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ADDING LIFE, ERASING THE RECORD¹

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Abstract. *This essay addresses two forms of life-telling: the automatic and the palliative. In the opinion of this author, who has written three memoirs, the first was once, but no longer, vulnerable to social revolution, the second is a perennial placebo. The (im)possibility of autobiography or even of the autobiographical subject is explored through the changing qualities and quantities of memory now available in the new media, and how they affect memoir, autobiography, and the (re) (dis) membered subject.*

I am going to address two forms of life-telling: the automatic and the palliative. The first was once, but no longer, vulnerable to social revolution, the second is a perennial placebo and my subject tonight.

Let's start with the first: is it possible to have a life without having a biography? On the face of it, the answer would be yes, but on further thought I'd say that, yes, before the advent of the modern, bureaucratic state it was possible. The bureaucratic state, however, inscribed every individual with the infrastructure of biography. You can even say that the state invented the individual by means of biography. The individual is someone with a recorded birth, marriage, school attendance, property deeds, employment record, and death certificate. The individual is the writing that defines him. It is not possible to be an individual without a biography. It is illegal to be an individual without a biography. The state sees to it--through the recorded infrastructure--that each individual has a unique biography.

The official infrastructure is filled out over a lifetime by the modern individual with a network of paper trails: correspondence, inter-office memos, faxes, email, audio and video recordings. There is little difficulty in biographing anyone alive after the mid-eighteenth century in Europe or North America, and what little difficulty there is has to do with the overabundance of data and the need to select. The biographical act of the state is automatic and increasingly weighty while the biographical subject is increasingly baroque and circumscribed.

The radical act under such circumstances is to erase or overthrow the record, either in favor of *tabula rasa*--through revolution--or by writing one's autobiography. I'm using "revolution" here to mean anarchy, i.e, the moment of the burning of the Office of the Registrar and the Archive of the Secret Police. This happened to some extent in 1989 in Bucharest, but the destruction of archives here was not a great act of spontaneous longing for rebirth, but rather a deliberate attempt by the "authors" of the files in these archives to erase their attempts at writing the biographies of certain citizens. The destroyers of the *Securitate* archives were momentarily disgusted by the quality of their work and tried, like Gogol, to burn the sequel to *Dead Souls* in a moment of simulated anarchy. (Otherwise known as "literary self-criticism") Soon enough, they figured out, as indeed all biographers must, that alternative and simultaneous biographies must be written for the purpose of a later reading by earnest researchers. The fake biographies of others must not only produce convenient versions of "the lives of others," as Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck demonstrated brilliantly in his 2006 film, *The Lives of Others*,² but also

¹ This talk was the keynote speech to open the English Department Conference at the University of Bucharest on June 6, 2008.

² A secret policeman who has devoted his life to ferreting out "dangerous" characters is thrown into a quandary when he investigates a writer. It's 1984, and Capt. Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Muehe) is an agent of the Stasi, the East

convenient autobiographies of the biographers. The autobiographies of spies are written by the falsification of the data in their subjects' biographies.

Nothing could be farther from "anarchy," or "revolution," as Arthur Rimbaud might have seen it in the first days of the Paris commune. Such "revolution," is no longer possible since our biographies are no longer centralized, but spread farther than most individuals travel, with bits and pieces lodged and multiplied in databases that are everywhere and nowhere at once.

We moderns, or post-moderns, are over-written. Over-inscribed. Over-recorded. The modern state is an automatic over-producer of individual biographies helped in large measure by our own assiduous collection of data on ourselves, data we are only too eager to share with the world. If there ever was any reticence toward self-exposure this has disappeared with the advent of the internet biography. The state doesn't any longer need to spy on your bedroom, it can look into you through My Space.

The necessity to control every aspect of human existence, down to and beyond the molecular level, is an automatic function of the bureaucratic machine. The overabundance of biography is also a result of democracy. In theocratic societies only kings and nobles had biographies. Subjects were known only by their functions: butlers, weavers, blacksmiths, buttresses, picklers, seamstresses, moat-diggers. The nameless serf layers below the professionals were known only as "souls." Souls didn't have biographies, they had only a collective life and, if they went to church, a private afterlife. The modern state and increasing democracy gave these souls back their bodies, unique bodies with the marks of identity on them. The body is the biography. It is the body, gained through social revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries, that provides records to the state, and is now overproducing enough data to create not just the individual to whom it belongs, but other bodies as well, whether fictional (virtual) or (soon) cloned.

The overabundance of data may also have a liberating effect. One can subvert one's official biography by rewriting it. Autobiography is the opposite of biography insofar as it is the individual's attempt to escape the description of the state. Autobiographers will use official records, of course, but in effect, for the purpose of challenging those records. When one begins a tale with the words "I was born in Pontoise in 1456," one will spend the rest of one's argument, indifferent of whether one was born in Pontoise or not, on decrying or apologizing for that fact. Even nostalgia is a critique of that simple fact. The misfortune of being born, to paraphrase Cioran, along with all the other misfortunes deemed fit for the record, is what autobiographers target for destruction. Every autobiography is an antisocial, subversive act aimed against the recorded facts of one's life.

Autobiography subverts the data-heavy body by attempting to give back the individual his soul, to return the body-specifics to the collective matrix. Autobiographers aspire to be serfs of undifferentiated energy. Autobiography subverts not only the state, but the body, which is the biography authored by the state. The autobiographer makes a claim to immortality. The body is, of course, mortal, and the state, while it encourages reproduction, is in the process of withering, just like Marx predicted, though for reasons other than the ones he predicted.

And now along comes a new virtuality, which empties the body and makes possible the overwriting of the soul. To give just one example: the Paper Body of the U.S. President has grown so vast in half a century it is quite impossible to see. The librarian of Jimmy Carter's presidential library in Atlanta told me that Roosevelt, who was a four-term president and oversaw some of the most dramatic events of the twentieth century, the Great Depression, World War II, produced less than half as many papers as Carter, a one-term President. The librarian dreaded to imagine the size of Bill Clinton's White House archive where every email was backed by a hard copy and every copy was copied. When such dimensions are reached, the body becomes invisible. Proportion dictates that monuments cannot rise above a certain height without disappearing. The Body of the Nation, following closely on the Body of the President, is likewise drowning or dissolving in biographical overabundance.

German Secret Police. Wiesler carefully investigates people who might be deemed some sort of threat to the state, but in this case he is forced to rethink his own life.

Just in time, a new virtuality magnified by unlimited memory rushed to our defense. Andrew Grove's microprocessor chip is to biography and the state what Napoleon was to Europe. He made it possible to imagine a new state that remained outwardly consistent while containing everything that might be said about it, including the things that threatened to destroy its component parts. In the virtual world made possible by unlimited memory we can rewrite our biography, autobiographomaniacize to our heart's content. We can also change identities altogether, slipping out of bodies and genders quicker than it takes to change clothes. We can shape-shift across species, we can spin in the changing rooms of MUDs (multi-user dungeons) as fast as we want, and we can appropriate the autobiographies of others. We can be anything imaginable. Virtuality has put evolution on fast-forward. Imagination is now the new currency, a form of exchange based on how quickly we can trade and profit from our recorded lives, whether the facts belong to us or to an avatar.

But this Darwin-on-speed mode is only as good as the data, which is to say that the disembodied body made possible by the computer is programmed by a writing that is neither less nor more than the abstracted biography of the state. Which is, of course, the abstract of all the biographies of individuals. This tail-swallowing is only seemingly generative of soul. The freedom to muck around in the esthetics of identity is still a game. Virtuality still means just that: game-development. The metamorphoses of the virtual autobiographer are limited by the imagination of the programmer. Ironically, the creation of any fiction of identity is an admission of dependence on programming languages, whether mathematical or bureaucratic. You can make your self up, yes, but, in addition to the laws of nature, you must now obey the laws of the programming language of your writing device, as well as the state's regulations on the use of data, including copyright.

What, then, is the state of autobiography in a sea of drifting facts that can fit with ease anywhere, in a world where collage is the predominant mode of expression? And where the self, composed in whatever manner one wishes, remains contained? Is there an approach for the individual that does not require the reinvention of a moral system? Why is the individual still subversive? Why does the individual continue to stubbornly exist even after it was demonstrated that he or she was only a construct?

Given the tattered remains of twentieth-century systems, adrift across the sands of a psychology in retreat before machines, is the memoirist anything more than a child with a box of crayons before a coloring book? The presumption that one's own life matters enough to write about is odd. One writes an autobiography either to escape life or to make some if there isn't enough. In any case, the activity bares a pattern and makes escape--from the moment one sees and discovers this pattern--difficult unless one writes one autobiography after another, each one in flagrant opposition to the one that came before. One might create serial lives like (concomitant) sentences, but the questions remains: who is "one" and why bother?

My first autobiography, titled modestly, *The Life & Times of an Involuntary Genius*, was written in the third person with a long section--a letter to my first love--in the second. By removing myself, at age 23, from the scant facts of my life, I was hoping to create a listenable story, much the same way that someone calling a help line might say, "I have this friend with a problem..." Of course, the reason I wrote an autobiography at such a tender age was that I had the problem of all tender-aged people, namely, I was unknown. By telling this tale of a young man with an exemplary life-story I was hoping to remedy that situation. The advantage of writing at such a tender age was that I remembered everything or nearly everything that happened to me. I had the benefit of only a few events, earth-shattering they seemed to me, and I used them to create an initiatory structure. I had no axe to grind, but I had (already!) some excuses to make. I left my country and my girl and I felt bad about it. By writing those things down I recast them to appear heroic: I wasn't a renegade, I was an exile, a hero. By leaving my girlfriend I was saving her from the dreadful company of a doomed poet. So I was both a renegade and doomed, and there was nothing that could contradict this view, except for the hated rhetoric of the national state and the conventions of society. Literature came to my aid there, with its long and distinguished list of exile-heroes. I had no doubt then (or now) that literature stood in firm opposition to officialdom in any form, whether governmental, religious, or faux-folk. This first memoir was, in fact, addressed to my mother. I made the poor woman embody every authority I'd known, since we were

quarrelling at the time. Her response to the published book was, “Why didn’t you call it a novel? Did you have to call it an autobiography?” Her only problem was with genre.

My second autobiography, *In America’s Shoes*, picked up where the first one left off, at the beginning of my life in America, and it was a first-person record of the rapid process of becoming American. I felt that by changing countries and languages I had literally been born again. In this sense, I was not starting where I’d left off, but from my new birth in 1966 in Detroit, Michigan. This book is mostly about my life in California, a region of America where the remaking of one’s identity was the chief business of the inhabitants. This book is less a record of the past as a writing of the present in its becoming past. The speeded-up nature of time in America is the real subject of this work. In America, I noticed from the very beginning, the future becomes the past before anyone can possibly understand it. I was hoping to invent a way by which thinking about the past could be made as fast as the transformation itself. The Gogolian sentence, as I understood it from Nabokov’s description, with its endless clauses, rolling open parentheses, and constant digressions, was the tool for such enterprise. This book is an autobiography-on-the-run, a “meditation in an emergency,” as Frank O’Hara put it. It is also an American book because it made use of the “open field” as proposed by Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Frank O’Hara, Ted Berrigan, and others, which is to say that it rode the wave of time even as it explained the drowning.

My third autobiography--which was never published--was intended as an autobiography from everyone else’s point of view. I mailed out about a hundred questionnaires to friends and acquaintances asking them a number of questions like: “When did we meet? What did we do? What happened afterwards? How do I figure in your life?” I got back a great variety of answers. Some writers took the questions as an opportunity to reminisce scrupulously, others as a license to invent. There were true and fantastic stories in the mix, all of them stylistically incompatible. I realized a number of things: first of all, I was not as important to others as I was to myself. My friends’ accounts of our moments together were tawdry and pale compared to how I conceived of them. Secondly, one’s biography from the perspective of others was as loosely connected as subatomic particles: immense spaces sat between events, attracted only by forces too weak to make a compelling fiction. The biography provided by the state was more substantial than the memories of my friends. I could have gone to the *Securitate* archives, to the INS, the FBI, and the San Francisco City Hall, and gotten more satisfying, or at least more consistent, results.

The autobiographical enterprise has been enjoying great popularity for the last decade of the 20th century, the first decade of the 21st, and it shows no sign of abating. There is a panic that is only partly the fear of book publishers that books may be in trouble. The larger panic is that of individuals who feel uneasy about the informal autobiography of blogging. They fear, and rightly so, in my opinion, that the forms of self-story-telling getting attention now, including blogs, gossips, oral poetry, and credit ratings, are not enough or, on the contrary, too much a *particular* sense of self. The book-memoir seems to be running a race against obsolescence, against the collective biography written by new and newer media.

Memoir is a fuzzy word, but it bypasses even the minimum requirements of the genre of *autobiography*. *Memoir* recognizes the fallibility of memory, the impossibility of ordering what is recalled. Still, whatever you call it, whether *memoir* or *autobiography*, the fact remains that the genre cannot exist without an initiatory structure. Whether closer in construction to the novel or to the journal, this form says: these things happened to me and to no one else, yet for all the particularity of things that happened to me and to no one else, they retell an exemplary story. The hero leaves home in search of self-fulfillment, encounters many dangers, is transformed into an adult, and returns to slay the dragons of conformity by becoming the head of the household. And the new authority. Or something like that. The endings are of necessity open, because the memoirist doesn’t know the end. An autobiography cannot end in the death of the hero, like a novel, unless an autobiographer can fake his own death and call the book *a novel*. (See how easy it is, mom?) By not dying, the hero of an autobiography always triumphs. The form is implicitly optimistic and as such, American. We, Americans, we do not believe in endings: we believe in success. We want to hear stories of triumph. Which is why we have heard mostly Europeans (with the unfortunate exception of Francis “end-of-history” Fukuyama) proclaiming “the

death” of this or that, whether “God”, “the novel,” or “philosophy.” We like to think that those things are only metaphors for the “death of Europe,” though the value of the euro doesn’t support this at the moment.

In America, things do not die, they collapse into a data-subconscious from where they can be retrieved by a memory-stick. The American form of parting with the past is making a different file and pulling it off the desktop into a folder marked “the past.” We have more computer memory now than the entire world had in its whole recorded past. This memory allows us to do computations on a scale impossible before, computations so vast that they allow for the discovery and transformation of the future, while making it simultaneously obsolescent. This is a virtuality more potent than the *memoir*, which is just an individual’s attempt to remember unquantifiable and undescribable feelings by manipulating a few “facts.”

An honest memoirist must believe that what happened to his/her self in the bodied world can be rendered by a story that cannot be duplicated by any known means of reproduction, sexual, electronic, chemical, genetic, or mechanical. He or she must consider now that what happens in the bodied world is that the collapsed pasts, presents, and futures that we forget as soon as we create them, continue a non-virtual existence that gives birth to a number of monstrous, grotesque, unforeseen *fleurs-de-mal*, of which *memoirs* are but one product. The memoirist piles coincidence on coincidence in order to create a fate (a book) that advertises the author’s presence at every seam. We know who and where the writer is at all times in a memoir: he or she is wherever two unlikely events or characters meet and he or she is that which puts them together. The mystery of how those coincidences came about when the writer was there is the true subject of any memoir.

If everything were visible everything would be seamless: the logos is at all times in motion, an ocean, everything is part of it. Happily, no book can be endless: it cannot be the past, it can merely resemble (not reassemble) a picture of it. Language is connected at all points with whatever it passes through. An autobiographer must ignore the cogency of logos, but render the story of a particular life as a new story, courtesy of a uniquely selecting memory and faith in fate. To spin the facts into crude coincidence, to fit them into the Procustian bed of the book is a serious job, even if one wasn’t going up against technology, time, and postmodern doubt. Where the circumspect autobiographer of forty years ago might have said, “I hear those words from a half century ago as if they were spoken today...” and then went on to make them up, the contemporary memoirist no longer bothers. Many of today’s memoirs, with a few notable exceptions, namely those of scientists, are just fairytales, primitive novels intended to palliate a public seized by the fear of failure. Failure is un-American and American memoirs are inevitably self-help manuals: the author is challenged, but does not die.

The confessional mania that possesses us today has emptied the nation’s closets on television, on radio, in newspapers, in memoirs. Nothing is hidden any longer, but the desire for what is hidden is increased a hundred-fold. The open maw of insatiable media and the public desire it stimulates and frustrates, demands more and more from the ransacked closets. But fear not: the production of false memory is a booming business. False Memory Syndrome is no longer limited to pop psychologists and their distressed charges, it is the status quo of the moment. The memoir answers that call by affirming a faith in a unique identity that may or may not exist. In truth, the memoir is a skeumorph, a content-empty form anyone can put their stuff in, like etch-a-sketch.

On the other hand, I do believe, with Tristan Tzara, that “I am still charming.” Who’s that “I”, anyway, and where is it?