

# *Michael Milburn*

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## Me Again

I like the sound of the words: Why I Write.  
There you have three short unambiguous  
words that share a sound, and the sound they  
share is this: I, I, I.

Joan Didion

In the American artist Marilyn Minter’s three-and-a-half minute video “I’m Not Much, But I’m All I Think About,” two gold-painted letters spelling the word “ME” fall in slow motion into a churning, viscous liquid, then reappear at the top of the frame and fall again, followed by two M&M candies, letter-side up, also coated in gold and angled to spell “ME.” As these splash down explosively and satisfyingly, two more gold letters—“ME” again—descend for a final plunge. The video ends with its title printed in white letters against a black background.

A few years ago a reader of my essays commented on their “quietly vocal, faintly narcissistic” quality. I didn’t know what he meant by “quietly vocal,” but decided to take it as a compliment, and couldn’t object to “faintly narcissistic” because wasn’t all art faintly narcissistic? I felt like the poet Siegfried Sassoon, who, when a reviewer remarked that his writing was devoid of intellectual edge, said, “But I could have told him that myself.”

When a friend suggested that “faintly narcissistic” sounded pejorative, I wondered if I had misinterpreted it, and from then on the phrase, its qualifying adjective notwithstanding, nagged at me, touching on my sensitivity about being too personal a writer. The issue had first come up in a college poetry workshop when my teacher handed me back some marked-up poems that inadvertently included a sheet of notes he had made to himself. The phrase “too diary-like” jumped out at me. At that time, the early 1970s heyday of confessional poetry, it was epidemic among my peers to pass off artlessly

autobiographical writing as literature. My own surrender to this trend had come when my freshman English class read a poem from Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*. Confident that the minutia of my upper-class family life could sound as glamorous as Lowell's, I began to write personal poems and have never stopped, mining my upbringing, schooling, marriage, and fatherhood. I hope that I have learned some artistry over the years, but continue to feel ambivalent about this subject matter.

Along the way, I wrote reviews and then critical essays, with my prose also taking a turn for the personal when I began to come across Robert Hass's essays on contemporary poetry and prosody (eventually collected in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Pleasures*) in literary magazines. Their anecdotal openings proved as infectious as Lowell's family stories.

I've been trying to think about form in poetry and my mind keeps returning to a time in the country in New York when I was puzzled that my son Leif was getting up a little earlier every morning.

"One Body: Some Notes on Form"

Thinking about Tranströmer's Baltics in midwinter and mid-Vermont; lots of snow: white, grey, smoke blue, dark green pines, windrows of snow-burned cedar.

"Tranströmer's Baltics: Making a Form of Time"

Just down from the mountains, early August. Lugging my youngest child from the car, I noticed his perfectly relaxed body was getting heavier every year.

"Images"

As much as I love this kind of writing, my own disclosures often make me cringe. Or rather, I imagine readers cringing, as if I were a tipsy party guest slurring intimate details. My lack of inhibition is at odds with my extreme reserve in person, and the act of working out personal matters on paper smacks of therapy. (Leigh Gilmore, author of *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, writes that "a serial autobiographer returns to the scene because she has left a body there which requires further attention.") Overworked literary forms from confessional poetry to contemporary memoir have diminished autobiography in my eyes. Finally, the books that I grew up with by

Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner instilled in me a belief that real writers make things up, or at least take pains to alter reality. I envy the short story writers George Saunders and Jim Shepard, whose subject matter tends toward the fabulist and historical, respectively, and the poet John Ashbery, who never reports what he did yesterday or two or twenty years ago. All three keep their personal lives out of sight. “Don’t write about yourself,” Annie Dillard advises in her essay “Notes for Young Writers.” “Boring people talk about themselves.”

At the same time, there’s no writer I admire more than the essayist Montaigne, who wrote, “I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics....I am myself the matter of my book.” In the four centuries since that book, *Essais*, appeared, a great deal of impersonal writing has fallen into obscurity while Montaigne’s navel gazing remains valued and read. The same could be said of two of my favorite poets, Lowell and William Butler Yeats, whose best work probes their experiences and psyches. “Why not say what happened?” Lowell asked, and Yeats ended “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” with the lines “I must lie down where all the ladders start/In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.” Documenting my life and rooting around in my heart feels self-indulgent to me, but I still believe that the most original and moving writing is achieved in this way.

All this is not to say that I only enjoy personal writing. I take vicarious pleasure in reading poetry and prose that involve no overt autobiography, fictionalized or not. But as much as I admire, say, the journalism that *The New Yorker* publishes, the pieces strike me as interchangeable in one respect: I suspect that any *New Yorker* regular—Jon Lee Anderson, David Owen, Margaret Talbot, Dexter Filkins, George Packer, Burkhard Bilger, John Seabrook, Phillip Gourevitch—could have reported and written any one of them equally well. The primary requirement was the energy and temperament to do the interviews and research, and the ability to do the writing. I love reading this kind of impersonal nonfiction, but in my own work prefer to rely on contributions that only I can provide. And so I persist at writing personal poems and essays, all the while feeling jealous of writers who deal in lives other than their own.

When it comes to reading poems, I don’t necessarily prefer personal ones to impersonal ones. Some poems that reveal nothing explicit about their authors’ lives rank

among my favorites: T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding"; Hart Crane's "Voyages"; Robert Frost's "Home Burial". But in general I am more affected by poems such as Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter," in which it seems safe to identify the narrator with the poet and the poem's details with his or her life, than by poems such as Wallace Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" that give no grounds for these assumptions.

Under this cradle-hood and coverlid  
My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle  
But Gregory's wood and one bare hill  
Whereby the haystack- and roof-leveling wind,  
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;  
And for an hour I have walked and prayed  
Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.  
I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour  
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower.

"A Prayer for My Daughter"

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea  
Of this invention, this invented world,  
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again  
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye  
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source  
Of this idea nor for that mind compose  
A voluminous master folded in his fire.

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"

Of course, it's simplistic to label writing as personal or impersonal—a poet's life always seeps into his or her poems—and to read autobiography as documentary truth. But regardless of its veracity, the poetry that moves me most and inspires me to write is that which, like "A Prayer for my Daughter," gives me a sense of the poet as an actual person struggling to understand and express his or her experience. "A man's being, fought for, fragment by fragment, there on the page: this we can recognize," Hayden Carruth said in

reference to Lowell's poetry. I find more evidence of this battle in Yeats's lines than in Stevens's.

I'm mystified by poets who don't use their daily lives as subject matter. True, no one will ever call their work narcissistic or diary-like, but to my mind they disqualify themselves from producing art as great as the greatest art ever produced—that of plainly self-examining writers such as Montaigne and Yeats. The distance that autobiographically oblique writers keep from their experience, or the masks that they don to disguise or dramatize it, keep me at a slight remove as a reader, and this tempers my response. I know how many great poems I appear to be slighting here, from Browning's "My Last Duchess" to Elizabeth Bishop's "Crusoe in England" to Lucie Brock-Broido's "Elective Mutes." I love these poems and understand that one can know a poet as intimately through a dramatic monologue as through an autobiographical lyric, but I still find the latter form more revealing and therefore more moving.

The prospect of writing impersonal poetry attracts me both as a way to protect my privacy and as a route to originality. Refusing to write the kind of anecdotal personal poem ubiquitous in today's literary journals would set me apart from the majority of my fellow poets. After all, what could be more predictable in 2015 than generating yet another poem about an epiphany prompted by a recent event or resonant childhood memory? And yet to choose or avoid subject matter solely in order to rebel against fashion is to pursue originality for its own sake. The greater challenge is to try to plough the much-ploughed ground of autobiography in a new way. Jane Kenyon said in an interview, "I am working at one thing, the short lyric. It is all I want, at this point: to write short, intense, musical cries of the spirit. I am a miniaturist...I'm not being modest...there's nothing remotely modest about trying to write short lyrics in the tradition of Sappho, Keats, and Akhmatova."

I feel that way about emulating Yeats, Lowell, and Montaigne, but also wonder if there isn't more modesty in exploring one's own life than in presuming to render another's. I possess no gift for looking outside myself in my writing—I'm too introverted to approach people for interviews, and instinctively focus everything I observe through the lens of my own experience. For me, the interest and pleasure of writing lies in cultivating the personal, not effacing it the way a journalist must. "When he enjoys life, it

is Montaigne himself he is enjoying,” Erich Auerbach wrote. Remembering what has happened to me, recording it, figuring out how I feel about it, and expressing all of this—that’s why I write, and when writers say that they invent everything (Asked about the role of autobiography in his work, the fiction writer Richard Bausch said, “Very little. I really am usually making it all up”) I wonder, “Where’s the satisfaction in that?” Of course, Bausch’s satisfaction lies in part in creating, and in part in pleasing his reader—meaning me, as I love his short stories—but invention of that kind has never motivated me.

Which brings me to my worry, prompted by the “faintly narcissistic” comment, that my self-involvement as a writer means I’m that way as a person, too. I think of self-involved people as monopolizing conversation with talk about themselves, rarely asking questions or expressing curiosity, and acting as if their views and doings are of automatic interest to others. I’m too taciturn to monopolize conversations, and anxiety about filling silences in company causes me to ask too many questions. My fear of coming across as self-involved can make me unforthcoming in social situations, though far from absolving me of the charge of narcissism, this reticence probably draws more attention than if I opened up. Even my concern about being boring suggests a greater preoccupation with my inner life than if I simply said what was on my mind.

The critic Louis Menand wrote of John Updike, “Self-absorption was a key ingredient of Updike’s creativity, and it’s not surprising that it could affect personal relations.” Detached observers absorb the world into themselves rather than participating in it. In my case this leads to misanthropy, a love of solitude where I can be alone with my thoughts in my own unsurpassed company, like the mythical Narcissus rejecting Echo’s amorous advances and retreating to the water’s edge to gaze at his reflection. Some of my reclusiveness is caused by shyness, but in my thoughts and in conversations with people close to me I also exhibit a curmudgeonly attitude. For example, a recent *New York Times* column on how prominent New Yorkers pass their Sundays described a museum director’s hectic itinerary of bagel purchases, espresso stops, and Central Park walks. Reading the article aloud to my wife, I accused the woman of trying too hard to convince herself that she was immersed in the culinary, cultural, and social swim of the Big Apple. I had no reason to suspect her of doing anything other than enjoying life, but freely found fault with her for that.

That's my general attitude toward the world: I mock, I criticize, either to myself or to someone who knows me well enough to brush off my contempt as benign grumpiness. Yet there's enough genuine scorn behind my words—as when I watch my retired neighbor putter around his yard all day and ask my wife how anyone with a brain could spend so much time pulling weeds—to make it seem self-directed, aimed at my own paltry doings and frustrated ambitions, to the point where I wonder if most misanthropy is a blend of shyness and re-channeled self-something—self-superiority in that no one is worth our time or company; self-loathing in that we dare not expose anyone to the ill spirit that we live with every day.

So here again I find myself up to my elbows in writing about me—or more precisely, writing about me writing about me—making disclosures about my character flaws that I don't confide to anyone in person and that will embarrass me if I meet someone who has read them. (“I didn't want to become Miss Lonelyhearts,” Joan Didion said about her decision to stop writing personal essays). What's more, if I spoke these insecurities out loud, they would be welcomed by people I know who are frustrated by my reserve. My tendency to clam up in person and overshare in print may perplex others, but the use of writing as an outlet has saved me. Without it I'd be sealed off from communication to a dangerous extent. My social awkwardness is such that when I do speak in public, I tend to compromise my virtues, and end up reminded that my best self, free of stammering, stage-frightened, word-garbled malapropisms and overeagerness to please, is my written one. My voice comes out differently in print, more like the way it plays in my head, and that's part of the appeal and mystique of writing.

In my early teens, I found a worn leather suitcase containing my older brother Frank's manuscripts in the attic of our parents' house. Frank would later publish two novels and a book of nonfiction, but these papers came from drafts of a novel that he had started in college. Looking at them was the first time I realized that one's written persona could sound so different—more confident, concise—from one's spoken one. Many people can express themselves more honestly in writing by virtue of doing it in solitude with no judging listener, and thanks to revision they can communicate more clearly and thus more forcefully in print than in person. “It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance,” Henry James wrote. Writing also focuses one's thoughts. Mulling

things over on a walk or venting to a friend risks inconclusiveness. One need not resolve one's problems on a walk, and might withhold information from a friend for fear of sounding too vulnerable or narcissistic. By contrast, writing, with its demands of precision, succinctness, and some degree of closure, calls forth our most disciplined self.

In a recent *New York Times* column entitled "Introspective or Narcissistic," David Brooks asked, "How do you succeed in being introspective without being self-absorbed?" He cited a "paradox at the heart of introspection," in which "the self is something that can be seen more accurately from a distance than from close up. The more you can yank yourself away from your own intimacy with yourself, the more reliable your self-awareness is likely to be." Although writing about the self would seem to increase this intimacy, this is only true of artless autobiography such as diary and journal entries. The rigor of language and form that artistic writing demands forces us to view our experience from a more detached perspective. Brooks says:

We can achieve distance from self through language...We should see ourselves as literary critics, putting each incident in the perspective of a longer life story. The narrative form is a more supple way of understanding human processes, even unconscious ones, than rationalistic analysis.

Looking through my brother's drafts, I recognized the autobiography behind his fiction; some sentences could have come directly from a diary. I suppose this made his writing self-absorbed, the work of a man digging into himself and inspecting what he came up with. But elsewhere in the manuscripts I detected a literary voice that didn't sound like the Frank I sat next to at family dinners—or rather it expressed a part of his personality that I recognized but hadn't heard in language before. This helped me to see writing not just as a groping around in the self, but as giving voice to a self that does not come across in person. "One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self," Madame Merle says in *Portrait of a Lady*. The work toward this expression is just as much an outwardly directed act as an inward one.

At least, that's what writing means to me: a way both to hold my experience up to the light of language to see it more clearly and coherently, and to communicate what and how I am thinking given that my inarticulateness prevents me from doing so through

speaking. If this is narcissistic, then so is most human interaction. Perhaps a more accurate example of a narcissist is someone who doesn't reflect on what happens or refine expression, as if life is simply there to be lived, not figured out. This brings to mind both the mythical Narcissus and the dictionary definitions of the condition named for him, which my reader may have had in mind when characterizing my essays.

Excessive self-love or vanity; self-admiration, self-centredness. (*OED*)

An extreme interest in your own life and problems that prevents you from caring about other people. (*MacMillan Dictionary*)

Excessive preoccupation with or admiration of oneself. (*American Heritage Dictionary*)

Undue dwelling on one's own self or attainments (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*)

Looking at these, my first thought is that any diagnosis of narcissism depends on one's interpretation of "excessive," "undue," and "extreme." In the essays in question was my degree of interest in myself acceptable until it went too far? Too many personal essays without an impersonal one for balance? In the first case, should I have redacted particular details, such as the scene where my son reacts to the news that his mother and I are separating? Or do some people, like Annie Dillard, simply disapprove of autobiographical writing, making their evaluations as much a matter of personal preference as my choice of subject? If so, their definition of narcissism dispenses with qualifiers and diagnoses the condition as plain old "interest in oneself."

Maybe they confuse narcissism with egocentrism—preoccupation with one's internal world. Egocentrics regard themselves and their opinions or interests as being the most important or valid. Anyone who writes and tries to publish as much information about himself as I do can't protest that charge, though my written autobiographies are usually self-diminishing rather than self-aggrandizing—the stuff of martial failures, parenting inadequacies, depression, anxiety. I may be excessive in my preoccupation with all this, but it hardly gratifies me to examine it or glorifies me to reveal it, and I often give other people's opinions, especially about me, more weight than my own. Narcissus

was transfixed by his beauty, not his failed relationships or a snarky comment overheard in the office corridor.

I can't find much in common with that mythical guy, whose failing was excessive looking outward at his reflection in the pool rather than inward at his memories and feelings. All he saw was an image, not the material for understanding or expressing or even re-making his character. In Ovid's words, "he thrusts his arms to catch the neck that's pictured in the middle of the stream! Yet never may he wreath his arms around that image of himself." If he had waded in and attempted to retrieve and reassemble its dispersing fragments, I could relate. My challenge as a writer is to bring an elusive picture of myself into clarity, and the result is hardly ever something I admire; if it was, I wouldn't be so embarrassed about my disclosures.

That's why Marilyn Minter's title, "I'm Not Much, But I'm All I Think About," suits me as a motto for what I do. It suggests that humility and self-interest can co-exist, and helps me to understand why I feel so ambivalent about making my often dubious experiences public. Playing art critic with Minter's video, I identify those different constructions of "ME" sinking into the primordial soup as the self worked over by the inquiring, ruminative, artistic mind, then recycled back through the world and dunked and processed again. It's an appropriately messy metaphor for how I write, and for what I'm most and least proud of in my work. I prefer it to the unsatisfactory and, to my mind, inaccurate label that my reader chose.