

A HISTORY OF ENGLISH AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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CHAPTER 26

*Around 2000**Memoir as literature*

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[W]hat everyone has in them, these days, is not a novel but a memoir.
Martin Amis, *Experience* (2000, 6)

Perhaps everyone has a memoir in them. But can everyone get it out? A memoir requires memory and experience. It also requires writing. Those who are known for their writing thus seem qualified for the genre. They provide the subject of the present chapter: the recent history of the literary memoir. That term can be understood in terms both of provenance (the memoir of the writer, the person from the world of literature) and of form (the memoir as literary art). A working assumption is that the two senses connect: the practising, and practised, writer is the most likely to produce a memoir that might be deemed literature.

But the literary memoir also raises an immediate paradox. Writers may be the best qualified to write memoir, but they may also be among the last people who should write it, as their lives have been composed primarily of writing. Henry James thematised this very duality in the uncanny story 'The Private Life' (1891), where a writer needs one self to live and another to write. In modern autobiography, this corresponds to the actual practice of ghostwriting. The self who has experienced but cannot write can be voiced through the conduit of the self who has not had the experiences, but has the craft to convey them.

Some writers resolve this issue through having specific, exceptional bouts of experience which are worth recounting. Exemplary here is Salman Rushdie, whose *Joseph Anton* (2012) centres on his uniquely dramatic experience of hiding from assassins. More common is the production of a memoir that centres heavily on the early years before the writer truly became a writer: years that may be formative and are also, in effect, pre-literary. Thus the first half of J. G. Ballard's *Miracles of Life* (2008) is devoted to his upbringing in Shanghai, and John McGahern's *Memoir*

(2005) is largely 'the story of my upbringing, the people who brought me up, my parents and those around them, in their time and landscape' (McGahern 2005, 260). More specifically, a memoir may explore a particular trouble in the writer's past or family. Blake Morrison's sequence on his parents, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (1993) and *Things My Mother Never Told Me* (2002), formed a widely discussed and influential example.

Morrison's works belong to the genre of 'memoir' rather than 'autobiography', and here it is worth briefly clarifying terms. 'Autobiography', 'memoir', and 'life-writing' all overlap, whether etymologically or in practical usage. No absolute distinctions between them should be sought. But for the purposes of this essay, 'life-writing' is the most capacious term, comprising all manner of writing on one's own life. 'Autobiography' can be understood as a comprehensive chronological record of a life. Many non-literary instances of life-writing (the ghostwritten lives of sportspeople, for instance) take this form. Creative writers appear to practise it less, but Ballard's strikingly linear *Miracles of Life* is an instance. 'Memoir' would then suggest a piece of writing about oneself which evades the demands of comprehensiveness: giving itself licence, for instance, to focus on certain chosen periods while leaving others undiscussed. From just outside literature, Bob Dylan's *Chronicles: Volume One* (2004) exemplifies this mode, reminiscing in rich detail about certain scenes in Dylan's life while leaving others invisible. The literary memoirs below follow a similar rule, though less starkly than Dylan. Finally, a memoir may also promise to shed light not only on the writer, but on his or her surroundings, or on some specific aspect of one's life: 'a memoir of my father', 'a memoir of Soho in the 1960s'.

Which writers can publish memoirs? A primary qualification is a measure of fame. However gifted a writer, their memoir will have less chance of publication without an existing public profile and sales. A second criterion is experience. Sometimes a particular emotional experience such as grief, abuse, or adoption makes the memoir a viable proposition. Yet experience also tends to imply a degree of seniority. In contemporary literature, memoir has often appeared to offer seasoned writers a respite from producing new work in their usual genre. '1985 wasn't the day of the memoir', comments Jeanette Winterson, implying that 2011 is (Winterson 2011, 3). Like an academic chair, the literary memoir is an option for which one generally qualifies by substantial previous publication. Age seems to condition what use can be made of one's life. Conventionally, the experience amassed by a 25-year-old is not memoir material but, precisely, the material

for a first novel. Yet the same writer at sixty, in the contemporary book market, might well produce a memoir dwelling heavily on their first quarter-century.

Different literary fields have produced differing amounts of life-writing. Theatre people (notably playwrights, also directors) can, unlike many writers, claim the making of their art itself as a vivid experience. David Hare, Howard Brenton, and Richard Eyre have all published diaries. The implication is that theatrical experience is enthralling enough to go straight into print: the mediation of 'writing up' we would associate with the memoir seems less necessary, and might detract from the immediacy of the diary of a production. English theatre's most prominent and indefatigable exponent of the public diary is Alan Bennett, who has regularly published an edited selection in the *London Review of Books* since the mid 1980s. His persona affects to shun publicity and fuss, but he has nonetheless redoubled the exposure by reprinting the diaries in book form, for anyone who missed them in the journal.

Beyond the theatre, novelists are predominant makers of the literary memoir. Few poets have the visibility and commercial traction to make memoir a viable proposition. (One exception to this, as to most claims about poetry's status, was Seamus Heaney, who will be addressed below.) Commerce aside, it is intuitive that novelists will possess the craft of prose narrative. The shift in mode from novel to memoir is, in a sense, minimal compared with the shift required by playwright or poet (let alone politician or yachtswoman). Accordingly, we can hope that the novelist's memoir will show something of the same craft and formal self-consciousness that they would apply to fiction.

The next section of this essay will explore this proposition, by considering four acclaimed memoirs published since 2000 by major novelists from the British Isles. They are Martin Amis's *Experience* (2000), Hilary Mantel's *Giving Up The Ghost* (2003), John McGahern's *Memoir* (2005), and Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011). The four authors are unusually prominent. Amis is a peculiarly celebrated and controversial figure, both for his fiction and for his laconic announcements beyond it. McGahern was the most esteemed Irish novelist in his lifetime. Winterson has been a public figure since her emergence as a young, openly lesbian novelist in the mid 1980s. Mantel, a latecomer to fame, has become perhaps the most successful English literary novelist of the twenty-first century. The following discussion will compare the four memoirs' structure and handling of time, their treatment of troubling or traumatic material, and their commentary on literature, finally considering

how the memoirs relate to the authors' own fiction. The comparison will offer some lessons about tendencies and options in literary memoir at the start of the twenty-first century.

McGahern's *Memoir* is true to its plain title in being the most formally simple of the four. It centres on his childhood and youth in rural County Leitrim, narrating this period in almost continuously chronological order. The book has no chapters and hence no immediately evident structure: its strongest formal division is an occasional line space between paragraphs. The book's pace can slow to that of the cyclical rural world it depicts. The material world of objects, nature, and work is regularly visible:

I brought water in iron barrels covered with wet sacking with the jennet and cart to the wooden barrel on the headland. When it was filled, the bluestone was set to steep in a bag hung from the broken handle of a spade, and once it had melted and soda was added, the blue turned a rich turquoise. I stood by the barrel with the resting jennet and watched the workmen back up and down the matted furrows with their knapsack sprayers. (McGahern 2005, 85)

Such a passage typifies at least one strand of the book. Its prose is largely direct and literal, stating concrete facts. Memory is being exercised and savoured, and a piece of social history is painted in, yet there remains something understated about this method. McGahern offers a chronicle but tacitly leaves any further meaning for the reader to infer. It is thus the more striking when, on occasion, he ventures out from this narrative caution to such a wider disquisition as his moving meditation on the dying, for whom everyday scenes 'belong to a world that went mostly unregarded when it was ours but now becomes a place of unobtainable happiness, in even the meanest of forms' (Ibid., 116).

In one respect McGahern's work dodges linearity. On its closing page, the author has returned to live in Leitrim and imagines walking the fields again with his late mother. The details – 'blue crayfish shells where the otter feeds and trains her young', 'the wild orchid and the windflower' (Ibid., 272) – precisely reproduce those of the opening page, which the reader can now recall was not so much the chronological start of the story but a vision of the landscape from a retrospective distance: 'these fields have hardly changed at all since I ran and played and worked in them as a boy' (Ibid., 1). McGahern thus complicates linear narrative with a slender gesture at elegant circularity, his first paragraphs forming a frame from which the rest of the book flashes back. Apart from this, his work can stand as a model of formal simplicity in the contemporary memoir.

The memoirs of Mantel and Winterson more strongly complicate chronology. Mantel commences 'It is a Saturday, late July, 2000' (Mantel 2003, 1), a time when she and her husband are selling their Norfolk cottage. Plainly she is beginning at the end. She will return to this moment ten pages from the close, recommencing: 'It is 12 August, 2000: a Sunday in Norfolk' (Ibid., 241) and describing the departure from the cottage. Mantel's last pages take us up to the present tense of narration: 'Now on light clear nights, I sometimes go out on to the balcony' (Ibid., 251). Her first chapter, centring on recent years, also meditates on the art of autobiography from the present. Between these post-millennial poles, the remaining four chapters of Mantel's book narrate the past. Indeed, her second chapter stages a transition into it: 'This is the first thing I remember. I am sitting up in my pram' (Ibid., 27). From this point, her narrative moves consistently forward, though at varied pace.

Jeanette Winterson's structure offers a further level of elaboration. Beside McGahern's dearth of chapters and Mantel's five and a half, Winterson offers fifteen, along with an intermission and coda. The brief intermission effectively splits the book between distant and recent pasts. Winterson avers here that her fiction has 'pushed against the weight of clock time, of calendar time, of linear unravellings' (Winterson 2011, 153). She claims the right to break with chronology at this point of her memoir:

The womb to tomb of an interesting life – but I can't write my own; never could. Not *Oranges*. Not now. I would rather go on reading myself as a fiction than as a fact.

The fact is that I am going to miss out twenty-five years. Maybe later . . . (Ibid., 154)

The remaining eighty pages take us from 2007 to the time of writing: the last line is 'I have no idea what happens next' (Winterson 2011, 230). This later section recounts Winterson's struggles with mental illness and her attempt to find her birth mother. The attempt's success gives the work a *coup de grâce*: here the writer's middle age has delivered a drama equal to those of childhood that memoirists often privilege. The book's first eleven chapters hold Winterson's version of that earlier drama, primarily set in the 1970s. The memoir is thus peculiarly split between two periods, with the intermission justifying and making explicit its leap forward from one to the other. Yet – as Winterson's insistence on her own practice would suggest – the book's earlier chapters are also considerably non-linear in their own right. A gradual movement forward through childhood to university (a movement that also forms the bulk of both McGahern's

and Mantel's memoirs) is complicated by diagonal moves across time, pulling us thematically sideways as well as temporally backward or forward: the narrative is striated with discussions of particular themes (Manchester, literature, religion) and complicated by an authorial presence that manifestly writes from a later point, making judgements, comparisons, and jokes about the past. Winterson is informative about her childhood, but she does not reimmerge herself (and us) in it. The past remains a set of stories around which to weave new thought, more than an autonomous sensory sphere to which one can return.

Amis's *Experience* is the most evidently crafted of the memoirs considered here. The book is in two parts. Each of these is further divided into named sections, several of whose titles ('The Hands of Mike Szabatura', 'The Magics') are enigmatic at first glance. Through the first part a sequence of letters from school and home are transcribed and interspersed, making these sections alternate with the interrupting voice of a much younger Amis. (McGahern also reproduces entire letters from family members, with a related sense of estrangement as we encounter the voices of the past: but unlike Amis's the letters are not his own.) Further, the sections as named on the contents page in fact contain shorter named sections, their titles taken from the text they head. After all the above, the book offers in succession a postscript, an appendix and an addendum, as though sporting with the forms available. Riddled with these careful segregations, *Experience* stands as the opposite pole to McGahern's unbroken flow: the memoir as labyrinth, or as a cabinet of many nooks and compartments. Correspondingly, Amis's is also the least bound by linear chronological motion. Taken as a whole the book moves forward, but its formal strategy of interruption makes for frequent cuts back and forth across time. Amis himself declares that the book's form displays 'the novelist's addiction to seeing parallels and making connections' (Amis 2000, 7). In fact, its structural intricacy is greater than that of Amis's own novels. Insofar as literary art involves form and composition, here if anywhere is the memoir as literature.

The memoir of trauma has been a prominent phenomenon since the 1990s, as Neil Vickers explores in Chapter 27 of the present collection. The literary memoirs assessed here do not necessarily belong to that category. Their primary interest, on the face of it, derives from their authors' literary repute, and from the possibility of a revelation about the roots of creativity. Yet trauma is not easily bracketed off, for experiences of suffering occupy much of these works. For both McGahern and Winterson, the primary trauma is childhood at the hands of a parent: McGahern's police sergeant

father and Winterson's adoptive mother. Swathes of McGahern's book recount his father's abusive and self-pitying behaviour. After nearly two hundred pages the reader might assume that, insufferable as Sergeant McGahern was, he at least did not cross the boundary to sexual abuse. McGahern suddenly disabuses us of this assumption, noting that well into his teens they shared a bed: 'He never interfered with me in an obviously sexual way, but he frequently massaged my belly and thighs . . . I suspect he was masturbating' (McGahern 2005, 188). The most remarkable quality of this revelation is its casualness. The reader may experience it as the culmination of the father's wrongs, but McGahern moves on as though no special information has been vouchsafed. In this moment, his book is almost the antithesis of the traumatic memoir of revelation and recovery: as though McGahern prefers coolly to put his father in his place by not aggrandising his crimes.

Winterson does not refrain from aggrandising her adoptive mother. Constance Winterson, physically and emotionally overbearing, dominates the book's first part. When Winterson announces that she has found happiness with a teenage girlfriend, her mother utters the title phrase, 'Why be happy when you could be normal?' (Winterson 2011, 114). The question strains logic, demonstrating the peculiar pressures on her thought. It is also ironic beyond the mother's ken, in that she herself is far from 'normal': 'a flamboyant depressive; a woman who kept a revolver in the duster drawer, and the bullets in a tin of Pledge' (Ibid., 1). McGahern's strong emphasis on childhood, and Winterson's vivid portrait of her eccentric upbringing, might support the Wordsworthian or Freudian intuition that the formative experiences of damage or drive are to be found in childhood. Mantel can give this impression too, with her uncanny recall of childhood perceptions: with 'overwhelming sensory power', 'they come complete' to her mind in the present (Mantel 2003, 24). Yet Mantel's real wounds come later, in the severe medical problems which, from around age twenty, plague her for decades and leave her unable to bear children. For Amis, it is truer still that what he dubs 'the main events' arrive later in life. He discloses three dramas of unusual intensity: the discovery of a long-lost daughter; the revelation that his vanished cousin had been murdered by the serial killer Frederick West; and the dementia and death of his father, Kingsley. These events are diverse in texture and meaning, but they lend *Experience* gravity.

The simplest rationale for this proliferation of wounds and griefs is Henry de Montherlant's proposition that happiness writes in white ink on a white page (Becker 1970, 63). From the memoirist's standpoint such

misfortunes provide material troubling enough to be worth telling. A little more specifically, it can be said that trouble drives narrative: the presence of pain or injustice enables conflict and suspense. Against life's distress, these literary memoirs consistently have one distinctive property to offer: literature. McGahern, with a strong unacknowledged echo of James Joyce, records exchanging a vocation for the priesthood for a calling to write. In his teens he rows a boat on the nearby river and savours books:

Over many days and months, gradually, a fantastical idea formed. Why take on any single life – a priest, a soldier, teacher, doctor, airman – if a writer could create all these people far more vividly? In that one life of the mind, the writer could live many lives and all of life. I had not even the vaguest idea how books came into being, but the dream took hold, and held . . . Instead of being a priest of God, I would be the god of a small, vivid world. (McGahern 2005, 205)

McGahern reverts more than once to this life-shaping revelation, which he can say 'set me free' (Ibid., 205). Winterson's testimony is analogous. Banned as a child from reading books, she rebels by consuming Accrington library's holdings: one of her chapters is called 'English Literature A-Z'. At one moment of crisis, she takes solace in discovering T. S. Eliot's poetry:

A tough life needs a tough language – and that is what poetry is. That is what literature offers – a language powerful enough to say how it is. It isn't a hiding place. It is a finding place. (Winterson 2011, 40)

Books, Winterson declares, are her 'birthright'; a library 'was where I had always been happiest' (Ibid., 143). Mantel, recording another working-class childhood, likewise claims to have read the contents of the local children's library 'upside down and inside out . . . so hard that when I gave them back the print was faint and grey with exhaustion' (Mantel 2003, 114). She stops short of Winterson's evangelism for literature, but her more quirky love of books emerges as she describes packing her cottage's contents, including her childhood volume of Shakespeare: 'My child's fingerprints were on every leaf of it. I felt as if it talked back to me, as if I had exchanged breath with it; no other Complete Works would ever be the same' (Ibid., 243). Writing naturally emerges as a creative counterpart to the salve of reading. When her mother burns her books, Winterson defiantly realises she can write her own (Winterson 2011, 43). Confronted by emotional 'welts', she counsels 'Rewrite the hurt'. Writing is explicitly a means not so much of therapy as of survival: 'To avoid the narrow mesh of Mrs Winterson's story

I had to be able to tell my own' (Ibid., 5). Mantel's tribulations differ, but writing has an analogous role: 'I am writing in order to take charge of the story of my childhood and my childlessness; and in order to locate myself, if not within a body, then in the narrow space between one letter and the next . . . sometimes I feel that each morning it is necessary to write myself into being' (Mantel 2003, 222).

Amis is the exception here: hailing from a profoundly lettered background, he does not discover literature as a forbidden glory to set against the constrictions of home. Rather, he produces an account of life that seems surrounded and permeated by literature. Phrases, descriptions, and events from fiction (notably that of his father Kingsley) become part of the book's medium along with 'experience' itself. Even Amis's famous dental afflictions place him alongside Joyce and Nabokov, in which regard he quotes not merely biographical facts but passages from their fiction (Amis 2000, 113–7). Memoir here becomes 'literary' in a further sense, in spilling confidently from life to comparable fiction and back again.

This brings us to a last question about these memoirs: their relation to the fiction that qualified the authors as memoirists. The answers are diverse. Amis, though producing a memoir steeped in literature, makes relatively little connection with his own fiction. A few nuggets and hints are dispensed: thus *Money* (1984), says a footnote, 'is the novel that John Self, the narrator, had in him but would never write' (Ibid., 6), and more elaborately Amis retrospectively avows that the novel 'turned on my own preoccupations' as a single, childless man (Ibid., 177). These are insights, but remain fleeting. Given that the memoir has offered Amis countless pages in which he could have illuminated this key post-war novel, it may be said that his treatment of his own fiction is reticent. The works are, quietly, events within the life, and Amis informs us of small details from life that went into fiction. But on the larger significance of the writing to which he has dedicated his entire professional life, he effectively withholds comment. *Experience* stands as an addition to the *oeuvre* rather than an explanation of it. For Hilary Mantel, too, memoir seems a proposition somewhat distinct from fiction. She indicates the long gestation of what became *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), her epic of the French Revolution, but by definition the experience that produced that book was one of library books and card indexes (Mantel 2003, 184). Plainly some of Mantel's fiction has been more directly primed by her life, notably by her spells in Africa and Saudi Arabia; but she does not advertise the connections. As with Amis, a degree of reticence surrounds the practice of fiction writing to which she has

devoted her adult life. The memoir comes partly to centre on the 'ghosts' of the children she could never have, but her novels are still more spectral, modestly hidden from view in Mantel's story of herself. Something of the paradox with which we began lingers in Amis and Mantel: boldly open about traumatic experiences, the one thing they tiptoe shyly around is the undramatic act of writing fiction.

Unlike Mantel's, John McGahern's best-known works fictionalise the same world described in his memoir. Neither *The Barracks* (1963) nor *The Dark* (1965) map absolutely on to the reality described by *Memoir*, but between them they correspond to much of it. Of the first novel McGahern himself states that '[t]he setting and the rituals of barrack life are replicated in the novel, but the characters are all imagined', his monstrous father replaced with a more acceptable figure (McGahern 2005, 245). In *The Dark* the struggle with the abusive father is depicted at length. *The Leavetaking* (1975) recalls a mother's death in terms that *Memoir* echoes, at times, almost verbatim. Even McGahern's later novel *Amongst Women* (1990), with its tyrannical but ailing IRA veteran, clearly reprises strong elements of the family structure depicted in *Memoir*. Where Amis admits to allowing stray details from reality into a fiction which is nonetheless aesthetically autonomous, McGahern has effectively transposed whole situations from life to art. Particular elements (like the relocation of Sergeant McGahern's tempestuous character to another policeman in *The Barracks*) thus become the points of difference, not similarity, between the two worlds of reality and fiction. In one sense McGahern presents us with the simplest correlation between life and art. Yet even this relation is curiously kaleidoscopic, given the discrete character of his fictional works. No single novel of McGahern's coincides precisely with his memoir. Rather, *Memoir* tenders the single body of material that each novel has distinctively refracted. Among its retrospective effects is to draw together fictions that were ostensibly separate.

It is Winterson who confronts head on the relation between art and life. *Why Be Happy?* exists in a direct dialogue with *Oranges*, which is mentioned on the opening page and quoted on the second. The opening set-piece depicts Winterson and her mother's furious telephone conversation following the novel's publication. Constance Winterson demands 'if it is a story, why is the main character called Jeanette?', and protests that the contents of the book are 'not true' (Winterson 2011, 5–6). A quarter-century later, the remembered dispute is the occasion for the author's reflection on truth and fiction:

I told my version – faithful and invented, accurate and misremembered, shuffled in time . . . And I suppose that the saddest thing for me, thinking about the cover version that is *Oranges*, is that I wrote a story I could live with. The other one was too painful. I could not survive it. (Ibid., 6)

Life and art are here inextricable, though distinct. If her debut novel was a 'cover story' for life, her memoir can also be considered a shadow to the fiction, following it and sounding echoes from it. Memoir does not, as with McGahern, simply narrate life and leave the reader to detect how fiction came of it. Rather Winterson, unusually, becomes a commentator on her own art, quoting her own fiction as Amis does Nabokov's (Ibid., 26), weaving her belated factual narrative in and out of an earlier fictional one. We may say that if memoir aspires to be literature, Winterson's also becomes a kind of literary criticism.

The preceding discussion has explored how four major novelists have fashioned literary memoir since 2000: diversely, but with much suggestive common ground. Let us finally consider three distinct approaches to life-writing that have appeared in the same period.

Paul Morley's *Nothing* (2000) pivots on the suicide of his father in 1977. The book culminates in a pilgrimage to the site of the suicide, and contains much reminiscence of certain scenes from Morley's childhood. Yet these relatively conventional (though still harrowing) materials for contemporary memoir are accompanied by an extensive, wilful complication of the memoir form. The book repeatedly seems to restart and finish, interrupting its progress and approaching its subject all over again. It offers incongruous numbered lists, and digresses into dilatory passages in which words are permuted and recycled: 'I would always have found myself in the position of needing to adopt a position during the writing about the writing' (Morley 2000, 72–3). *Nothing* also imagines alternatives to itself, mentioning titles that Morley claims to have given his project:

It was in the middle of a book to be called *Snapping the Braces of My Confusion*, a book about the death of my father, that I spent nearly forty pages wondering what on earth Kierkegaard was on about when he wrote in *The Sickness unto Death*.

A long quotation follows. Soon Morley is going on:

As you can imagine, I never finished *Snapping the Braces of My Confusion*. I didn't actually get to start it either. I did get to start *The Memoir of a Man Who Cannot Remember Much* and somewhere in the middle of this book, I was writing the following . . . (Ibid., 30–1)

It is common enough for the literary memoirist to reflect openly at some point on the practice of memoir. But Morley expands such reflexivity beyond all regular proportion, not only turning it into a major seam of his book but also straying into fabulation and play. He lists a 'series of opening sentences to a number of books that I had or hadn't written', including what look like serious scholarly statements alongside gambits such as 'I never met the comedian Ken Dodd, and I don't think about him every day, and to be honest I haven't thought about him this year at all. Until, funnily enough, now' (Ibid., 30). The sense that memoir is a repository of truth – as in McGahern's case, the truth beneath the fictions – is not reliably available in *Nothing*. The work undoubtedly contains sincere recollections, but they coexist with what are openly fantasies and intellectual exercises. In the book's third part, every subsection is headed; the headings range from 'ON: SUICIDE AS COSMIC JOKE', with the content 'Taboo or not taboo?', to 'ON: JULIA KRISTEVA', announcing a brief quotation from her *Black Sun* (Ibid., 288, 251). Plainly such sport seems to clash with the memoir's ultimate subject. How can Morley jest about Ken Dodd at a time like this? But it is equally clear, in practice, that the work's fantastic humour and obsessive digressions are his response to death: a subject which he acknowledges he has been circling or evading for the past two decades. *Nothing* manages to be both an authentic memoir of trauma and a protracted implosion of that genre.

Dennis O'Driscoll's *Stepping Stones* (2008) is a continuous volume of interviews with Seamus Heaney. This work is effectively a fuller autobiography than any we have considered hitherto. It runs exhaustively from childhood to old age, describing in detail Heaney's every dwelling and acquaintance. At the same time it discloses the development and wellsprings of the poetry, and capaciously records his thought on almost every writer, event, or issue that could be reckoned relevant to his career. The book's success strikingly derives from its form. Heaney, we are told, chose to answer O'Driscoll's questions 'principally in writing and by post' (O'Driscoll 2008, x). *Stepping Stones* can thus be considered primarily a prose work by Heaney – far larger than any other single written work he has produced. Yet this immense act of life-writing (nearly 500 pages) is only possible because of O'Driscoll's contribution. Plainly, Heaney would not issue this cascade of information without O'Driscoll's questions to prompt it. But more particularly, the questions compel Heaney to detour through nuances he would otherwise avoid. Asked about a cautious tone in *North*, Heaney responds with another question:

Is it too sophisticated to suggest that there's a difference between being alert to the situation and addressing it or addressing the reader about it? You're right to say I was proceeding carefully and cautiously, minding my mouth but minding it, I hope, for the right reasons. (Ibid., 159–60)

An inquisition about carefulness generates careful distinctions in response. Heaney's alliterations ('carefully and cautiously, minding my mouth') are also characteristic of his weighing of words throughout. Individual terms are scrutinised as they arise. When O'Driscoll asks how legitimate a poet who had ignored the Troubles could be, Heaney's immediate response is "Legitimate" is an unnerving word there'. A page later he is expanding meticulously on his own earlier distinction between political, public, and civic poets (Ibid., 384–5). Dialogue keeps Heaney honest, compelling him to register his thought more precisely than he would if were authoring this work alone. By these lights, we might consider anthologies of existing interviews (like the *Literary Conversations* series published by the University of Mississippi Press) as a form of biography to equal the more conventional memoir. But few writers have matched *Stepping Stones*, a complete work that rests not only on Heaney's own patiently capacious responses but, crucially, on the presence of an interlocutor whose inward knowledge of the subject's life make him able to function almost as an *alter ego*.

Alasdair Gray's *A Life in Pictures* (2010) offers a final alternative model. Gray has been a painter since before he was a published novelist, producing murals, townscapes, portraits of friends, and book covers. All are vividly reproduced in this volume, whose formal novelty Gray emphasises by coining the term 'autopictography'. The book's plainest innovation, next to our other examples, is to prioritise images over words in representing life. The blurb of *Experience* advertises Amis's 'memorable pen-portraits', but Gray more literally provides portraits, for those who wonder what the SNP MP Margo Macdonald or a young Liz Lochhead looked like. Still it cannot exactly be said that Gray replaces narrative prose with a visual counterpart, as for instance the graphic artists Alison Bechdel or Art Spiegelman have done. His images are not one continuous sequence, but many discrete works, often in groups, each captioned with a title, measurement, and details of its materials. This much would make a catalogue, but not a life story. Narrative, even in autopictography, still relies on words. Gray provides a dense, extensive commentary alongside the images, recounting his own life and how each work came about. We could say that the book neither replaces word with image, nor uses image to illustrate word, but takes image as the occasion for word. As an autobiography, the work is innately weighted towards Gray's activity as a visual artist and the people and places it involved.

Two further features merit remark. One is the tendency for Gray's visual motifs to recur. Having painted a nude in 1980, he can still be found reusing the figure in a new context on a book cover decades later. Meanwhile, large paintings are set aside and returned to, again after decades. The autopictography thus conveys a sense of the slow and cyclical aspects of Gray's life. Material is not simply drawn once and left behind; it recirculates and is remade in fresh contexts, providing a suggestive implicit analogy with memory itself. Even as Gray's narrative is linear, the echoes between his paintings offer a more recursive sense of his experience. Lastly, Gray's images are not photographs. They bear his highly distinct visual style. The reader moving through Gray's book seems to gain an impression of how his time and place looked. But to a significant degree it is also to see how it looked *to Gray*, or how his aesthetic filtered and reshaped that world.

The same could be said of literary style. And here we reach the quality that at once unifies and distinguishes all the works surveyed here, across their differing approaches to chronology or structure. McGahern's stately, unshowy recital of consecutive facts; Amis's cool measurement of clipped sentences; Winterson's heartfelt declarations of wisdom; Mantel's calmly droll reflections on her own eccentricity; Morley's deadpan philosophical comedy. Narrating information and offering judgement, each of these memoirs also speaks in its own voice, which may be the purest access to whatever is singular about its author. Simply in carrying their distinct cadences, these memoirs hold one quality to which many life-writing politicians, tycoons, or footballers do not aspire. Here, perhaps, is where literature and memoir most valuably meet.

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