

FOR MADMEN ONLY? THE AUTHENTIC MEMOIR'S DESTABILIZATION OF
IDENTITY

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Abstract

The memoir has been called creative nonfiction which positions it somewhere in between fiction and nonfiction. This paper considers the memoir's capacity to approach authenticity and the challenges this presents for those writing about mental illness. This paper also clarifies the idiosyncrasies of the genre of memoir, particularly how it stands out against other genres such as the novel and autobiography, and how this generates certain expectations in the readers of memoir. Research is used that investigates the complexity of the genre of memoir as well as the concept of authenticity to make an argument for how authors might approach authenticity in their memoir writing. It is shown that memoir is a genre that allows for an emphasis on subjectivity and creativity rather than historical fact. Authenticity is shown to be a polemical concept, which, in the case of memoir, is directed against the author's previous identity. Marion Milner's autobiographical writing method is used as an example for writing authentic memoir. This thesis argues that the authentic memoir may be used to create a new identity of its own and therefore relies on an author's relinquishing of previous identity, and that through this process of identity destabilization the activity of writing memoir approaches an authenticity of its own. This suggests a contradiction between the writing of an authentic memoir and the common approach of mental illness memoir writers. The apparent ambiguousness regarding the genre of memoir calls for further investigation of what may properly be called memoir.

For Madmen Only? The Authentic Memoir's Destabilization of Identity

Early on in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling considers the suggestion that “authenticity is implicitly a polemical concept” (94). My intentions here are to describe what an authentic memoir looks like, and in the process, make clear that what the authentic memoir polemicizes against is what appears to be its very origin: the author.

This project aims to answer the question of how the memoir is a suitable genre for pursuing authenticity. One must look at what authenticity requires, what this entails for an author with such a goal. To this end, I will clarify what exactly the genre of memoir includes, and how this can be compared, on one side, to that of fictional novel writing, and, on the other side, to that of nonfictional biographical writing. This section will explain what the memoir's strengths and advantages are over those of other genres. Here, I will also show how the memoir finds its place in between that of fiction and nonfiction and the kind of responsibilities for a writer that come along with that.

This project also will approach these questions with an emphasis on how our answers specifically affect those authors who are writing with, or about, mental illness. This will involve addressing the question of why those with mental illness are more likely to fall short of achieving authenticity. What I will also cover in this section is why those with mental illness are further challenged in their attempt to create an authentic memoir as I define it here. What I aim to show in this section is that those with mental illness will be more challenged in the search for authenticity because this may involve an intensification of what may have been previously regarded as a mental health issue. I use Kay Redfield Jamison's memoir, *An Unquiet Mind*, as an example of the tendency of inauthenticity in the memoir.

The criticism of Jamison's inauthenticity prepares the way for a discussion on the concept of authenticity and how it may be applied as a standard of judgment. I will use material from Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* as well as Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author." This section will also explain various ways this term may be applied to the memoir, including an authentic author-author relationship and an authentic memoir in itself, so that it may be clarified where authenticity is to lie in order for one's memoir to be considered authentic.

I will then use Marion Milner's memoir, *Eternity's Sunrise*, as exemplary of authenticity in memoir. As Milner's works make clear, the process of writing an authentic memoir serves as a destabilizing process, a process in which the author is to overcome something in the present encounter with their own memory of things. Here I compare Milner's process and work to the inauthenticity in many mental health memoirs by returning to Jamison's, *An Unquiet Mind*. Unlike Milner, Jamison does not confront the implications of her own reflection in order to produce what I define here as authentic memoir: here again, a work about the self that aims to destabilize and rebuild that self as separate from the everyday persona of the author. The memoir's capacity to allow for this self-creative process, in which the reader is allowed to witness the overcoming of authorial identity, is what sets it apart from other genres.

Memoir Genre

The memoir is a complex genre producing a complex set of truths. As falling somewhere in between fiction and nonfiction, it has been called creative nonfiction. Chris Mays, in "'Can't Make This Stuff Up': Complexity, Facts, and Creative Nonfiction," brings our attention to the complexity of such a genre, and what this means regarding the standard of

truth we judge it by. For Mays, it is important to note that facts are created by the genre that they come out of (321). We may be drawn to say that what happens in someone's memoir is not an objective truth, but if we do not take into account the genre they are writing from, which may be one that creates different kinds of truths, then we miss the unique and complex aspects that writing in such a genre as memoir entails.

What we are brought to ask is what exactly does such a genre call for, does such a genre allow for, does such a genre demand? For me, these questions stemmed out of an initial disappointment with particular memoirs I encountered, Redfield's *An Unquiet Mind* being one of them. This disappointment led me to wonder what I really expected from such a genre. Why did I seem to hold such high expectations for this genre and were these expectations justified? Mays notes how a genre provides guidance to its reader on what to expect and how to interpret the content it provides (324), but what happens when an author sets up a reader for certain facts that they fail to provide?

Simon Stern, in "*Sentimental Frauds*," notes an expectation of "emotional sincerity" that such a genre as the memoir may be said to illicit and how, upon the failure to exhibit such sincerity, a reader may be left feeling "cheated" (Stern 95). This runs parallel to Mays' mention of the "ethical requirements" that such a genre as nonfiction may impose and how the inability to fulfill such requirements takes advantage of the genre at the expense of depriving its readers from a genuine reading experience (Mays 330). This can be said to undermine the genre as well, for in particular memoirs that overemphasize either the fictional aspect or the nonfictional aspect we see a failure to do what memoir best allows us to do: expose truth based on a creative blurring of these lines. This failure runs the risk of watering down such an idiosyncratic genre. What we

then see are different expectations from readers as well as unclear requirements on the part of future authors which may, as Marjorie Worthington notes in her “Fiction in the ‘Post-Truth’ Era: The Ironic Effects of Autofiction,” have the effect of nonfiction appearing to be a “shortcut to depth and poignancy” (474), which would relinquish authors from the responsibility of quality writing (474).

This idea that the memoir sets up an expectation of emotional sincerity speaks to the kind of truth we might expect to see from it. David Berner in his article, “Memoir or Novel—Should You Fictionalize Your Life?,” directly advises such a memoirist to “[d]ig for the emotional facts,” as opposed to preoccupying oneself with certain actual details of one’s past experience (Berner n.p.). This resonates as well with Mimi Schwartz’s advice that she gives in “Memoir? Fiction? Where’s the Line?”: “go for emotional truth, that’s what matters” (n.p.). Both Berner and Schwartz point out that the memoir is not about an objective historical kind of truth. This may better help us to realize what kind of truth such a genre sets its reader up for, as well as what kind of truth a writer in such a genre is hoping to share.

Here, we see the memoir diverge from the genre of autobiography, which is more restricted to sticking to the facts and tries to tell the complete history of person, as claimed by Worthington when she distinguishes the memoir from the autobiography by saying, “an autobiography purports to tell *the* story of an entire life, while a memoir tells *a* story—a personal and highly specific story—about a particular episode or aspect of a life” [italics in original] (476). The personal truth that may be expected to be so prevalent within the genre of memoir does not make as glamorous of an appearance in the telling of “*the* story of an entire life” (Worthington 476). This, as Worthington calls it, “single

perspective on a single event” (476) allows the memoir to distance itself from the objective telling of historical facts.

However, while the memoir genre as a whole implies this element of subjectivity, which some may label as representative of its fictional aspect, authors of memoir do not always take full responsibility for, or embrace, this aspect of the genre. I would like to show that taking responsibility for this element is imperative to fulfilling the memoir’s function. Stern mentions the disagreement between sentimental novelists of the 18th century regarding how direct to be with their readers in confronting the fictionality of their works (95). While one side of the disagreement claimed “effects would be diminished if readers were reminded too directly it was all made up” (Stern 95), the other side preferred to “confront the novel’s fictionality directly and to characterize the genre’s mission” (Stern 95). Mays strikes a similar chord when he, speaking directly of memoir authors, says, “while many acknowledge subjectivity, few authors in the genre embrace it” (321). As opposed to embracing subjectivity, the superficial acknowledgement of subjectivity, as Mays would put it, or indirect confrontation of fictionality, as Stern would say, leaves the “genre’s mission” (Stern 95) “beneath the surface of [. . .] murky waters” (Mays 321). In other words, authors fail to take advantage of the full capacity of the genre of memoir when such a significant aspect of it, namely, the creative artistry of subjectivity, is not directly confronted and embraced.

This still demands a clarification of the memoir’s “full capacity” which will highlight for us a way in which the memoir differs from fiction. Berner advises those who are intimidated by the “personal” (n.p.), “raw” (n.p.), “close to the bone” (n.p.) qualities of memoir to take the route of autobiographical fiction (n.p.), which is a genre that is

based on real events but is published as fiction, which may allow an author to change or add certain parts to the story. What are the effects of this? Stern notes the advantage sentimental novelists, which can be closely compared to autobiographical fiction writers, gained by employing this strategy when he speaks of the distance left in between the authors and their characters (91). He describes the sentimental novelists as “hesitant to align themselves wholeheartedly with their characters” (Stern 91), which would highlight their inability to reduce their personal emotional stance down to the “emotional force” (91) of a character, or series of narrated events (92). The advice to take up autobiographical fiction given this fear of closing the distance points out that a distance of this kind is more easily accepted by a reader in the genre of fiction. We don’t need to see the author fully align themselves with their creation for it to hold weight. This distance leaves room for readers to employ their own interpretations, to take their own stance within the narrative. The author, on the other hand, takes a rather back seat, and has his own identity protected, in a sense, by this distance.

This distanced protection can also be varied with control by an author of fiction. Worthington notes how the pull towards the genre of autofiction, or autobiographical fiction, may indicate an author’s attempt to “control the construction of his authorial image” (479). This control may be seen as equivalent to the distance between an authorial image and the image of a text. Considering that the genre of autobiographical fiction approaches nonfiction but still remains within the bounds of fiction, an author may participate in the construction of his own (fictitious) image while never being responsible to lay full claim to it. By lay full claim to it, I mean align him or herself with the image portrayed by the text. The reluctance of an author to lay full claim to the image of a text

is exemplified in the case of Ellis Bret Easton regarding his *American Psycho*, in which case Easton attempts to relinquish the blame for having written it, for the responsibility for the events that unfold in his novel, a relinquishing that is allowed only in the genre of fiction (Worthington 480). As long as we remain within the genre of fiction, we see a modest approach on the author's part towards representing themselves in the text; an acknowledgement, beforehand, of the irreconcilability between the author and the created narrative.

As noted by Worthington, this inability to reconcile the character with the author is something confronted by both author and reader in the work of fiction (479). Stern touches on this as well when he notes *The Man of Feelings's* preface in which the author, Henry Mackenzie, indirectly notes the irreducibility between him and his character (92). For Mackenzie, this gave him the liberty and freedom to write about the events of the novel without making any claims about himself (Stern 92).

With the memoir, on the other hand, we see a bold attempt to overcome such irreconcilability and irreducibility. The author must do away with modesty and set out to *recreate* themselves and their experience for the reader. The difference here is a closing of said distance. We wonder how this might be possible, and it may be that it is not possible as conventionally understood. I used the term *recreate* above, but perhaps this is precisely how an author would run into problems in closing this distance. Perhaps, in order to close this distance, to overcome irreconcilability and irreducibility, our author mustn't set out to *recreate*, but to *create*. The shift from fiction to nonfiction involves the move towards authenticity of author identity within the text, not by successfully *recreating* oneself as a character in the text, but by taking responsibility for, or owning as

part of your identity, the resulting identity from the newly created narrative, one that may not be said to be under one's full control.

Paul Eakin in his "What are We Reading when We Read Autobiography?" comes to describe "the narrative activity in and of autobiography [as] an identity activity" (130). He borrows from neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's account of self that "posits that our sense of identity is itself generated *as* and *in* a narrative dimension of consciousness" (Eakin 129). What this reveals to us is that author identity, rather than being reduced to some character contained within one's narrative, is instead presented as the narrative itself. In this light, one's narrative is not seeking to authentically represent some seemingly separate identity but is itself where identity is found and created. Authenticity of one's memoir results not from a narrative being true to the author, but from the author being true to the narrative, of the author taking responsibility for, owning up to, what their narrative reveals about them.

This brings us full circle to Mays' idea that facts emerge out of the genre. In such an idiosyncratic genre such as memoir the facts that emerge can be said to be those of identity. In the same way that Mays states, "that facts do not exist prior to, nor outside of, the genres from which they emerge" (332), or that "[f]acts [. . .] seem to speak for themselves, but this becomes true only *after* they have been produced within a genre" (333), we may say, if identity is not separate from narrative, as Eakin and Damasio argue, that one's subjective truth, or facts of identity, do not exist prior to or outside of the narrative currently being constructed.

In the case of a memoir which claims itself to be nonfiction and to be authentic, an author is left with no choice but to say that they have in fact aligned themselves with

their narrative. While the author of fiction can dismiss the characters and narratives they create as being fictional, can go back to a previous identity they supposedly had before the created narrative, the memoirist must come to identify with the identity created in their narrative and take responsibility for the personal and emotional changes that occur from it. The dismissal in the case of fiction writers is noted by Worthington when she mentions the ability of a fictional character to alter an author's actual life and potentially have personal consequences (480). While the author of fiction may denounce such facts that emerge from their fiction, the memoir author is held responsible for them, or rather, is expected to align with them. Worthington notes a quote from fictional writer Ahron Appelfeld in which he says, "the creation is an independent creature" (481). Appelfeld states this as a disclaimer, as a sort of disowning of what such a creature may in fact say about him. However, the memoir author is expected to reflect on what their independent creation might say about them, to acknowledge that their identity, as something founded in the activity of narrative, turns out itself to be an independent creature as well, yet one that has a causal effect, unlike the dismissed characters or narratives of fiction to allow its facts/truths to have a causal effect. In other words, the memoirist is expected to take responsibility for the identity facts of their narrative by affirming this identity as a successful reconciliation, which may in fact just be a surrendering of the idea that there was anything to reconcile in the first place. This does not mean they successfully represented themselves, but that their narrative created an identity that they are subsequently moving into. The reconciliation is not the text's ability to represent the author or their experience but is the author's ability to allow themselves to be moved by a

narrative identity created in the text. We will later see what all this entails for an author's identity.

Mental Illness Memoirs

To see the effects of memoir upon identity, a good place to look is at those authors with mental illness who set out to write a memoir about their experience. This situation poses a particular set of problems. The tendency in writing about mental illness is that authors show how they overcame barriers between them and society as a way of displaying some previous achievement. They do this rather than moving in the direction of authenticity, which is instead a process of deindividualization. In these cases, the memoir tends to be a direct example of inauthenticity in that it does not result in the creation of an identity within the narrative, but attempts to represent a preconceived idea of self from the outside of the text. This "overcoming of barriers between them and society" may be compared to D. W. Winnicott's use of the concept of "flight to reality" as described by Beau Shaw in his "The Mania of Existence: Klein, Winnicott, and Heidegger's Concept of Inauthenticity." This concept, "flight to reality," is used to explain the counterintuitive case in which we are rendered delusional through a denial of inner fantasy and an affirmation of an acceptable reality (Shaw 58). This produces a delusion in which we come to deny our limitations (Shaw 59).

This denial of our limitations produces, for Shaw, the delusion of "omnipotence" (58), and, in the case of a memoir author writing with or about a mental illness, this delusion is translated into an attempt to represent the identity of a general category of people, usually that of those with the mental illness the memoirist is writing about. The inauthentic memoirist retreats from their own experience into a presentation of a common

identity. The “flight to reality” turns into a flight towards category, away from the individual. This poses several problems.

For one, this may present a problem for the population of individuals the author claims to represent. Mays brings our attention to the ability of nonfiction work, such as memoir, to harm the subjects being written about (331). An author of nonfiction has a responsibility for those they claim to write about, and this raises the question of whether such a diagnosis of a mental illness gives someone the right to represent a similarly diagnosed group of individuals. Furthermore, in a work such as the memoir, which can be said to target an individual’s experience, we do not expect a representation of a common identity but rather an exploration into one’s own narrative construction.

My objection to an author’s tendency to write in the name of the general label of mental illness can be clarified when one looks at Kay Redfield Jamison’s work on manic-depressive, or bipolar disorder. In her memoir, *An Unquiet Mind*, we see loads of information presented on the general characteristics of bipolar disorder as well as overly-didactic advice towards the methods of handling this disorder, such as the necessity of medications. To be fair, Jamison presents much valuable information that can be helpful to the public, and this can be expected as she approaches her illness as well as her memoir project from a clinical psychologist’s point of view, providing objective explanations for her experience.

However, Jamison’s approach runs against the memoir genre’s embracement of subjectivity and/or fictionality in that it seeks to appeal to objective facts as explanatory of one’s subjective experience, another consequence of the delusion of omnipotence. While a memoir may include factual events and information, it does not depend on such

objective material but is really about the individual's subjective experience. The experience as written about within narrative may literally speak for itself if we accede to narrative as an identity activity. It does not need to be explained by appeal to the objective facts or to communal interpretations. Jamison's approach towards writing her "memoir" neglects this valuable aspect of the genre, namely, its ability to develop one's own identity as separate from that of the general public identity one has been assigned. In neglecting this aspect, Jamison leaves a reader feeling cheated.

Writing from the psychiatric perspective, Jamison neglects the aspects of her individual experience in exchange for the professional perspective. The community from which she writes comes to overshadow her personal experience. Here we see another point of Mays' arise. He mentions the inescapable and profound effects of community discourse on the expectations and interpretations of writing in a genre (330). This is critical here for the discourse of mental health as perpetuated by the psychiatric power structure has crucial effects, crucial *repressive* effects, on the writing of personal memoirs from within mental illness. Jamison's text may be a perfect example of such repressive effects. Jamison, in coming from the perspective of psychiatry, has the intention of educating the public and perhaps others with bipolar disorder on how to welcome themselves back to normalcy, yet this intention that is brought to her project prevents an honest exploration of her own past experience and what this past experience may come to mean for her upon reflection.

Jamison, in her appeal to objectivity and the return to normalcy can be said to be in the very business of "mak[ing] a commodious universe, stretch[ing] words out beyond our private universe" (Mays 337); however, Mays would reply to such activity by noting,

“that the very process of creating our own narrative inhibits the creation of that commodious universe” (337). This brings to mind another point made early on by Hugh Haughton in his “The Milner Experiment: Psychoanalysis and The Diary,” where he mentions the taboo quality of self-analysis from the point of view of psychoanalysis (349). We see an absence of self-analysis in Jamison’s text, a dismissal of the exploration of subjectivity, and in its place, an appeal to the objective characterization of the bipolar disorder from the point of view of psychiatry. The consequences of such an appeal to objectivity are a reader let down by the lack of individual personality creation. Instead, this welcoming back to a common normalcy is the very inauthenticity that memoir, as a genre, combats. We can say that Jamison, rather than engaging in an authentic memoir, writes an anti-memoir.

It is not absurd to think that those who have been diagnosed and labeled as mentally ill will have a harder time confronting and overcoming the draw to “flee to reality,” or to flee to “normalcy,” which Shaw notes as the paradox of the inauthentic manic: that one is normal and delusional at the same time (59). One is capable of appearing normal to others, while in fact residing within an inauthentic space of mania, a mania which results from neglecting one’s own personal limited experience.

We see a turning away from the “problematic fantasy” (Shaw 59) of inner authenticity for the sake of an “acceptable reality” (59) that results in a pragmatic social conformity. This protects from the potential consequences of displaying authenticity (one displays authentic memoir writing by allowing identity to construct itself from within the narrative, as opposed to from without), such as the jeopardizing of one’s social image, and in the case of those with mental illness, harsher social consequences, such as the

seizing of personal freedoms or even relapse. The issue for those with mental illness is that they have been introduced to a self-doubt that now may come to speak over the way their experience has appeared for them. They may be blocked off from writing a narrative in which they could create themselves because the narrative would not be their own. Furthermore, if they were to find the ability to create their own narrative, this would need to confront and overcome the pressures that their label imposes on them to mistrust such an individual narrative. These pressures push one toward inauthenticity, which may express itself as educating the public on their specific mental illness, empowering others with the mental illness to overcome or approach normalcy, justifying or dismissing a past experience, and self-congratulations.

Does this mean we need a criticism of social institutions for the sake of authenticity? Who is to blame for the lack of authenticity within mental illness memoirs? At first thought, we may be drawn to blame the mental health community and discourse for suppressing the authenticity of those with mental illness. However, while I do not disclaim that problems may in fact be arising due to such institutions, that is not my focus here. I am focusing on the author's authentic interaction with themselves and the genre. Following from this, instead of blaming the psychiatric institution for suppressing authenticity, I instead aim to highlight the rather essential role that such a repression plays in challenging and *allowing* our memoirist to accomplish the authenticity endeavor. To repeat, we must recognize the essential role of such repressive aspects as community discourse, societal expectations, psychiatric institutions, and even parts of our psyche like the super-ego, which Lionel Trilling brings attention to in his *Sincerity and Authenticity*. This brings us to the complexity of such a concept as authenticity.

Authenticity

This central role of the repressive elements of society is highlighted by Trilling through an argument made by Marcuse in his *Eros and Civilization*: that without this very repression, individuals would not be brought to sublimate the generic life drives and impulses into individual expressions of such drives and impulses (Trilling 164). In other words, without the pressure to conform, there would be no pressure to individualize one's self, there would be no individuality. What we are left with then, is an authenticity that only comes about through the influence that imposes its very opposite. Authenticity does not stand on its own completely independent of inauthenticity, but rather turns out to be a derivative of the subjected pressures of inauthenticity.

What are these sources of inauthenticity? In the case of the individual within society, Trilling references Freud's theory of the psyche in describing how these pressures towards inauthenticity are engendered by our superego, which inflates the pragmatic expectations and pressures of society into impractical demands for its own power over the individual (151). Then, in the case of the authentic memoir in which we have a narrative identity being constructed from within the narrative itself, where does the inauthentic pressure come from? One answer could be from within the author. In relation to the memoir, the author stands in place of the superego, or to reference another point of Trilling's, stands in place of an authoritative past (137). While we may typically be drawn to say that it is the author's identity, or past, that authenticates the narrative, what I have aimed to clarify is that, on the contrary, the author's identity is that force that imposes inauthenticity on the narrative and must be overcome if the memoir is to

approach authenticity. The memoir itself must overcome the authorial pressure to conform to its author, and instead to create its own “identity activity” (Eakin 130).

To return to Marcuse’s point, the imposition of inauthenticity plays an essential role, suggesting that we cannot start with authenticity but that it must be achieved through a kind of overcoming of inauthentic imposition. This reflects another point Trilling makes about writing history in which he says that to reduce it to simplicity, in the form of a story, would be to betray it, and instead that the only way to write it is by “taking a bit of the past to pieces before the reader’s eyes and putting it together again” (136). Borrowing from Cohn’s *The Distinction of Fiction*, Worthington notes the poststructuralist ideas regarding “the notion that ‘the Truth’ is not out there” (476) and how this applies to history. For Worthington, “the mere selection, arrangement, and presentation of facts is a technique belonging to the field of fiction” (482). In an age where the past has been inauthenticated in this way, we do not merely do away with it, but instead use it as the necessary ground from which we spring an authentic *way of doing* history.

History is not the only thing that is subject to such a revision. Roland Barthes in his “The Death of the Author” thinks that we have also reached an age in which the author has lost authority and is dying. In parallel with the death of the past, Barthes states, “The author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book,” proposing on “the contrary, the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now” (4).

When we look back at the authentic memoir, we have an author who writes, but who cannot posit themselves as the origin of authenticity. What we are left with is, according to Barthes, “no other origin than language itself, that is, the very thing which ceaselessly questions any origin” (4).

However, keeping Marcuse in mind, we cannot entirely do away with the repressive role of an inauthentic origin. The memoir, just like modern history, becomes authentic in the success of overcoming the author that claims to be its origin. Within the authentic memoir, we see authors presenting themselves before tearing themselves to pieces and allowing themselves to be put back together within the narrative. The authentic memoir cannot start without an inauthentic authoritative author of the past but must start there and work towards modifying this element of the equation before the reader’s eyes. Just as history becomes the authentic modification of inauthentic past, so too does self-writing become the authentic modification of its inauthentic origin; and so it is not author identity that is rendered authentic within the memoir, but rather the memoir is authentic at the cost of author identity.

Peter Heehs in his “Writing the Self: Diaries, Memoirs, and the History of the Self,” covers Barthes in his chapter titled, “The Death of The Subject.” Heehs touches on Barthes’ exploration of “the form the memoir must take in the age of the death of the self” through Barthes’ own attempt at writing memoir (418). Barthes’ conclusion on writing about the self is that it is a kind of suicide (Heehs 417). Consider the suicide being directed at the social ego-image that Trilling speaks of. The authentic writing of memoir births narrative identity along with killing this ego; an endeavor that leads, as

Trilling concludes, directly and appropriately into what appears to be madness (168), a madness that “destroys itself by its own choice” (170).

What do we get out of this suicide? In the same way that history presents us with a liberated present at the cost of mutilating the past (Trilling 136), the authentic memoir gives us a narrative identity that liberates itself from its necessarily suicidal author.

Barthes proposes that out of this suicide we get the birth of the reader (Barthes 6).

However, this is not just any reader, but a reader who serves as the creator of the text, one who is not merely a “consumer but a producer of the text” (Heehs 219). In the same way that the historian becomes an active reader of the past by tearing it apart and putting it back together, the memoirist commits an act of identity suicide and leaves the bits to be picked up and reconstructed by the narrative itself, which, according to Barthes, is itself left incomplete until finally encountered by the active reader. Barthes writes, “the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination” (6).

Barthes calls for a new generation of readers and writers, particularly readers that provide the unity to necessarily incomplete written texts. But what do we get when the author engages in practices such as self-analysis within the text, such as what can be said to occur in most memoirs? In these cases, we have an author who is themselves their own reader. These sorts of texts seem to provide us with an exception to the always incomplete text. But do they? This is explored in Marion Milner’s writing strategy in her experimental diaries, which Hugh Haughton discusses in “The Milner Experiment: Psychoanalysis and The Diary.” Milner’s meta-writing method can give us a peek into what occurs in such cases, and through this we may perhaps gain a better understanding of what an authentic memoir looks like.

The Milner Case: Authentic?

To begin with Milner's "specialist diaries" (Haughton 351), I first describe the general details of this unique autobiographical undertaking of Milner's. In the published autobiographical works of Marion Milner, she presents to us diary entries that she has kept and uses to explore herself. She presents us with her past, while also giving present commentary on what this may have come to mean for her in the present. Haughton points out that what is produced is "not autobiographical documents so much as commentaries on autobiographical documents" (350). Haughton also notes that Milner's books do not record the mere "bread and butter currency of the quotidian" which might make them out to be useful historical documents (351), but that she instead captures and follows the "exceptional and the marginal" of her own personal past (351). Going beyond the historical serves shows how her work differs from autobiography. This reflects what Haughton notes as Milner's effort to do more than just write a diary, but to experiment with the task of managing one's life. This task leads to a style of self-exploration using a method of automatic thinking through one's own personal memories. This self-exploration is in opposition to the otherwise free and meaningless associations of everyday facts (353). In other words, Milner is not recounting historical events, but is rather jumping across her memories as they arise for her and seeing what she can gain out of such examinations.

Milner's method of past exploration is an example of what occurs when someone does not engage in the "flight to reality" as Winnicott's existential manic does, or as an example of someone who escapes what Barthes' refers to as the "snare of realism"—something that writers are too often drawn into as this produces a misleading "reality

effect” (Heehs 216). Milner’s projects appear more as artistic experiments of self-portraiture, rather than a self-portraiture through an account of the past. In them we see the past, as represented by diary entries, serving only to “provide the focal point for innumerable over-writings and re-interpretations” (Haughton 356-7) or as the “launch pad for the metamorphosis of the moment into an object in the psychic afterlife” (Haughton 357). There the self may be explored, unpacked, interpreted. This artistic experiment, far from giving us an objective account of historical events, instead “confront[s] the nature of [the] experiment and link[s] it with the displacement of the stable personality” (Haughton 356). Milner’s project shows us that when we confront the inherently artistic nature of representing ourselves, we cannot use a stable narrative of the past, but are forced into a process of re-interpretation, of destabilization.

If we return to Barthes’ point regarding an active reader, we can see that Milner here is playing the role of active reader and writer for her own past. She becomes an active reader of her own texts, her older diary entries, her own memory. She becomes a re-interpreter of herself as author. She does not take the information at face value or constrain its value to that of historical accuracy, but uses these “marginal and exceptional” memories, which she calls “beads” (Heehs 201), as a means to “make contact with an inner something” (Heehs 201). For Milner, this coming into contact with an inner something was about getting to know her body, and from these writing practices that she engaged in, the body, as some otherly guiding force, appears to speak to her through what she calls the “answering activity” (Heehs 200). Milner describes this “answering activity” as “not one’s self, in the ordinary sense of the word self” (Heehs 200).

Milner does not entirely know what to make of the “answering activity,” but, given what we have seen about the complexity of narrative identity, Milner’s “answering activity” can be compared to an identity that is being enacted from within her text, from within what Eakins would call her engagement in an “identity activity” (130). What is important to keep in mind about this otherly identity, which results from practices including automatic writing, memory analysis, and exercises in body mindfulness, is that she does not identify with it. This is reminiscent of Worthington’s mention of fictional authors’ independent creatures that their created characters seemed to turn into, except in Milner’s case she is not denying the reality of this other inner (non)self, but sees it as providing useful information to her. This useful information served, according to Milner, as a guiding force that helped her escape what she referred to as the imprisoning island of her self-conscious automatic self (Heehs 199). Milner’s “automatic self” was a part of herself that she associated with the embarrassing, unconscious “chimeras and monsters” that an undeliberate idle mind would produce (Heehs 199).

The automatic self may be thought of as a self that came before, or from outside of, the narrative, while the narrative identity created through narrative can be thought to give rise to something such as the “answering activity” (Heehs 200). This narrative identity would in fact be this very automatic self that had been subject to personal observation and narration. The automatic self may be likened to an inauthentic self that through rendering explicit comes to serve, for Milner, as a guiding integral force, which may appear to be other to the author. Language, or the text, guides the author out of themselves. Milner’s diaries, which she thought to be putting her into contact with an inner other, may in another sense be the very creation of an outer other, namely the text’s

identity, which she could use to move out of her previous identity, to dethrone the past authority.

Milner's idea that she was connecting with her body may also be her disconnecting with the literal content of her mind, a mind that attempts to inauthentically represent itself as a stable identity. The "connecting to body" may be another way of conceptualizing the movement towards an unknown textual non-self, or a sort of unconscious that the text renders explicit, but an unconscious not uncovered, but created in the text's narrative. Rather than the author uncovering parts of themselves, we have a text that accidentally creates new selves which may draw an author out of themselves if approached in the spirit of authentic memoir. So, we do not see an author becoming whole, but an author becoming different, going through a shift despite their past.

We can refer back to Trilling and consider this process under the heading of madness. Just as he describes, this madness is the very process by which Milner may be said to come to individualize herself, as well as a process she, being a psychoanalyst herself, places under the label of managing her life. If we accede to placing what Milner is doing under the heading of madness, then this process would be reminiscent of R.D. Laing's claim that we see Trilling reference in his book: "all psychosis is to be thought of as a process of therapy, not in itself a disease but an effort to cure a disease" (170).

In Milner's case, her "disease" may be thought of as that inauthentic "ego-image, the image that has been developed in the service of social survival" (Milner 112), the image that is torn to pieces by an over-suppressed creative urge (Milner 112). Milner notes, "the most important thing seems to be not to rush to self-justification in defense of a noble self-image" (167)—something that is seen in an inauthentic memoir. Haughton

connects this self-image resistance to a resistance of history, a resistance of “ordinary biographical information” and links it instead with an affirmation of a redemptive commentary (361). The structure of Milner’s diaries gives us an example of what is meant by Haughton’s description. Milner’s describes her work as a collage (189), Haughton an “integrative mosaic” (360) and “palimpsest” (361). This is exhibited by Milner’s taking bits of her past, including her past diary entries, and literally “tearing [and] cutting” (Milner 189), “disintegrating” (Haughton 361), and rearranging until a new, unique, “intriguing pattern emerged” (Milner 189).

Milner’s project can be said to provide us with an example of what Laing may mean when he says something like, “‘true sanity’ entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self completely adjusted to our alienated reality” (170). Milner gives us an ideal demonstration of how one might descend out of one’s self and give birth to a process of authentic self-writing, producing an identity that may be considered other from the perspective of the initial author(ity), a constantly shifting identity that may not even be said to belong to our author but to the text itself. This is really a lack of stabilization, and in consequence a lack of identity.

Returning Remarks

To touch back with Barthes, who said that unity is only completed in the destination of a text, or, the reader, what would we like to say about a text, like Milner’s diaries, whose reader is its very own author? Does the text find its unity then in the author? No. For as Barthes notes about our destined reader, they can “no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology” (6). Our reader, even in the case that it is, or *was*, the author, is someone new and different now. To use Barthes’

terms, they have just been “birthed” as a reader, and this happens despite our author. In order for this integration of a new reader, the author’s will and intention will be forgotten about. Milner, as reader of her own diaries, does not restrain herself to the past, but disintegrates and reintegrates into a new present.

Now we return to those with mental illness who are writing, and we ask ourselves, how are they to approach this task of writing a memoir? I argue that, by following the example of Marion Milner, who provides us with a splendid example of a person descending into her own individual “madness,” that those with mental illness may authentically take on the project of memoir. The memoir provides an opportunity to examine, reflect, and disintegrate one’s own past (self) and integrate in its place a new unity birthed out of the text that is to be adopted by the (dead) author, who is the de-historicized and depersonalized reader of their very own disintegrated past.

What presents itself as a special challenge for those with mental illness is engaging in a process that looks like psychosis from an outside perspective that perhaps even is psychosis by some standards. But this must be done for the sake of a destabilizing an inauthentic identity that may be based on a label or category of people and creating a new individual one. A further challenge is that this involves self-analysis, a practice that is frowned upon by traditional psychoanalysis, frowned upon by the powers which themselves impose inauthenticity upon a repressed individual. This ‘frowning upon’ is perhaps with good reason too, as one who descends into a psychosis of self-analysis has no guarantee of making it out on the other side as a “truly sane” individual (Laing’s individual). Memoir writers such as Marya Hornbacher, author of *Wasted*, and Lori Schiller, author of *The Quiet Room*, who fell into relapse either during or after the writing

of their memoirs demonstrate this lack of guarantee. This is what raises the stakes for those who engage in authentic memoir as well as the expectations of readers who pick up a memoir. This risk is what makes the memoir endeavor particularly challenging.

There are no clear and concrete answers as to how one might take on this endeavor. This analysis shows that the work of memoir is rather complex, much more complex, than an autobiographical account of one's past. Instead, the authentic memoir is a polemic against one's past, giving it the very mark of authenticity that Trilling remarks on (94). The endeavor of writing a memoir comes to take on the appearance of an intense artistic enterprise, borderlining it with works of fiction and showing us where it gets its creative aspect. Yet, the project of memoir remains nonfiction in that it bases itself off of a truly experienced past and provides its author with an identity (of nonidentity) that becomes indistinguishable from their own moving forward with the writing. Whereas in the work of fiction, an author may relinquish responsibility for the views, interpretations, or events that take place, in the memoir the author closes the distance between this otherly narrative identity and themselves.

In this essay I have argued that in the memoir, the author becomes the created identity, becomes the depersonalized reader who reinterprets and provides a new unity to the deauthorized given. It is this movement, this shift, reinterpretation, differentiation, from old to new that we get to witness in the memoir that sets it apart from other genres. This is a movement of the author against themselves, while accidentally finding themselves for an other non-self. David Malouf is quoted by Anneli Knight in her "Truth in Fiction" saying, "the only thing that's going to be interesting in the book is what you don't yet know" (58). When we translate this to the genre of memoir we may say that the only

thing that will be of interest in one's memoir is the identity that one has not yet become; the interpretation or creation of a past, that one has yet to experience; the identity that one is just now becoming, the past that one is just now experiencing.

The memoir takes on a romantic quality. In creating and becoming the other identity of one's own narrative, writing a memoir becomes a process similar to that romantic process described by Anneli Knight in her "Truth in Fiction," as being accidental, as involving a "letting go of conscious and controlled thought" (58), in which one's own present experience of the past/text "takes on a life of [its] own" (58). This "liberation of the imagination" (Knight 58), as the creative element of memoir, can be said to be equivalent to the attitude of an impersonal reader without a history, the attitude that a writer comes to have towards their own work in memoir. Out of this attitude an authentic narrative identity is born.

This all points back to a critique of memoir as it tends to be used by those with mental illness: that they are using memoir as a tool for identity stabilization. On the contrary, if what we are seeking is authenticity, memoir is a unique genre that is best suited for the task of individualization necessary for this authenticity, and this involves a destabilization of identity. When those with mental illness use the memoir as a tool for representing an overcoming of their illness, what is often observed by the reader is an objective account of their historical past, a description of identity as prescribed by a label, a "flight to reality" in which an author contradicts what they claim to be doing, thus rendering it inauthentic.

Memoirs such as these end up suppressing the creative aspect of memoir and slip themselves into an inauthentic activity in which one merely represents a self that has been

given to them, or brought by them, from outside the narrative, whether this be from the past or from external information. The very consequences and advantages of writing a memoir are suppressed. The memoir is prevented from taking on a life of its own, from becoming its own independent creature, from becoming itself. The memoir is used as a social tool in service of the social ego, and what we are left with is a lack of individualization, stagnancy, a reign of sameness; nothing new emerges. What are we then writing for? What are we then reading for?

Narrative identity is itself the accidental and implicit arising of an otherwise suppressed creativity, and through the movement towards this an author can approach authenticity. A suppression of narrative identity turns into the equivalent of saying no to the power of memoir. A holding fast to objective facts and memory of the external past is the equivalent of saying no to the memoir. We say no to the creation and integration of novelty, and by doing so we say no to the process of unbinding ourselves from an inauthentic social identity.

Conclusion

The memoir has been shown to have a heavy aspect of creativity involved in it. This allows it to distance itself from strictly nonfictional autobiography. On the other hand, it differs from the novel in that an author leaves no distance between themselves and their creation. This poses a challenge for an author to overcome their role as an authority and move with and into the narrative.

Those with mental illness face specific challenges in confronting the enterprise of memoir. If we specifically look at those who are writing about their ability to overcome a particular mental illness, then we often see the power of memoir especially neglected. In

such cases, an author turns the memoir into a social tool while asserting themselves and their past as an authority, something we have seen to be old fashioned and inauthentic. My main argument rests here, in that mental illness memoirs especially challenge their authors by requiring they return into a cycle of madness that they allegedly have already overcome. The presupposition of having already been there and done that prevents the return into the cycle that is necessary for authentic memoiring. In order to do this, an author must differentiate themselves from their mental illness label as well as from the author's identity as a recovered self, which proposes to have already differentiated from such a label.

For a specific example of effective, authentic memoir, I turned to the experimental "meta-diary" (Haughton 349) strategy of Marion Milner as an example of authentic memoiring and described how this meets the standards of the complex concept of authenticity. I also concluded with a note on how the memoir may come to adopt strategies associated with romantic writing in the hopes of approaching authenticity.

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