

An I for an I - Cheryl Moskowitz

(for the European Science Foundation First-Person Writing, Four Way Reading conference at Birkbeck, University of London, Dec 1 – 3 2011)

In first person writing, just as in psychoanalysis, the subject tries to construct a narrative that comes as close as possible to matching who they think they are or would like to be. But this may prove an impossible task, and a risky one. What we risk when we enter analysis as a patient, or set out as a writer to write about ourselves, is loss. We risk losing what we thought we knew as absolute and true. We let go of fixed identity or any sense of certainty about ourselves and enter instead a hall of mirrors in which every way we turn reveals new possibilities and perspectives.

I'm interested in what happens to the 'I' that is telling the story in both these processes, particularly when the patient or writer reaches a point where certain aspects of their story become impossible to tell. Impossible perhaps because there are things they simply can't remember well enough to give an accurate version of or because there are elements which feel too painful, too exposing, too uncomfortable to reveal, to the analyst or on the page. Either way there will be a gap, circumvention in the telling. In selectively telling the story of who we are, do we risk losing the part of ourselves that we are not able to tell?

Or, consider this another way. During analysis or in the process of writing his or her memoir, the writer or patient comes to a point in the telling where they themselves are unable to tell anymore what is true and what is not. Remembering becomes anecdote. Facts about events and experiences prove to be unverifiable or unrecoverable, truth becomes interchangeable with invention. The whole process of telling begins to feel like a confabulation, an attempt to plaster over the cracks and fill in the gaps. For the patient in analysis this might either mark the end (surely nothing can come of nothing) or the true beginning of the process. This is where the unconscious mind can take free rein, go where it will, and the analyst and patient can work together to follow it. However confused or lost along the way they might feel themselves to be, they are in it together. The clues left by free association and dreaming act as signposts, like the white pebbles Hansel and Gretel leave in the forest, that they hope will lead eventually back to something that can be known, understood and familiar.

The writer however does not have such a hand to hold. The writer is on their own with the writing and can only conjure a partner in the process by imagining their audience, the reaction of those that might eventually witness this telling. The readers. The writer worries, how will the I in the story be judged? The I that even the writer now authoring it no longer feels they can recognize. Self consciousness creeps in, self awareness flees. Is the writer then not in an even more precarious position? The telling of the self becomes a pretense. The I that is doing the telling risks complete abnegation of self, of the person they once thought they were. The attempt to reach back into the abyss of unobtainable memory feels like drowning and to surface from that into a kind of telling that does not feel rooted in anything real, has the effect of a tsunami on the self wrenching away the familiar and leaving only a desolate and scarred landscape behind. There may be pieces or fragments of a known self left, but these, for the most part will be lost somewhere to the ravages of a vast and unfathomable ocean of not knowing.

When I submitted the abstract for this presentation I gave it the title ‘An I for an I’. I had in mind, in choosing this title, something to do with exchange. What must be traded in order to establish and maintain a true sense of self in first person writing?

I wanted to say something, ultimately about preservation of the self. Perhaps in the course of trying to remember what can’t be remembered, or attempting to articulate something about the now that feels too close to the bone to be stated, we are destined to lose a certain sense of ourselves - or will be forced to compromise the truth in some way. But might there be another way, borrowing from psychoanalysis, to replace the unutterable in writing with the stuff of dreams and the imagination and thereby gain an increased sense of self and further self knowledge?

The ‘I for an I’ of my title is clearly a play on the phrase derived from the Old Testament ‘eye for eye, tooth for tooth’ which is the biblical dictate that punishment must always be equal to the crime or offence. Applying this idea to first person autobiographical writing could be interpreted to mean that whatever gets written about the self must be equal to the true self that is writing it. But how?

Thirteen years ago my book *Wyoming Trail* was published. It’s the story of my life but when Granta my publisher asked what classification to give it I opted to

call it a novel rather than autobiography however, neither of those categories felt quite right.

I named the main character (me) Francine and I chose new names for the family members (my mother, my father and my two sisters). In a conscious way I suppose this was an effort to protect the identity of those who were bound to feature in my writing. But in retrospect I can see also that there may have been a more unconscious motive driven by an instinct to get closer to the truth, not further away from it. By taking on the responsibility to name again those who already had names I was doing what an adoptive parent might with a child they decide to commit to, or that we might all have done as a child to mark possession of a special doll or toy. I was making them my own, owning my relationship with them, and in the process revealing much more about the I that was doing the choosing than those who were having new names chosen for them. I was endowing them with my own associations. I was preserving a part of me - that is my specific personal relationship to each one of them - rather than to risk losing it (as I might have done had I used their real names) to the more amorphous sphere of public identity.

I wrote the book in three parts. The first part establishes the landscape of my childhood which is also my inner landscape as a writer and this part ends by having to leave that place, aged 11 to begin a new life in England. My America, told through the eye, through the I, of Francine. The remembering in this part is a bringing together of the parts of my early experience that floated to the top; recurrent dreams, parents arguing, staying with Grandma, younger sister being born, being a stranger in a strange land. Father leaving; for Woodstock, for London, for good. Mother's fury; with me, with the government, with my father.

Initially when setting out to write the book one of the main questions I wanted to pursue was the effect of dislocation on identity. I was aware of having to discover ways early on to adapt to sudden uncertainty and change. Consequently the need to control as much as I could about myself and those surrounding me became a key issue for me growing up, manifesting most significantly as anorexia which I suffered from as a teenager and into early adulthood.

Around the time of writing *Wyoming Trail* I read Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, the story of her family's move from Poland to Canada in the late 1950's. I wanted to do something similar in terms of telling what it had been

like for me to move with my family from America to England. Amongst the questions Hoffman asks in her book is, what happens to language when a person changes country? Though I was not having to learn a new language I identified with Hoffman's sense of foreignness and the need to establish new definitions of things.

I am not a plot driven writer. I am propelled instead by questions. So, even though I knew the story I was telling was my own, I did not know exactly what would happen or where the story would take me. I was driven primarily by the question of identity. How (not why) do we become who we become? And I suppose the sub-question, if there was one, was can we be defined as much by what we imagine as what we know?'

The second part of *Wyoming Trail* explores adolescence and young adulthood and traverses between the real and imagined as the 'I' in the piece, the me, Francine, journeys to find her father Leon who has estranged himself from all family members. She finds him first lodging with a lesbian couple, both mountain climbers, in Redwood City and later being 'Sugar Daddied' by his millionaire homosexual art-dealer lover and wife-by-convenience who is dying of cancer in a mansion house in the fashionable Noe Valley in San Francisco (none so far, of these details are invention). Also in Part 2 we see Francine confessing a sexual indiscretion, sleeping with a young man who her father claims to be in love with. What she confesses is real although the person she confesses it to is invented, a man she mistakes for being a priest on an airplane. We are also with her in this part (with me) exploring the pathology surrounding her eating disorder in two different settings, first with her therapist Mr. Eccles (real) and secondly as an exhibit in a Show and Tell session with medical students and their professors (imagined).

It was interesting for me to discover, as I'm sure many other writers will have done in the course of telling their own stories (hence the saying, truth is stranger than fiction) that my story, however sparingly told in places, contains such an abundance of sensational material that it was hard to quell the scorn of the inner critic, surely you must be exaggerating! But I was not, Exaggeration would have served no purpose in what I was trying to do.

I know, from my own experience as a counselor and as an analysand in my own analysis, that it is common for a patient to express embarrassment or shame about the material they are bringing. And also to feel the need to reassure the therapist that they are not making it up. That the lurid details

which resurface again and again in their story are not exaggerated. However, even if the therapist does not appear to balk at such detail the patient also feels the need to apologise, at least in their heads if not directly to the analyst, for being 'too much'. Maybe all our telling of the past is like that, the way that the remembering of it makes it concertina into a tight wadge of stuff with a circus-like colour and intensity. In his book *On Flirtation* psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes, "People come for psychoanalysis when there is something they cannot forget, something they cannot stop telling themselves..."

In any case, once I had dealt with the child and young adult parts of my life in Parts 1 and 2, I felt somehow that the only honest thing to do would be to bring the story up to date and write about my life in the present. Reluctantly I began Part 3 with this intention. I say reluctantly because it turns out there is no way to be anything but stultifyingly boring and dull about the present. To write openly and honestly in the first person about what is happening in your life now is like throwing open your bedroom curtains for all to look in. That may be all right for reality TV or an art exhibition, time slowed down to an impossibly languid pace like watching Tilda Swinton asleep for hours inside a glass box as part of Cornelia Parker's 'The Maybe', but who could possibly be interested in material which, because of its immediacy, has had no time to be processed and must therefore be censored or edited in ways that only further strip the life from it? Besides, my intention with the writing was always to understand something more about myself, 'How do we become who we become?' not to bare all just for the sake of it.

The third part was not right and I began to lose heart with the project altogether. I had not set out to simply describe my life as it had been up till now, I had not risked the 'I' in telling all this for a simple show and tell session however well written or entertaining. Not only did I want to abandon what I had done already but I wanted to destroy it. Throw it on the fire, like Robert Louis Stevenson did with his first draft of *Jekyll and Hyde*, or like my own anorexic Francine (me) did with written vows and pages from her teenage diary. Burned them and then rubbed her face in the ashes in order to what... claim back or expurgate? In any case to try to remove from view whatever had been written down and said.

In writing down what I could remember, in so far as I had been able to do it, I felt suddenly that I was playing a very dangerous game. With memory. Dislocation. It is hardly surprising that so many important first person writings have come from those who have felt themselves to be uprooted from place,

from culture, from the land of health, through illness. The effect of dislocation is disintegration. Writing can be a way of trying to re-integrate. To make connections with a past you have left behind and the very different present that you now find yourself in. *Things Fall Apart*, as the line from the Yeats poem 'Second Coming' tells us and which is also the title of the seminal novel written in the first person by African writer Chinua Achebe. But far from re-integrating, I was afraid that writing in the 'I' about who I'd been and where I'd come from, would undo me even further.

We had come to England from America with suitcases, nothing more. My home, my friends, my toys, my American identity all left behind. And then my father left too, without a trace. Up until the writing of *Wyoming Trail* I had kept those things alive, my America, my father, in my head. Now I had given them away, not only that but I had told dark secrets about my illness, about my own falling apart, and now I felt myself to be in danger of falling into a void with nothing left to tell.

In psychoanalysis this falling apart, this place of nothingness, this arrival at a cliff edge facing an empty void is, in many ways, a marker of success. That the analysis is proceeding as it should be, that the patient and analyst are both properly there, inside the analysis. That the thicket of awkward silences, endless repetition of material, always told in the same way and always met with the same blankness, has finally been got through. The way is clear for moving on, stepping off that cliff edge together, into the void.

I had spent some time in psychotherapy before starting to write *Wyoming Trail*. Whilst still seeing my therapist I'd written a novella, *The Only Sound There Ever Was*, also told in the first person from the point of view of a therapist who gives up all her patients in order to spend time exclusively with only one; a girl who arrives on her doorstep deaf, blind and unable to speak. It is not hard to see what kind of wishes or fears I was expressing in the writing of that first piece of long fiction and, where I might have placed myself in relation to the 'I' that was narrating. Writing *Wyoming Trail* was different however, and by the time I'd reached my stuck point with Part 3 I'd left therapy and entered into five times a week psychoanalysis.

In response to my despair about Part 3 and the writing of the whole book, which by now a literary agent had taken an interest in, my husband asked me, what are you afraid of? I knew the answer to that immediately. I was afraid of losing those memories, which were all I had left of my place of origin, my

original self. I was afraid that having written what I could remember about my past I would now no longer be able to retrieve any of it. I was afraid of forgetting, of losing my ability to remember.

Then you have to write that, my husband said.

It has often been my advice to my children, to friends, to clients when I was practicing as a counselor, that the best way to explore a fear about the possibility of something happening is by travelling down the road of imagining that thing actually happening, as far as feels possible, in order to understand and deal with the anxiety.

Dreaming was considered by Freud to be the ‘royal road to the unconscious’ and I was very aware, as a patient, of how pleased and excited my analyst became when I brought details from my dreams into the analysis. In the beginning, this had perplexed me. A dream is, after all, made up material. Pure invention, albeit of the unconscious mind. But nonetheless this stuff of invention presents as gold dust to the analyst. There is a strange kind of moralistic imperative involved for the patient bringing a dream into analysis. What is to stop the patient lying about a dream they have had, using their conscious mind to make up a fantastically interesting dream they can then tell in analysis? The telling of a dream must be an honest telling or there is no value in it surely. But the excitement of the analyst in receiving the dreams of the patient encourages more dreaming. The patient *wants* to dream for the analyst (whether consciously or unconsciously). And whatever the patient is capable of imagining enables the analyst to also imagine, on the patient’s behalf. Finally, it becomes clear, that whatever truths are being looked for will be found in the space between these two imaginations.

I began to write Part 3. Fuelled by my fear of forgetting, I travelled down that road as far as I felt possible. I imagined myself into a state of being, some way into the future, at an age I had not yet reached and at a stage of life I had not yet experienced. The ‘I’ that does the telling in Part 3 is the same as the remembering ‘I’ in Parts 1 and Parts 2 but has lost the ability to remember and can no longer recall the parts of her life that have gone before. Nonetheless she is still completely a product of them. Freud’s concept of the ‘dream day’ suggests that we unconsciously pick things out during our waking hours to use as dream material in the night ahead. My future self in Part 3 of Wyoming Trail is my dreamed self, a true imagining. An “I” for an “I”.

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 requires a certain risk, as the subject will not know his outcome; indeed, to be a character is to be released into being.”

In the course of teaching on the Creative Writing and Personal Development MA at Sussex University I developed a writing exercise for the students to encourage them to imagine their own future selves. What I asked the students to do was this: Think of a time some way ahead of where you are now. Place yourself somewhere you can imagine yourself being in that time. And then imagine someone who you have not yet met, but who, in this future time and space, has become a significant figure in your life. Write yourself in relation to that other.

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. As the French psychoanalyst and philosopher Jean Laplanche says, “The other person is primal in relation to the construction of human subjectivity.” There would be no first person writing without the other person to read it.

In the end I believe the self must be defined by the capacity of the imagination, as well as the real lived experiences of the individual. What we lose in remembering we can gain by imagining and neither the remembered or the imagined are any less true and, indeed, just like the “I” in writing, one would be impossible without the other.

Cheryl Moskowitz (December 2011)

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