ficta*; in political persons, the movement from one personality to another is a sequence of as ifs. In politics, I call *ficta* "spectacles," the creation of necessary fictions. To be entirely successful, these fictions must be hidden; Machiavelli's axioms of "seeming" and "supposing" rather than *being* still hold. But today, making "seeming" *seem real* requires close attunement to the media.

Reagan grew up with the modern media. Al Gore "created the Internet." He is, Bill Clinton quipped, "the only person ever to hold political office who knew what the gestalt of a gigabyte is." (Bush quipped

that he must have also invented the calculator.) Both Gore and Reagan, endowed with immense fictive capacities, learned from the media (and taught the media) how to operate in the theater of endless unfolding into fictions. We can learn from them too.

I began this paper by wondering how we remember modern political persons in biography. I concluded that what we must remember about political leaders is the fictions they created, for those were their meaning; and to remember fictions the biographer must immerse himself in ficticity. From different angles, Morris and Turque led me to the conclusion that in our time a new political personage has been born, emerging into leadership through public charisma generated by inner fictions. This political personality is a new element in our world, the birth, in Yeats's phrase, of a "terrible beauty," a new planet in our system. In honor of its discoverers, and in a true scientific spirit, I hereby name it "the Morris-Turque Syndrome," and leave it to my audience for further reflections.

Jeffrey Meyers: Conor Cruise O'Brien, the distinguished Irish intellectual, scholar, and statesman, is our next speaker. With respect to this conference, perhaps his most notable books are *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke*, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution 1785–1800*, and most recently, *Memoir: My Life and Themes*. He is speaking today on "Revising Personal and National Themes: Confluences and Contradictions."

Conor Cruise O'Brien: The title announced for my lecture sets out some general themes, which I propose to approach in a personal and concrete way. I shall explore these themes through a consideration of the difficulties and snares which lie in the way of a person attempting an autobiography, or memoir, such as the one I have published. In the course of legal proceedings witnesses are required to swear, before they give evidence, that they will "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

In the context of legal proceedings, this undertaking can be reasonably given and kept. "The whole truth" which the witness undertakes to provide is in fact not limitless. It means that he will give truthful answers to a limited number of questions believed to relate to matters within his personal knowledge. And many possible truthful answers—"I don't know" or "I don't remember"—are necessarily included, although a witness giving such answers is liable to be cross-examined concerning his declared incapacity to know or to recollect.

The writer of an autobiography, however, cannot be reasonably asked to offer "the whole truth" as to what he remembers about the

course of his life. In general, the writing of an autobiography is undertaken at a rather advanced age. If the writer were to sincerely attempt to tell "the whole truth" about every transaction or experience in his long life which he can recollect, the result would be insufferably prolix, confusing, and tedious.

So the memoirist is forced to select from the experiences of his life those which are meaningful, and this is where the difficulties and ambiguities begin.

The first difficulty concerns the actual working of memory. A person may genuinely forget transactions of which he is subconsciously ashamed. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote: "My memory says I did this. My pride says I did not. My memory yields."

And as it happens an example of the working of Nietzsche's Law is unconsciously provided by Freud. When Freud first offered his own theory of memory and lapses of memory, he was reminded that Nietzsche had got in there first, more than a decade earlier in 1893. Freud then claimed he had never read Nietzsche's maxim. If Freud had never read it he would have been unique among the educated reading public in the Germany of his day where all Nietzsche's utterances were closely studied. So Freud was unintentionally providing a striking personal example of the force of Nietzsche's Law which Freud chose not to know about.

Unconscious editing is the most subtle of the traps facing the memoirist. There are others, more blatant, but no less formidable. A great body of memoirs—probably the great bulk of memoirs—have been provided by soldiers and politicians. Almost invariably those memoirs will be cleansed to protect the writer's place in history and to rebut charges being pressed by his rivals. Such a memoir is an *apologia pro vita sua*, as Cardinal Newman put it.

When I received my first lessons in historiography from the late great T. W. Moody of Trinity College, Dublin, my supervisor for my Ph.D. thesis, he told me of the low value proper historians attach to memoirs as a source of historical information. Memoirs are essentially pleadings by interested parties and therefore inherently subject to distortion. The historians must distrust especially persons concerned about their place in history, and so, liable to edit their narrative with a view to ensuring that their place will be as high as possible. The material the historian most prizes is that written for a known, immediate, practical purpose, and without any thought at all for such a remote consideration as a place in history or an impact on posterity.

Of course, I fully accept Moody's verdict concerning the lowly place of memoirs in the hierarchy of historiographical materials. It is a lowly

place, but still it is a place. And the prized material, written for no practical purpose, has most often probably not been preserved at all, and, when preserved, often has little or no bearing on major historical events.

Then there is the case of material composed for the attainment of practical objectives in the here and now, and without concern for place in history. Speeches and articles by practical politicians fall into this category. These statements are certainly by no means as reliable as the material written for no practical purpose. But they are much more copious, and as they are also varied, and often written with conflicting objectives in mind, the sensitive and judicious historian can often piece together from the conflicting evidence a fairly convincing account of the nature and purposes of the dispute.

And the memoir material, at another and lower level, can also complement the speeches and articles. The speeches and articles show how the contenders sought to portray events during the period when they were happening. The memoirs—when available—show how the same contenders sought to portray the same events in *retrospect*. Comparisons of the two sets of statements can be quite instructive, though seldom edifying. So the place of memoirs in historiography though a lowly one is real, and an indispensable part of the limited though varied body of relevant historical material.

I should now like to offer a case-history—my own—first as an active participant in politics, and then as the author of a memoir.

Trained as I had been by Moody, I was used to setting a high value on truth. But when I was involved in active politics I found myself constrained to set limits to the expression of truth so that I might—in Edmund Burke's elegant phrase—"live to tell it the longer."

That in itself was a bit disconcerting. But what was much more disconcerting was when I found myself constrained to say things which I did not believe at all, in order that I might retain the capacity to maintain a cause in which I did passionately believe.

The cause in which I believed was that Irish Nationalists should desist from insisting that the Unionists of Northern Ireland should move in a direction in which they are altogether unwilling to move: that of a united Ireland. I thought then, as I still think now, that this insistence is at the root of the violence that continues in Northern Ireland (despite the prevailing misleading announcements that the violence has stopped).

But my position on the North was strongly controversial within the Irish Labour Party, to which I belonged and which I represented in parliament. A strong section of the party, especially in Dublin, insisted that I should come to heel and oppose partition, or be removed from the

position which I held of being spokesman for the party on Northern Ireland. Their motion failed, but it was touch and go, and I knew if I took on one additional unpopular cause, it would be "go."

Now this was 1978 and a referendum was about to take place on whether the Republic should enter the Common Market. The Labour Party had decided, at a conference, to oppose entry. In fact I was personally in favor of entry, and thought the opposition to entry was basically unreasonable and xenophobic. But I had not spoken against entry at the conference because I knew that the "against" people would carry it. Worse still, once opposition to entry was ratified I personally, as Party spokesman on Foreign Affairs, would be bound to defend the declared party policy. So I did so in one miserable little speech. I made that speech because I knew that if I did not, I would cease to be spokesman on Northern Ireland, which was the cause I cared about most.

This was a painful experience, and one which I felt to be demeaning. But I did not feel I could break with my party, for which I was still spokesman on Northern Ireland. So I stayed on and swallowed the necessity of lying from time to time, for the sake of the cause to which I was most committed.

Then—basically for unconnected reasons—I lost my seat in the Irish Dail. This did not release me immediately from all the distasteful constraints I had accepted. I had been elected to the Irish Senate as a member of the Labour Party, and I assumed I could continue to defend the line which I had followed when a member of the Dail.

A new leader of the party—Frank Cluskey—had been chosen in the wake of the General Election and believed my line to have become an electoral liability. Frank, being a friend of mine, knew precisely how to get rid of me, and did so. After I had delivered a speech on Northern Ireland to the British and Irish society and said what I continue to believe, Frank summoned me to his presence. He said that he, as leader of the Labour Party, had made himself spokesman on Northern Ireland in the Dail and that in the future anything I might say on the subject, in any forum must be cleared with him in advance. As he knew I would, I then tendered my resignation from the Parliamentary Labour Party. A little later after Labour reverted to its former anti-partition line, and after I had resigned my seat in the Senate, I became once more altogether free to speak my mind on any subject that concerned me.

This meant that I was now free to write my memoirs, without having to look over my shoulder. There were now no external constraints upon me, but I was aware that there might be some internal constraints. Insofar as these might be constraints of the kind identified by

Friedrich Nietzsche—cases where the memory yields—there did not appear to be anything I could do. But there were also things I would have preferred to forget, but remembered with remorse, and might have been tempted to refrain from alluding to. One of these was an extremely complex—and devastatingly humiliating and painful—personal experience of an excruciating interaction between religion and nationalism. The area on which this impinged was that of my marriage. Having had a cruel early experience of the oppressive power of the Catholic Church, I felt then that I could not marry a practicing Catholic. But in recoiling from Catholicism, I felt in my youth that it was all the more important to cling to the basic nationalism to which all my family adhered. A person born into an Irish Catholic family who rejected *both* Catholicism *and* nationalism would, as it were, disappear existentially. There would be nothing left of him. Having rejected Catholicism, an Irish person born a Catholic was as it were living on one lung. If he rejected nationalism *also*, the remaining lung was gone.

As most Catholics were Nationalists, and the great majority of Protestants were Unionists, it did not look as if I were likely to find an acceptable spouse. But as it happened, Christine Foster, who became my first wife, fitted the requirement or appeared to fit it. During the First World War, my uncle, Tom Kettle, and Christine's uncle, Robert Lynd, had been friends. Both were then moderate Nationalists favoring Home Rule, without a total break with Britain. Most Irish Nationalists were like that, before 1916. So Lynds and Sheehys—my mother's people—could get on very nicely, in the period before 1916.

I had been attracted to Christine, on non-ideological grounds, before I discovered, through the Kettle-Lynd link, that we were also ideologically compatible. So we were married, and both families, at first, appeared to approve the marriage.

Unfortunately there was one case, and that a critically important one, on which the approval was based on a misunderstanding. After 1916, and especially after the 1918 election leading to the dominance of Sinn Fein in the Republic, the prevailing form of Irish nationalism had become a much more radical affair than it had been before 1916. The Kettle form of nationalism was now out of favor. Now my aunt Hanna—Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington—was one of the most radical and extreme of Irish republican Nationalists. She seems to have assumed initially—rather improbably—that Christine's family were nationalists, as she understood nationalism. So Hanna not merely approved the marriage, she also offered us an apartment in her house at a favorable rate—

which was important as we were in straitened circumstances at the time. In an evil hour, we moved in to our apartment in Hanna's house.

Then, in an even more evil hour, we arranged for Hanna and Christine's mother, Anne Foster, née Lynd, to meet at the Lynd family home in Belfast. The Second World War had just broken out and Anne was passionately in favor of the British war effort. In expressing her view she used a two-letter monosyllable with unintended explosive effect. She said "we" in a context which implied, quite correctly, that she was now identifying herself as British. Hanna was sitting beside me and I felt her stiffen at the loathsome word. Hanna said "we," at a volume which made it almost inaudible, and I don't think Anne heard it. But I heard it, with a sinking heart.

From now on Hanna was hostile, not directly to me, but directly to Christine—and therefore to our marriage. And it is at this point that the phase of which I am ashamed begins.

We were still living in Hanna's house when Hanna made the fatal discovery that Christine's family was pro-British and *ipso facto* unacceptable. She therefore began to make life difficult for Christine in a variety of little ways. I was vaguely aware of this, but I was very busy at the time and I fear I did my best to ignore what was going on. Christine never complained, although I should have known that she was suffering, but I averted my eyes and ears. Basically I was afraid of Hanna, but tried to avoid any realization that this was so. Then a sinister little episode occurred in which my fear took a paralyzing form.

Our little apartment in Hanna's house was not sealed off but opened into Hanna's own residence. It was lit by gas, and the window was covered only by a flimsy gauze screen. Then one evening a breeze blew the gauze screen over the gas flame and the screen caught on fire. There was never any real danger, as the screen burned out almost immediately. But Hanna was on the scene in a flash and used the incident in order to vent her rage and hatred against Christine. In theory, she was denouncing both of us for our criminal carelessness in nearly burning the house down. But in practice, as all three of us knew, it was Christine whom she wished to punish. I should have spoken up in Christine's defense, and knew I should. But I became for the time incapable of speech.

I was repeating, as I later realized, an experience of Sean O'Casey's. He had also been the recipient of a passionate Nationalist diatribe of Hanna's over a presentation of the 1916 Easter Rising in *The Plough and the Stars*, which fervent Nationalists felt to be a blasphemy against the sacred sacrifice of Pearse in 1916. And O'Casey too, like myself

years later, became paralyzed by fear and unable to answer Hanna. Shortly afterwards, O'Casey left Ireland never to return.

For me, the only good thing about this painful and shameful experience was that *I have never ceased to remember it.* According to Friedrich Nietzsche's Law: "My memory says I did this. My pride says I did not. My memory yields."

In my case it was my pride that yielded, not my memory.

As I came to write my memoirs, and found myself relating this experience in much more detail than I have recorded it here, I felt—possibly wrongly—that I was immune to the operation of Nietzsche's Law. It remains theoretically possible that there were other even more shameful transactions in my life which I have come to forget, in accordance with Nietzsche's Law. But I don't in fact believe that this is the case. If there was anything on which my memory could have yielded, it would surely have been this one. There were other things of which I have been ashamed in the course of my long and varied life, and I have set these things down also in my autobiography. But the little fire in the bedroom, and my incapacity to speak, was by far the most shaming experience of my life. And so my inability to forget it is, as it were, the main backing for the currency of my memoir.

Let me just add a coda, about another fire. Years after the Hanna episode, I found myself in the Congo representing the United Nations. With the approval of the then Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjold, I was engaged in attempting to end the secession of Katanga from the Congo. When things began to go wrong with that attempt, Dag Hammarskjold began covering his tracks. The UN Secretariat put out a story, under his direction, that the UN had never attempted to end the secession. We had just been trying to put out a fire in a garage. When that story reached me, and its implications sank in, I decided I could not live with that lie. I would resign from UN service, and my own country's service, in order to be able to tell the true story. So I did resign and then told the story.

It seems that between the real fire in Aunt Hanna's house and the false fire in Katanga I must have been doing some growing up.

In conclusion, let me reaffirm that I accept the relatively low place in the canon of historiographical evidence that Theo Moody assigns to memoirs. I would only claim that, as memoirs go, my own one is not too bad. I thank you.

Jeffrey Meyers: Geoffrey Hartman, the Sterling Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at Yale University, and Project

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Geoffrey Hartman: "Realism, Authenticity, and the New Biographical Culture." It is Friday, March 31, 2000. I am thinking about my essay. It hardly matters what date it is, but the concreteness of that marker is strangely comforting.

Two "signs of the times" in *The New York Times* catch my attention. One is a full-page ad for a Sotheby's auction featuring master photographers. It reproduces an Edward Weston photo, "Hands against Kimono," valued at between $100,000 and $150,000. The blurb describing it reads in part: "This bravura print of Tina Modotti's hands is one of Edward Weston's most sensitive studies of his lover."

Why would the photo's value be less, I wonder, if its attribution were uncertain? And how much do the biographical details, the specificity of the woman's name and role in Weston's life, add to its value?

The second item is a review by Michiko Kakutani of *Blonde*, Joyce Carol Oates's fictionalized biography of Marilyn Monroe. The review is unusually harsh, accusing the author of "shamelessly. . .using the life of Marilyn Monroe as a substitute for inventing an original story" to cash in on the star's legend. Oates has changed the real names either into other or allegorizing nicknames: "the Ex-Athlete"(Joe DiMaggio), "the Prince" (President Kennedy), "Miss Golden Dreams" (Marilyn herself).

What Oates has done, I surmise from the review, is not all that different from a recent tendency to move historical fiction into the present, to rehearse or recreate lives and events within the direct memory of many contemporaries. A genre has emerged that hovers between fiction and reportage, and even mixes historical actors with invented observers.

The elder novelists, however, unless their purpose is topical satire, avoid a *roman à clef* that needs no key. They elide the source of what initially inspired them: the "germ" of the whole, as Henry James called it. At the same time, they may novelize it as a structural trace that conveys the feel of contemporary fact. I glimpse such a trace in the striking and mysterious newspaper advertisement which is the pivot of Kleist's *Marquise of O.* Also in the quite ordinary request for information about a missing person in the *Paris-Soir* of December 31, 1941, a notice that, in December 1988, forty-seven years after its insertion, catches the narrator's attention in Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder.* It initiates a quest that takes up the entire novel.

The impact of the "fait divers" of newspaper (and now TV) signals a new phase in the relation of fiction to contemporaneity. In both Kleist

and Modiano it is an ad, conspicuous in the one case, inconspicuous in the other, that yields a clue to the story of a life. Everything else about the two narratives is different. That a Marquise, during the turmoil of the Napoleonic wars, resorts to a public medium in order to find her rescuer-rapist implies a daring solecism, a desperate if courageous act on the part of a woman born into the nobility. In Modiano, however, the ordinariness of the medium emphasizes the deceptive ordinariness of the event. The missing girl for whom the novel is named had no power of self-determination except for the "fugue" or escapade that may have doomed her. She disappears twice: as a runaway in the winter of 1941, and again in June of 1942, when she was probably seized in one of the *rafles* for Jews in Nazi-occupied Paris.

Is Modiano's novel history or fiction? *Dora Bruder* offers, at first glance, nothing to sustain fictional suspense except the removal of a mystification. The "Vichy syndrome" occulted into the 1980s the part played by the French police in the deportation of Jews. The first-person narrator of *Dora Bruder*, eventually identified as Modiano himself, retrieves by his research a single unknown girl's life—and death—from obscurity: he makes her name live, or rather, reveals through it a collective fate.

But there is mystery because we are left to conjecture why he should engage on precisely this quest, motivated by an announcement seen by chance. He has no personal or family relation to Dora, except in the sense in which her last name implies universal kinship. He says only that he is familiar with the *quartier* where Dora lived, and experienced an adolescent rebellion at the same age. His family, being Jewish, found itself in a comparably dangerous situation in wartime Paris. He also betrays regret for the city he knew while growing up, because it is being altered by postwar changes.

Remarkably, because the author's inquiry is so thorough, historical and archival, it's impossible to decide from internal evidence whether the gradually recovered details of Dora Bruder's fate are fictive, or present an actual slice of history. The self-burdened narrator meets the discipline of history on its own ground, producing a persuasive facsimile.

Yet his novel cannot be called "faction." Modiano respects his remoteness from the events, and the narrative "I," though distinctive enough, tied to certain memories and caught up in the search, has only a spotty autobiographical density. Sparse details about the author's life contrast with the increasing weight of facts about Dora's fugitive passage across the landscape of a disastrous epoch.

Without being impersonal, Modiano's "history" achieves a representational quality similar to neoclassical *récits* that report terrible events

rather than showing them on stage. Its narrator, however, is not an eyewitness, as in those *récits*. He is a belated observer, drawn as if accidentally—through no more than a printed trace—to an act of necromancy that rescues Dora from the anonymous mass of Holocaust victims.

Two questions are correlative to any discussion of realism in its contemporary phase, when autobiography, biography, testimony, and confessional memoir invade both fictional and nonfictional space. One is the liaison between the "I" and historical events, as in *Dora Bruder* or W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*. The second is the status of the "I" itself, which is 1) a character in the story, 2) seemingly coincident with its narrative source, and 3) a peculiar linguistic entity.

Let me first deal—briefly—with the status of the "I." As a character it is entirely variable: reticent in *Dora Bruder* and *The Emigrants*, flamboyant in confessional literature or self-exposé, a style shifter in E. L. Doctorow's *City of God*. This chameleon quality is partly enabled by a linguistic feature. While "I" has the consistency of a name, being a pronoun backed by a noun (the name of autobiographer, biographer, or novelist), it is, at the same time, what linguists call a shifter, a conduit allowing the narrative to proceed, to convert *langue* into *parole*. Call it semantically opaque (like most proper names) but syntactically transparent.

Basically, the "I" promises to reveal something factually true about the speaker. This expectation proves to be deceptive, or very intricate. The flow of words in personal narratives can become allergic to itself, to that implicit promise. There is certainly an acute awareness of what Henry James called "the terrible fluidity" of self-revelation. Hence certain reticences or ellipses. As shifters, moreover, the "I" and some related concepts ("now," "here") express a deceptive temporality, a present unable to sustain itself and which slips into an anterior future, an "always already." Such words, then, are either empty universals that promise too much or part of an imaginary, if credible, biography—more precisely, thanatography. Reading *Dora Bruder* in the context of Modiano's other novels, this purely structural feature of first-person narratives opens into an obsessive pattern, one that suggests a deep-seated identity puzzle.

Modiano often traces the passage of a missing person, who may turn out to be the narrator himself as in *Rue des boutiques obscures* (1978). "I am nothing. Nothing but a clear silhouette," is how the novel begins. It goes on to explain that "nothing" in a commonplace manner, disclosing that the speaker is referring to his amnesia. In *Voyage de Noces* (1990), however, the literalizing device of amnesia is dropped. Everything slips into a sentiment of unreality, a permanent *fugue*, and the narrator has to grasp at various identity-scraps: addresses, places

previously visited, phone numbers, and, as in *Dora Bruder*, a classified ad for a missing person ("*On recherche une jeune fille. . .*" etc.).

Modiano has confessed to blending "reality and fiction. . .a procedure producing a certain uneasiness that would not arise if readers were sure of finding themselves either inside a totally imaginary situation or else in historical reality." This uneasy *clair-obscur* may convey his revolt against a deadly bureaucratic world, where only persons with a *fiche d'identité* have the right to exist.

Yet his fascination with vanishings also has other resonances. Particular places, illuminated fitfully by the people passing through and as if into them, glow with a ghostliness reminiscent of old photographs or homemade movies. A sustained contrast, in fact, governs all the novels. In *Dora Bruder*, by eliding much of his own biography in order to focus on the missing girl, "the extreme precision of certain details" sets off "the night, the unknown, the forgetfulness, the nothingness all around them."

To adapt one of Freud's observations: the dead girl's imaginative impact is stronger than the living might have been. Why? The historical context may furnish a clue. The fullness of the empty center called Dora suggests an incarnation arising from an "absent memory" that afflicts, in particular, a postwar generation of Jewish writers. Not having directly experienced the Holocaust era, members of that generation are compelled to research, rather than recall, what happened in and to their families. The descendants' imagination is haunted by absent presences.

The engagement, then, that retrieves in the form of a personal quest the memory of an unwitnessed reality lifts the element of romance in this kind of fiction to a new level of seriousness. It is a form of belated witness complementary to the memory that returns in the testimony of eyewitnesses. By now the popular appeal of these testimonies may have increased memory-envy in two respects. First, the testimonies are by people akin to Dora Bruder, rather than exclusively by those who played important roles in or after the Holocaust. Secondly, they reinforce the wish, always latent in us, for strong, identity-shaping memories.

To come to our other concern: the relation of the invented or reconstructed "I" to the historical as a form of realism. Does historical fact always further the realistic mode? In fiction, the specificity of the famous name, of "Marilyn Monroe" for instance, may not have much effect, once the surprise wears off. Only when the name is unknown ("Martin Guerre"), or unrevealed (the bearer of a secret identity), or made evocative by a literature of its own (Proust's "Combray," Joyce's recycled "Ulysses"), does it become an intriguing index. Otherwise its reality-claim is no greater than that of the pro-name "I," which always

both reveals and conceals its meaning. Name-recognition, then, is only initially an advantage, like having an inside position on the race-track.

The fact is that fictional narratives must generate an interest independent of a coincident reality. There is an ironic reversal of the priority of real to fictive. The "Anne Frank" or "Philip Roth" of a Philip Roth novel, the "Paul Auster" in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, have their own confusing and disconcerting lives. That is demanded by the self-fashioning, self-inventive element associated with modern originality, a rebellious, break-away quality that competes with the narrative patience and extensively described settings we find in most great novelists.

Ortega y Gasset noted the novel's power to turn us into provincials of its world, of settings so carefully observed that they become a milieu, life-giving or life-impeding. That milieu has disintegrated in Modiano, though the houses and streets bear mocking vestiges of it, pieced together by his meticulous recreations. In Sebald, however, a specious miracle is described: the displaced persons build for themselves a new milieu with a solidity that camouflages past suffering and deceives for a time even the narrator. Indeed, Sebald introduces photos into his stories that claim to represent realia in the life of the emigrants, photos that function as attestation of his characters' near-zoological camouflage, of their seeming stillness and integration rather than alienation.

If authors, moreover, borrow historical figures, especially well-documented ones, the risk grows that the issue of authenticity will surface. We cannot suspend disbelief when known circumstances are denied or tinkered with. There is an existential, irreversible quality to those facts that renders clearly fictive insertions unconvincing.

In certain cases, of course, a penumbra of doubt continues to unsettle received history: Oliver Stone exploits this in his film on the Kennedy assassination. Counterfactual theorizing and science fiction's alternate realities abound. But we sense in these instances, as in detective stories generally (and *Dora Bruder* is a detective story), a skeptical or even gnostic element that deprives appearances—the familiar world, received history—of their apparent truth. An anxiety develops, expressed rather than alleviated by fictional suspense, that nothing is what it appears to be, that everything, eventually, will turn out to be deceptive, manipulated, counterfeit.

It should not come as a surprise that received historical fact is felt to be as fallible as any other. Historians themselves have as their principal task to affirm or disconfirm it. But while the stylistic demeanor of history-writing remains, on the whole, impersonal, today it often merges with a writing in the first person no longer shy about itself. Every

truth-claim in this area is shadowed by the awareness that it may be history-fiction despite itself. What *does* surprise is that fiction as a sustained mode distinct from historical representation should be (as yet quietly) devalued. Memoir, journal, testimony, and faction usurp all other realism.

With first-person writing the expanse of gossip comes at the expense of fiction. There are other challenges too. Reality TV, in which it is often difficult to tell spontaneous from faked or rehearsed, competes with a realism long outflanked by the hydra-headed genre of romance—the latter presently spawning new techno-wars in heaven as on earth. If the subject in question remains the "I," its integrity is harder to spot when surrounded by special effects. Could the "I" too be such an effect? Who, where, is the center of all this decentered magic? Who is real, the main character of the sci-fi movie *The Thirteenth Floor* asks at one point: how do I know I am not an optical illusion, a bundle of computer-driven electrical charges?

Doctorow's *City of God* struggles to regain something of realistic fiction's threatened integrity. It mixes veristic vignettes of contemporary life with fantastic riffs. There are several first-person narrators—including a novelist. Among the fantastic parts are cerebral digressions on "cosmosity," anti-anthropocentric speculations that spook the urban comedy striving to transform its chaos into a City of God yet failing to displace the human as the measure of all things. Cosmic space cannot become place, and certainly not a redemptive milieu. At the novel's end, despite the city's drift toward apocalyptic havoc, a man and a woman are left—a kind of Adam and Eve working to rebuild society through the Noah's Ark of a modest Upper West Side synagogue.

Doctorow's prose gravitates only slowly towards a personal form of containment, a clearly delineated "I." Yet the story-line, while devious and interrupted, is not complex. Everett, the novel's novelist, recounts the spiritual picaresque of Timothy, a lapsed priest, who will eventually marry a female rabbi. The narrator glimpses a form of redemptive heroism in the priest's adventures, as well as in his own brother's harrowing task of flying a bomber in the Second World War, and stories from the Kovno ghetto during the darkest days of the Holocaust.

The Kovno episodes, in particular, approach faction. They recall John Hersey's *The Wall* (1949), a novel that recreated the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946) was justly famous as a narrative equivalent of photo-journalism, but for his novel Hersey had to rely on eye-witness accounts in the YIVO archive. From these he "invents a memory," a character contemporary with the events he recounts for

posterity. Hersey would later become wary of such meta-journalistic resurrections.

Doctorow too invents a contemporary to chronicle the liquidation of Kovno's Jews but adds a twist: the lapsed priest is the one who hunts down and retrieves the lost archive. In addition, the novel's novelist, who calls himself a "faux Pop" (mocking the priestly honorific of "Father"), insinuates himself into the life of all his characters—some of whom are still in process, still being invented.

The very ease with which writers or cineasts deceive us, moving like Doctorow between gritty simulacra of daily life, archival quests, and dreamlike or imaginative fugues, betrays the doubt that has penetrated our sense of reality, radicalizing the eternal question about the truth of appearances. As an explicit symptom of this, Doctorow's novelist describes an affair with a woman whom he persuades—if only as a plot he conceives for a movie—to lure her husband into a situation where the latter's identity is nullified, because the lover's perfect counterfeit has successfully taken his place.

That the narrator calls himself a "faux Pop" is another symptom of distrust. It links *City of God* to the search for a true father or authority figure, a search that is a constant in Anglo-American history from early religious revivals to contemporary confidence hucksters. Does that theme of the "faux Pop" also connect with our new biographical culture, its claim of realism?

To answer—and conclude—I will look at one of the more interesting of a recent spate of academic autobiographies. Jane Tompkins's *A Life in School* is the conversion narrative of a teacher who reviews her quite ordinary life starting with "the dark corridors" of P.S. 98, through college, graduate training, and many years as a professor in various universities. The book tells of a late awakening to the fact that schooling has left out what school is for: life and community building.

Nowhere does the author find a holistic education. Her diagnosis, at once political and spiritual, is that the system substitutes authority for an alive teaching, and she recounts her not always successful efforts to relinquish authority in the classroom. Even when the classroom is made free and safe for the students, by the instructor removing herself as authority figure, it becomes unsafe for the teacher who used to be shielded by the mask of authority but is now open to the quirky as well as just criticism of her students.

I single out this memoir because it seeks to exorcize one type of "faux pop," that is, false authority, without falling prey to another "faux pop," that is, false populism or facile notions of community. It illustrates the

search for authenticity motivating most autobiographies. Here is someone who was always an aspiring student and became a successful scholar-teacher. Yet Tompkins's book, unsparing in its depiction of her schooling, is marked by an equally unsparing self-portrait.

The "I" that reveals itself is neither apologetic nor vaunting. Nor does it have quick remedies for personal loneliness or the incapacity of our schools to draw students towards a vital sense of kinship, cooperation, and community. Instead it returns continually to a dissatisfaction with the very self that describes a delayed awakening. It achieves, though at the cost of being relentlessly unfunny, the accumulative force of a *Bildungsroman*.

Tompkins's awakening was prompted by a duo of repeated dreams exposing her fear of authority and investing it with two separate meanings. There is the fear of personal failure, related to the power a teacher has over you, and which was instilled from the very beginning of the author's life in school. But later there is also the fear of becoming an authority figure yourself—a fraudulent one. Tompkins writes that the dream of being exposed as a fraud is experienced in one form or another by thousands of teachers at the beginning of each school year.

Once upon a time awakenings of this kind were followed by revivalist movements. But in this book the spirituality is ecumenical and dressed down. It is not unthinkable, then, that the autobiographical wave we are experiencing is a contemporary version of a perennial anxiety whose classic examples are Augustine and Rousseau.

I draw two lessons from the above. Autobiography, at its best, is neither ego-trip nor history-fiction but rather, as in Tompkins, a clear-sighted analysis together with a refusal to impose pedagogical or social solutions that could provoke further tyranny and iatrogenic suffering. Whether the hypocrisy of half-baked ideologies is punctured by the earnest realism of memoir-writer and novelist, or—since "the worst returns to laughter"—by picaresque forms of hilarity, is less important than that the relation between description and prescription become as complex as in a work of art. Let there be a greening of the pedagogical element, so that, to quote Wallace Stevens's "Phosphor Reading by his own Light": "The green falls on you as you look. . . / That elemental parent, the green night, / Teaching a fusky alphabet."

The drive, moreover, to be totally embodied and yet transparent, a drive fostered by today's biographical and self-biographical culture, by all those candid constructions or reconstructions, cannot expunge a lingering fear of personal inauthenticity. This fear need not be as explicit as the torments of self-examination undergone in the spiritual

autobiographies of seventeenth-century seekers for evidences of grace or the integrity of their conversion. But it is often the unmistakable subplot. Even should authenticity be what Henry Louis Gates called "one of the founding lies of the modern age," how far back does that other untruthful term "modern" extend? I prefer to adopt a phrase from Shelley and think of authenticity as an "illustrious superstition."

Jeffrey Meyers: Thank you, Geoffrey. It is now question and comment time.

Millicent Bell: In response to Jay Martin's talk, I was stimulated to reflect on the whole meaning of appearance and essentiality that concerns us as either depictors of other selves, or even reflectors upon ourselves. In reviewing the two biographies of Gore and Reagan, Jay described how these fictive personalities of our politicians are created, and the chameleon nature of change dictated by the externalities of political programs and political contests. Although he didn't extend his discussion to this question, I am prompted to ask if human beings are always in the business of creating fictive selves. Is there no other essentiality, a belief to which we cling? One thinks of discussions that go back to Shakespeare, to Hamlet, who, when challenged by his mother, for seeming to think the death of fathers uncommon, says, "Seems, madam? Nay, it is; I know not 'seems'" and then goes on to say, "I have that within which passes show." Whether one has "that within which passes show" is of course the great question, even for Hamlet, who is compelled to assume a form, a plot, which is not his own creation but which is something he is concerned with, something he has inherited from the traditions of literature, namely the revenge plot. He has had that imposed upon him, and was compelled to enact and fulfill this dictated plot. We heard yesterday of the dictated Biblical plot of the Jewish person who feels that he must follow a certain course. Interestingly, I thought I heard in O'Brien's account of his own experience on arbitrating between the dictated plot, we might say, of political necessity in his role as an Irish politician, and the examination that he subjects himself to in the writing of his memoir, which leads him to say that "what I really was at the time was something else."

And, finally, in Geoffrey Hartman's talk the question also arises (it's the haunting question of this conference): Are we complete skeptics? One thinks of the ending of *Huis clos*, in which I think Inez says to Garcin, who has been proclaiming that within himself he was somewhat different from the terrible things that he did, that condemned him to

hell, and she says to him, "We are our acts": "*Seules les actes décident de ce qu'on a voulu. . . .Tu n'es rien d'autre que ta vie*," our acts, being not manifestations but simply what we are, and nothing else.

Jay Martin: Millicent, I'm going to seize the opportunity to answer first. I found in this panel a remarkable experience. My first thought was that we were the three spokes of a wheel in which we are all sort of coming together. And now I am thinking that we'll soon turn into the Andrews Sisters. There was a lot of harmony. And I think that that harmony, in a way, was an answer to your question. I think Conor Cruise O'Brien exhibited something of the answer to the question about appearance and reality and fictive selves, and what might be a permanent core behind them. From at least one angle he proved to me that he was always destined to be a man of letters, and a brilliant politician; but not in the sense that politicians now exist. Mr. O'Brien said, "I felt constrained to do something I did not entirely believe in." *Constrained*. "It was a painful, demeaning experience. I found the necessity of lying." These are all words in which there is clearly a real self, whose experience, he said, is "remembered with remorse." That's another real self, a real self that's experiencing shame. That's clear. And shame is a profoundly human experience. Confucius says that the only truly monstrous person is the person who has no shame, because you can't trust him in any way whatsoever. Shame is a truly human capacity; and that's what, I think, unfortunately for Ireland, and perhaps for the world, prevented Conor Cruise O'Brien from becoming a permanent politician as others would be. In contrast, I want to read a passage from David Schippers's book *Sellout*. He describes a time during the 1996 campaign when President Clinton, according to Schippers, considered trying to turn one million non-citizen immigrants into voting citizens by shortcutting the naturalization process. It was understood that each of the freshly minted citizens would be expected to vote Democratic. But the director of the INS, Doris Meisner, felt some hesitation about waiving the usual FBI and other investigative procedures for conferring citizenship. Her response in the United States was, like Conor Cruise O'Brien's in Ireland, a moral one. But a political solution prevailed, a solution centered in a political fiction—the INS could merely "re-invent" the rules. A memo came to the President suggesting how this could be done.

> INS Commissioner Doris Meisner warns, if we are too agressive in removing the roadblocks to success we might be publicly criticized for running a pro-Democratic voter mill, and even risk having

> Congress stop us. Indeed many of the roadblocks originate with our own staff, who might well complain that if we waive the regulations and procedures they've created and followed for years, these people's complaints would seem credible to the public. Well, what are the options? I believe we can reduce, if not eliminate, the risk of controversy, by appointing one of our proven national performance review reinventors, as Deputy INS Commissioner.

This is a brilliant sort of invention of reinvention; and in the case of President Clinton, a natural move to create an office and a group of people who are called reinventors; to reinvent everything possible that needs to be reinvented. I think it was the first time in history that somebody has actually been employed as a "reinventor." Now that is something that I think Mr. O'Brien couldn't really do. The reinventors didn't have a core self. They were merely reinventors. Participles rather than nouns. They were just *doing*. He was just *being*.

I think the core of humanity Mr. O'Brien showed so well still remains; shame is its key, and shame is a difficult thing to sustain in our day. That would be my way of looking at it.

Geoffrey Hartman: I don't really have anything to add but this: Yes, we are happy, we are the Andrews Sisters, and we are all in harmony. But what then? Everybody in harmony; everybody saying the same thing, but what is being said is not particularly encouraging to human nature. So maybe, going back to Nietzsche, we have to bring up the question of repetition, how to live with repetition. As I was writing my own screed, the issue came up of how much historical specificity you can give to the absent memory which I said historically might be interpreted as located in the second generation of Jewish imaginative writers haunted by the Holocaust and the Second World War. Now, it's very important that it be made specific. But maybe every generation that has some kind of absent memory is wounded by the experience of the previous generation, which it has not witnessed. So, that's the repetition. And yet, I would say that historical particularity is very important.

Conor Cruise O'Brien: I think at this point I can only contribute to the harmony that has emerged between us by an acquiescence of silence.

Stanley Crouch: I was mightily impressed by everything the three of you said, because all three of you seemed to me to achieve what makes a statement important; and that is that the subject remains itself while a

poetic elevation arrives that seems to bring light. Mr. O'Brien was able to take things he was in the middle of, and make them be about himself, but at the same time achieve light by making us recognize something about the condition of human life in a political situation that reverberates all the way into one's personal life, including one's marriage. But we have to think about something that was introduced in the first talk, which is that the image, the light cast upon the wall in the film, if you will, and the light that comes at you from the television, and so much of what we find ourselves in the middle of today, is the competition of images for the crown. It's almost like there is always a Miss America of images. Who will win this time around? They are all there lined up in their bathing suits, they all do their routine, they all tell us their story, they all get their song, and then the judges have to say, this year's Miss America—the image—will be X. Now, what I would ask you three gentlemen is this: it seems to me that so much of where we are now is connected to the emergence of the individual through the democratic system, which makes, as talk television shows prove, everybody feel that whatever he or she is obsessed with is as important as what anyone else is obsessed with. There is an enormous break from the classical past when somebody can say, "Does the President think he is the only one who's ever had an affair with a young woman? I'll come on television and I will tell you, I have had affairs with fifty young women, and they are all in my family. And they will all come on and talk about me. Some of them will say, I wish I could marry the man." There will be consternation in the audience, and everybody will turn off the TV saying, "However screwed up I am, I am now sure that I am not the most screwed-up person in America." Now, what I am after is this: how do you all think the poetic moment of light will arrive when the writer has to fight off the kind of narcissism in which the you—you, the writer—begins to block the possible light that comes out of the words, and the reader turns away from your work, finally, disgusted not only with what you wrote, but with the idea of writing, and with you, the individual who has done it. This, I think is the experience many people have when they read something like *Dutch*. They may have thought Reagan was a bad guy when they started reading the book. But by the time they get to the end, they think Morris is a much worse person than Reagan, because of the sheer narcissistic audacity of this guy to impose himself as he has on an important historical moment. I hope this isn't too convoluted, but I wanted to find out how you three extraordinarily brilliant men might respond.

Jay Martin: Stanley is giving an answer to Millicent's question. He still believes that the political personality can continue to have elements of truthfulness and facticity, and also survive. Millicent asked whether there is an essential human character. Stanley has given us an example of that.

On the other hand, I think there is a difference between the kind of fictions that, traditionally, culture has been able to absorb, that have allowed us to see reality through fictions, and the current political fictions I have chronicled. There is a nice line in a poem by Edwin Arlington Robinson that comes to mind. I think it goes, "Games people play,/ Good glasses are to see the spirit through." We are accustomed, in traditional literature, even in *Don Quixote*, to see that the games, or the fictions that people adopt, can lead us to a kind of core reality. On the other hand, children who are questioned by professional investigators about their responses to TV believe that the characters on the screen have come through the television cord, the electric cord to the outlet, and that somehow they've been put into the building from outside. This is not so different from what the psychoanalyst Viktor Tausk described as schizophrenia, messages that are projected into you from some infernal machine in Berlin. The Surgeon General of the United States has done more studies on the effects of television on human intelligence and creativity than on the health effects of cigarettes. The conclusion is uniformly the same in all of these studies; that the following message should be seen on the top of every television screen: "This will be damaging to your mental health." Every test that has been done shows that if you give people a measurement of alertness, intelligence, ability to solve puzzles, and then have them watch TV for an hour, whether it's a sitcom, or an action film in which somebody is murdered, or an educational program meant to teach them something, their ability to solve puzzles (and the rest) will decline. I think we have a situation in culture that the politician has seized upon that exists in the media and allows for a different kind of fiction than the traditional fiction, which led us into insight so that the culture learned to absorb something that will provide insight. The fictions of today do not provide insight.

Geoffrey Hartman: Of course, one could say not to worry, since human narcissism is without depth, and that democracy is both an intoxicant and a disintoxicant. So the wheel continues to turn. There is an old adage that mankind wants to be deceived. There is a very real need, wish, desire in us to be elsewhere, to go in this fictive way, which has to be recognized—a libido; it's part of our being. We recognize it, but the question is, what do we do with it? Television may make it too easy.

If you look at it historically, you find some peculiar things, such as a certain puritanism which tries to limit and license spectacles. That is, it will have the religious spectacle as the only one you may look on, that you may invest in. You use the term "adaptation." Not adaptation in the crass sense of accomodation, but somehow as recognizing that the desire to be deceived is a part of human nature, and has to be dealt with. And you are quite right, the Alexandrian age on the one hand, the democratic age on the other, are the environments in which we live and breathe and have a being, and, therefore, impose certain conditions which we must meet, which we must struggle with.

Conor Cruise O'Brien: I think this is a profound question, which troubles me. I don't find an answer. I think we would need to open a whole second phase of our discussions here. I hope it may provide the base for that sometime in the future, but I wouldn't like to try a snap answer right now.

Helena Lewis: I chair a seminar on biography at the Harvard Humanities Center. As biographers we are, alas, largely driven to use memoirs, those terribly unreliable low orders of truth. Is there any hope for us? We do try so hard to approach some sort of reality, some sort of truth.

Conor Cruise O'Brien: I think it's quite true that none of the sources taken by themselves are altogether reliable. But I think the historian, by drawing on all the available relevant material, comparing it, challenging it, seeing what the contradictions are, trying to find the base for them, can find his way to something approaching a bit more closely to the truth than any of the materials he is using, taken separately. But it's quite a difficult task, and it can only get done with considerable sensitivity and discretion, which some, but not all, historians have shown.

Victor Kestenbaum: This is directed to Mr. Martin. You say that the task of the biographer is to judge and balance each kind of truth with the other, and you refer to coherence/correspondence theories. Could you tell us a little about the particular challenges you faced in writing a biography of Dewey, not exactly a political personality, but what today some people might regard as a public intellectual.

Jay Martin: Jeffrey touched on one aspect of the excitement of doing something like the biography of Dewey. There is only a small biography of Dewey written by a person who had no access, twenty or more years

ago, to the immense number of Dewey's personal papers. And as it was for Jeffrey, when he held Wyndham Lewis's brain in his hands, it was for me like opening a new world: you open the first box that will contain the first page of a million pages and know that you are going to have in your hands a life that has been otherwise lost. When I was writing the biography of Nathanael West, I discovered something that Jeffrey spoke of—you become the central recorder and historian, to whom members of the family come, and say, "I knew Pep West from this angle, or that angle. Tell me what he was like for other people. I want to get the whole family sense together, the real person." So that's one sort of excitement.

Here is the second excitement. Dr. Yale Kramer said to me, "I feel terribly sorry for you. Dewey must be the most boring person in the world." It turns out that he led a terrifically exciting life, not merely as a public intellectual, but as a public doer. He was part of the beginnings of the CIA, working for Woodrow Wilson in the First World War (Wilson had been his teacher). He was the chairperson of the Trotsky hearings when Stalin accused Trotsky of treason. I could go on and on. Henry Steele Commager said at one point that no question in America was settled while Dewey was alive until he had spoken on it. Here is a person who was always ranked during his life as one of the ten great Americans, and who has almost disappeared from public sight.

For me it's exciting to see a person who is, on the one hand, going down to Mexico City to hold a hearing of the most important note about Trotsky, and going to Diego Rivera's house, where Rivera wears a bandolier with bullets and a carbine in case anybody tries to kill Trotsky. Dewey received death threats and defied them. He was the only person whom both the right and left trusted to hold the tribunal. And while he prepared to chair the tribunal, he was, at the same time, traveling down to Mexico on the Sunshine Special with Jim Farrell the novelist, staying up nights writing an essay on Leibnitz, reading all of Trotsky's works, and then writing love letters, at the age of seventy-two, to his latest girlfriend, one of the succession of women that Dewey was entranced by after his wife's death. His life was so full that when he was eighty-eight years old, he adopted two children, and when he got married at the age of eighty-seven, he wrote in a letter, on his wedding night, "Oh, to be sixty again!" That's a real guy! The immense excitement of his philosophy, of course, is there for those who wish to write about his philosophy; Richard Rorty says, and others agree, that with Wittgenstein and Heidegger, Dewey is one of the three great philosophers of the twentieth century. But it's also an immensely exciting thing to see a per-

son who starts as a replacement child, who should never have been born: his older brother, John Dewey, was terribly burned by falling into a pot of hot liquid, a big vessel, and then, when his parents wrapped him in bandages, the bandages combusted, and he burned to death in front of their eyes. In the same week, in solace perhaps, they conceived another child, whom they named John Dewey, after the first one. He lived in the shadow of having to live a life for others, all of his life, and made a great life out of it.

Victor Kestenbaum: I hope your book will help to balance the great disservice that has been frequently done to Dewey, not beginning with, but let's say exemplified by Richard Hofstadter in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. He purports to show how Dewey's educational philosophy contributed to anti-intellectualism, and says, before I do that, let me give you an account of the essential argument of Dewey's philosophy of education. This he proceeds to do in three paragraphs.

Jay Martin: One thing that gives me hope is that half of his works were written after the age of sixty. And he wrote forty-eight volumes, so that's a lot of work. When he is around seventy, he says, "I am beginning really to see what I was after all this time." He was growing and growing continuously. The great work, I think, is his *Theory of Valuation*, a logical theory of inquiry written toward the end of his life. At the end of his life, at the age of ninety-two, he wrote a vast plan to rework the whole history of his thinking. This is a great guy.

Igor Webb: I just want to make an observation about why there are so many memoirs, and to relate realism to shame. It seems to risk banality to say that realism depends on the kind of plot which is optimistic and maybe even positivistic, and certainly entangled with the Enlightenment; and that our experience in the twentieth century, in particular since we were speaking so much of Jewish experience, has been to blow all of that optimism, and all the failed gods of our century right out of the water—and that one of our most powerful reactions to that is shame. We are ashamed to have believed, and we are ashamed, in particular, of what that belief created, and we are ashamed of our not being able to act or to speak out in protest, and we are even ashamed vicariously. And we hope to redeem ourselves by expressing our shame, one of the best means of which is the memoir; and, of course, the expression of shame in the memoir, famously, includes shamelessness, which is a piquant part of so many memoirs.

Session IV: Facts and Fictions in All Three Genres

Joanna S. Rose: I am Joanna Rose, chairman of *Partisan Review*'s advisory board. I want to welcome you all to this fourth and final session of the conference on "Autobiography, Biography & Memoir." In today's session there are three speakers, Francine du Plessix Gray, Hilary Spurling, and Denis Donoghue, who will perhaps go off into different but no less interesting directions than the ones you heard earlier in the conference.

Our first speaker is Francine du Plessix Gray, a fiction and nonfiction writer and biographer. She has taught biography at Columbia, Brown, Princeton, and Vassar. Her works include *Rage and Fire*, a life of Flaubert's mistress Louise Colet, and *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life*. Her tenth book, on the philosopher Simone Weil, will be published in the coming year. Her subject today is "Mothers/Daughters."

Francine du Plessix Gray: I have detected a lack of concern throughout this wonderful conference for the manner in which the female half of the planet has handled the autobiography, memoir, and biography form. So to remedy the lacunae, I'm going to comment on a quintessentially female theme, a theme that has seldom been explored—mothers writing about their daughters. The reverse process, the chronicling of the maternal bond by daughters, has obviously become a virtual industry in this country, displayed in hundreds of memoirs with various degrees of excellence and tawdriness for many decades. Mother as nurturer or muse—from Colette to de Beauvoir and Jamaica Kincaid; mother as abuser—Mommy Dearest, Mary Karr, Diane Middlebrook's book on Anne Sexton; mother as brilliant, absent intellectual—Mary Catherine Bateson's book on Margaret Mead. But the reverse process, mothers writing about daughters, is rare indeed. There are obvious biological reasons for the scarcity. Unless their child dies tragically young, as Sylvia Plath did, few mothers live long enough to reflect on the entire span of their relationships with their daughters.

Moreover, to complain about a disgraceful offspring, either in life or in literature, is an admission of maternal failure, whereas to praise an admirable child might be seen as ungainly bragging. The complexities of the maternal bond, now recognized as the most pivotal one in a woman's life, as a wellspring of most of our hopes, frustrations, obsessions, phobias, is seldom, if ever, discussed from the mother's point of view, either in memoirs or, amazingly, in psychiatry. This paucity of

material in psychiatry might be traced to the Freudian legacy of exclusively child-centered analytic theory. A psychiatrist friend whom I queried on this issue, Dr. Anna Fels of New York, had this to say: "It's a fascinating lacuna. Mothers' confessional statements about their daughters seem to be one of the last taboos. There is apparently something too frightening about contemplating the difficulties of motherhood. All such flaws are seen as highly pathological."

Out of a very narrow spectrum of possibilities, I chose to focus on a seventeenth-century French writer who was truly the patron saint of the maternal memoir form, Madame de Sévigné. Sévigné's letters to her daughter, written over a span of twenty-five years, have never been properly included in the autobiographical or the memoir canon, even though they fulfill most of the conditions set out by historians of life-writing. The personal, meditative components of Sévigné's letters present the gradual unfolding of character over time. They offer the essence of the autobiographical act—the history of a personality. As for her historical set pieces, including her missives, they give us the most vivid memoirs we have, matched only by Saint-Simon's in their brilliance, of French high society in the seventeenth century.

Before I attempt to unravel the skeins of fact and fiction in her writings, I'd like to talk about Madame de Sévigné, who is hardly known in this country. Born in 1626, she was a woman of the lesser nobility. She had lost her father and mother by the time she was eight, and both of her beloved grandparents, who were her legal guardians, died the following year. She was brought up by a trio of doting, bookish uncles who gave her a more brilliant education than any other woman of her time. She was married off at age eighteen to a dissolute Breton playboy, the Marquis de Sévigné, who died on the day she turned twenty-five while dueling over the favors of a hooker called La Belle Loulou.

In 1651, Madame de Sévigné finds herself a widow with nothing much to survive on beyond her charm, her wit, her pleasant (though not outstanding) looks, and her superb education. She also has two small children, a boy and a girl, to bring up. The obsessive passion she will later pour into her letters to her daughter, whom she spoils and flatters outlandishly from the start, must be viewed in the light of two pivotal biographical facts: her own unfulfilled need for maternal love, and an innate aversion to heterosexual relations created by the humiliation she suffered in her own marriage. This antipathy leads her to turn down marriage offers from some of the most captivating men in France, among them the Duke de La Rochefoucauld, and the fourteenth attendant of finances, Nicolas Fouquet. It also leads her to celebrate widowhood

with an enthusiasm that would even please Andrea Dworkin. "The state of widowhood spells liberty," she writes to a recently widowed niece. She tells another friend that her true birthday falls on the date her widowhood began, when she was reborn into a gentle and happy life.

It says something about the highly feminized climate of seventeenth-century French culture that within a few years of being widowed Sévigné established a central place in Paris society, solely through her intellectual gifts. She frequented that circle of Bluestocking women, called *les Précieuses*, so satirized by Molière, who played a key role in his feminization of seventeenth-century French society. She became an intimate friend of Madame de La Fayette, author of *La Princesse de Clèves*, and of her two rejected suitors, La Rochefoucauld and Fouquet. But she did nothing with her talents until the age of forty-three, when she was literally born as a writer through the following circumstances: her daughter, the beautiful, spoiled, aloof Françoise had married the Count de Grignan, a distinguished Provençal lord. Because of her charmless reserve and haughty manner, Françoise had not attracted any serious suitors until the perilously late age of twenty-three.

The couple first lived with the bride's mother in Paris. But a year into their marriage, Grignan was appointed governor of his native Provence, an often dangerous fifteen-day journey from the capital. Sévigné's daughter had to follow her husband to his ancestral home, north of Avignon, and the voluminous flow of letters Sévigné wrote to her daughter was a way of surviving the terrible sorrow of the separation, which became the central and organizing fact of her life. In the following twenty-five years, Sévigné would write several times a week, an average of some twenty-five-hundred folio pages a year, to her daughter. "Still weeping, still swooning with grief, I look in vain for my dear daughter." So begins the correspondence the very day the Countess de Grignan leaves for Provence. "Oh, what a cruel separation it is; I spent five hours sobbing incessantly. I went to Madame de La Fayette, who only intensified my grief by sharing in it."

Three days later she writes: "My passion for you is the one we should have for God, if we did have religious duty. You are my heart's sole passion, my life's greatest joy and sorrow." A fortnight later, Sévigné stands by a window on the top floor of her house, contemplating suicide because of a painful longing for her child. She chooses to live on, but puts up a large screen in her living room to hide the painful view of her daughter's empty bedroom.

One is struck by the erotic impulses that imbue the mother's desperate letters, such as this phrase censored out of all editions of Sévigné until twenty years ago: "I kiss with all my heart your beautiful cheeks

and breasts." One is equally struck by the keen sense of rivalry Madame de Sévigné expresses toward her son-in-law. She continually attempts to prove that it is she, the mother, who should remain the center of her daughter's affections. "How can a husband be worth a mother?" she bursts out on one occasion. "The only love you can count on is mine," she writes her daughter. "I'm the one person in the world who can love you with total devotion."

Before trying to unravel the elements of fact and fiction in Sévigné's writings, I have to make brief asides on the status of the letter as a literary genre in seventeenth-century France, and also, on a few ironies of the Sévigné correspondence. This is a time when letters served as the only medium of national news, particularly in the provinces, and a significant portion of their contents was for public consumption, to be shared with friends at the discretion of the recipient. In addition, Sévigné was writing at the precise time when the letter, long considered a minor, marginal genre, was emerging in France as an important autonomous literary form. And she was writing at the moment when the male literary hierarchy—La Bruyère among others—were declaring that women were superior to men at the art of the letter.

A typical missive from Madame de Sévigné to her daughter, dated 1675, touches on the following events: news of the war front in Holland (including a mention of the way her son Charles distinguished himself in battle); the death on the same battlefield of the century's greatest military leader, General de Turenne; the appearance of a new work by the Cardinal du Retz; a scandalous story about the King's homosexual brother. That is the imformative portion of that particular week's correspondence, a kind of gazette which the countess disseminated to her acquaintances throughout France. Notwithstanding her standoffish attitude toward her mother, she much savored her mother's letters.

The more personal parts of the missives, however, were meant to be strictly private. They included moments of Sévigné's brooding religious introspection—she was devout and worried a great deal about her standing in God's eyes. "How will I leave this life? How will I appear this side of God?" she writes in one such moment. "What can I hope for? Am I worthy of Paradise? Is Hell my just dessert? What alternatives? What a perplexity!" And these letters would inevitably include those declarations of amorous passion for her daughter which make Sévigné's missives so unique and so disturbing. Tortured accusations that her daughter's affections will never match hers in intensity, articulations of unfounded jealousies, paranoid expressions of rivalry with the countess's husband—the voicing of all those feelings, in sum, that show

Sévigné in her true colors as a nightmare of a mother. For this was an extremely physical and prehensile love. Sévigné herself is frequently puzzled and confused by the excessive ardor of her passion, and it is a puzzlement that often gives her musings an Augustinian depth. She fears that her passion for her daughter may amount to idolatry, that it threatens to ruin her relationship with God. "My confessor scolded me severely," she writes to the countess. "He told me that I was an outright pagan, that I set you up as an idol in my heart. In sum, he told me that I had best give thought to my immortal soul." So severely did her confessor view her idolatry, in fact, that several times he denied her the permission to take communion in Holy Week. Sévigné was clear-headed enough to see the potential destructiveness of her passion for her daughter. "We are killing each other," she burst out several times.

It's kind of fun to give a paper at the end of a conference, because you can work in some of the elements which your colleagues have accreted over the span of the conference; I'm thinking in particular of André Aciman's marvelous paper, in which he talked about the Proustian experience of longing as absence. Sévigné's correspondence is all about absence. It's about the delectation of using language as a substitute for the loved one's presence, for in real life, the women's relations were a total disaster. When they were together, all hell broke loose. Sévigné continually nagged the Grignans about her daughter's health, which was very poor, and about their gambling and their general improvidence. During the countess's stays in Paris, Sévigné's snooping and bullying were so extreme that the two women often communicated by letter from room to room, across closed doors, rather than face another violent confrontation.

The tactless inveighing of the mother even interfered in the daughter's sexual life. Sévigné had a morbid fear of the countess's frequent pregnancies. She refused to accept the fact that her daughter was deeply in love with her husband. That was indeed a rare emotion in seventeenth-century arranged marriages, and one totally foreign to Sévigné's experience. She constantly pleaded with both spouses to curb their marital lust. "I implore you, my darling, do not be overconfident about sleeping in separate beds," she writes her daughter. "The temptation is still there. Have someone else sleep in the same room."

When her daughter has her third pregnancy, Sévigné writes the count, "Do you think I gave her to you to kill her, to destroy her health, her youth, her beauty? I'll take your wife away from you!" In this eccentric triangle, which continually recalls the classical mythological archetype of Demeter and Persephone, it is the courteous, patient, tolerant count who emerges as the only hero. The analogy to the goddess of fertility

was hardly lost to Sévigné. When Lully's opera "Proserpine" opened at court, she drew playful analogies between its plot and her own life, casting the count, of course, as Pluto.

Absence, indeed, marks every aspect of this correspondence, for another irony is that it is one-sided. Countess de Grignan's letters to her mother were all destroyed by her descendants. In one of the few writing samples that remain, the postscript of a note the countess had written to her cousin, she intimates that she can't abide her mother's invasiveness, and can't wait to get back to her husband. Otherwise, we can only guess at her responses to her mother's prehensile love. She appears to be torn, deeply guilt-ridden by the conflict of loyalties apparently imposed on her. But apart from a few comments from contemporaries concerning the countess's aloofness and general nastiness, she only echoes back to us obliquely through her mother's letters, as through a maze of distorting mirrors.

A third irony in this correspondence is that Madame de Sévigné had two offspring, two "love objects" to choose from, and she chose her remote, secretive daughter over her affectionate, demonstrative son. Charles de Sévigné looks on his mother as his closest confidante. He even runs home to tell her about his moments of sexual impotence, sharing the news with her with a candor which makes contemporary family relations seem rabidly repressed. "We laughed uproariously," Sévigné writes her daughter about her son's report of a sexual fiasco. "He laid the blame on me, saying he had inherited my frigidity." So Charles is a learned, witty, devoted companion who shares many traits and tastes with his mother. Unlike his sister, who vents her resentment of mom in fits of rage, he heeds her advice with touching docility—and yet Sévigné is rather indifferent to this delicious, accommodating son. Perhaps he is too present to be loved in the truly Proustian sense. To the last, it is the remote, uncommunicative daughter who would remain, in Sévigné's words, "my heart's unique passion, my life's only pleasure and pain."

I'm finally ready to get to the pith of the question that concerns this particular panel: What is the balance of fact and fiction in the memoirs and autobiographical entries evolved over a quarter of a century in Sévigné's letters? History's judgment is that the memoirist passages are extremely true to fact. Those segments in which she displays her talent as a social, political, and literary chronicler are deemed to be as accurate as the most meticulous historical recording of the period, and often more accurate than Saint-Simon's. Such passages record a vast spectrum of themes—Louis XIV's shifting of affection to various mistresses and numerous more absurd aspects of the Sun King's reign, such

as the suicide of the Prince Royal's chief cook, Vatel, who kills himself upon learning that the seafood he had ordered the night before might not arrive in time to make his famous *quenelles de brochet* for the royal party's lunch (the most famous culinary incident in history).

As for fact and fiction in the more emotive autobiographical part of Sévigné's letters, I would be far more cautious, for this reason: Sévigné is very cagey and shrewd about the image she projects to the world. Her survival as an independent single woman depends on it. She is a pragmatist and a consummate diplomat, and her talent for self-preservation, for working the room, for networking, is renowned. No wonder she is sometimes referred to in Paris society as "the chameleon." Even though she is extremely drawn to Jansenism, and to the politically dissident movement called the Fronde, she is careful never to be officially associated with those factions, for she dreads falling out with the networks of protection she has carefully cultivated with the Church and the Court. She takes equal care in grooming her public image as ideal mother, for motherhood is a determinant factor in her construction of a public identity. Her social standing as one of the most gifted epistolary artists of her day, after all, has been in part achieved by the renowned intensity of her maternal emotions. She gets very upset, in fact, when her daughter makes public those passages of her letters which reveal the women's stormy relations. "Let us reestablish our reputation by a reunion at which we'll show ourselves more reasonable," she writes. "Never again let them say, 'They are killing each other.'" Such phrases clearly indicate that we must approach her maternal rhetoric cautiously. Did she really contemplate suicide a few days after her daughter left for Provence? We'll never know. We can only venture that the forcing of these women's tempestuous emotions into socially sanctioned maternal/filial behavior may have involved a great deal of exaggeration and role-playing.

Moreover, Sévigné's correspondence calls into question the very nature of the letter form—an issue which deserves an entire conference of its own. And it calls into question the adequacy of the letter as a vehicle of autobiographical veracity. What kind of an "autobiographical pact," let's say, in Philippe Lejeune's sense, is made between the reader and the writer in different circumstances? I have an example in mind, and I'm going to wing it on this, because it's something that just came to my mind today. As an example, let's compare the letters of Cicero to the letters of Sévigné.

We often examine Cicero's letters, when we teach autobiography, as the first true instance of fully developed autobiographical consciousness, in the sense that they trace the full spectrum of his emotions and ambitions and pains and sorrows over a matter of years. In Cicero's

case, they are addressed to a few of his closest male friends, and to his wife, who are objects of total stability and whom he's known for many years. That is exactly the opposite from the case of Sévigné, because we must always remember that Sévigné's letters to her daughter are, above all, instruments of seduction. So in relative terms, we can trust Cicero's letters because he has no ulterior motive in writing them, beyond exposing and analyzing his emotions, whereas in Sévigné's case, she must always conquer and conquer and conquer on.

The compliments she lavishes on her child—"your charm is sorcerous, you are the toast of Provence"—are hardly in accord with the countess's public reputation of insufferable haughtiness, of making as many enemies as her mother has friends and admirers. Love letters must always be approached with great care, especially when they are addressed, as Sévigné's are, to a love object who is constantly escaping reach, to a "figure of flight," in the Proustian sense.

Finally, there is the issue of maternal narcissism, which is bound to affect most any autobiographical expression of maternal love for daughters. Like most moms, Sévigné wants her daughter to reflect her traits, her predilections. She looks to her daughter for a mirroring effect in just those years when a child needs to achieve that severance and that individuation from mother, which every woman needs to complete in order to reach true emotional maturity.

It's a nightmare of a relationship. Thank heaven for the feminist scholars who've helped to decipher it in the past decades. They've made invaluable contributions, and they've particularly helped to explain Sévigné's potential for mythologizing. They have discerned a link in Sévigné's psyche between the mother she lost when she was eight years old, and the daughter she keeps losing every two years when the latter returns to Provence. They have reminded us that women's early experience of parental loss are easily rearoused by the various experiences of motherhood, and in particular, by the separation they endure from their children. In Harriet Allentuck's reading, for instance, Sévigné's lifelong, seemingly unexplored grief for her own mother, whom she only mentions once in her entire corpus of letters, is reawakened by each of her daughter's departures. This emphasis on Sévigné's tragically cut-off filial bondings helps us to see how desperately these letters aim to return her child to the maternal flesh, perhaps even to recreate an illusory reunion with her own mother. And it reminds us that such a delusionary transference will entail considerable distortions and rhetorical histrionics.

But notwithstanding this wealth of fine scholarship, several mysteries still surround the Sévigné correspondence, and none is greater than the

mother and daughter's relationship at the time of the writer's death, which came to her at the age of seventy. For the last decade of Sévigné's life, the two women had gotten along increasingly well. One of the most moving aspects of Sévigné's spiritual journey, in fact, is her gradual acknowledgement of her daughter's need for independence, her gradual letting go, which is accompanied by a whole new level of religious acceptance, of what she called in her very Jansenist term "providence." Countess de Grignan also mellowed, and displayed far greater tenderness and openness with her mother. In the last two years of her life, Madame de Sévigné lived at the Grignans' castle in Provence, by the side of her "invariable passion," as she called her child. She had gone there to nurse her back to health from a long illness, and fell very ill herself from an ailment that has never been determined, most probably a form of influenza.

The greatest mystery that attends her death is the following. During the two weeks of the illness that carried her mother away, the countess never set foot into her mother's sick room; she never even attended the funeral. Even in her last days, Sévigné's passion for her daughter was stamped with absence. Over the centuries, the Countess de Grignan's descendants have set forth several theories to protect her from a reputation of heartlessness, such as the notion that she was not fully enough recovered from her own illness to visit her mother. All such conjectures have been discounted by contemporary historians, whose prevailing view, at least in France, is the following: obsessed by the idolatrous nature of her love and wishing to make one great final penance, it was Madame de Sévigné herself who forbade her daughter to come into her room for a last visit. As a prerequisite to entering the presence of her Maker, in her last days she may have made the supreme sacrifice and denied herself her life's greatest treasure—her daughter's presence.

The final irony of Sévigné's correspondence is that within a few decades of her death, this most prominent and pathological of maternal infatuations was virtually sanctified in France as a paragon of maternal emotion. By 1830, her stature had become so iconic that she was welcomed into the highest ranks of the French literary pantheon. She was the very first writer chosen to inaugurate the "Grands Écrivains de France" series, which later became a model for the Pléiade editions of our own era. One is indeed grateful for those elements of zaniness in French culture which apotheosized Sévigné, thus assuring the careful preservation of her texts. One is equally grateful for the total dearth of any psychoanalytic self-consciousness in her time, which might have censored her emotions. It enabled her to offer us that extremely rare literary phenomenon—an expression of maternal passion in its most

devouring, most archaic, most unleashed form, maternal passion in its full spectrum of grandeur and terror.

Joanna S. Rose: Our next speaker, Hilary Spurling, is a writer, critic, literary editor of *The Spectator*, book reviewer, and biographer of Ivy Compton-Burnett and Paul Scott. Her most recent books are *The Unknown Matisse*, volume 1 of the first ever biography of Henri Matisse, and *La Grande Thérèse: The Greatest Scandal of the Century*. She has been described as a biographer with the abilities of a detective and the narrative skills of a novelist. The title of her talk is "On the Smoking Ruins of Structuralism."

Hilary Spurling: One of the surprises of this cosmopolitan and transatlantic gathering has been, for me, its emphasis on the metaphysical rather than ethical aspects of biography. I hadn't fully realized before that all the similar occasions I have ever attended in Britain or France have invariably revolved around ethics. The two countries take opposing positions on this as on so many fronts and, as a British biographer working for the past ten years on a French subject, I shall begin my brief dispatch from London and Paris with a horticultural metaphor.

It was, as you might have guessed, a Frenchman who characterized biography as a weed on the smoking ruins of structuralism. But it might just as easily have been the founding father of contemporary biography in Britain, Michael Holroyd, who recently became so exasperated by his colleagues' interminable defensive ethical debates that he delivered a swinging speech for the prosecution. Holroyd himself, incidentally, demolished his own case shortly afterwards by publishing his memoirs, *Basil Street Blues*, a hilarious and sometimes harrowing account of the Holroyd family and how they turned him into a biographer. At its core is a passionate defense, cast not in the shape of a philosophical or forensic argument but on an intensely moving human level. Holroyd epitomizes the power of biography to restore and re-enter other lives and the worlds that shaped them, to give life to the past from which we come. Like many radical reformers, he is at his most subtle when he is simplest. Here he is looking out a window at people on the street outside, and following them in his imagination: "I never tire of watching. I watch, therefore I am; I am what I watch; and *what I watch entrances me.*"

That is the nub, the essential philosophical base on which any defense of the British approach to biography—as opposed to the French or Cartesian school—must rest. Holroyd divides biography into three categories: popular, academic, and literary. He dismisses the first group as

drug dealers ruthlessly exploiting the wretched reader's addiction, purveying unsavory, offensive, often downright disgusting information for large sums of tainted money. The second category consists of bland, officially approved, more or less ingratiating practitioners—often cashing in on the celebrity of recent or still active politicians. These academic time-servers may be seen as history's butlers. Serious attention has tended to concentrate on the third band of literary or artistic biographers, frequently categorized by writers working in more established fields—especially novelists—as parasites feeding off other people's rich growth, possessing no roots, no genuine creative power or originality of their own, filching a spurious vitality from their subjects who find themselves chewed up and spat out when sucked dry.

This is pretty much the French view. Biography is enjoying a hectic, not entirely convincing, and almost certainly brief flowering in France at present. French biographers held their first conference the year before last. *Le Nouvel Observateur* marked the occasion with a double-page spread, explaining this regrettable surge of popularity as the inevitable consequence of the even more regrettable—and equally temporary—eclipse that has overtaken serious critical theory. That is to say, first the Marxists, and now the Structuralists, have been mown down—leaving the field free for lowly peasants (or biographical parasites) like me to make illicit hay. "After the good times comes a period of cutbacks and retrenchment," wrote *Le Nouvel Observateur*, adding a stern rider: "biographies are beginning to spring up again like weeds on the smoking ruins of Structuralism."

This quarrel goes back at least to the eighteenth century when philosophical arguments pioneered by Rousseau and Voltaire took on a decidedly more pragmatic shape on the other side of the English Channel in the hands of Samuel Johnson, and that first and greatest of all literary parasites, his biographer, James Boswell. People today still react with civilized disdain in France to the empirical Anglo-Saxon approach. When I first started working there, I quickly learned never to mention the word "biography." If people asked what I was doing, it saved trouble to mention research without specifying what kind. It took me a while to understand that, however hard they try and for all their innate politeness, the French can never view biography as anything but the intellectual pits. What they find equally hard to grasp is that any self-respecting author can openly practice the trade without feeling ashamed.

They see biography as a typically Anglo-Saxon enterprise, based on a primitive, even brutish obsession with the facts: an essentially clod-hopping earth-bound activity with a dash of ancestral treachery thrown in;

an excuse for *les perfides Albions* to dish the dirt as usual. The biographer, from this viewpoint, is not only cheap and vulgar but ruthlessly exploitative as well, rightly stigmatized in the popular imagination as a scavenger, butcher, or carrion crow. The traditional defense at this point is that the claims of Truth and Justice should override the basic human instinct to cover up the murkier aspects of reality. But from the French point of view, historical accuracy—what actually happened, *les données* or the given facts—is of minimal interest. What counts is the intellectual structure that can be erected on nature's crude unpolished base. Any essay, thesis, book, even a humble biography, will be judged not by its initial *données* but by the dazzling display of philosophical and imaginative pyrotechnics thrown up around them.

I don't want to discuss specific French biographies, still less biographers, but I will quote the words which made me finally decide a decade ago that there might be room for an Anglo-Saxon biography of Henri Matisse. They come from the doyen of Matisse experts in France, my distinguished colleague, Pierre Schneider, who prefaced his seminal study of the painter with this magisterial disclaimer: "History will be present in this book as a sort of latent menace, a negation that will have to be constantly warded off." That in a nutshell is the Cartesian view. It explains why the French published the first volume of their *Dictionnaire de biographie française* half a century after our own *Dictionary of National Biography*, and why they have now abandoned it again, having taken sixty-six years to reach the letter *H*. The sixty-three volumes of the British DNB came out in fifteen years flat. Its editor was Leslie Stephen, whose daughter, Virginia Woolf, claimed to have been crushed by the *Dictionary* in the womb. The French would have sympathized with her predicament, because inevitably their dim view of our fact-grubbing trade is self-fulfilling.

A biographer operating along Cartesian lines seeks to rise above actuality by overriding its surprises and smoothing out its rough or dirty places to comply with higher theoretical requirements. This sort of biographer runs the perennial risk of falling into Holroyd's second category of academic practitioners, history's butlers who serve up their subjects on a metaphorical silver salver. Schneider solved the problem with characteristic elegance by separating off his account of Matisse's life and stowing it below stairs, so to speak, tucked away behind the literary equivalent of a green baize door. The facts (at any rate such facts as he had got, or been given) were relegated to a brief section at the back of his book, where they obligingly confirmed its author's view of history as a menace: tawdry, shallow, mundane, and misleading.

That outline was virtually all I had to go on when I first tentatively approached the same subject myself. It was my publisher's idea. It took him a year to persuade me that no one had ever written a life of Matisse, nor was anyone thinking of doing so in France, the U.S., or the U.K. In the end I sent a message to Britain's leading Matisse scholar to ask whether this unexpected state of affairs could be true. The answer was *yes*. Matisse had never had a biography, and the reason was that his life would be too dull to write about. My response was bewilderment. At that point I knew as little as most people about the painter as opposed to his work. If I had an image of him at all, it was based on a group of well-known photographs taken towards the end of his life, showing a genial white-haired old gentleman sitting up in bed with pigeons flying round his head.

Reading the relatively limited available material proved little help. The standard impression, circulated by serious art historians, as well as by more popular journalistic recyclers, was of a stuffy conventional citizen with an irredeemably bourgeois mentality: a hard-headed businessman whose undoubted talent for decorative effects was the product of a thoroughly uneventful life. I couldn't believe it. I could *not* believe that paintings so full of power and energy had been produced by a dull and unenterprising character. I had nothing to go on at that stage but my instinct, a biographer's hunch that insisted something was wrong. So, feeling as foolish as the little tailor in the fairy tale, I backed my hunch by setting out in search of what I thought of from the beginning as my unknown Matisse.

I started by going to see his heirs in Paris. I was granted an interview by the head of the family, who said formally when asked what he thought of the possibility of my writing a biography of Matisse: "Madame, I have no legal right to forbid you." "No, Monsieur," I said faintly (for I suspected his claim wasn't strictly true, at least in a French court of law), "but you have a moral right. And if you wish to exercise it, please do so now, for that would save us both no end of time and trouble." If he was surprised, he remained too polite to show it but, when I left forty minutes later, he wished me a skeptical "*Bon courage*."

Most biographies start with this sort of interview. At any rate, all mine have begun with a skeptical family assuring me I would find nothing worth saying about my subject after which the life in question turned out, in each case, to conceal dramatic surprises, the kind of dark secret kept—in the words of my first subject, Ivy Compton-Burnett—through long lives and on death beds. Experts who insist that someone is too dull to write about make me feel these days like one of Holroyd's

drug-dealers. To be more precise, I feel like a ferret, which is not a pleasant sensation. At the outset, admittedly, I haven't the faintest inkling as to what sort of secrets I am likely to ferret out. But, though the family at this stage always know far more than I do, they don't know what sort of ferret they have just put down their trousers.

It is at moments like this that I come closest to sharing French misgivings about Anglo-Saxon methods and, still more distasteful, Anglo-Saxon morals. I see the logic behind their ability to make even the most routine biographical research feel like ignoble ferreting, or muckraking. The French have perfected a protective and defensive system of legal and bureaucratic regulation that militates against any attempt to take a second look at a life that has been reduced over the years, like Matisse's, to a handful of legends, endlessly recycled and passed down like Bible stories. Checking up on these legends often proved next to impossible. Looking back, I see my years of research in France as a long series of shocks.

My first shock was the discovery that biography's name was mud. My second was to find that the name of Matisse was mud, too. Most people in the small northern town where he grew up—as well as in the neighboring towns where he was born and went to school—had never heard of him. The few who knew his name generally belonged to an older generation that remained too embarrassed to talk about him. Several elderly people described his work to me as pictures a child could have painted ("Have you *seen* his paintings, Madame?"), explaining that nobody in those parts would have been fool enough to shell out the ludicrous prices apparently paid for such things in Paris.

But the next generation of people in their forties and fifties more often than not knew nothing at all about him. I visited the law firm that had once handled Matisse's father's business affairs. The office still exists a little further along the street from the seed store where the painter grew up, and the head of the firm, who couldn't have been more accommodating, saw no problem about my consulting his records (which were kept in sacks in an attic at the top of a winding stair across the courtyard). "What name did you say, Madame?" he asked helpfully. "Mathis? Mathys? How are you spelling that? with an *i* or with a *y*?"

This was in 1992, and I found similar reactions all over the painter's native North. The director of the local art school, where Matisse had enrolled in secret as a boy, kept the relevant register at home, not in the school itself, precisely so as to avoid prying eyes like mine. When we finally met, after eighteen months of broken appointments and missed rendezvous, he told me that the very name of Matisse had brought shame and ignominy to his school's otherwise proud record. This sort

of response taught me a great deal. People whose feelings were still so bitter a century after Matisse had left the region gave me my first inkling of the depths of humiliation and persecution he had endured there.

His history, as it slowly emerged, reminded me again and again of the fate that had overtaken Vincent Van Gogh, born sixteen years before Matisse, roughly a hundred miles away on the far side of the great central European plain. This was French Flanders, the source of the Rivers Somme and Sambre, a difficult place to come to terms with at first for anyone from England. Matisse's birthplace, Le Cateau-Cambrésis, is ringed with British cemeteries holding young soldiers who died in 1914–1918. If it took me some time to get used to signposts pointing to places of sombre memory like "Le Cateau" and "Ypres," it took just as long for even more ancient memories to begin to surface in the old people of Matisse's hometown.

These were people who had grown up hearing their parents talk in whispers about *le sot Matisse*, the village idiot or madman who had been despised, jeered at, hounded, and finally run out of town. Their initial secretiveness had deep historical roots. Their region had been the cockpit of European battles from the time of Julius Caesar onwards. All the local towns and villages had been occupied by German armies three times in Matisse's lifetime. He himself had grown up in a countryside full of fresh graves, being taken to visit the field on which France was defeated when he was a baby of twelve months in 1871, listening as a small boy to tales of looting, pillage, and destruction, of civilian hostages lined up to be shot, of whole populations helpless to protect themselves or their dependents.

People had learned to bury or burn possessions and papers rather than have them forcibly removed by Prussian invaders. Old habits of mistrust and reticence governed their ways of thinking and behaving. I was often reminded of a saying that had become almost a refrain in those parts. Matisse's mother repeated it at mealtimes in his childhood, like a grace: "Well, there's another one the Germans won't get their hands on [*Encore un que les Allemands n'auront pas*]." Wrongs that couldn't be righted could at least be obliterated. Denial and repression—the destruction of records, the refusal to keep mementos or look back at the past—remain widespread to this day throughout the region.

I had come across cultural amnesia on this scale once before, in India, when I made a journey across the subcontinent in the footsteps of the novelist Paul Scott—who was my second biographical subject. *The Jewel in the Crown*—a hugely popular TV series based on Scott's novels after his death—coincided with a wave of imperial nostalgia in Britain in the

1980s that would have astounded Scott himself. His work brought him little success in his lifetime. The partition of India in 1947, the appalling carnage between Muslims and Hindus that followed the hasty (and humiliating) departure of the British rulers, all made the public look away. Readers did not want to think about these things, let alone face making the uncomfortable moral and political reckoning that Scott was almost unique in attempting in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s.

Ten years after Scott's death, when I set out to write his life, I found a parallel blankness in India. There seemed to be little or no obvious remaining trace of the former empire. Many of the young Indians I met had only the vaguest impression that the British had once ruled their country. So far as they were concerned, the whole affair was ancient history. Scott himself had always insisted that the past remains unfinished business. He was pilloried for it at the time. But subsequent events in India and Pakistan have repeatedly proved him right when he insisted it was a dangerous mistake to pretend the past had never happened, or to try to sweep it under the carpet.

In Matisse's case, the skeleton under the carpet turned out to be a major politico-financial scandal that rocked the country and very nearly brought down the French Government at the turn of the century. The Humbert Affair, following immediately after the Dreyfus Affair, was hushed up so successfully at the time and afterwards that it barely rates a mention in histories or memoirs of the period. Nor was there any reference in published or unpublished accounts of Matisse's life to a national and international scandal that turned his own and his family's lives upside down. It had traumatic personal consequences, and it has distorted his public image ever since. It explains why there has been no biography until now. It was in large part responsible for that famous figment—the tame, dull, solemn Matisse—who turned out to be almost the opposite of the bold, passionate, warm-hearted, humorous, and anarchic unknown Matisse I found myself writing about.

This is where I rest my case, with neither muckrakers nor hagiographers. Whichever goal they pursue, whether they want sensational revelations or a decent cover-up, both parties know precisely what they are looking for from the beginning. I belong to a third party of biographers who set out with no notion of where they are going, who work without preconceptions, and whose sole aim is to discover what actually happened. Uncertainty is our basic working principle. And the nearer you get to the present, the more uncertain you inevitably become. For it is a disconcerting rule that, the closer your focus, the more blurring and distortion surrounds the image, and the harder it is

to establish any kind of moral or temporal perspective. But it seems to me imperative to try.

There is a sense in which everyone who hears or reads these words has been influenced by Matisse, whether or not they have ever looked at one of his pictures. The paintings that once provoked such vituperation, making the public in Paris, New York, and London howl with laughter or rage, these same canvases seem suffused with radiant tranquillity today. This is not a passing fad or whim. It is a fundamental shift in vision, and Matisse's struggles to bring it about have been at least partially obscured by a false and conventional view of him. At its simplest level, biography is a work of clearance: a humble but necessary job of garbage disposal, followed by cleaning, renovation and restoration. On another level it is a matter of reclaiming and revitalizing the past, of giving rather than taking life.

It is natural enough for the French, whose approach to gardening developed so differently from ours in Britain, to look on our books as weeds sprouting untidily from the ruins of their own handsome and orderly theoretical structures. They view us Anglo-Saxon biographers as a gang of hooligans bursting into their clipped avenues and smooth parterres, scuffing the gravel, overturning the urns, trampling down neat rows of alternating orange marigolds and scarlet dahlias. But if we are to be classed as weeds, then I would sooner see us as the brilliant purple buddleias, the crimson rose bay willowherb, the cascades of cow parsley, tumbling elder, and spikes of pussy willow, sprouting into strange growth at odd angles from unexpected places, that make the glory of the luxuriant jungly garden of British and American biography.

Joanna S. Rose: Our final speaker of the conference, the internationally renowned Denis Donoghue, has held for twenty years the Henry James Chair of English and American Letters at New York University. An Irishman by birth, he lectures throughout the world, and has most recently written a critical biography of Walter Pater, books on the practice of reading, and *Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot*. Soon to appear is *Adam's Curse*, a volume of the Erasmus lectures he gave at Notre Dame on literature and religion. The title of his talk is "My Only Memoir."

Denis Donoghue: The reason for which I have been invited to speak at this conference seems to me frail indeed. I am not a professional philosopher or a professional biographer. The only reason I can discover for being at this conference is that in 1990 I published a short book called *Warrenpoint*, a memoir of the first seventeen years of my life. I

called it *Warrenpoint* because I lived there, a small town in Northern Ireland, just across the border between North and South, or rather between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State, as it was in 1928 when I was born. Some of you may know the town—it's not remarkable from any consideration. You will find it on the largest maps; it's immediately over the border into County Down; it lies along Carlingford Loch, and was in my time and, as far as I know, still is a town of about two thousand people. It's also relevant to what I'll have to say that in my time the population consisted of about a thousand Roman Catholics and a thousand Protestants, but I'll explicate that perhaps obnoxious remark as I go along.

My father was sergeant-in-charge of the Royal Ulster Constabulary in Warrenpoint, so we lived in the part of the barracks that was called "married quarters." We were seven, to begin with: father Denis, mother Johanna, sisters Kathleen and May, brothers Tim and John (the baby), and I. John died on December 28, 1932 in the usual Irish way of pneumonia at the age of fourteen months.

It was an uncomfortable station in the sense that we were very much aware that we were a Roman Catholic family living and participating in what was distinctly a Protestant or, as we would now call it, a Loyalist institution. And this, while it had its piquancies in certain respects, made my life somewhat uncomfortable. One of its consequences was that the prevalence of silence in the family became almost continuous and universal. Warrenpoint being what it was, and our lives being as they were, there were certain topics which could not be discussed, and these were religion and politics. My father was never heard to speak on these matters, nor indeed my mother.

This has some bearing because it refers to the sense of my growing up, and my relation to my father and my mother. I should say, by the way, especially in this setting, that I grew up as a Roman Catholic, and indeed in every old-fashioned sense an Irish Nationalist. That is, I believed that the border should not have happened. I believe that Northern Ireland should not exist as a political entity within the British Empire; I am nostalgic for the vision or the memory or the thought of Ireland being whole and undivided. I remain a Nationalist. These are my sentiments, and I doubt if I intend changing them.

We lived in the barracks until my father retired from the R.U.C. in September 1946 and the family left Warrenpoint because we had no compelling reason to stay. May went to Belfast to become a pharmacist, Kathleen to University College, Galway to become a secondary school teacher, Tim to Tullow—where I was born—to open a shop for the sale

of boots and shoes and to waste his life in drink, I to attend University College, Dublin and the Royal Irish Academy of Music as a student of Latin, English, and lieder. My parents went to Tullow in the frail hope of protecting Tim from his weaknesses and to live with my mother's sister Ciss and her uncle Martin Coady. September 1946 seemed a good moment to bring my memoir to an end.

What was there in my experience that could conceivably amount to a book long or short? Why would anyone write a book on material as flimsy as that? Well, the answer is, I think, that at the time, of course, or at virtually any time during the past thirty years, the subject of Northern Ireland has been an international issue. If you see people murdering each other and doing this virtually on television for the last thirty years, the question arises: if they have proclaimed themselves Christians, what do they think they are doing? Why are they murdering one another, and with this degree of ferocity? So, the matter might be claimed to have some slight degree of interest. When I came to teach at New York University, it was occasionally put to me that my experience of growing up as a boy in a small town in the north of Ireland might be of slightly more than provincial interest.

The matter became for me of particular relevance when several years later the Irish Republican Army had one of its major military successes, in a manner of speaking, by bombing and blowing up the very house in which we had lived, the police barracks. They also succeeded, tragically, in killing a young girl who lived next door to the bombed-out barracks. The question then gradually arose as to the possibility of my writing a short book on the subject of my experience, and my editor at Knopf, Gordon Lish, found my conversational reminiscences of childhood interesting. Besides, the mayhem in Northern Ireland at the time raised questions that I might address. Catholics and Protestants were killing one another in Belfast, Derry, and other towns. Why? Were they really quarreling about the theology of Transubstantiation and Papal Infallibility? Lish thought that I might write an attractive book, part memoir of my childhood, part historical and political elucidation.

My own motive was different. I had become bored with my own style, a style that had issued from the kind of literary comment that I had been making in books for many years. I started finding my sentences predictable, rhythmically uninteresting. And I thought that if I were to continue writing at all, I would have to acquire a new style. I thought, wouldn't it be splendid if I could extend my range of tones so that whatever its effect on readers might be, it might make me less weary of myself, less bored with sentences.

The first device I thought of to get over the embarrassment of trying to write a book about myself—having nothing to write about—was to get rid of the "I," the first person singular. I tried using the third person singular, on the authority of *The Education of Henry Adams*. But that authority, I soon saw, was not available to me. Adams wrote of himself:

> Had he been born in Jerusalem under the shadow of the Temple, and circumcised in the Synagogue by his uncle the high priest, under the name of Israel Cohen, he would scarcely have been more distinctly branded, and not much more heavily handicapped in the races of the coming century, in running for such stakes as the century was to offer.

But to be born Denis Donoghue was to incur no brand, no handicap: as a name, it carried no implication. The only Donoghue one heard about was a jockey, Steve Donoghue, no relation of mine. Narration in the third person singular, I found, was more egotistical than the blatant if not candid "I," because it would be claiming exemplary status, as Henry Adams is justified in doing.

The second problem was that my childhood was bereft of incident. The only things that would interest me in relation to my own life were not things that I had done but the books I had read. Certain books, sentences, phrases that I happened to have read, were indelible. I then devised a method of writing a book full of quotations. At every weak moment, when the trail of incident, such as it was, had run out, I would produce a passage, a few sentences, a phrase, and I would mull these over for a bit. Still, there was no easy way of getting over the difficulty of having nothing to write about, and having nothing to say. And I might mention, marginally, that it's perhaps significant that whenever I have made any gesture at all toward bringing to an author an interest mainly biographical, I have tended to move toward authors who like myself had almost nothing in the way of a life. I wrote a critical biography of Walter Pater, for example. Just think, of all the major Victorians, he was the one who had less life than anybody else, and I felt I could recite his life in a few pages. I seemed to find that stirring in some strange way. I started making a comparison between myself and Henry James's John Marcher. In "The Beast in the Jungle," Marcher spends all his life waiting for some marvelous thing to happen, waiting for providence to designate him as the one who would sustain some great destiny, and he consumes his life waiting for this. And at the end, nothing happens, he has no destiny at all, except the fate of having missed a

possible minor destiny; and James says about him that he was the one of all the world to whom absolutely nothing was to have happened.

When I started writing the book, I didn't know how it would develop. But when it was written, it became clear that it was a book about my father. If Edmund Gosse hadn't preempted me by writing a book called *Father and Son*, I probably would have elected to call mine *Father and Son*.

My father was the chief personage in my life, impressive even in his limitations. He was strong, honorable, and central in our lives; but also rigid. I think of him as having always been in uniform and armed: revolver, pouch of bullets, truncheon. When I walked with him, he insisted that I move with shoulders erect and feet in step with his: left, right, left, right. My father was one of the best policemen in the R.U.C., but he knew that as a Catholic in a Protestant police force he would not be promoted beyond the rank of sergeant. To achieve preferment in those days, he would have had to change his religion, become an Anglican or a Presbyterian, and join the Orange Order. He showed no sign of resentment, but I resented the injustice on his behalf. Meanwhile my mother lived as well as she could without drawing attention to herself. She was often ill, suffered we were told from epilepsy and could be expected to have epileptic seizures, "turns" my father called them. When she had one of those attacks—my father being often out on duty—we were to run up the street to "Innisaimer" and fetch Mrs. Crawford, who had been a nurse before she married Sean Crawford, a teacher. She would know what to do. Kathleen does not believe, by the way, that our mother had epilepsy. She thinks her problem was hormonal imbalance and could have been controlled by proper medication.

In *Warrenpoint* my mother hardly appears, and when the book was published, I received a very rare and indignant letter from Kathleen. She wrote that the book had bleached my mother out of the record entirely. I so revered my father, she maintained, that he had to be the center of attention. I allowed my mother to be a shadow, afflicted with illness and melancholy. Kathleen, I now see, is right. But I can see that it was partly for structural reasons that my father should govern the scene, taking up virtually all the space of the book. My mother remained in the margin as someone who had to be looked after.

Then there was John. I think Gordon Lish is responsible for my giving the dead infant a more compelling place in my story than he had in my life. In a story as uneventful as mine, the death of a child might be thought to be momentous and to leave traces of its sadness on every page. I don't think it did. There was also a photograph of John peering out from his

pram, and Lish insisted on making this photograph a centerpiece in the book. I'm afraid I went along with the notion that the death of my brother was a major episode in my life. Seamus Heaney once remarked that Irish families that lose a child either cover the death with silence or talk about it interminably. I never heard my mother or father speak of John after they buried him. Nor did I speak of him. Maybe Lish felt that John's death must have been indelible, since we couldn't bring ourselves to mention it. When we left Warrenpoint, John's grave in Burren had no marker. My father didn't arrange to have the grave named in any way. Many years later, May, Kathleen, and I got a small piece of marble inscribed with John's name and date of death. The grave doesn't need to be attended to: instead of grass, it is covered with concrete and loose stones.

In the absence of plot, I did whatever I could for characterization, but it was not enough. Whenever I felt inclined to insert myself in the book, I found myself quoting passages from other writers. Some reviewers—Karl Miller, for one—were irritated by this device. "If you have a story to tell, tell it; if not, not." But my part in the little story consisted of the books I read. I could say that my life was vicarious, lived through other people, except that I never mistook another life for mine. I knew that Prince Hamlet was one figure, J. Alfred Prufrock another, and Denis Donoghue a third: self-delusion was not one of my disabilities. I did not conceive a theory of the imagination, but I knew that the imagination was the mind in the practice of its freedom, and that mine exerted itself by entering notionally into lives other than my own. Among books, I vaguely thought that I might practice living a life alternative to mine, or that I might have a life apart from my given one, and additional to it. Harold Bloom says of James's Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* that her decision to return to her husband leads her to "the renewed Emersonian realization that she is her own alternative." During my years, there were no Emersonian intuitions in Ireland, much less realizations. The conviction of being one's own alternative did not occur to me. But the experience of reading poems and novels at least allowed me to feel that I might (moving from Emerson to Dickinson) dwell in possibility.

There was another way of expressing this vague desire, though I did not come across it until years later. Yeats distinguishes between character and personality. Character is the sum of our circumstances, a function of chance: our parents, contingencies, the cultural and economic forces. Personality is what we make of these conditions by choice and imagination, especially the imagination of difference. Yeats got the distinction from his father, John Butler Yeats, especially from a letter of March 5, 1910. Character, John Butler Yeats wrote to his son, "always means a

man in whom the will power is predominant, it is in fact the bureaucratic mind, and is as interesting as Berlin governed by its police." Personality "to my mind is human nature when undergoing a passion for self-expression. . .it is character in movement to declare itself." In my early life, reading provided the only experience by which I could even imagine becoming, in John Butler Yeats's sense, a personality.

The possibility was embodied for me not in plots but in sentences and in lines of verse. I read for the style, and committed to memory the examples of style I carried with me in Warrenpoint and later in Dublin. My favorite line in Yeats's poetry—from an otherwise unremarkable poem, "The Folly of Being Comforted"—is not even a complete sentence: "The fire that stirs about her, when she stirs." To complete the sentence, you have to add a few lines not as enchanting as that one:

> Heart cries, 'No,
> I have not a crumb of comfort, not a grain.
> Time can but make her beauty over again:
> Because of that great nobleness of hers
> The fire that stirs about her, when she stirs,
> Burns but more clearly. O she had not these ways
> When all the wild summer was in her gaze.

So I turned my boyhood into an anthology, a small *Golden Treasury*.

Have I thought of trying to write a sequel to *Warrenpoint*? The thought has crossed my mind, or been put into my mind by two or three friends. But without insistence. A sequel would be concerned with my early years as a student of literature and music in Dublin. But I don't think I could make much of them, or of the years in which I had a job in the Civil Service (Department of Finance, Establishments Division) and later in the English Department at University College, Dublin. I have not felt under compulsion to write a sequel. However, I am not absolutely innocent of the temptation. Recently I tried to write a memoir of Dublin, but it ended up—not surprisingly—as a study of T. S. Eliot's poems; or more accurately a description of the experience of submitting myself to a major writer. The book is entitled *Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot*. I appear in it intermittently, and mainly in the first couple of chapters. I chose Eliot because he was a major presence in my reading life. He was everywhere, as poet and critic. Poets of comparable power—Yeats and Stevens, for example—were amateurs in criticism, though I treasure Yeats's essays and *A Vision* and Stevens's *The Necessary Angel* and *Opus Posthumous*.

One thing I think a good deal of is my affection for a certain kind of biography. This is not a kind that has been taken for granted up to this point at this conference. Most of the biographies which have been referred to have been large works, biographies which offer to be decisive, if not definitive. The validity of that kind of book seems to me to have been taken for granted at this conference. I have an affection for what used to be called a brief life which might not be more than fifty pages, and in which a biographer would give her sense of feeling in relation to the subject of the biography.

I'm encouraged to remember that consideration mainly by an argument put forward several years ago, vigorously indeed, by Hugh Kenner, when he reviewed Richard Ellmann's big biography of James Joyce. Kenner said that these big biographies are planned not just to throw light upon their subjects, but to dislodge their subjects, or rather that they are planned to dislodge the works in favor of the life, to make people feel, when they've read Ellmann's life of *Joyce*, that they have encompassed Joyce, they don't need to do anything further. Yeats said that the intellect of man is forced to choose perfection of the life or of the work, and W. H. Auden replied that it's not a choice, since perfection is impossible in both categories. But the work is the thing. It's Joyce's books that count; it would be almost vicious for a biographer to give the impression that by writing a comprehensive biography rich with detail the books themselves are subsumed within the biography. I imagine that Jeffrey Meyers might have something to say about that.

Finally, there is one aspect of biography, autobiographical writing, and memoirs, which we haven't touched upon, and that is the notion of these things as writing. The real motive of autobiographical writing may not have as much to do with memory and the past, and making sense of our lives, or finding the sense of other people's lives made for them by biographers. It could be argued that the purpose of biographies and autobiographies is the production of further writing. The stitching and unstitching that Yeats referred to in "Adam's Curse" could have as its main motive the production of further sentences, paragraphs, and books. It could be maintained that all of these forms, biography and autobiography, belong to the history of style. We should bring life-writing back to the considerations that apply to all literature—the notion of performance, productivity, production of sentences, the question of tone and form.

Joanna S. Rose: Thank you. I think you will all agree that we have now covered many aspects of autobiography, biography, and memoir. Would

those who have questions or would like to make statements please come to the microphone.

Jeffrey Mehlman: It seems to me that central questions have been raised. One of them is: what is a life, after all, in its relation to works that we agree ought to remain central? Another question is the relationship between France and England, Hilary Spurling's question. I would like to suggest a potential answer to the two questions together. It has to do with the work of an Anglo-French figure of some distinction who died some years ago. His name was Charles Mauron. I have recently come across a letter from Virginia Woolf to Mauron saying she believes she could learn more about writing from this Frenchman than from anyone in England. In any event, Mauron thought that the way to understand a writer's life most productively might be analogous to what Francis Galton used to do with the negatives of photos of family members—he would superimpose them, blotting out individual traits, features, and eventually arriving at a kind of composite portrait. Mauron thought you could do the same thing with the plays of Racine or the poems of Mallarmé or the novels of E. M. Forster, and attempted to. He was of the opinion that what one would arrive at would be the structured conflict or personal myth, as he called it, the matrix within which one could see both the work and the life evolving. From this one gets a version of the life which seems to me pruned—like the short life that Denis Donoghue speaks in favor of. Hilary Spurling, you spoke eloquently about good biography as garbage disposal, but how can one be sure that many biographies will not be garbage *collection*? Frequently, that's the danger. So, the interest of this method of the superimposition of texts, I am suggesting, would be that it gives you a life as a kind of structured matrix, not imposed on the works, which was more or less one of your formulations, but as the matrix out of which the works, as they evolve, might be generated in a way entirely parallel to the life itself.

Hilary Spurling: Yes, I think that's a very interesting approach, but in the case I am currently struggling with, *The Life of Matisse*, I don't think it will work, because my argument is that until now nobody really has known very much about Matisse's life. Many of the salient points have been deliberately suppressed in pursuance of the very respectable French theory (well, not specifically French, but the French adhere to it) that what is important is the artist's work, that the artist's life is of no interest and should remain forever a blank page. I have absolutely no quarrel with that theory. All I can say is that it doesn't take account of human

nature. What happened in Matisse's case was not that his life remained a blank page, but that the page was filled up with misconceptions, distortions, and outright inventions. Insofar as anybody knows or has any view of Matisse's character, that is all they have to go on. But it is almost the reverse of the truth, and that is why I brought garbage disposal into my closing account of biography—not that I think that that is all biographers are there to do, but it is one function, a humble but crucial one. And in this particular case, what I have been trying to do is reverse the legend. Whether it is actually possible, I don't know—we shall see.

Many deductions have been made by art historians on, I think, ludicrously inadequate evidence, which have then obscured their view of Matisse's art. They've misdated pictures, they've left out crucial influences, they've misunderstood very often what Matisse was doing because of a simple lack of attention to chronology. In my particular case, I spend a lot of time disposing of garbage. I am attempting to rear another structure, which may well in due course become garbage itself. I am not making any great case for biographies as deathless works of art. Indeed, they cannot be; they must of their nature be superceded. But each generation, for that very reason, needs to attempt it afresh.

Denis Donoghue: I find the motif of the family portrait, the family likeness, interesting. I think the aspect of the big biography which is not just regrettable but corrupt is loose speculation. I am thinking of Michael Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey. It includes pages of speculation as to what he felt when he saw all those beautiful boys, and so on; it is oppressive speculation.

Chantal Zabus: I am from the University of Paris XIII, and I have a general question for the panel, more specifically about gender. I was wondering whether the three genres we have been discussing were not genres that have been inexorably gendered for and by Western males. Maybe Hilary could digress on the comforts and the discomforts of being a female biographer approaching the life of a man, and maybe Francine could talk about the letter as a feminine genre.

Francine du Plessix Gray: Well, I think women biographers tend to look for the crevices which men biographers have taken for granted. I'm thinking right now of Claire Tomalin's book on Dickens's mistress, whom no male biographer had ever fully included—this is a very central drama in Dickens's life. No one had ever done justice to it until Claire Tomalin came along. I think there *is* such a thing as gendered reading, I

think women do read a man's life with a different eye. I'm curious to see how Hilary feels about it. I certainly know that when I started out on my biography of Sade, I noticed to my horror that those rather extraordinary letters from his wife had seldom been mentioned by male biographers. They cast a huge light on Sade's character. He was much more schizophrenic than I thought in the sense that there was a very kind, family-loving side of the man which was always in a clash with the Dionysiac impulse to break up the family by being the nomadic, sperm-scattering male. He also had a great love for the nuclear family and the order it imposed. So I do think that there's such a thing as gendered reading. I think a lot of male biographers of our time have been positively influenced by feminist-oriented biography, and they've begun to notice more carefully and pay more heed to the women in great men's lives.

Hilary Spurling: When I first came to write about a man—Paul Scott, a novelist—various people, and I myself, had wondered what difference this would make. Before that, I had written about a woman. I didn't in fact find that it made the slightest difference, because of the reason Denis mentioned: the fact that I was of a different sex from the person I was writing about was the least of my problems. That is to say, what is interesting about Scott, what is interesting about Matisse, is not primarily the fact that they are men; it is the fact that one was a truly extraordinary novelist and the other was a major painter. I didn't find my own sex making it impossible for me to consider these two artists.

That being said, there is a whole field of biography that has certainly never been tackled by men, which was broached by Claire Tomalin in the book Francine mentioned called *The Invisible Woman*. In the lives of practically all men, that is to say practically all biographies written before, say, the last fifty years, there are nearly always crucial women who receive relatively little attention. A good example is Victoria Glendinning's life of Trollope. Glendinning was the first to attempt to do any kind of justice to Mrs. Trollope, who remained married to her husband for most of his life, and was crucially important to him. Without her he clearly could not have led the life, nor produced the books he did. It is difficult to write about these generations upon generations of invisible women who have left so little trace. And what Glendinning did was not really to create a Mrs. Trollope—this is to answer another point that Denis made—that would have been impossible. There are very few letters, there are no accounts; Trollope's friends didn't discuss or describe her. What Glendinning did was ingenious and original. It was to write her biography with at the center of it, at its core, a kind of wife-shaped

hole. And this is a really strange thing to do, although I don't think any of the male reviewers noticed it. I certainly did. I had never seen it done before, and it's one way of solving this difficult problem of how to recreate lives that have disappeared without apparent or recoverable trace. After all, half the human race have always been women, they did exist. How are we to resurrect and revitalize them? I don't know. We've mentioned two methods: one was Claire Tomalin's; the other, Victoria Glendinning's. Both were very successful.

One of the great pleasures for me in writing about Matisse has been unearthing and exploring the lives of the women who played such an enormous role in his life. I have done two in my first volume, and there will be three more extraordinary women, all of whom shared Matisse's life, all of whom were formidable characters in their own right, because Matisse, unlike Picasso in this as in much else, didn't like subservient or passive women. Picasso, as we know, famously defined women as doormats or goddesses. Matisse didn't care for either: he liked equal partners who gave as good as they got. His women were of course always beautiful, but they were strong-willed as well. I considered a lot of things before I took on this nightmare task, but I didn't think of the powerful female partners who have remained more or less invisible until now. You will find their existence mentioned in other accounts, but little or no attempt to treat them as human, or to examine the central roles they played.

Denis Donoghue: The only part of this I don't much like is the implied ideological aspect of it. I fully approve of light being cast upon any life that is interesting, or suggestive, or far-reaching. It is perfectly in order that Brenda Maddox should have written a biography of Nora Joyce, although Nora Joyce's achievement in any public or literary or creative sense is zero. And it's perfectly in order for Ann Saddlemeyer to attempt a biography of Mrs. Yeats—George Yeats. But I don't see the necessity or the desirability of turning it into an ideological generalization. I think a man of intelligence would be perfectly capable of writing a good book on George Yeats, and I doubt if Ann Saddlemeyer would claim that she can see special things by virtue of the fact that she is a woman.

Chantal Zabus: They are only interesting insofar as they are the wives of great men: Joyce and Yeats.

Denis Donoghue: Yes, but if these women are interesting, they are interesting not solely in relation to their more famous husbands. They are interesting in their own right, and therefore whatever access we have to

their lives is worth achieving. I don't see this as necessarily or desirably an ideological issue because it would quickly get into the doubtful consideration of whether there are special things a man or a woman can see. T. S. Eliot was quite right to say that the only method is to be very intelligent.

Stanley Crouch: I don't think that the idea of the boys' and girls' clubs of literature, aesthetics, etc., is very interesting. In fact I think it's a dull segregationist conception that gets in the way of our seeing the problem of human commonality while addressing specificity.

What I was wondering though, is whether or not the writer ever escapes his or her sensibilities? When I wrote a novel about a white woman from South Dakota coming to New York and becoming a jazz musician, I wanted to use the old trick of the outsider coming into something so that we would come to understand the world through her adventures. But I also wanted to get away from me. I felt that I had a chance to avoid trying to justify who I am, as sometimes a writer does by sneaking himself or herself into a character. So I was wondering if, when you are writing something about another person, or about yourself, you are ever able to become free of yourself. Can one ever escape his or her sensibility arriving in the material, no matter who the subject is?

Francine du Plessix Gray: Well, I still think that it's an almost epistemological problem—we read with our whole entire life behind us. We read with an autobiography behind us, and it's inevitable that all of our experiences are going to influx into the text. If I reread Valéry's "Cimetière Marin" today, which I learned by heart when I was twenty two, I would read it with a totally different eye because I'm a different person from what I was half a century ago. I think we can't help but read—Virginia Woolf intimated this in *A Room of One's Own*—with womanly eyes, that we cannot totally avoid this female epistemology, this female way of looking at things. I agree with you that we must strive to universality, and we must strive to a humanness which transcends gender. But I am not totally sure—and I don't want to be ideological, I have never made an ideology of anything I've written—that I can escape my status as a woman when I read or write.

Hilary Spurling: Or as an individual. For me, at any rate, biography is in the first instance fact-based. It must be historically accurate; at least, one must be in possession of as much detail as possible—though it doesn't mean, necessarily, that one's going to use it. Indeed, God forbid, because a book becomes unreadable if you put in too much of this stuff. But

you've got to have mastered the historical facts before you can move on to the further stage, which is of course to create a text, to devise a structure for your book which will carry its meaning. The third stage is when you actually come to write it. I have often thought that this process has much in common with an actor putting on his makeup and his costume, and preparing to come before an audience. This is the simple answer to why one subject can have many different biographies in different generations, in different countries. They will bear the same relation to each other as different portraits by different painters of the same subject will resemble one another. You wouldn't say because we have a Renoir painting of somebody that we don't want the Degas version, would you? When one comes to paint or write a portrait, there is a degree of impersonation; there has to be. It cannot of course be complete, and it certainly isn't proprietary because I don't think any good biographer would claim to know or possess his subject in the way that Denis suggested we do. In fact, I can't think of a biographer here at this conference who has made any such claim. There is, nonetheless, the moment at which you must attempt some impersonation of your subject because, if you cannot present how things seemed to him or to her at particular moments, then what was the point of trying it at all?

You must also be able to draw back. You have to see him or her as he appears in the round, you have to try to see him through the eyes of his nearest and dearest, through the eyes of his enemies, through the eyes of casual acquaintances, through the eyes of his or her professional rivals. That is the whole pleasure of it. Biography is an immensely complex activity which one tries to resolve and to give a shape, not simple, necessarily, but clear, so that people can take in at least such meaning as you yourself have managed to discern. Of course, this can never be final. Human beings are a mystery, an eternal mystery, and one you can never fully penetrate. All you can see is as much as you are capable of seeing, and that I think is the most any biographer would claim.

Denis Donoghue: I think biographers should, as a matter of principle, get themselves out of the way of their subjects, and they should be prepared to fail. Unless there is the power of impersonation, which is the power of dramatic imagination, the exercise is not worth attempting. I still feel that the word we are missing in all of this is "form." Yeats said, "The poet is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast." The difference is the submission of all the feelings in the case to the imperative of form, by which of course I don't mean form in the sense in which a Shakespearean sonnet has fourteen lines. I

think form is what the authentic writer submits to and aspires to; form is the grace of all the feelings that have gone into the situation. I think that form should be sought in the way in which T. S. Eliot respected tradition. He of course allowed for individual talents, but he thought of tradition in a formal and disciplinary sense. I think he was right.

Michal Govrin: Thank you for this wonderful panel, which was in a way a summary of the entire conference. I think we could start from this panel again—so many were its ideas and so many were its directions. I will ask three short questions.

To Francine: I was fascinated by the portrait of Madame de Sévigné. To borrow from Denis's last words about form and tradition, what was fascinating for me was your associating her writing, her letters, with her relation to the Church and her confessor, and later alluding to these realms in her relationship with her daughter. And then you spoke of her being sanctified as the model mother, although a tormented one. Does that have to do with the Virgin Mary model of motherhood? Is that a seventeenth-century narcissistic interpretation of the Virgin Mary, drawn first by Sévigné herself and then by her contemporaries?

Francine du Plessix Gray: A fascinating question, Michal. You've struck on one of my obsessions, which is that if we examine French feminism from the nineteenth century on, starting with George Sand and going right on through to our time, we see that French feminism has always stuck with motherhood. It never went through a phase of repudiating the status of motherhood, or of hating the male as in the Anglo-American tradition. I mean, there is no Andrea Dworkin in France. And the reason, I think, depends on the Marist tradition, on the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Mediterranean countries and particularly in France, where it has a special coloring of its own. We can follow it from the seventeenth century on. Even great male writers, like Claudel, had a particular kind of fixation on the Virgin Mary. And I think that it's that woman-centered religiousness which kept motherhood very much at the center of any discourse. Now there is another issue to be careful about—I didn't have time to include it in this very short presentation—which is that the status of the letter changes a lot in France, and probably in all the other countries, from the Renaissance on. In the Renaissance the letter begins to achieve a kind of honored status in the humanist Erasmian tradition, in which the whole human being is expected to enter the letter—his anxiety, his hatreds, his love, as well as theoretical set pieces and descriptions of his times.

Michal Govrin: Fascinating. Now to Hilary. Taking this thread of womanhood, I was struck by your speaking about the absence of the wives in biographies of male writers. I thought about the absence of any female writer in the enormous tradition of Jewish books until modern times. There are hardly any books, or letters, or confessions signed by a woman. But a few women enter as anecdotes, many of them in the Bible, and fewer in the Talmud. What I wanted to comment on is this link between work and life. There is a sentence in the Mishna saying that what is important is not the knowledge, is not the invention, is not what you write about, but what you actually do. That opened a whole genre of anecdotes through the Mishna and the Talmud, in which a certain gesture of a rabbi is quoted as the foundation for a new law. So life, in that case, precedes the work, life is seen as the essential work, and is incorporated into the corpus of the writing or legislations of that rabbi. I wondered in what sense could you rediscover Matisse's work through the data you now have about his life. Are these details essential keys for rediscovering his art?

Hilary Spurling: Matisse, especially in the second part of his life, painted above all the circumstances of his domestic life, which for him meant what was in the studio. With the exception of Rembrandt, no artist I can think of has done that more obsessively and constantly throughout his life, day after day. And since he spent most of every day in the studio, what he painted was what made up his life. He had in his studio chests of clothes in which he dressed up his models, posing them in settings which he also set up like stage sets. I am talking now particularly about the twenties and thirties, the period during which Matisse painted odalisques, paintings of women in harem pants, often gauzy transparent clothes, sometimes half-naked, arranged on cushions with amazing tapestry patterns, all absorbed into the structure of his works. This is a period which has been dismissed until very recently as typical of the decadent and bourgeois painter Matisse is (I think wrongly) believed to be. Decorative pretty paintings, but not serious in the way that his modernist contemporaries were. This is a whole aspect of Matisse's painting which art history has to some extent neglected, and is only now beginning to remedy. In fact for me these are some of the toughest of all Matisse's paintings. Anybody who looks carefully and seriously at one of those odalisques will see that it is not a painting of lust and desire, of even the passing pretty girl, is simply a decorative element—no, not simply, because of course Matisse always had a relationship with his models. Although he himself said he painted them as he might paint a leaf. I don't think that's true at all, and I think one can document that, and

shall hope to do so. The relationship with these various women drew from him something that he found impossible to draw from himself without them. He said that again and again in all sorts of different forms. What they drew from him was a deep and powerful emotional, imaginative, and aesthetic exploration. To create a vehicle, a structure, in which he could pursue these very searching and exacting investigations into the nature of both feeling and form (the two always went together for Matisse), he needed—and this will be one of the nubs of my second volume, one of the things that absolutely fascinates me—he needed, generally, to respond to a specific woman. This is no doubt a peculiarity of his character. One can't say that of every painter. I suppose you could to some extent say that of Bonnard, his contemporary and great friend, but the actual shape these relationships took was very different in the case of these two individual men.

Michal Govrin: Thank you. The last question is for Denis. I was struck by a connection between your talk and Conor Cruise O'Brien's this morning. I was struck especially by your telling how writing about yourself became writing about your father. I want to pursue that as a cultural-political-historical question. Both of you spoke about your political background and both of you evoked 1916 in your presentations. Would you say that once you write in a place where history is still in the making, from an ideological point of view, the legacy of the family, the lineage, the legacy of the father is the tradition, is the larger form, as Catholicism may be for Madame de Sévigné, for writing yourself, in a way that I would call "the pre-writing" of your own life and that of your father's as well?

Denis Donoghue: I don't think I could have imagined any terms of reference other than the family, and then leading out from the family to the larger social context, which I touch upon briefly. In fact there was more to it. My mother's brother Seamus O'Neil was out in 1916, he was a rebel, second in command to Sean Treacy in south Tipperary, and he was an ardent speaker and teacher of the Irish language. He gave up all political activity at the civil war because he would take no part in the murdering of one Irishman by another. He told me some years later that if he had been offered a choice to have Ireland still Irish-speaking, and still within the British Empire, or the choice of modern Ireland as it developed, with some degree of self-government, but on the whole speaking English, he would have chosen to have Ireland remain within the British Empire as an Irish-speaking country. If by divine intervention that had been possible, he

would have preferred it to the other kind of Ireland, which he felt had been grossly assimilated to England by virtue of the English language.

Bill O'Donnell: I knew Robert Frost for nineteen years. When Frost was in England, between 1912 and 1915, he invented the phrase "the sound of sense," and he talked it over with his friend Edward Thomas, and he wrote letters back to America to good friends like Sydney Cox, and other people. Yet one time Frost said to me that he never believed a word of that idea. Recently, Frost's "sound of sense" has become critical in writings about him. For example, it's an important part of Richard Poirier's book *Frost: The Work of Knowing*.

Frost said he used to be frightened to appear in public, so he talked a lot about the "sound of sense." He said he knew he couldn't get up and read poems for an hour, so he talked about the "sound of sense." You could say he established a kind of critical religion, and yet he eventually turned out to be a kind of heretic. My question is this: how do we treat that after Frost said he never believed a word of it?

Denis Donoghue: Well, we treat it for whatever biographical interest we deem it to have. I don't think Richard Poirier would be dismayed to be told that Frost lost faith in this phrase, because Poirier found it helpful and far-reaching. It's rather like T. S. Eliot claiming in his later years that he couldn't remember what he meant by the phrase "objective correlative." When it was proposed that his Harvard dissertation on the philosopher Bradley be published, he read it and said he had no idea what it was all about. But I do think this is troubling.

Millicent Bell: A very brief comment directed mostly to Denis. His plea for form in the art of the biography reminds me that biography stands at the intersection of art and what we always try to somehow differentiate from it as life. To Denis, the holder of the Henry James Chair, I don't have to invoke a familiar passage in James in which he says that life in fact stops nowhere, though it's the obligation of the artist to make it appear as though it does. In other words, to give it the appearance of form. But life is the undifferentiated mass of material that not only the biographer but also any artist, novelist, poet, engages with ineradicable impulse toward form. And perhaps it's even our fate in being human beings, that in our lives we are engaged in that contest, that battle, that desire to give experience that sense-making impulsion. What is the meaning of what I am doing, or what others are doing, what is life all about? We are always formulating this for ourselves, and of course art

refines and intensifies the effort, and the biographer who is both the agglutinating accumulator of dumb facts is like everybody else intensely engaged in that battle. I just wanted to throw that out to you, Denis, since you invoked the problem.

Joanna S. Rose: Would you like to comment on that statement, Denis?

Denis Donoghue: Millicent has stated it well.

Jay Martin: I want to tell a little story that will confirm something Denis talked about. When I was starting to write my biography of Henry Miller, we talked about it over Ping-Pong, in a friendly way. We'd play and talk, and perhaps have a drink. After a while, Henry would say to me, "Well, you found that out, but you won't find this out and that out." Henry started to invent things he hadn't done. He said to me, "Jay, you are my greatest enemy. I've spent my life writing all these books about my life, and I still haven't completed it, and you are going to get there before I do. They will read your book, and they won't read mine." This was the fear of the author. When you reflect on the idea that the biographer will take over the author's life, I think you are speaking as an author, not as a biographer. The biographer is better represented by a comment in a much forgotten biography of John Keats that Amy Lowell wrote (I think) in 1923. Lowell asked: why is it that we write about, and the audience wants to hear about, these biographical subjects? Why do we want to write about Keats and tell his life? Lowell's answer was a simple but profound one that goes in the other direction from what Denis said, focusing on form. She said we learn how close we are to such creative people. Not that there isn't a gulf between us, but as Denis said, with just a slightly different twist we might have been that creative, or that insightful. In this sense Lowell was saying biography isn't about form. It gives its form to something; it itself has a form, but it's also about the hope of the biographer representing an audience. Therefore biography is about hope and community, the hope that we are all, in some sense, almost like these creators, and that they were in some sense, when they were at breakfast, much like us. Biography expresses human hope in the imagination and its possibilities. Biography evokes the hope of the community to bring the artist close to us.

Joanna S. Rose: That's a wonderful note on which to end. Thank you, thank you all.

KIRSTEN OLSON LANIER

Conference Comment

THIS PAST FRIDAY AND SATURDAY I attended a wonderfully entertaining, ruminative, and panoplistic conference on the current state of autobiography, biography, and memoir, sponsored and organized by *Partisan Review*. I wanted to offer a view of the *mise en scene*, the major performers, and some of the themes and questions suggested.

The individuals presenting over the two days were a disparate, heady lot: historians, novelists, biographers of traditional sorts, memoirists of untraditional sorts. Conor Cruise O'Brien, now perhaps in his mid-eighties, spoke about the moral dilemmas posed by memories of himself as a young bridegroom around the time of the First World War. The big, forest floor shaking, preternaturally dynamic Stanley Crouch was also there talking about cultural narcissism in America and sexual confessionals on *Oprah*. ("You turn off the TV and the net effect is to think, 'I'm not the most fucked up person in America,'" Crouch said later.)

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AFTER A BRIEF OVERVIEW from Jon Westling, president of Boston University, in which Westling raised the question of why there is currently a burst of popular interest in biography and autobiography, ("We turn to biography now to see how real men and women lead their lives; the explosion of interest is about a longing for the human center in readers today. . . .") Jeffrey Meyers, the first presenter, spoke about the biographer's passionate interest in his or her subject and the way in which serendipitous findings, obscure and unexpected details, and accidents of geography are the very fabric of this sort of writing. One of the most traditional biographers of the conference (most recently the author of *George Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation*), with flushed face and racing lips, Meyers over-brimmed with enthusiasm at his cleverness as he described outfoxing the obstructive literary widow and the thrill of discovering formerly unknown sexual liaisons in the subject's life. At a slipstream, Meyers told of journeying around the world to "find"

aspects of Orwell—discovering evidence of Orwell's sexual insecurity, his profound and unmet need for love, his deep unconventionality. Without explicit mention, it became clear to the audience what this extraordinary—if somewhat unconscious—enthusiasm was about. Pursued, almost chased by the subject, biography in this case was not only a textual reconsideration of a major literary figure long in the canon, it was also the unacknowledged invention and reimagination of the biographer himself.

Coincidentally continuing to pursue questions as the intricate relationship between the biographer and subject, next Michal Govrin, an Israeli writer and novelist, asked: in biography and autobiography, what story is written first, the story or the life? Does the life happen before the story, or does the story precede the life? (And, of course, who writes the life?) Specifically, she explicated some of her views of the archetypal "Jewish biography," of twentieth-century culture, "the one that lies underneath much of Western civilization,"—of exile, persecution, and the genocide of a chosen people. She spoke of the "imprisonment, the entrapment" of being a part of such a powerful story ("Is this the only story we have to tell?"), of the quality of Jewish memory in terms of such a story—of the "Chekovian silences," of the Holocaust dead, and of the "longing for memory" (another presenter called this "memory envy") among Holocaust relatives. The "self-hagiographical" super-personas which pervade biographical and autobiographical writings of the twentieth century, Govrin suggested, indicate a longing for answers about how to live, and "how to find more life" in face of a "God of awful, awesome plotting." Govrin also explicated the multilayered, double-edged quality of many Hebrew words, how they contain within them a complex contradiction which calls into question the primary sense of a word—a form of argumentation and ambiguity deeply ingrained in a people she sees as eternally—simply as a matter of living—needing to escape pain. To contradict, to argue, to countermine, is to give life and to escape laceration from a God of awesome plotting.

Next, in one of the most playful and delightful presentations of the conference, André Aciman, memoirist and essayist, offered a meditation on the notion of "temporizing," the dilatory military strategy of "dogging the enemy" to victory. To temporize, Aciman suggested, is utterly native to himself, a Jewish child growing up in Egypt with his parents and family who understood the singular power of lying low. ("If I kill myself a tiny bit each day doesn't it obviate the need for you to kill me?" Aciman explained philosophically.) A temporizer is a compromiser, an evader, a fudger, and the perfect background for a writer of memoirs

about memory. He is one who "lives in two time zones at once, therefore existing in neither. . . .The suggestion of deception is deeply inscribed in the verb." One would not temporize a weakling, Aciman suggested; temporizing is the strategy for victory of the less strong—it is about the habit of waiting out the giant and the condition of living in abeyance. A psychological temporizer, Aciman says, "fends off the present all his life"; like Proust (*Remembrance of Things Past* was a central meditation of this conference) he is one who "looks back to a time when all he did was look forward in time."

The point, of course, and there is a deep point in Aciman's beautiful essay on memoir, is to find ways to craft around sorrow, pain, and loss, to "escape the tyranny of the day-to-day"; to cope with the "unmanageable intensity of the present" in which "the narrator gains a liquid and unsteady foothold" on the future through examination of the past. Aciman describes looking at a group of sunbathers on a grassy bank on 98th Street in New York, where he lived after graduate school, and thinking this was a "beach day in Alexandria." At this moment he realized that the only way he could live in his present observation of the individuals on the grassy bank—to make friends with them and to partake of their experience—was to carry them back to the Egypt of his childhood. All experience, he said, must have an Egyptian analog because, for him, Alexandria was the Capital of Memory. (When you boil an egg and mix up its yolk with something else, and place it back in the egg this process is called deviling, he noted. "Egypt is the egg upon which I devil memory.") Aciman is a superb essayist with a playful, muscular, and poetic adroitness.

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In a world in which "heroic adaptations" of the truth are necessary to be a political figure in contemporary life—to meet the "gestalt of the gigabyte"—are true selves, authentic selves, possible? In the next major segment of the conference, three writers looked at the questions of invention and memory, and the possible necessity of prevarication and grandiosity in contemporary life. In a paper about "Who am I this time?" Jay Martin examined the "fictionalized biographical" techniques of Edmund Morris, the author of *Dutch* (a memoir of Ronald Reagan), and Bill Turque, the author of *Inventing Al Gore*, as examples of ways in which the biographer's work and the politician's invention of self are actually overlapping, non-contradictory crafts.

As Morris wrote about his own technique,

> The narrator of *Dutch* is only semi-fictional. . . .All I have done. . . is to make myself Reagan's contemporary, in effect extending that closeness of observation. . .in order to render it as vividly and honestly as I do the presidency. And all I ask of my reader is simply to accept my presence as unquestionably as we accept that of any truthful storyteller who acts as an intermediary between what he knows and what we can't know. . . .

Martin's soulful, humane, and loving essay looked at what is apparently necessary for us to invent about ourselves to understand our own larger "truths," and what, for the individual, still actually exists as reality—in biography and in life.

Is there a line of discernment, for instance, between the things Al Gore says about himself which are fantastically untrue (such as his statement that he "invented the Internet" in the early 1980s) and a non-reinvented, non-reconstituted self? "Performative statements," and prevarications of such colossal grandiosity, myths spun about young Al by his parents since childhood are true because "they must be true," they are a part of the "presidential precursor narrative," deeply imprinted on this man's life. "But does Al know the difference?" Martin asked, to a loudly laughing audience, "And why does he tell such whoppers?"

In the refracted world of public personality today, with political figures such as Reagan and Gore, things are sometimes true because we need them to be so, and in the shadowy, projection-filled life of a person such as Reagan, "he was not a deliberate deceiver"; perhaps it is more likely that Americans, like Morris, invented the fictive personality of this president. ("Did the presidency dream Reagan, or did Reagan dream the presidency?") If political figures like Gore and Reagan must use both "pathological grandiosities along with helpful imitations"—a sequence of "as ifs" and approximations of self—as a consequence of the electronic age in order to project their heroic super-narratives, the political personality must then have flexible adaptiveness of the "fictive personality." Therefore, is politics fiction? And what objections, consequently, can be legitimately raised to a fictionalized biography? (To which came an impassioned question from the audience, "Are we complete skeptics? Is there that within us which passes show?")

Also speaking—in a much more formal and donnish way—about the slipperiness of truth in regard to recollections about oneself, Conor Cruise O'Brien described his own internal conflicts writing his memoirs late in life. He noted the unexalted position in which memoir has been held among traditional historians, a genre described to him by his thesis

advisor at Cambridge as "the pleadings of interested parties." "Memoir has a lowly place, but still it is a place," O'Brien acknowledged, and he went on to share some of the powerful, personal, shaming dilemmas posed by accurate recollection in his own life. Quoting Nietzsche, O'Brien said, "My memory says I did this; my pride says I did not. My memory yields." In this talk, however, memory did not yield and O'Brien told of his failure to protect his first wife against the hostilities of his separatist Irish aunt in 1918. In very heartfelt, simple terms he recalled his betrayal of his wife when he and his just married bride lived in the house of a fierce, punitive aunt; the aunt brutalized his wife, he says, unfairly blaming her for a number of insignificant domestic mishaps because the passions over Irish separation ran so divisively through the house. He did not protect his bride, he said. "I pretended I did not see, I lost my voice."

To the question "Is there an authentic self?" both Martin and O'Brien agreed that shame—a somewhat downgraded emotion in contemporary life—and the necessity of honest psychological housekeeping are what keep us morally coherent and human. There can be authenticity in life and memoir, perhaps, only if one feels shame in telling untruths—and the person who has no shame is the truly inhumane. Narcissistic audacity is an apparent condition of our time, many presenters seemed to agree, but "shame still exists," Martin said affirmingly.

Finally, Geoffrey Hartman spoke, in a roundabout way, of the "memory envy" of many Holocaust testimonies, of the "dead's imaginative impact which is far greater than the actual living person might have had." Memoir, Hartman proposed, that "first-person voice no longer shy about itself," has now perhaps devalued fiction—fiction has come to be less esteemed as the first-person narrative becomes more accepted. "The expansion of gossip comes at the cost of fiction," Hartman explained, and this is a loss to us. In this "autobiographical age," he said, recalling St. Augustine and Rousseau, we have a wish to be "totally embodied and also transparent." Hartman said he feared fraudulence. "I am afraid of inauthenticity," he said. Our belief in our ability to transcribe our personal truths are, to quote Shelley, "an illustrious superstition, but only a superstition."

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Like all contemporary academic work in the social sciences and humanities, the conference was a rich, deeply textured, highly literate investigation of the postmodern question of who has authority to speak

about what, and who grants this authority. O'Brien, the octogenarian of the conference, recalled his undergraduate training when it was simply understood—in the 1920s and 1930s—that certain forms of scholarship and "traditional" historical methods were inviolate and preferred, and others were discredited and lesser. As the force of the dialog over the twentieth century has largely been to call into question such inviolate notions of authority and authenticity (Who is served by such notions and why? Whose truth is represented by such views?) the scholarly world of biography, autobiography, and memoir has become much less defined and far more complex. Older-style biographers like Jeffery Meyers seem somewhat unconscious and unanalyzed, but are we ready for the fictionalized projections like Morris's portrayal of Reagan? Ultimately, what truth do we want to know and why? Who is keeping track of what is important ("Are we all fictive selves?" an audience member queried), and what sources can be trusted? If truth and sense of meaning and mattering must be found within ourselves, do we each actually have an essentiality, a self within "which passes show?" In contemporary life do we have the equipment to produce such authenticity in the individual and atomized self?

At the crux of how we make meaning and judge value in these three contemporary forms, writers of them offered powerful views of being chased by their stories, entrapped by them, escaping through them. The accidental sagacity involved in finding the story of another's life—or finding one's own in the story—was also a piece of the play among the enlivened, impassioned adventurers speaking here. The ways in which a "subject's life forces its coherence upon one's own mind" in Jay Martin's words made the conference a delightfully complex scholarly meditation on the imaginative outlines of human life.

In terms of "Sunday Styles of Academia": There are a significant number of academics out in the world who still read papers to audiences. These papers are highly literate and require extensive scaffolding to follow—they are not blithely entertaining and they do assume some perquisites to learning. Not only were the ideas in the papers presented at this conference weighty, building on each other and heavily referenced with philosophy, history, and literature, the words were intricately crafted. And mattered. This is in increasing contrast to some social science and education research conferences one attends, where bullet point presentations are the norm and audiences are assumed to have choke-collar short attention spans. There was no pandering here, no apologies for intensity of intellectual experience or intellectual demand. Consequently, I think, the conference was entertaining, lively, fun.

CZESLAW MILOSZ

From *Milosz's ABC's*

ANONYMOUS LETTERS. "People don't like you, Mr. Milosz." The anonymous author appended these words when he sent me a copy of a rather disgusting article about me from the Polish émigré press. And it was true, because with the exception of a small group of people, I was never liked. There is no reason for us to be too certain that we are right. My enemies, who often wrote anonymous letters or shot arrows at me from under cover, believed that they were right. First, my various flaws made it difficult to raise me onto a pedestal despite the obvious social need. Second, my innate bloodthirstiness often erupted in contemptuous remarks about individuals, which I now consider to be simple rudeness. Third, from the beginning of my career accusations of arrogance were raised by people I had offended and by those I had rejected, whose presence was a moral problem for me. Let us consider what a huge number of people enter the fray through writing, painting, sculpting. A sense of hierarchy forbids us to praise results which, in our opinion, are not worthy of being praised, but it can be painful to think about a poet, for example, who sends me his new poem, who is proud of it, and expects me to praise it. I had a choice: I could write to tell him that the poem is bad, or I could not respond. This is not a made-up example; that is how I wounded Aleksander Janta, and it was the end of our friendship.

BALZAC, Honoré de. Read mainly during the German occupation of Warsaw by our threesome—Janka, Andrzejewski, and me. A brutal writer, and a good one, especially for what was happening at that time. May that threesome be with me in these pages, as we were then, and not later on, when our fates diverged. Balzac came shortly after we produced in Dynasy, the neighborhood where Janka and I were living, the first book of poetry to be printed (in about fifty copies) in the occupied

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city. It was my chapbook, issued under the pseudonym Jan Syruć, my great-grandfather's family name. Antoni Bohdziewicz supplied the paper and the duplicating machine, Janka sewed the books, and Jerzy helped out. Right after that, a passion for reading Balzac. Against Conrad. That was when Jerzy was editing a literary newsletter for circles of readers, and I was his chief co-author, and when his short stories, which he published in it, kept returning, with high dramatic intensity, to ultimate questions. Janka was very sober-minded and inclined to irony, and she did not care for the Conradian lyricism (Conrad translated by Aniela Zagórska) she saw in Jerzy's work, as she would tell him frankly during our vodka-drinking sessions at the Under the Rooster bar. There is not a trace of romantic lyricism in Balzac's prose, and in her opinion that author (in Boy's translations) supported her arguments.

My dearest shades, I cannot invite you to converse with me, for behind us, as only we three know, lies our tragic life. Our conversation would develop into a lament in three voices.

CHIAROMONTE, Nicola. This name has always been linked in my mind with thoughts about greatness. I have known many famous people, but have carefully distinguished between fame and greatness. Nicola was not famous, and his name meant a lot only within his circle of friends, because even his reportage and articles, scattered among various journals, were at most his enigmatic way of thinking. His thought, shaped by Greek thinkers, always remained in the public sphere and attempted to define the obligations of a humanist toward the *polis*. His life is an example of engagement with political movements that repeatedly devolved into ideological servitude in our chaotic twentieth century. Chiaromonte had a heightened sense of historicity and history, but he rejected all ideologies. An opponent of Italian Fascism, he emigrated from Italy. He participated in the war in Spain on the Republican side, as a pilot in Malraux's squadron, but he did not side with the Communists. During his American years, hailed as a master and teacher by the non-Communist left of Dwight Macdonald's and Mary McCarthy's group, he published in *Partisan Review* and in *Politics*. After his return to France and, finally, in 1953, to Italy, he and Ignazio Silone edited the journal *Tempo Presente*, which meant shouldering the obligation of opposing public opinion, dominated as it was by the Communists and their sympathizers.

Ignazio Silone, who had been at one time a Communist and a delegate to the Comintern, elevated by the political "elevator" to the height of fame for his novel *Fontamara*, broke with Communism on moral

grounds and in complete awareness of what that would mean: his name, absent in Fascist Italy, ceased to exist in the anti-Fascist press and later, after the fall of Fascism, while he and Chiaromonte edited *Tempo Presente*, it did not exist for a wider public. Nicola and Silone represented for me uncompromising rightness of motives. They were the greatest Italians I ever met.

DOSTOEVSKY, Fyodor. I taught a class on Dostoevsky and have been asked many times why I have not written a book about him. I have always answered that an entire library in various languages has been written about him and that I am not a literary scholar; at most, I am a distant cousin to one. To tell the truth, however, there is another reason why.

It would have to be a book based on mistrust, and one cannot do without trust. That great writer had an influence like none of his contemporaries, with the exception of Nietzsche, on the thinking of Europe and America. Neither Balzac, nor Dickens, nor Flaubert, nor Stendhal are names as universally known now. He used a form of the novel such as no one had ever succeeded in using before (or after) him, although George Sand attempted it—to present a diagnosis of an immense phenomenon which he himself had experienced from the inside and had thoroughly comprehended: the erosion of religious belief. His diagnosis turned out to be correct. He foresaw the results of this erosion in the minds of the Russian intelligentsia. The Russian Revolution found its prediction in *The Possessed*, as Lunacharsky openly admitted, and in "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor."

Undoubtedly a prophet. But also a dangerous teacher. Bakhtin, in his book on Dostoevsky's poetics, proposed the hypothesis that the polyphonic novel was that Russian writer's invention. Polyphony makes Dostoevsky such a modern writer: he hears voices, many voices, in the air, quarreling with each other, proclaiming contradictory ideas—are we not all in the present phase of civilization exposed to this raucous chaos of voices?

His polyphony has limits, however. Behind it is concealed the fervent man of faith, the Russian millennialist and messianist. It is difficult to think of anything less polyphonic than the scene with the Poles in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a crass satire which does not fit the seriousness of this work. The treatment of the character Ivan Karamazov produces a far stronger emotional effect than polyphony would allow.

Dostoevsky the ideologue has been distinguished from Dostoevsky the writer in order to protect his greatness, which is marred by unfortunate

pronouncements, and Bakhtin's hypothesis has proved a great help in this effort. In point of fact, however, one can say that had there been no Russian messianist and his passionate concern for Russia, there would have been no international writer. It was not only his concern for Russia that gave him strength, but also his fears about Russia's future that forced him to write in order to issue a warning.

Was he a Christian? That is not clear. Perhaps he thought that he would become one, because he saw no salvation for Russia outside of Christianity? But the conclusion of *The Brothers Karamazov* allows us to doubt whether the destructive forces, which he observed, had found an effective counterweight in his mind. The pure youth Alyosha, at the head of his twelve schoolboys, like a Boy Scout troop, as a projection of Christian Russia capable of saving her from Revolution? That's just a bit too sweet and kitschy.

He fled from kitsch; he sought strong flavors. The sinners, rebels, deviants, madmen of world literature first inhabited his novels. It seems that descending into the depths of sin and shame is a condition in his works for salvation, but he also creates the damned, like Svidrigailov and Stavrogin. Although he is all his characters, one in particular was given the type of understanding that is closest to his own: Ivan Karamazov. That is why Lev Shestov suspects, justifiably so, in my opinion, that Ivan expresses Dostoevsky's ultimate inability to believe, despite his positive characters, the Elder Zosima and Alyosha. What is it that Ivan declares? He returns the Creator's "ticket" because of a single tear of a child and then relates the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, which he himself has composed, and whose meaning leads us to the conclusion that if it is impossible to make people happy under the sign of Christ, then one must try to bring them happiness by collaborating with the devil. Berdiayev wrote that Ivan is characterized by "false oversensitivity" and no doubt the same could be said of Dostoevsky.

He wrote in a letter to Mrs. Fonvizin that if he were ordered to choose between the truth and Christ, he would choose Christ. Those who would choose the truth are probably more honorable, even if the truth appears on the surface to deny Christ (as Simone Weil argued). At least they are not relying on their fantasy and not constructing idols in their own image.

There is something that would incline me to make a softer judgment: it is the fact that Lev Shestov found the inspiration for his tragic philosophy in Dostoevsky. Shestov is very important for me. It was thanks to my reading of him that Joseph Brodsky and I were able to understand each other intellectually.

HOOK, Sidney. Born in Brooklyn, he experienced poverty in his childhood. Like "all of New York," in the thirties he believed in the end of capitalism and the world victory of Communism. Educated as a philosopher, originally as a Marxist, he later turned to the pragmatism of Dewey. He broke with the Communists early, and their press called him a "counterrevolutionary reptile." Although he was not a Trotskyist, after the Moscow trials he and Dewey organized a committee to study the alleged crimes of Trotsky and to clear his name.

I became acquainted with him during my first postwar Paris period. I had been following his activities for a long time and met him in Palo Alto, where he settled after retiring from the university. He struck me as a dry, unyielding intellect. From the perspective of time, I see that one was supposed to honor him for his obduracy. He was a fanatic of reason and hated lying, so that his life was an incessant struggle with admirers and sympathizers of Soviet Russia. He founded the Committee for Cultural Freedom in New York in the beginning of 1950, before the June congress in Berlin and the opening of the Congress of Cultural Freedom in Paris. His and his committee's relations with the Paris Congress are a story of shifting tactics toward the Eastern ideology. The creators of the Paris Congress represented the NCL, the non-Communist left, and were critical of many events in America, throwing ballast overboard, as it were, in order to draw closer to the universal criticism in Europe of the American system (racism, the Rosenberg trials, McCarthyism, the war in Vietnam). Hook and his colleagues in New York, confronting the well-organized propaganda of anti-Americanism, attempted to study each accusation separately and adopt a considered position. They maintained a sober evaluation of the "revolution" of the sixties and the politicization of the universities, and defended professors who resisted it and were, therefore, unpopular. When the Congress was dissolved and transformed into the Association pour la Liberté de la Culture in 1968, after it was revealed that it had been financed by the CIA, Hook no longer had any points in common with the organization, whose main personalities were Pierre Emmanuel and Kot Jeleński, and the only person who shared his uncompromising stance was Leopold Labedź, the editor of the London journal *Survey*.

Hook's most famous essay was titled "Heresy Yes, Conspiracy No"; it defined his stand as a defender of democracy.

KOESTLER, Arthur. The first international best-seller immediately after World War II was probably Koestler's short novel *Darkness at Noon*, published in French translation under the title *Le Zéro et l'infini*.

As is usually the case with fame, it was the sensationalism of the theme that made an impact. We should recall that Communism was fashionable at the time, that historical events were understood as a struggle of the powers of progress against Fascism. On one side were Hitler, Mussolini, General Franco, and on the other democratic Spain, the Soviet Union, and soon, the Western democracies. Koestler's novel horrified people by its breaking of a taboo, for it was forbidden to speak other than affirmatively about the socialist system as it was known in Russia. Poles who had passed through Soviet prisons and camps, and who tried in vain to explain something about this to the West, certainly learned this. Russian socialism was protected by an unwritten comradely pact; that is, by uttering any warnings against it, one committed a faux pas. The millions of fallen Soviet soldiers and Stalin's victory, also the West European Communist parties, who were now practically the only ones on the playing field with their service in the resistance movement, supported a reality which no one dared to denigrate. Anti-Soviet meant Fascist, so that, for example, the Party newspaper *L'Humanité* wrote about the French government's inexplicable tolerance of Anders's Fascist army, which had its cell in the Hôtel Lambert, directed by the (Nazi) major Józef Czapski.

And now here was a book that spoke of the terror of Stalin's governments, which took up (belatedly, to be sure) the secret of the Moscow trials of the 1930s. Immediately dread, the odor of betrayal, hellfire, formed around the book, and that is what makes for good sales.

Koestler wrote many books after that, including a lengthy autobiography, so I can refer to them. He was of a generation that entered the international arena from German culture, in the orbit of Vienna, or still in the traditions of the Habsburg monarchy. Like Kafka in Prague, like my friends Hannah Benzion, who was born in Czech Liberec, and Arthur Mandel, who was born in Bielsk, like Georg Lukács from Budapest—they all wrote in German. Koestler was born in Budapest but studied in Vienna, and from there he went everywhere. One can say of him that because of his voracious, inquisitive intellect he visited, one after the other, all the intellectual fashions and currents of his century. First Zionism and emigration to Palestine as a *halutz* contributing to the building of a Jewish state, then a passionate engagement with science and editing of the science section of a large Berlin newspaper, and right afterward, in Weimar Germany, Communism. From 1933 to 1939 he managed to work in Münzenberg's central office for Communist propaganda, in Paris, to serve as a correspondent during the Spanish Civil War, to spend time in one of Franco's prisons, and to break with the

Party. His later emotional engagements included anti-Communist activity among intellectuals (the Congress for Cultural Freedom), a campaign against the death penalty in England, and finally a return to the interests of his youth, to the history of science, with sideways leaps, such as the mystery of the creative mind, or the Khazar roots of East European Jews.

I read *Darkness at Noon* (in English) several years before I met the author. Its theme is an investigation in the Lubianka prison. A true Soviet, the hard-headed Gletkin, is assigned to interrogate the old Bolshevik Rubashov, so that the latter should confess to crimes he did not commit, because in the trial that is to take place, he is supposed to receive the death penalty. In other words, the novel is an attempt to answer the question asked by many people in the thirties: Why did the old Bolsheviks confess that they were guilty and repent publicly? It must have meant that they were truly guilty, that Stalin was correct to kill them, because how else could these confessions be explained? In the novel, Rubashov yields to Gletkin's arguments: as a Communist he is obligated to place the Party's interests in first place, above all other interests, such as his good name or his desire to save his friends. The Party demands that he should publicly admit to being guilty and accuse his colleagues, because that is necessary during the given era. A record of his dedication to the cause will be preserved in the archives, and after his death, when the proper time comes, the truth that he was innocent will be brought to light.

Thus, an explanation in terms of ideology, as befits an intellectual. It seemed exceedingly recherché, and later, many people simply insisted that those people were broken by torture during the trials. Aleksander Wat, however, cites a conversation with the old Bolshevik Steklov, right before that dignitary's death in Saratov prison. According to Steklov, they confessed out of disgust at their own past: they each had so many crimes on their account, that it cost them nothing to demean themselves once again, and torture was not necessary.

No doubt both Koestler and his critics captured a portion of the truth. I am writing about him because he provides a link to the period of the civil war in Spain. People went there to fight out of the purest ideological motives, and perished at the front as the result of a sentence executed by Stalin's agents. Spain was at the center of the "anti-Fascist" propaganda carried out on an international scale by the Paris bureau, and one of its closest collaborators was Koestler himself. They made use of so-called "useful idiots" in many countries, naive people who wanted to do good. To what extent Münzenberg, the director of the bureau, was

aware of Stalin's double game is unknown. In Spain, Koestler, Dos Passos, and George Orwell came to understand it.

I met Koestler in Paris, probably in 1951. His physical form explained a great deal. He was harmoniously built and handsome, but tiny, almost a dwarf, and this may have contributed to his Napoleonic ambitions and pugnaciousness, which made it difficult for him to function in any group. It was he, after all, who came up with the idea of working among the West European intellectual circles in order to cure them of Marxism, and the Berlin Congress of the Defenders of Cultural Freedom in 1950 was his work, and from it evolved the American Congress of Cultural Freedom in Paris, but Koestler himself was swiftly maneuvered out of there. Later, living in England, he limited his interests in Eastern totalitarianism to creating a fund to help émigré writers. He dedicated some of his royalties to that end.

My relations with him were eminently collegial, although superficial. We never got into a serious conversation. During the 1960s, he traveled in the United States with his much younger girlfriend or wife. They paid us a visit in Berkeley. As on many similar occasions, I was in an uncomfortable position. For him, I was the author of *The Captive Mind*, a book which he had read and valued, but in my own mind I was someone entirely different, the author of poems which he knew nothing about. I don't ascribe my bad behavior during their visit, however, to this divergence in our fields. Simply I, the host, drank too much and fell asleep, which I confess with a sense of shame, and it seems to me that I offended him without meaning to at all. Were it not for his small stature, with its attendant excessive pride, perhaps he might have seen this in a better light.

He was, it seems, above all a man of nineteenth-century positivism, whose two branches—the nationalist and the socialist—both attracted him for a certain time. His strong humanitarian sentiments made him work against the English penalty of death by hanging, and later he fought for a law permitting euthanasia. He was an adherent of euthanasia and proved it in practice. He and his young wife were found together, seated side by side in armchairs, dead.

WHITMAN, Walt. "The priest departs," he wrote, "the divine literatus comes." All-embracing, all-devouring, blessing everything, turned to the future, a prophet. The astonishing linkage of the word and the historical victory of America. Despite my adoration, however, I knew that it would be useless for me pretend to closeness if the civilization to which I was linked was afraid to support the freedom of the individual.

Europe had its Whitman moment. I would place it around 1913. In poetry, the French were the middlemen, beginning with Valery Larbaud, but Whitmanizing is not only a matter of liberating oneself from meter and rhyme; it is also a rapturous movement toward happiness, a democratic pledge of breaking down class divisions, expressed in poetry, prose, painting, theater, and also in a noticeable change of customs. It's a brighter ecstatic tone after surviving the *fin de siècle*—for example, in the first volumes of Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe*, in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, in Russian Acmeism, in Frans Masereel's wood-cuttings. Pacifist and revolutionary accents are a part of the European makeover of the Whitmanesque word *en masse*. Gavrilo Princip, who shot Archduke Ferdinand in 1914, was convinced that he was carrying out his beloved poet's orders, which called for a war against kings. And then the colossal slaughterhouse of World War I instantly put an end to great hopes. For a couple of decades they fluttered, like startled pigeons, over the Russian Revolution.

In Poland this bright interlude barely occurred. Polish poetry did know a kind of biblical verse, although it had used it to celebrate the victory over the Turks (Wespazjan Kochowski) or for messianic parodies of the Gospels, which is telling. Who, after all, would Whitmanize? Country squires? Iwaszkiewicz's youthful poetic prose does contain a little bit of ecstatic joy. The peasants? Not a chance. Perhaps the Jews. Indeed, the young Tuwim, liberated for a brief time, speaks of the "colossal old man" who addressed his readers as "Camerado," but immediately slings the noose of traditional stanzas around him.

I first encountered Whitman in Polish translation. He was translated by Alfred Tom, Stanislaw Vincenz, Stefan Napierski. Immediately, revelation: to be able to write as he did! I understood that it was not a matter of form, but of an act of inner freedom, and therein lay the real difficulty.

The "divine literatus" had conquered the distance between the "I" and the crowd, had devoured religions and philosophies, so that instead of contradictions, mortality and immortality both fit into his poetry, a leaf of grass and eternity; above all, he spoke as one of the many, an equal among equals. One hundred years after his death a collective mood appears, a collective mode of feeling, called New Age. In order to make a list of the most characteristic features of this phenomenon, it would seem that we should simply describe Whitman's poetry transformed into a great number of practitioners. That is not exactly the same thing, because poetry lasts longer than fashions, but the prophecy was fulfilled: each will be his own priest, a "divine literatus." The most

Whitmanesque among American poets was Allen Ginsberg, not so much because of his open homosexuality as through the courage with which he broke with convention, often against his own will.

ZAN, Tomasz. In the city of my childhood and youth he was a grand figure. In his student years he belonged to a Masonic lodge, just like Kontrym, the university librarian who discreetly supported the Philomaths and who, it seems, was hierarchically above Mickiewicz, who, as far as we know, never belonged to any lodge in Wilno. Wilno Freemasonry, long banned by order of the tsars, returned after 1900 when the new Scoundrels' Society began to meet. This does not mean that all the Scoundrels' members were Masons, but those circles were related. It appears, too, that the Tomasz Zan lodge was founded immediately after 1905.

For me, a *gymnasium* student, what was important was the Tomasz Zan Library, founded in the 1920s and intended as support for the schools; that is, young people came there to read books and periodicals (not to borrow books to take home). For the lower grades, the lending library of the Polish School Society was adequate; it was housed right next to my school on Little Pohulanka Street. But one read Conrad's works, translated into Polish, or more serious books on the history of literature in the Tomasz Zan Library, which at that time was located on the corner of Greater Pohulanka Street, across from the theater, and later moved to its own building on Portowa Street.

Why was the library given this name? The founders, Father Milkowski and Miss Ruszczyc, were probably not moved by any Masonic designs and perhaps did not even know the Masonic connections of that name. Tomasz Zan simply appealed to them as patron by virtue of having been a Philomath and an exile who remained faithful to his country.

I still remember evenings spent at the Tomasz Zan Library, including readings of the literary supplement to the Warsaw newspaper, *The Voice of Truth*. It was edited by Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski, who maintained it patiently and seriously as a mini literature school for youth. It was in that supplement—most likely in 1927 or 1928—that I first came upon a poem by Józef Czechowicz and committed it to memory. It is also where a letter I wrote to the editor appeared—my first published text. I think with gratitude of the founders of the Tomasz Zan Library. May at least some trace of their activity remain.

EDITH KURZWEIL

New York Film Festival of 2000

Although I attended only about half of the films chosen for the 38th New York Film Festival, in October 2000, I was struck by the fact that in these most of the protagonists in the lands of plenty—America, France, Sweden, Japan—were the down-and-outs, the lost sheep, the losers. They tended to be surrounded by heaps of discarded plastic, of garish and multicolored trash—whether pushed in front of garbage trucks to swamp wide, central streets and steep, outlying ravines, or to underline the injustices discussed in our daily press and shown on our television screens. Inevitably, the pristine, wide landscapes of China and Japan, for instance, depicted the beauty of preindustrial life, along with its hardships. The themes of these documentaries and films varied from merely suggestive sexual ones to the most ruthless killings—many among them somewhat short of genuine suspense. This is not to say that the viewers didn't feel for the fates of the characters. Still, I couldn't but wonder whether their directors were emulating, or playing to, cultural trends, couldn't find stories that in one way or another hadn't been filmed before, or simply expected to show it as it is. Much of the acting was superb, the photographers' techniques of moving in and around objects, and of achieving novel pictorial effects, and moods, were often stunning as well as surprising.

One of the surprises was the French documentary, *The Gleaners and I*, that inspired Agnes Varda to compare the picture of women gleaners—who pick up what kernels the harvesters have left behind—in an 1867 painting by Jean-François Millet that hangs in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris—to contemporary gleaners. Varda pursued them during all of 1999, from potato fields, vineyards, and apple orchards, to trash depositories, market places, and cabbage fields, and noted the ways in which formerly proud harvesters have descended to the lowest rungs of society. She talked to farmers who explained why and how the French bureaucracy now gives licenses to those it allows to gather unharvested fruit. She interrogated a lawyer who read to her from the relevant code book; and a former truck driver in a shabby trailer, as well as working people for whom gleaning has become a way of life. Whereas to begin

with Varda seemed to point to the wastefulness and poverty in the midst of plenty, by the end of this film we are overwhelmed by beautiful images of the landscape she surveys. I felt I was reliving some of my own carefree trips through the Loire valley and the Bourgogne, and my days of youthful exuberance—just as Varda did herself.

Another and very different surprise was to see Paul Robeson in his movie debut of 1925, in the silent film, *Body and Soul*. He plays twin brothers, the evil Isaiah who is an escaped convict impersonating a minister, and the good Sylvester who is an inventor. Of course, it is no surprise that both of them are after the same young woman, Isabelle, whose naive mother favors the deceitful minister. As in all silent films, its director, Oscar Micheaux, had to rely on his actors' exaggerated gestures and on written titles to explain the ups and downs of the plot, that eventually result in Isabelle's downfall. After Isaiah, a consummate con man, steals the money Isabelle's mother had saved for her dowry in the family Bible, and sneers that her mother would never believe it were Isabelle to tell her of his deed, her feelings of shame at having been raped by him, and her fear of telling her mother about it, eventually lead to her death in a miserable garret—though not until after a tearful reunion with her mother. But neither Robeson's splendid acting, nor Micheaux's directing could have been as riveting as it turned out, had it not been accompanied by Lincoln Center's Jazz Orchestra, with Wynton Marsalis. The vigorous, original score by the trombonist Wycliffe Gordon uses folkloric themes, handclaps and knee slaps, chants and melodies from the blues that embroider on the characters' interactions and feelings, and that involve the audience to an extent that the silents never could then, and much less so in our age of hype.

Boesman and Lena—based on Athol Fugard's play—is another tale of anguish. It recounts the cruel fate of a mixed-race couple in apartheid South Africa, as Lena recalls their descent from a life of dancing and hope in their own house to a desolate shanty made of scrap metal, wire, and other detritus. Exposed to the elements, and to bitter loneliness, her flashes of memory depict the couple's relentless downward drift from radiant, sexual beings to angry, desperate ones. The director, John Berry, who died just before this film was completed, manages to convey the social injustices by means of the emotional disagreements between the characters, dealt with by Boesman mostly through outbursts of rage and by Lena with her incorrigible dependency. (As has become the fashion, much was made of Berry's "survival" after having been blacklisted by Hollywood.)

Some of the sets of this film could have been borrowed for *George Washington*, which is said to float somewhere in the limbo between Tobacco Road and a post-industrial moonscape. The director, Gordon Green, found his amateur, mostly black, cast at churches, teen centers, and on the street, and then lived with them and the crew, recording the pre-teen girls' chatter about boys while fixing each other's hairdos, and the boys' more reluctant disclosure of feelings—from love of animals to pop-philosophy and dreams of (unattainable) ambitions—while wrestling and horsing around on a deserted playground and in alleys. These kids faced many conflicts, and acted on both good-natured and violent feelings, especially after—during an innocent game in an abandoned amusement park—one of the kids dies. As they realize that by telling exactly what had happened they might not be believed, they decide on what to relate about the event, and end up struggling with the complex relationships among themselves—as they deal with their individual consciences, even while enacting the director's fantasy plot. This ambiguous film is emblematic of the current trend to mix reality with reverie, often leaving it to the audience to figure it all out.

In *Platform*, another group of youngsters chronicles their lives. However, they live in a small town in China—between 1979 and 1989—and, influenced first by talk of privatization and then by the availability of Western fashion, they gradually move from singing Maoist propaganda to punk-rock concerts and break dancing. We smile at celebrations of industrial advances, such as thanking Mao for finally having brought electricity to their village, and cannot help contrasting their type of poverty to ours. Essentially, this is a boring, slow-moving, and somewhat disjointed three-and-a-half hour plot, whose historical message we already know. And we cannot help but observe that in China crumbling, primitive housing structures, and the acceptance of dire poverty by inhabitants whose lives revolve around leaky kitchen sinks and bicycles that keep falling apart, make for no more happiness than they do in capitalist societies. In both, parents can be authoritarian, and teens have reveries of romance.

Eureka, another three-and-a-half hour film, takes place in an even smaller town in Japan. The focus is on the trauma of the three survivors of an attempted bus highjacking. The bus driver (Makoto), after aimlessly roaming the country for two years, joins the teenage brother and his younger sister, who have inherited their house after their father dies. When Makoto moves in, he begins by cleaning up the mess they live in, but is unable to get the youngsters to speak. He ends up buying and outfitting an old camper and drives through backwater Japan, over mountains to the sea and to holy shrines. (At times, I was reminded of various

areas in the Rhone valley and Northern Italy.) In every town they visit, mysterious killings of young women begin to occur, and Makoto is suspected. But this bleak, and often boring, film in which nothing seems to happen, is almost redeemed by its unexpected endings that explain some of its exceedingly dreamy qualities.

Even as concrete a film as *Pollock* has its moments of reverie, mostly when the director/actor, Ed Harris, is portraying that seminal Abstract Expressionist's periods of painterly indecision. According to the press release, Harris is better looking than the original. He seems to incarnate Pollock, which is most difficult, especially when he so plausibly reenacts the drip technique. Clement Greenberg, the art critic who put Pollock on the map, and with whom he had a falling-out before he died, is much more lackluster than the original. However, from pussycat behavior to alcoholic violence, Harris is everything we know Pollock to have been: a consummate egotist who swaggers and rages, sobs and shakes, and a passionate artist who threw his all into his work. And his wife, Lee Krasner (Maria Gay Harden), a painter who recognized his genius and subordinated her own career to his, is presented as a formidable influence on Pollock's career. But why some in the audience kept tittering and laughing during the scenes that to Pollock must have been most unbearable, and those that led to his death, is beyond my comprehension.

Whereas the director Ed Harris portrayed a painter, the world renowned artist Julian Schnabel tried his hand at directing the film, *Before Night Falls* is a posthumous celebration of the undervalued and nearly forgotten Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas. He was persecuted by the Castro regime as both a political dissident and a homosexual. Harassed, imprisoned, and physically abused, even more so after he managed to smuggle one of his manuscripts out of the country, Arenas finally escaped as one of the "criminals" Castro at one point shipped to the United States. Schnabel shows scenes from Arenas's biography that demonstrate how sometimes homosexuality, and other times resistance to dictatorship, was being used so brutally by the system to get rid of all opposition. But life in exile, that brought Arenas to Miami and then to New York, was fraught with frustrations and poverty as well. When encountering the harshness of survival that writers in capitalist society experience, he concluded that "there really is no solace anywhere," and after his stay in a dismal hospital ward, his sorrowful long-time companion, who succeeded in following him out of Cuba, assists him in taking his life—in 1990, at the age of forty-seven.

Homosexuality was even more of a taboo in nineteenth-century Japan, to judge from *Gohatto*—which shows the irresistible attraction

of a ravishing and seductive eighteen-year-old boy in the exclusive school for samurai warriors. He turns out to be a gifted fighter as well, who demonstrates that he is even able to decapitate—in cold blood—a friend, in order to uphold the samurai code. He remains dispassionate even in the (only) love scene. And vaguely arouses passion, also, in his heterosexual superiors. The only thing he fails at is heterosexual love. Neither this, nor any of the other love stories in this year's festival end on happy notes. No longer are we presented with cheerful endings in marriage as most such Hollywood films used to be famous for. No longer are sexual encounters simply alluded to: whether between heterosexual couples or homosexual ones, you get to see everything, including the pubic hair. At the same time, as directors attempt to express moods, resort to flashbacks and reminiscences, and employ ever more sophisticated pictorial tricks, protagonists' nostalgia for the past and/or their youth, adds sadness rather than celebration. And as life has gotten better for us all, we walk out of these films chastised and lost in thought—be it after seeing Liv Ullman's *Faithless*, Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*, or Lars Von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*.

My own vote for the best film in this festival is *Faithless*, not simply because the central characters—Marianne (Lena Endre) who tells Bergman (Erland Josephson is his stand-in) about the ins and outs of her affair with David (Krister Henriksson) while she was happily married to Markus (Thomas Hanzon)—so splendidly act out and expose their innermost feelings as these evolve over the years, but because the actors' precision and projection keeps us wondering whether Marianne was a ghost from Bergman's own guilty past, is being considered as the star of a film he is planning, or is helping him to recapture his youth. As the story of what started out as a casual affair increasingly turns into a feverish obsession, we are more and more engrossed in the ever entangled emotions of the protagonists, and of their extraordinary little girl, Isabelle (Michelle Gylemo). We ponder why Marianne didn't stop the affair at its nadir when it would still have been easy; and why she started it at all, given the "excellent sex" with her husband. Long after the unexpected ending of this film, we cannot help but continue to speculate about the twists and turns of human passions.

Whereas in *Faithless* Liv Ullman has Marianne and the other actors ponder, reenact, and suffer through a painful, long-gone love affair, Wong Kar-wai, who directs *In the Mood for Love*, has his actors express their feelings through gestures rather than confessions, outbursts of passion, or reactment of memories of sexual passion. Whether simply an expression of cultural differences—speaking of and acting out

one's feelings in Western countries, and holding on to traditional values and self-restraint in an Eastern environment such as Hong Kong, or the more subtle influence of their milieus on the respective directors, I found this romantic mood as idyllic as any explicit love scene. Two married people find out that their spouses are having an affair with each other. During occasional dinners they talk mostly about what their spouses might be doing, but are dancing around their feelings as a cat might around her too-hot food. Tenderness plays in Chiu-wai's (Tony Leung) eyes, Su-Li-shen (Maggie Cheung Man-yuk) hesitates when passing his door. Careful not to arouse suspicions in their neighbors, they return separately after having their joint meals; and do not sleep in one bed even when spending the night in the same apartment in order *not* to let anyone suspect their friendship. Their love is ephemeral. When their spouses return from one of their shared vacations and decide to resume their married lives, the mood is shattered, the non-consumed idyll is over. Its end, eventually, is as mysterious as their love had been—once again letting honor, convention, and pride rule over their feelings. Even though it might be said that nothing happens in this slowly paced film, the tension that something might, and the beauty of the actors and the photography are riveting the audience to their seats.

Dancer in the Dark originally captivates us because we try to get straight the many plot lines; later on because we wonder how this nearly blind single mother's, Selma's (Björk), unlimited love for her son, Gene, will manage to save him; and in the end whether or not she herself will live. A Czech immigrant to the United States, Selma works in a tool and die factory in order to amass the sum needed for her son's operation to cure his hereditary blindness. She decides to supplement her income with a night job. As she is rapidly losing her eyesight, Selma finds hope and sustenance in music and rehearses for the part of Maria in *The Sound of Music*—which she sometimes imagines to be replacing reality. Selma even refuses her admirer Jeff's (Peter Stormare) offers to drive her home after work. Her buoyance infects all those she comes in contact with, especially her co-worker Kathy (Catherine Deneuve), and her neighbors Bill (Dave Morse) and Linda (Cara Seymour)—who often watch Gene while Selma works. After Selma refuses to lend Bill money (he has lost his job and is afraid to tell Linda), he steals it. In their ensuing confrontation Bill draws his gun, which accidentally goes off and kills him. Selma's anger gets the better of her, and she keeps hitting him after he is dead, and then rushes to deposit the money with Dr. Pokorny (Udo Kier) to guarantee Gene's operation. That Bill is a policeman, and that Selma gives a false name at the clinic clinches her fate. She is tried

and found guilty. The rest of the film is about the best argument against the death penalty I have ever come across. As Selma refuses to accept a new lawyer and to change her testimony, and as we witness the drawn-out procedures and Selma's emotional state, the audience is more and more revulsed. That in the end Selma again imagines herself as dancing to the *Sound of Music*, while we watch her endure last minute reprieves, botched attempts to execute her, and her final walk to the gallows, is more than overkill. Yes, as in Selma's Song, "I've seen it all," the audience too got to see it all, but did not have to see every detail in order to turn against the death penalty—or to discriminate between guilty criminals and innocent victims, circumstantial and incontrovertible evidence.

This is not the only film with a covert political message, or with fashionable multicultural overtones. Why else, for instance, did the press receive releases announcing the ten languages of the sixteen films that had been chosen; and why was so much time during press conferences spent on questions of photography, techniques of filming and acting, and so little on political content—either on repression in Cuba and China, or on the cultural differences we want to overlook? Certainly, the films I saw—whether about dire poverty, homosexual or heterosexual love, communist repression or overt violence—mostly expressed traditional values in Asian milieus, and postmodern ones in Western cultures.

Kippur alone among all these films deals directly with war—with the surprise attack on Israel by Egypt and Syria in 1973, on Yom Kippur. It is upsetting to see the reenactment of the earnest Weinraub's (Liron Levo) experiences. The film begins while he and Dina (Liat Glick Levo), are making love. After hearing alarm sirens, he joins a medical rescue squad. We see many dead and injured; evolving friendships among the men who fight together to save the wounded, and who soon part when their helicopter is destroyed—after they themselves have been hit by shrapnel, and worse. No matter where we stand politically, we end up pondering the futility and terrible consequences of wars, especially as Israelis and Arabs are fighting once again. And we understand better why so many Israelis, who cannot expect Palestinians who are teaching their young to hate them—along with all other Jews—seem to want peace at all costs. *Kippur* is an existential anti-war movie, not via demonstrations, but via the showing of blood, sweat and fire bombs, the traffic jams, and the helplessness of even the most courageous and duty-bound individuals who shoulder their obligations to their fellow men.

Brother as well demonstrates such obligations, but restricts these to the brotherhood of gangsters—from Tokyo to Los Angeles—who are ruled by their own code of honor. The director, Takeshi Kitano, who is

said to be the reigning master of the gangster film (and here also plays the central protagonist, Yamamoto), has produced the bloodiest, most brutally violent film I have ever seen. The plot is simple: he has been banished from Tokyo in the aftermath of a gang war and travels to Los Angeles to find his younger brother—who is engaged in low-level crimes. Since Yamamoto deems these activities unprofessional, he decides to take over and to build up an organization, which is in competition with the local mafia. Throughout the many ruthless murders, Yamamoto's eyes stay almost shut; except for a very faint facial tic, he remains inscrutable; uses few words and many high-caliber, blazing guns. His startling cruelty knows no end.

In his director's statement, Mr. Kitano said that although he expected problems, he "had a great time shooting in the States, especially the action scenes, which [he] couldn't possibly expect to do in Japan." I was struck by this comment when reading it on the day after I had watched the congressional hearings about means of preventing children's exposure to violent television and films, that concluded that "parents raise children, not government." Very true. But politicians and the folks in the entertainment industry know that children will always find ways of doing and seeing what is forbidden. I kept waiting for someone to say that the best way to keep such violence at bay would be not to produce it. After all, such protection used to exist—without particularly harming anyone—except a few movie moguls. After seeing *Brother* I thought that our lawmakers ought to find the time to define censorship precisely. Instead they are in the avant-garde of permitting evil productions while decrying its deleterious effects—not only on kids but on potential criminals as well. Of course, evil sells. Still, if we do nothing, let us at least admit that we allow the psychic well-being of "our children" to suffer in order to allow the movie industry to flourish. During the press screenings no one walked out; some people tittered or laughed. Was it because they liked the film; because the audience already had become inured to violence; or because they concentrated on the wonderful photography without seeing its gory content? The reviewer for *The New York Times* did suggest that it might have been better to end *Brothers* a few scenes before the last one. He failed to mention that that scene shows Yamamoto's end: he is shot down by at least a dozen sharp-shooting mafiosi who stand shoulder to shoulder and keep shooting long after he is already dead. Did the producer reproduce the Oklahoma killings, or vice versa?

TERRY TEACHOUT

Dance Chronicle: The Course of Empire

ONCE UPON A TIME, ballets were occasional and disposable—yesterday's flowers. Though a few full-evening works were thought worthy of revival, usually in versions of questionable authenticity, one did not normally go to the ballet to commune with the "classics," but to revel in virtuoso dancing. (This is still the attitude of certain choreography-blind patrons of American Ballet Theatre.) Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, which brought classical ballet into the age of modernism, carried over some of its more popular pieces from season to season, but Diaghilev and his associates were in the business of one-upping themselves, not building a repertory. Nor did they end up creating one by happenstance: no more than a half-dozen Ballets Russes dances now survive in danceable, stylistically convincing versions. We know more about the Ballets Russes' costumes than its choreography.

This aesthetic of evanescence long set dance apart from most other art forms. Indeed, a case can be made that until fairly recently, it was *the* defining characteristic of dance. Significantly, Diaghilev was not a creator but a producer, a cultivated dilettante turned professional impresario who was obsessed with the ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the synthesis of the arts beloved of perfect Wagnerites. "Parade," for example, consisted of a libretto by Jean Cocteau, a musical score by Erik Satie, décor by Pablo Picasso, and choreography by Léonide Massine, with all four elements coequal in importance. Moreover, the final balance was struck not by librettist, composer, designer, or choreographer, but by Diaghilev himself, who chose his collaborators and had the last word on the presentation of their joint creations.

Such collective undertakings are by definition fragile, and this very fragility seems to have formed part of their appeal to the cultural cognoscenti of the day; it also helps to explain the attraction exerted by ballet on partisans of the camp sensibility. At the same time, the impermanence of ballet sharply limited its expressive potential. W. H. Auden, no stranger to the dubious joys of camp, nonetheless dismissed classical ballet as a "very, very minor art," and my guess is that he did so because

he knew that no work of art can be truly major unless it aspires to the condition of permanence.

All this has changed radically, and the man responsible for changing it was Lincoln Kirstein. As Nancy Reynolds observes in an essay about Kirstein included in Lynn Garafola's *The Ballets Russes and Its World* (1999), the co-founder of New York City Ballet dreamed of becoming a second Diaghilev. Unlike Diaghilev, though, Kirstein had the wit to realize that in George Balanchine, he had found a choreographer of unprecedented genius whose ballets were not only of permanent interest, but complete in and of themselves. They required no elaborate backdrops by world-famous painters, nor finishing touches from willful impresarios who longed to poke their busy fingers in the creative pie. However reluctantly, Kirstein made it his life's work to let Balanchine be Balanchine. "People don't realize the specific way in which George ran the company," he admitted in old age. "There was nothing except what he wished."

Balanchine did not make his ballets with an eye on posterity, and affected to believe that they would not long outlive him, at least not in any recognizable form. But he and Kirstein also founded NYCB and the School of American Ballet, which exist to preserve authentic versions of Balanchine's ballets and teach the techniques necessary to dance them idiomatically, and he also made his ballets available to other companies that wished to perform them. In addition, he left the rights to those ballets not to NYCB but to fourteen individuals—dancers, close friends, and colleagues—who in turn deposited them in the Balanchine Trust, which supervises all authorized productions of the seventy-five-odd surviving ballets it controls.

The Balanchine Trust was not Balanchine's idea: it was organized after his death by his legatees and loyal disciples, several of whom fanned out across the United States and started ballet companies of their own. In addition, a number of dancers have written books about him, the latest and most ambitious of which is *Suki Schorer on Balanchine Technique* (1999). Schorer, an NYCB alumna who now teaches at the School of American Ballet, is the daughter of the literary scholar Mark Schorer, so it is no surprise that she should have produced so penetrating and lucidly written an analysis of Balanchine's methods. But for all its plain-spoken practicality, *Suki Schorer on Balanchine Technique* is hardly less interesting for the light it sheds on the near-devotional reverence Balanchine inspired in his dancers:

> I believed in Balanchine. Seeing and then dancing in his ballets made me believe in his aesthetic. Sharing the life of his company and school made me believe in his approach to work and to life in general. In the evening I would think back over what had happened during the day and try to apply it not only to my dancing, but also to my life. I felt he knew not just how to dance, but also how to live.

Balanchine was not the first choreographer to start a school or a company, or to attract reverent disciples who went on to teach his technique and start companies of their own. What sets him apart is the existence of a worldwide network of institutions and individuals—Suki Schorer being prominent among the latter—whose purpose is to disseminate authentic versions of his ballets as widely as possible, and to give them a permanent life in repertory. To date, no other choreographic oeuvre has been the subject of so thoroughgoing an attempt at long-term preservation.

Obviously, the primary "draw" of the Balanchine repertory is its quality: everybody wants to dance a ballet like "Serenade" because it is so beautiful. But everybody also wants to dance Martha Graham's "Appalachian Spring." The difference is that Graham refused to let other companies perform her works during her lifetime, and made no definitive arrangements by which they could be preserved or licensed after her death. As a result, they are now entangled in litigation, and are increasingly unlikely to survive in stageable form. Not so the Balanchine ballets. "Balanchine Lives!" a TV documentary by Michael Blackwood which aired on PBS last spring, shows what happens when a dance company decides to produce a piece by Balanchine, a process that turns out to be almost as orderly as renting a car. You apply to the Balanchine Trust for a fixed-term performing license; if the application is approved, the trust sends an authorized *répétiteur* to stage the dance on your company, for which service you pay a reasonable fee, plus an additional licensing fee that varies with the size of your budget. That's all there is to it.

It helps, of course, that most of Balanchine's dances are well suited to the restrictive circumstances under which repertory ballet is normally presented in this country. A piece like "Concerto Barocco," for example, has no set and no costumes—it is danced in simple practice clothes—making it relatively cheap to produce. Nor does the plotless "Barocco" require elaborate direction to make its theatrical effect: it contains no significant glances, no labyrinthine subtexts, just steps and music. On the other hand, the steps are hard to execute, and their style

is different from that of classical ballet (the footwork is faster, the choreography for the corps far more elaborate).

Hence the importance of the "Balanchine companies" led by former NYCB members, the best known of which are Edward Villella's Miami City Ballet, Francia Russell's Pacific Northwest Ballet, Helgi Tomasson's San Francisco Ballet, and Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem. In these companies, Balanchine's ballets are treated not as interchangeable parts of a large and varied repertory, no more or less important than the works of any other famous choreographer, but as the indispensable cornerstones of a unified "house style." Though other choreographers have sought this kind of stylistic unanimity, they were only able to achieve it by organizing their own companies, and only for as long as they themselves were alive to supervise restagings of their works. But by making his dances available to anyone who wanted to perform them, and encouraging his senior dancers to start "competing" companies of their own, Balanchine ensured that the preservation of his oeuvre would not be left solely to his successors at New York City Ballet, but would evolve over time into a self-perpetuating enterprise.

This, too, is a radical innovation, no less so for having been largely unintended, and its consequences were illustrated to unforgettable effect last September by the Kennedy Center's Balanchine Celebration, a two-week festival at which thirteen major Balanchine ballets and a *pas de deux* were danced by Miami City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, Pennsylvania Ballet, the Bolshoi Ballet, the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, and the Suzanne Farrell Ballet Company, the last an ad hoc ensemble put together by NYCB's most famous alumna. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time in the history of dance that so large a group of ballet companies has joined forces to perform the works of a single choreographer.

Missing from the roster were Pacific Northwest Ballet, which made a powerful impression a few years ago during a too-short visit to New York's City Center, and Dance Theatre of Harlem, which was absent for a good reason: it was busy giving admirable performances of "Serenade" and "The Four Temperaments" at City Center. Missing, too, was New York City Ballet, for a less good reason: a restrictive union contract prevents NYCB from touring without its resident pit orchestra, which the Kennedy Center could not afford to bring to Washington. But the absence of Balanchine's own company from the Balanchine Celebration served in the event to emphasize the fact that his ballets need no longer rely on the good offices of NYCB to make their way in the world. Indeed, I would now say that outside of the superlative work of such individual dancers as Peter Boal, Monique Meunier, Jenifer Ringer, Jennie Somogyi,

and Ethan Stiefel (who is now with American Ballet Theater), the most stylish Balanchine performances in America are no longer to be seen in New York, but in the provinces.

New York-based critics, alas, must go well out of their way to see Miami City Ballet, which does not appear in Manhattan (it costs too much), but the various performances I have caught on the wing in the past few years were all highly impressive, while the stagings of "Agon," "Rubies," and "The Four Temperaments" I saw at the Balanchine Celebration were better than anything currently on display at Lincoln Center—more vital, more exact, more committed. Similarly, Suzanne Farrell's company-in-the-making danced the demanding "Divertimento No. 15" as beautifully as I have ever seen it done. Even the two non-Balanchine troupes did themselves proud: the Bolshoi's "Mozartiana" was warmly poetic, while the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, which departed New York five years ago in severe artistic and financial disarray, served up a thrilling "Square Dance."

It says much about the continuing viability of George Balanchine's ballets that the Balanchine Celebration could have been solely devoted to them without any resulting sense of strain. But the festival's exclusive focus on Balanchine's choreography also served to obscure one of the most puzzling aspects of his artistic legacy: none of his first-generation disciples has become a major choreographer. Tomasson and NYCB's Peter Martins are prolific dancemakers, but their work is strictly minor; Mitchell and Villella have only dabbled in choreography, while Farrell and Russell make no dances at all. For this reason, I have lately taken a special interest in Carolina Ballet, a three-year-old company founded by Robert Weiss, a noted NYCB dancer who went on to run Pennsylvania Ballet. Weiss has made a great many dances of his own, but none of them have been seen in New York in recent years, and after his abrupt departure from Pennsylvania Ballet (he was fired in 1990), he spent most of the Nineties in the wilderness, looking for a company to run. The Raleigh-based Carolina Ballet, which he built from scratch, dances an eclectic mixture of Balanchine and various contemporary choreographers, but it also performs a number of works by Weiss himself, who specializes not in the plotless one-act ballets that were Balanchine's trademark, but in full-evening story ballets.

So far, I have seen two of Weiss's ballets, "Romeo and Juliet" and "Carmen," both of which I found highly impressive. They are choreographed in the manner of Balanchine's 1962 adaptation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," in which the plot is propelled, and the characters defined, through movement rather than mime. "I don't like

seeing a lot of people standing around on stage doing nothing," Weiss explains. Accordingly, he builds each scene around a carefully organized dance sequence, just as Balanchine did in his great Shakespeare ballet. He uses the steps and combinations of Balanchine-style neoclassical ballet to make specific narrative points, yet his large ensembles have a near-symphonic clarity of structure that keeps the eye engaged. Though the second-act tavern scene of "Carmen" consists of a half-hour of virtually non-stop dancing, the dramatic tension builds fast and stays taut.

Whether Weiss can keep Carolina Ballet's doors open remains to be seen, but it can only be a matter of time before the artistic directors of other companies realize that he is making the best story ballets to be premiered in the past decade and more. Together with the similarly striking output of Christopher Wheeldon, a younger, post-Balanchine choreographer whose work combines Balanchinian neoclassicism with the romantic lyricism of Frederick Ashton, Weiss's dances offer fresh hope for the future of classical ballet. To be sure, Balanchine's posthumous empire continues to grow by leaps and bounds, but one choreographer, however great, cannot singlehandedly make a minor art form major. Only if Balanchine's ballets inspire an ongoing tradition of genuine choreographic creativity will his career prove in the very long run to have been more than merely a glorious fluke.

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