

Life-Writing The Future

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When seeking to understand what is meant when we use the term life writing there are particular questions, as a writer, that concern me. For example when we talk about life writing are we referring only to the writing of real life experience already lived? Is life writing, by definition, the process of reconstructing the past and recounting memories or, could it instead focus on what might have been or what might still be, as opposed to what is or what was? Can writing about something that has only ever been dreamed or imagined, something that might form the basis of our longings or our fears rather than what is actual or real in our life, can these things be classified as life writing?

I start with these questions about the nature and purpose of life writing with the intention of arguing for a definition of autobiographical life writing that can include the creation of a future self alongside a reconstruction of the past. I wish to suggest that this way of imagining the future could help to establish greater emotional truth and psychological voracity in the telling of a life.

In autobiographical life writing the writer subject chooses which parts of their life they want to question, to write about, and in doing so creates the possibility for those parts of their life to be read and interpreted by others. This can be an exhilarating process but inevitably creates a kind of vulnerability too. And, as well as whatever other central questions might drive the writing, there will be many questions relating to the insecurity of the writer which are being asked during the process of the writing. How do my experiences compare to other peoples in terms of ordinariness or extraordinariness? Is my life worthy enough? What has been my greatest happiness? My biggest regret? Who or what has made a significant impact on my life so far? Have I made a significant impact on others? Am I allowed to write about them if they are still alive? Even if I find it interesting will my life be of interest to anyone else?

Ten years ago my novel Wyoming Trail was published. Wyoming Trail is according to the publisher's classification a work of fiction, though I

would also say it is indisputably a work of life-writing - earning this definition not so much despite of, but because of its fictional elements. Let me explain. Wyoming Trail is the story of a life told through the voice of a first person narrator in three parts, which divide into; Part 1, my child self, Part 2, my young adult self and, Part 3, my future self.

When I began writing the book I was engaged in a process of remembering or trying to remember. I wanted to explore the question of identity. How is it we become who we become? I had just read Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and was hugely affected by it. I felt certain parallels in her story to my own. I was interested particularly in the effect of dislocation, language and place on identity. I wanted to interrogate the details of my own life in order to explore this. I was born in America and came to England with my family when I was 11 years old, ostensibly to stay no more than a year. My father whose original purpose in coming was to complete a period of research as a pathologist, left the family and the medical profession that same year to pursue alternative life paths, experimenting with drugs, sexual orientation, religious and spiritual beliefs. He returned to the US but I, my mother and my sisters stayed. During our first few months in England we had no permanent home, we moved from commune to commune and to begin with I didn't go to school. When I finally did I was condemned by my accent. The Vietnam War was still raging. Americans were not liked. Despite the fact that I had been a flower child in the States - my mother was an anti war campaigner who attended the National Convention in Chicago in 1968 as a democratic delegate in support of the peace candidate Eugene McCarthy - in England we were tarred with the same brush that painted US Hands off on every bridge arch in London.

We had come away from America with only suitcases in our hands. Everything that had formed my childhood landscape was left behind. House, school, toys, possessions, relatives, friends. I developed an eating disorder which dislocated me too, mind from body. Eventually I went on a search to find my father convinced that he was the part of my life that was missing. That search took me, for a while, back to America, where I felt myself to be a stranger once again. I lived for a year with my father and his gay sugar daddy lover who had a wife by convenience, dying of cancer.

I wrote these bizarre events from my past life in a reasonably chronological order. Though often painful it was not hard to give them humour and colour. However I became ever more fearful as the writing neared what seemed to be the current present of my life. I began to feel

that everything was going to lead up to some kind of inevitable judgement. Just how well have I done, how satisfied am I with how things have turned out? How, in any case, does one sum up? How can you make that kind of assessment when you are still living your life, when things are still, as it were, in progress?

Mere mention of the word 'progress' can produce anxiety. Progress implies advancement, things getting better. By implication, wherever I am now in the present should be further on than where I used to be in the past. Not only that but all future activity should continue in a forward movement to improve on any past or present situation. Under the aegis of progress things mustn't stand still or go backwards. People's lives, like businesses, are expected to continually thrive and boom, to make good progress.

But what if mine doesn't? What if things don't get better from here on out, but worse? While writing *Wyoming Trail* I was aware of having to make choices and though I knew this was inevitable it worried me that the choosing of particular memories over others to write about might somehow cement the past, fixing it in a way that might prevent any other version from being remembered. I was sure too that any attempt to open a curtain on the present would feel too close to the bone, too intrusive, a wholly indecent exposure. In any case I was convinced that in the end I would be accused by those who knew me of having remembered events wrongly, of skewing the story unfairly in some way and doubted that my writing would ever survive these criticisms. I did not want to simply leave the telling where it was, unanchored and suspended as it was in a past whose truth I could no longer be certain about, but nor could I see a way of making it any more truthful by advancing it toward the present.

Moreover I was afraid that, after having written parts of it, my life might not manage to progress any more at all. Would I, by my writing, have obliterated the possibility for any change, development or improvement? Will I have sentenced myself to staying still forever, and prevented myself from ever moving on in the future? Or, worse still, might I actually have 'ended my life' by writing my autobiography as Philippe LeJeune has suggested earlier in his keynote address to this Conference and elsewhere in his writing on the subject (LeJeune, 2001).

Writers are well placed to know the power of writing, how magical it can be. The way writing works to conjure, cast spells and bring what is gone, what is dead, back to life. I was worried it might also do the opposite, arrest future development, kill off and destroy rather than engender

possibility. If, by writing my past I was saying effectively, ‘this is the way things were’. Might that not also suggest that wherever I leave that writing off is making the statement, ‘this is at last how things are’? I did not want to do that, to seal the envelope on my past and by doing so, maybe also on my future.

But I had started so I thought I must finish. I dutifully wrote a third part to the book that took everything up to the present. I wrote myself recovering from my anorexia, meeting my husband, marrying and having my three children. Not surprisingly, the writing in this part was banal, pedestrian, self-conscious and without literary merit. I was ready to bin the whole lot. Especially as I felt a responsibility to both my families. My family of origin, my mother and my sisters, knew I was writing something about my life and were waiting anxiously on the sidelines dreading the results. I had changed their names and other identifying details and tried to take careful ownership of the narrative perspective to protect the way they might feel implicated in the earlier parts of the narrative but writing the third part in this way made the whole thing feel like a pointless exercise. The family I had made for myself with three young children and a husband had tolerated and supported me for two years while I was doing the writing. I felt I owed them something better than this. ‘It’s awful,’ I said to my husband. ‘What’s wrong with it,’ he asked? ‘It’s too protected, too guarded, too safe,’ I said. ‘As a piece of writing, it’s no use to anyone.’ And so he asked me an obvious but very important question, ‘What are you afraid of?’

Given that everything I had been writing about up to that point had been based on what I could remember and that much of what I was remembering was to do with a life left behind it was not surprising that my answer to his question, when it came, was, ‘I’m afraid of forgetting.’ At that time Alzheimers was a kind of zeitgeist. There were news reports, documentaries. My publisher, Granta, had just published another author, Linda Grant’s, memoir about her mother’s experience of Multi-Infarct Dementia, *Remind Me Again Who I Am?* (Granta 1999).

In writing down what I remembered, in the way I remembered it, I had become afraid that I would lose those memories. I was afraid that the stories I told in the book might supercede the memories or the experiences themselves. I was afraid that by turning the past into a story, the past I knew would no longer be real. I was afraid of losing everything, my memory and all sense of myself.

Then you have to write it, he said. Make it happen. Make it real.

All writing is risk. What we risk when we write is loss. We risk losing what we think is real and trading it in for an imagined state of being. We risk losing our dreams and fantasies to the writing process. What we risk when we put ourselves on the page is the loss of previously held idea of who we are, or were. But this loss may also be a gain. In losing what we thought we previously knew about our selves in the past we may create new possibility for knowing our selves in the future.

Ulrich Neisser concludes in his chapter on Self Narratives in *The Remembering Self* 'To be human ... means also to know that we have a past and a future.' (Neisser, 1994: 16) However he concedes that the past we know about, the story of who we were and what we have done in our lives up till now may change, the accuracy of the detail may alter according to how and when we are doing the remembering and which aspects of our remembering selves we engage in the process. Perhaps our idea of the future, which we know is coming but don't know quite how, can change too. Perhaps we can change the way we anticipate and ultimately experience our own future by daring at particular moments to imagine ourselves in it before we get there.

In answering my husband's question about what I was afraid of, I believe I was touching on something we are all afraid of. A past with no future and a future with no past. I'm afraid of growing old with nothing to look back on and having only a void in front of me. I'm afraid of the kind of incapacitation, mental and physical, that might come with age.

I took my husband's advice and wrote. I aged myself thirty years, gave myself a stroke and located myself inside a physically paralysed body with a mind confused by amnesia and dementia. I wrote to see what happened. With no memory to hold me in the past, I had to be in the present. The future present. This was easier, less frightening and much more enjoyable than I thought it was going to be. In this future scenario, stripped of memory and the ability to move I was left with the essentials of who I am. I was writing myself into a state of being that was a direct expression of my biggest and most real anxiety and fear, deterioration of mind and body and loss of the past. Doing so provided me with the solution I needed to continue my life story, truthfully, and write the third part of my book.

Different voices trailed around me like multicoloured ribbon draped around a maypole. There were pocket-sized flashes here and there where I thought I recognized the person

who was speaking but even those brief moments faded into the wider blue oblivion. The bed I was lying on was high up off the ground. (Moskowitz, 1999: 179)

I have not suffered a stroke and don't have dementia but these occurrences are the real life possibilities, particularly memory loss, which were haunting me as I wrote the past of my life. Our hopes, fears and anxiety about the future define us as much as our real life experiences in the past have done.

I have written about the process I used in my novel in more detail in a paper I presented at a LAPIDUS conference a few years ago (Plunging into the Unknown: The Writing of our Future Selves, C. Moskowitz 2004). In that paper I also detail an exercise which I have developed for use in the teaching I do on the MA in Creative Writing and Personal Development at Sussex University.

What I ask my students to do is this. Think of a time some way ahead of where you are now. It could be a year, it could be five years, it could be ten, twenty or even thirty like I did in Wyoming Trail. A time that you do not yet know about. Place yourself somewhere in that time, it may be some place you are already familiar with or it may be somewhere new you where you can imagine yourself being. Into that time and that place imagine someone who you may have not yet met but who, in that future time and space has become a significant figure in your life. Who are they, how have you come to know them? Why are they important? Write yourself in relation to that other.

The notion of the other is important here as is of course, the concept of time. If the future self that is created is to be real at least in a psychological sense, the other must be present in that construction. In part 3 of Wyoming Trail my significant other person was 'the man with no face' who sat patiently in the corner of the room as I (my future self 'I') lay in a hospital bed trying to make sense of where I was.

Could be days, could be weeks in this place. They don't care. They don't give you a clock or a calendar to measure the time against. I haven't even got a mirror so the only way to tell how old I'm getting is to look at the faces of those around me. Just about everyone has a name now, at least one I can remember. Cynthia, Melanie, Brian, Natalie, Poppy ... except that man in the corner, the one I don't know. He sits there waiting and I can't quite see his face. (Moskowitz 1999: 210)

In psychoanalytic terms the individual knows of its existence primarily in relation to the other. We know that we exist, that we are real, because of

the way we experience ourselves as reflected in the eyes of someone else. In his essay 'Time and the Other' the French philosopher and psychoanalyst, Jean Laplanche says 'The other person is primal in relation to the construction of human subjectivity.' (Laplanche, 1998).

In fleshing out a version of our future self that is real and recognisable we almost certainly have to draw on what we know about ourselves in the past and the present. The future self, I believe is constructed not only out of our fears or preoccupations (as mine was in Wyoming Trail) but also out of our hopes, anticipations and our dreams.

Freud had a concept of the 'dream day' where individuals, unbeknown to their conscious selves, would be picking things out during the day to use as dream material in the night ahead. In relation to life writing the future I like to think of the past and the present as equivalent to Freud's dream day in the way that they provide the reason and the material for imagining the future.

In his chapter on 'Futures' in his book, *On Flirtation*, the psychologist Adam Phillips writes, "People come for psychoanalysis when there is something they cannot forget, something they cannot stop telling themselves ... about their lives. In our repetitions we seem to be staying away from the future, keeping it at bay." (Phillips, 1995: 153)

The psychoanalyst, Christopher Bollas suggests that the future - future selves and states of mind - arise through a process of evocation. That is, by imagining, by consciously constructing our dreams we can bring certain parts of our selves to life. "To be a character," writes Bollas in his book on that subject, "to release one's idiom into lived experience (or, in this case, imagined lived experience) requires a certain risk, as the subject will not know his outcome; indeed, to be a character is to be released into being." (Bollas, 1994: 53)

Life writing the future, that is projecting your self and the events of your life forward in time, relates to Heidegger's notion of 'being in time'. and the Heideggerian concept of temporalisation as an idea of time and existence that stretches between the present, the future and the having-been. These are the three ekstases or, from the Greek, ex-stasis, meaning to be or stand outside oneself, a removal to elsewhere. (Heidegger in Laplanche, 1998: 257)

In his 1988 essay 'Five Kinds of Self Knowledge' one of the aspects of self Neisser describes is the 'extended self'. He says of the extended self it is

‘the self as it was in the past and as we expect it to be in the future, known primarily on the basis of memory.’ (Neisser, 1988) Later he returned to this idea emphasising the temporal nature of that concept, defining the ‘temporally extended self’ as one that can extend in both directions and does not distinguish between the past and the future (Neisser, 1994: 16).

It could be said that the use of metaphor in fiction and poetry enables both a distance and a closeness in the viewing of the subject. In terms of life-writing the future I would say that this is achieved by the process of projection. I have used the word projection at various times in this paper to describe the process of imagining oneself forward in time, thinking ahead. Anticipating what might be to come. However there is another important definition of the term projection which comes out of psychoanalytic thinking, specifically Freud and Klein, which can be applied here too. Projection is the mechanism whereby we manage emotions and experiences that are too difficult or too painful to stay with in the present. By projecting thoughts, remembered experience and feelings outside of ourselves onto another person, time or place we make it possible to see what is most personal to us from another perspective and thereby enable some deeper understanding and management of it.

Life writing the future offers not only a new and exciting approach in the work of life writing but can afford the writer (and the reader) the opportunity to process uncomfortable material and rehearse new ways of being. Writing the future is not a hocus pocus that might simply erase the past and provide an entirely blank slate on which the future can be written. Life writing the future depends on a certain knowing of the past and a consideration of the present. But in so much as the past and the present are real and true in life-writing, so too is the future.

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