

man, the Belgian philosopher and leader of the Belgian resistance, who abandoned analytic philosophy once he studied how lawyers actually argue cases in real life. Rorty often gives the impression that any attempt to persuade beyond simply standing up and reciting one's story or screening one's film or offering a fresh vocabulary smacks of surrender to old-fashioned realism. It is yet another irony of Rorty's irony that this steadfast foe of realism is so insistent that people talk a correct meta-language.

Other openings in the Rortyan front line suggest themselves—his distinct lack of interest in the role of evil in moral responsibility, for instance, and his deafness to the jurisprudential overtones of "justification" that render it, in the public ear, a more realist notion than he thinks. *Truth and Progress*, nonetheless, demonstrates

that Richard Rorty remains not only the master philosophical expositor of his era but a thinker who has raised (some would say lowered) philosophical historiography to an art form. Early on, Rorty shares an anecdote. "When I was a thrusting young academic philosopher," he recalls, "I heard an admired senior colleague, Stuart Hampshire, describe a starstudded international conference on some vast and pretentious topic." Hampshire, who'd attended, had been asked to sum up the results. "No trick at all," Hampshire explained, "for an old syncretist hack like me." At that moment, I realized what I wanted to be when I grew up."

As it turns out, Rorty overachieved. He long ago won a promotion, like it or not, to syncretic downsizer and designated Gestalt-switch-hitter. Just don't look for those tags in the newspaper articles. ■

sents the democratization of the written word, because everyone has a story and, as with the harmonica, anyone can make noise. In these pages, the memoir has been tied to feminism by way of "the radicalism of a woman telling her own story." In *When Memory Speaks* (Knopf) Jill Ker Conway argues that we can no longer surrender our disbelief to works of fiction, and subjects such as psychology, philosophy and culture are lost to us because scholarly discourse is of necessity inaccessible. "Autobiography," Conway writes, "is almost the only kind of writing which tackles such questions in language a nonspecialist can read."

This is not a defensible assertion. Neither is the new memoir to be taken on its own terms. The only encouraging thing about the phenomenon, it seems to me, is the number of people who suspect it. This indicates that we, the reading public, maintain a critical faculty no matter how far the scholars retreat into obscurantism or what we are told by those in control of the media. Given the power and money now dedicated to pure distraction as the corporatization of discourse proceeds, this is no small point. The memoir trend is not just a publishing ruse to get more people to buy more books. It's an intellectual fraud, a cultural fraud, a fraud perpetrated by us, in the end, upon ourselves and our past.

Having committed several big words to print, let me continue with a gaping contradiction—apparent, not real: We have been treated to some very fine memoirs in the past couple of years. Two by accomplished novelists come immediately to mind: Elizabeth Spencer's *Landscapes of the Heart* and James Salter's *Burning the Days* (both Random House). Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (Scribner) is first-rate work. So are books by Mary Karr and James McBride, about which more later.

What do these books have in common? It is a dedication to public discourse in one form or another, or to some object or event outside the self. For Spencer and Salter, as for my friend Herb and his fragment from childhood, memory illuminates work made to stand on its own—and in Spencer's case also the South, a vanished time in an altered place. It is the same with *Angela's Ashes*. The power of McCourt's book lies in its account of an emerging consciousness—a universal experience that is rarely articulated well. It is also about poverty and childhood, survival and laughter, and to an extent the long tragedy of the Irish.

It is curious that some of these books—*Burning the Days*, for instance—are consistently faulted for being impersonal. But that misses the point, and is not the same as

## What Memoir Forgets

PATRICK SMITH

...what do I care about what matters only to me?

—André Malraux, *Anti-Memoirs*

I have an artist friend named Herb, a noted printmaker and painter, who is like a father to me. Once not long ago, he described a game he played while growing up in Providence. Walking home across the city, he would keep to the shabby back alleys. "Sometimes it would take hours, but I'd make it without walking down a street." Herb's was the Providence of the twenties and thirties—even then a city of glass-strewn sidewalks and boarded-up shopfronts. As he summoned it from memory, his 76-year-old features yielded to an impish grin.

It's a slight reminiscence. But when cast in the context of Herb's work, I find it deeply suggestive. Herb's art graces many fine collections. He works in the academic tradition, infusing a pronounced formality of style with exceptional vitality and imagination. His subjects are landscape, certain animals and the female figure. There are no back alleys or broken windows in Herb's prints and pictures—and that is the point. Implicit in that memory is a revelation of the ideal he serves with pencils, plates and brushes. There is something in it, too, about the stealth with which he approaches his public persona and

the artistic tradition he works within.

What if this recollection were written as memoir? Would it count for anything? Not on its own, I wouldn't think. On its own, it is a small story shared over an evening martini. But in relation to the art, it assumes a power beyond the merely private. In relation to the art Herb has, without intending to, quoted to good effect Eliot's famous dictum on poetry: "It is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." The great, unfashionable Eliot, from whom we have nothing to learn, followed that observation with this one: "The emotion of art is impersonal."

Today we are awash in published memoirs of the most emotional and personal kind, Lillian Ross's exhumation of her life with *New Yorker* editor William Shawn the most recent example to have gained notoriety. How shall we read them?

Great claims have been made in behalf of the contemporary memoir these past few publishing seasons. The memoir is "reality-based literature"—a new genre. It repre-

Patrick Smith, a former newspaper correspondent, is the author of *Japan: A Reinterpretation* (Pantheon).

being unrevealing or otherwise short of the mark. Let's go back a few decades, to a writer who thought this through. "I have called this book *Anti-Memoirs*," Malraux wrote at the start of his 1967 work, "because it answers a question which memoirs do not pose and does not answer those which they do." Malraux disliked the memoir as confession; he had no interest in "the pursuit of secrets," as he put it. "What interests me in any man is the human condition," he explained. "And in all of them, certain characteristics which express not so much an individual personality as a particular relationship with the world." This is Salter's interest, too. His subject is not James Salter so much as James Salter's endeavor to become the man who produced novels that contain some of the most exquisitely balanced sentences of anyone now writing in English.

"I had... come to believe that self was not the principal thing," Salter writes, "and I lived that way for a long time." Quoting the writer and diarist Paul Léautaud, Salter also observes: "'Your language is your country,' but memory is also, as well as being a measure, in its imprint, of the value of things." The key word here is "value." It is the way the new memoirs value some things and devalue others that makes the best worthy and the poorest of them undeserving.

Geraldine Brooks wants us to know what a stickler her father was about pressing old bits of soap into new bars. She tells us how hard her parents worked around the house and what a knockout Daddy was in the thirties, some decades before Brooks was born. She does not want us to know why we're supposed to know these things, though—a fair assumption, given that in *Foreign Correspondence* (Anchor), her oddly shaped memoir, she never attaches these details to the story she tells.

Her story is simple but complicated all at once. As a child in Australia Brooks had pen pals; as an adult she searches them out when her reporting for the *Wall Street Journal* brings them into proximity. There was one in the United States, who killed herself; one in France; two—an Arab and a Jew—in Israel. Along the way Brooks makes passing references to local events—the strikes in France in late 1995, the Arab-Israeli impasse. But as literary architecture, this is exceedingly lame. You are left with the feeling that the book is a ploy, a method of cramming Brooks's career as a Foreign Correspondent—always rendered in capitals—into dramatic relief.

Strange as this design may be, there are others like it. The climactic events in *Heretic's Heart* (Beacon), Margot Adler's

intimately told life story, are related by way of the correspondence she carried on with a Spec 4 serving in Vietnam in 1967. *Daughter of the Queen of Sheba* (Houghton Mifflin), by Jacki Lyden, is focused on the author's sadly deranged mother (and named for an incident in which the mother imagined herself as the biblical monarch). It, too, ranges far and wide: from the arid suburbs of postwar Milwaukee to the Middle East, where Lyden has worked as a correspondent.

What do these books share? All are by women. All three women are journalists. All three journalists stand, it is fair to say, somewhere along the liberal-left spectrum. And all three exhibit some degree of preoccupation with family eccentricities, and by way of those make an implicit claim to the authors' singularity. Jill Conway would approve of these books—all of them. Her thesis in *When Memory Speaks* is that by tradition men possess agency; they act. Women are acted upon. And these books, surely, break the mold.

One might make something of these similarities—but not overmuch. Conway's feminism, after all, is fairly flaccid stuff. Much more interesting is a feature, common to these books and many others like them, that Conway never mentions. To use Salter's term, it is the way they value what is private and devalue what is public, and the ignorance they heap upon history.

"How easy to retreat into the personal in order to save one's sanity," Adler remarks some way through *Heretic's Heart*. I have always thought sanity lies in the opposite direction, but the notion is the key to this sort of memoir. To rephrase Eliot, these volumes do not represent an embrace of public discourse but a flight from it. In the press kit that arrived with *Daughter of the Queen of Sheba*, an imaginary interviewer asks Lyden why she wrote her book. "I was afraid that my mother... would drift away from me if I did not write this down," Lyden replies. There is no larger point, it seems. The first words of her text are these: "This book was written first and foremost for my mother and my family." It would be hard to put the problem more succinctly.

The problem is not just narcissism or self-absorption—familiar criticisms, evident enough in these books. The problem is relentless self-reference combined with the pretense of historical commentary. While Adler's subject is unmistakably Adler, she casts her real concerns—her mother, her weight, her sex life—against the background of the Free Speech Movement, Vietnam, Cuba and so on. It produces

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a kind of false gravitas, an unearned legitimacy. Brooks reduces the Middle East conflict to a proscenium for her encounters with pen pals. Lyden performs a truly remarkable feat: There are paragraphs in her book that begin, say, at her mother's dressing table and end in the Gaza Strip. This is history devalued—history privatized.

One may easily enough look upon this as further evidence of public man's fall—and the corresponding elevation of the private haven, the family sanctuary and sentiment as a substitute for thought. But the lesson goes beyond that. It is peculiar to Americans, it seems to me. Why is it that only Americans are near to drowning in all-too-personal memoirs? Why not the French, who have spent the past year arguing about a proper accounting of the Communist era, or the Germans or Italians or Spanish—why aren't they as busy exchanging private memories?

It is not easy to answer this, but it is not impossible, either. My theory begins with the cold war and our inability as a nation to come to terms with what we have done—at home and abroad, to ourselves and others—over the past half-century. Only Americans have turned so much recent history into fiction, or a kind of exhibit cordoned off so that it cannot be touched, to say nothing of altered. Having departed so far from our ideals, we are losing our ability to converse honestly among ourselves. Official history is something one suffers, as the Soviets suffered theirs, because it is disemboweled of memory. Ours, then, is the problem of history without memory—a grand but incomplete postwar narrative. And in privatizing history, what are many memoirists doing if not acquiescing in this travesty? Are they not refusing the challenge of unburying the past as it really was?

When Geraldine Brooks finally finds her old Middle Eastern pen pals, the Arab is now a carpenter in Nazareth and the Jew a bank teller in Netanya. What a wealth of themes Brooks could have explored between these two, who did not know one another. What an opportunity—a missed opportunity, that is. For after all her encounters as a correspondent and traveler in the region, Brooks concludes with this:

Driving away from Nazareth later that night, I felt relaxed in a way I rarely had before on journeys to Israel. As a reporter there, my business had most often been the seeking of extremes.... But it may be in the quiet center, among the

bankers of Netanya and the carpenters of Nazareth, that the real history of a place is written after all. As another carpenter from Nazareth observed a long time ago, it is the meek who shall inherit the earth.

How shall we describe this passage? Is it merely irresponsible in its refusal of all significance? Or, in its trivialization of history, is it an offense to the ordinary Middle Easterners for whom Brooks claims sympathy? It is not my intention to single out this or any other author for harsh criticism. But it is essential, it seems to me, that we are clear as to what we are doing in publishing books that set forth this sort of attitude toward others and toward the past.

The new memoirs have been criticized often enough for the violence they do to literature. But the true violence, I believe, is the violence done to history. And in this connection it is interesting that so many

*We arrive at a curious, unexpected truth: that the purely personal is not the stuff of the memoir but its enemy.*

good memoirs are by writers born before the great wars of our time—World War II and the cold war—and so many of the bad ones are by those who seem to know no history other than the cold war version.

But what about the memoir as literature's replacement? What happens if we take it on those terms?

I do not agree that the good memoir draws its power, as a prominent critic has said of Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club* (Penguin), "from the fact that it's fact." If that were so, where is the power in a book such as *An Empty Lap* (Pocket), Jill Smolowe's lament of childlessness and celebration of adoption? As with so many others, there is nothing especially wrong with this book, but neither is it powerful. And it certainly cannot stand in literature's stead. When Lear emerges from the great nighttime storm in Act III, we've witnessed a human passage, a transformation of character. In *An Empty Lap*, an afternoon by the pool is nothing more than that. It's all fact, presumably, but the pool is just a pool, the afternoon just an afternoon, and the people, in the end, are never as important to the reader as they are to the writer.

No, a good memoir makes powerful reading usually to the same extent that it reaches beyond "the fact that it's fact." I think of Salter once again, or Spencer—or Karr. From the first line of *The Liar's Club*—"My sharpest memory is of a single

instant surrounded by dark"—you know you are about to spend time with a writer who understands sentences and makes them work on many levels. The subject is not Mary Karr. It is the survival of the individual consciousness in conditions of isolation and continual assault—a familiar enough experience to many Americans.

Here is how James McBride begins *The Color of Water* (Riverhead), a black man's memoir of his white mother:

As a boy, I never knew where my mother was from—where she was born, who her parents were. When I asked she'd say, "God made me." When I asked if she was white, she'd say, "I'm light-skinned," and change the subject.

This is a powerful book, a book whose facts are not going to sit there on the page like so many potatoes. McBride wants to tell us about the discovery of racial identity. But what makes his account so effective? The writing, certainly, and his mother's natural nobility and courage. But it is also his relationship with history. *The Color of Water* is

not an occasion for forgetting history but for remembering it. It doesn't shrink down race relations in America to a stage prop, handy for self-dramatization. It amplifies the race issue. And what a difference. There is nothing privatized, nothing hermetic, in *The Color of Water*. McBride connects to our shared past by way of memory—and so allows us to connect with it, too.

Karr and McBride are examples of what can occur when the memoir works as literature. But what occurs when the transaction is reversed, and literature is supposed to work as memoir? As it happens, we can judge this odd transformation quite precisely by way of certain novelists' work.

"It began at the airport," Kathryn Harrison writes in her 1991 novel, *Thicker Than Water*. "When he kissed me good-bye, my father put his tongue into my mouth." And here is the scene for which Harrison named her famous 1997 memoir, *The Kiss* (Bard):

My father pushes his tongue deep into my mouth: Wet, insistent, exploring, then withdrawn. He picks up his camera case, and, smiling brightly, he joins the end of the line of passengers disappearing into the airplane.

I do not propose to critique Harrison's fiction—or to ask why she wrote her memoir of incest in such a way that we are more or less forced to recognize the preponderance of unretouched autobiography in novels such as *Thicker Than Water* and *Expo-*

sure. But Harrison begs another question: What is gained or lost when the same material is transported from fiction to memoir? Having revealed her literary method, she is a test case, a lab experiment. Another is Maria Flook. *My Sister's Life* (Pantheon) is Flook's memoir of a sibling's abrupt, four-year disappearance. As reviewers (including *The Nation's*) have noted, the book reveals the great extent to which Flook's earlier novels, especially the 1993 *Family Night*, are reworked autobiography.

Without meaning to, these exercises do readers an important service. Like any other successful work of art, a piece of fiction must ultimately be divorced from its creator. It might be filled with autobiographical detail, but it is not autobiography. The key here, of course, is artistic form. Its form makes fiction a kind of common currency, an object in the public domain—fending for itself, as the old writer's cliché has it. It is negotiable coin, if you like, something transferable. This implies a dedication to public discourse. As I've argued, the memoirs worth bothering about share this dedication.

That recognition leads to the revealing thing about Harrison and Flook. They have not written memoirs that stand alongside bodies of work. They have taken the work and turned it back into private memory—have taken the opposite trip, if you will. What is gained, what lost? They've retreated into the personal, as Margot Adler put it. And in eschewing form and discourse, they have become part of the machinery of "entertainment" that discourages the exchange implicit in artistic creation in favor of passivity and voyeurism.

The book that best demonstrates the danger of this syndrome, ironically, is one that assiduously avoids it. *Boyhood* (Viking), J.M. Coetzee's reminiscence, is among the best memoirs I've read in the past year or so. It reveals that in Coetzee's novels—especially *In the Heart of the Country*—he may have drawn even more directly from his own life than Harrison. The desolate plains and farms of the fiction derive straight from the bleak South African suburb Coetzee describes in *Boyhood*. There is no mistaking that—or the harsh and distant father, among others of Coetzee's fictional figures.

But what control. Coetzee has written *Boyhood* in the third person. He does not even name himself until midway through the book—and then only once. *Boyhood* has elicited the usual charges of detachment and impersonality, which as usual miss the mark. The third-person device is odd, but to me it simply reflects Coetzee's

awareness of the perils of the memoir. As in his novels, Coetzee shows how effective restraint can be in producing narrative power. What comes through in *Boyhood* is a portrait of the enduring self, the self that produced the novels. What is avoided are confessions and secrets, as Malraux put it—that is, voyeurism.

We arrive at a curious, unexpected truth: that the purely personal is not the stuff of the memoir but its enemy. Once this is understood, it becomes clear that the memoir does not have to be a symptom of our

cultural decline, or our withdrawal, or our fading ability to imagine and create and then give form to our creations.

"I live, I suffer, I am here," Coetzee's narrator says in *In the Heart of the Country*. "With cunning and treachery, if necessary, I fight against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history." This can fairly be read as the fight of all memoirists. The trick is to embrace history, not oneself. So let us now repudiate private retreats—literary or otherwise; let us now praise cunning and treachery whenever they are put to good use. ■

## Powers of Invention

TOM LECLAIR

**GAIN.** By Richard Powers. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 353 pp. \$25.

Sixteen years ago Don DeLillo mocked "around-the-house-and-in-the-yard" realism, its concern with "marriages and separations and trips to Tanglewood." His eco-fiction, *White Noise*, chased the much-married Gladneys out of their smug house and subjected them to a dramatic "Airborne Toxic Event."

In *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley dramatized the poisoning of Iowa yards and farmland by polluting her Lear-like family with incest. Other eco-novelists have enlarged the scale, upped the dramatic ante. In William Gaddis's *JR*, the waste of big business smears every human relationship and prodigal page. Jonathan Franzen's corporation in *Strong Motion* sends waste down mine shafts and causes earthquakes. The rockets of *Gravity's Rainbow* rise on the petroleum waste of that "living critter" the Earth and threaten to annihilate its "green uprising." Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* portrays a "deep ecology," back-to-the-past future after toxic catastrophes.

Recently visiting Greece, I found the deep root of ecology in a necropolis. The word OIKOS was chiseled into marble tombs. It became "eco" in economy (literally, law of the home) and in ecology (figuratively, study of the home). In his new novel, *Gain*, Richard Powers lays out parallel narrative lines—one telling the history of an American business, the other examining the life of a contemporary homemaker—that meet at a horizon "oikos." Powers's invented Clare Corporation begins as an early-nineteenth-century soap and candle company and comes to re-

semble Procter & Gamble, right down to the creation of Clarene, an olestra knock-off. Clare has a factory in a Midwestern city called Lacewood, where 42-year-old Laura Bodey lives with her two teenage children, tends her backyard garden, sells houses for Next Millennium Realty and discovers Clare seeping into her life.

Caveat lector. I live three miles from a place called Ivorydale, a P&G factory. When the wind blows from the north, I get the unpleasant odor of manufacture in my home. Maybe that's one reason I'm a sucker for eco-fictions, novels that take up the conflict my Vermont high school English teacher hustled over—man against nature—in favor of social and existential conflicts, as if man against others or woman against herself didn't eventually affect green mountains or Lacewood.

One other caveat: Ten years ago, reviewing Powers's second novel (*Prisoner's Dilemma*), I compared it and his first book (*Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*) to Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *V.*, and on this (then scant) evidence pronounced Powers a "major American novelist." Thankfully, his next three novels were as good as or better than those first two, which dealt with World Wars I and II. *The Gold Bug Variations* is a golden braiding of Poe detection and Bach intricacy, genetics and art, romantic love and intellectual passion—a *Gravity's Rainbow* for the eighties. *Operation Wandering Soul*

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