

WRITING LIVES IS MORE THAN WRITING LINES: POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES ON LIFE WRITING

By Carl Leggo

Abstract

I want to compose the lined and layered art of (a) life. I seek to know the circular, circulatory, and curricular flowing of blood, life, and memory that constitutes the heart of the poet. To live well is to live rooted in the earth, energized by the heart, discerning with the heart. In my life writing I am learning to breathe with the heart's rhythms as I seek to disclose and know again my location situated in local geographical spaces that represent a location for locution in the bigger world. What I really want to promote in this paper is the notion that life writing is more than writing lines—I want to emphasize the energy of memory and emotion and spirit. Life writing is not so much about reviewing as previewing, not so much about looking back as looking forward. Life writing is about hope and seeking health.

To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy. (Heidegger 94)

A poet stands before reality that is every day new, miraculously complex, inexhaustible, and tries to enclose as much of it as possible in words. (Milosz 56)

I have a great deal to say in this paper,
and I will say very little,
not because I don't want to say more,
but simply because I don't know what I mean,
know only that I mean to mean
more than this meaning.
So, I will offer you only a few words,
not because I'm mean,
but still only a few poems,
a few stories, a few ruminations,
a simmering stew of words,
hopefully savory,
perhaps slaving.

I was born in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, in 1953.
According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook*, in 1953
a census of animals in the Gran Paradiso National Park
found 3,242 marmots and 109 badgers,
Albert Einstein published *Generalization of Gravitation Theory*,
the sex ratio in Hawaii still showed a considerable excess of males,
Mexico granted the vote to women,
President Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed an international agency to pool
atomic energy supplies from both the western and communist worlds for peaceful purposes,
world tunnelling activity increased significantly,
a panel discussion on religious art concluded
that the eclectic school of religious architecture had lost its influence,
Red Buttons told jokes on TV,
and a process was perfected which turns oranges into a powder
which may be reconstituted into highly palatable orange juice.
The *Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook* does not mention my birth.

In *A Letter to a Young Poet* Virginia Woolf writes: "All you need now is to stand at the window and let

your rhythmical sense open and shut, open, and shut, boldly and freely, until one thing melts in another, until the taxis are dancing with the daffodils, until a whole has been made from all these separate fragments.... That perhaps is your task—to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment; to rethink human life into poetry..." (22).

I am also keen to rethink poetry into human life. More and more I find my living and teaching and researching are poem-making—meandering, lingering, constantly surprised by twists and turns revealing views and vistas that take the breath away and then fill me with oxygen enough to explode the lungs.

I got married on May 13. I re-married Lana who I first met in 1967, and first dated in 1970, and first married in 1974. A few years ago, a long time ago, I destroyed my marriage with Lana, lived with another, wrote stories—destructive and hurtful, knew the world in fearful and terrible colours. Then, I returned to Lana just over a year ago, and now just recently we have spoken new vows, the old vows inadequately honoured, filled with hope that our new vows will write sturdy lines for living well, with wellness, in the world. At the wedding, a friend offered a gift of two words. He said, "To live well takes courage and humility." I have been ruminating on those words, courage and humility, and now I offer them to you as a gift.

Etymologically, "courage" is derived from the Old French word "curer" which means heart. Humility is connected to "humus" which means earth. The words heart and earth have the same letters with just the "h" moved from beginning to end. (Like the poet bpNichol I have a passion for the letter "h.")

Located in the earth,
knowing the heart,
I will learn by heart
the earth's rhythms,
rooted in humility
for forgetting and forgiving,
rooted in courage
for remembering and giving.

As Heidegger once wrote, "Poetry does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling" (218).

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In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, published posthumously in 1997, Paulo Freire acknowledges from the perspective of a long life nearing its end that his childhood backyard was a space connected to many spaces. Freire writes: "My childhood backyard has been unveiling itself to many other spaces—spaces that are not necessarily other yards. Spaces where this man of today sees the child of yesterday in himself and learns to see better what he had seen before. To see again what had already been seen before always implies seeing angles that were not perceived before. Thus, a posterior view of the world can be done in a more critical, less naïve, and more rigorous way" (38). Freire encourages me that "the more rooted I am in my location, the more I extend myself to other places so as to become a citizen of the world. No one becomes local from a universal location" (39).

I am learning that the heart of any pedagogic endeavour is learning to breathe. What I really want to promote in this paper is the notion that life writing is more than writing lines—I want to emphasize the

energy of memory and emotion and spirit. Life writing is not so much about reviewing as previewing, not so much about looking back as looking forward. Life writing is about hope and seeking health.

Ursula Kelly writes: “An apparent paradox has emerged out of the increasing influence of poststructural practice: the intensified attention to auto/biography in education. It is paradoxical in that a genre that has traditionally signaled attention to, and even romanticized, the *individual* of liberal humanist and modernist thinking—the essentialized authentic and rational self...—seems an unlikely site of popular practice within a theoretical context in which the constitution of self and the origins and authenticity of its narratives are highly contested” (47-48).

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Now, seven postmodern perspectives and seven autobiographical poems:

LINE ONE: POSTMODERNISM PROMOTES LANGUAGE AS CONSTITUTIVE.

Life writing is not only
recording and reporting and repeating
the lived story as known,
as written by the subject;
life writing is
recoding and restorying and restoring
the lived story as unknown,
as unwritten by the subject.

Brenda Marshall: “Postmodernism is about language. About how it controls, how it determines meaning, and how we try to exert control through language” (4).

bpNichol: “If the writing is evocative it is only so thru evocation. Which is partly syntax, partly mystery” (4).

Jane Rule: “A genuine autobiography is usually written by someone who has devoted a great deal of time to language” (32).

WINTER ALPHABET

returning in March after seven years
of November to January rain

I know only I have forgotten
the winters I grew up with

for a few days I walk in Corner Brook
as if I am fighting winter

head down, going somewhere fast
except I move slowly

almost pantomime, pushing myself

through winter like walking under water

I must learn to lean with winter
seek its erratic rhythms

like a dory sliding up and down
the smooth sides of a rough sea

I taste winter, winter savours
my body with a lustful lover's appetite

snow bites pinches pokes stabs
slices like a set of sharp knives

in a TV infomercial
neatly skinning a tomato

snow acts with verb exuberance,
a veritable thesaurus of action words

winter reduces the world
people stay home more

huddle in their cars more
hide in shopping malls more

deep snow, hard-packed snow,
plowed snow, powder snow

no hint of spring anywhere
except spring always comes

sunglasses essential, blind colour,
light and shadow tear the retina

snow in mountain creases
and cracks, a monochrome world

like the alphabet on paper,
a text I am learning to read again

reminded how quickly I grew
illiterate, lost my language

LINE TWO: POSTMODERNISM PROMOTES THE SUBJECT AS A CONSTRUCT, ALWAYS IN
PROCESS, A MATRIX OF IDENTITIES.

When I name myself or when I am named by others,
I am created (constructed or written) with identities,
and these identities are multiple
because I always occupy many subject positions:
teacher, poet, father, son, husband, believer,
long-haired white Canadian middle-aged man from Newfoundland.
I have written myself and been written in multiple identities.

Sometimes these identities are conflictual, possibly even contradictory,
constantly in a process of change, malleable and tentative.

Susan Griffin: "One can spend a whole life writing, . . . and still hardly begin" (176).

Rosemary Sullivan: "A life is a puzzle to be decoded, but it is not a solution to the puzzle that one is after; it is an unlayering of the depths of the puzzle so that its mystery can be revealed. I think of the Spanish verb *recordar*: to remember, to pass back through the heart" (xiv).

Ursula Kelly: "The attention to ambiguity, paradox, and difference—more complex and subtle renderings of experience—is libratory, in itself (51).

NO LOCKS

in my mother's house
doors had no locks

or we forgot to use them,
preferred, Can I come in?

the walls were thin like ice
on autumn morning puddles

no insulated world
the house never silent

the telephone rang
always TV glared

the radio chattered
records tapes blared

a little house
no space to hide in

no attic no garage
no storage shed

no hallway no porch
no upstairs downstairs

always somebody
dropping in

framed in the doorway
with jackets and boots on

No, b'y, I can't stay, just
wanted to see how you were doin'

oil furnace cutting in and out
steady hum in the long winter

the wringer washer twisted
a boiler of oil for chips gurgled

the refrigerator murmured
the fluorescent lights whined

clocks clicked
plumbing sluiced

always somebody going
and coming like a train station

like Tip the dog and his lover Ringo
who thought she lived with us

Skipper said, What are we doing,
heating up all Lynch's Lane?

everybody talked, all the time
at the same time

whether heard or not
performed soliloquies

a dramatic troupe
with kindled hearts

Skipper sang country and western
my brother impersonated TV stars

my sister was a feminist comedian
Nan improvised like Marlon Brando

I wanted to be Frank Capra
Carrie was the live audience

cars spun up Lynch's Lane fast
in order to keep traction

stones spinning
the mill steam whistle moaned

winter played the house
like a percussionist

the house always sweltering
summer night respite in the backyard

spring rain whistled
autumn wind teased

rhythms no poet could name
the house alive, breathed

people always calling to one another
always a sense of being watched

so close, smiling simultaneously

counterfeit and whole-souled

Carrie said, People lived close together
then, we'll never have that again

like she meant it,
like she missed something

LINE THREE: POSTMODERNISM PROMOTES THE INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN TRUTH
AND FICTION.

Too often we use language to declare
and assert and prove and argue and convince
and proclaim notions of "truth."
But what happens if we emphasize
the performative activity of language
to question and play and savour and ruminate
on notions of "truth"?
Language as performance
invites interactive responses,
intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic responses.

Brenda Marshall: "we give up the luxury of absolute Truths, choosing instead to put to work local and provisional truths" (3).

Jane Rule: "Autobiography is not easier than fiction.... It takes a rare, dispassionate intelligence to see the self from outside, a rare, compassionate intelligence to see others from inside. A willingness to be honest is not enough for those who have lied to themselves for so many years that they have come to believe the images of themselves they have created" (32).

Ursula Kelly: "Neither does such an approach constitute a rejection of the possibility of truth.... Truth is multiple—and always ever partial. Unsettled notions of what constitutes the personal, self, memory, history, and truth do, however, create the grounds for a more critical and reflective auto/biographical practice" (66).

VERNA TIBBLE

Last night Carrie called,
Harry Tibble died.

He was repairing his roof,
died with a hammer in his hands.

Ready to shingle heaven now.
Poor fellow, you remember Harry.

Four, five years ago
Harry's wife Verna spent

all their life savings,
nobody knows how much,

on BINGO and lottery tickets.
She wasn't lucky.

She told Harry. The next day
she drove to George's Lake,

pinned the car keys to her coat,
nobody knows why,

and jumped through the January ice.
At the funeral, I said all I could say,

Harry, you must feel some awful.
Harry said, I just can't understand it.

How could Verna do it? How could
Verna spend all that money?

Last night Carrie whispered,
If Verna had kept her secret,

just a few more years,
Harry would never have known.

LINE FOUR: POSTMODERNISM PROMOTES DISCOURSE AS PERSONAL AND POLITICAL.

Life writing acknowledges
how each one of us
is written by many others.
In my life writing
I do not seek a factual record.
I want evocation, a rendering,
a performative space
where stories can be conjured
out of memory imagination heart.
I want others to catch
the spirit of possibilities
in the alphabet,
to read my words
and know their words,
to read my stories
and know their stories,
to know how writing
transfuses translates transforms
life lives living liveliness.

Brenda Marshall: "The postmodern moment is an awareness of being-within, first, a language, and second, a particular historical, social, cultural framework" (3).

Ursula Kelly: "While poststructural theories may de-center the subject, the importance of the subject as a central point of transformation is not lost but reinscribed with, I would argue, greater political potential. Herein is the project of poststructural auto/biography" (49).

Paulo Freire: "As I speak with such hope about the possibility of changing the world, I do not intend to sound like a lyrical, naïve educator.... I recognize reality. I recognize the obstacles, but I refuse to resign in silence or to be reduced to a soft, ashamed, skeptical echo of the dominant discourse" (58).

GRADE FOUR GEOGRAPHY
(for Aaron)

In grade four geography
I read about
Bunga the Pygmy
who lived in Malaysia,
and other children, too,
tucked away in faraway
corners of the earth:
the steppes of Russia,
the savannahs of Africa,
the outback of Australia.

In grade four geography
I saw illustrations
of ten-year-old children;
for all their differences
they looked the same:
like Barbie dolls
with interchangeable costumes.

In grade four geography
I memorized enough
lists and facts
to colour the earth.
For example, what foods
did Bunga the Pygmy eat?
Mostly yams.

In grade four geography
I knew the earth
was an object,
solid, stable, static,
easily described,
the earth present
in the words
and pictures and maps
of my textbook.

In grade four geography
I learned about Bunga
the Malaysian Pygmy
who ate yams,
but I never learned
what Bunga learned
about Carl the Newfoundlander
who ate the tongues
of cod dipped
in milk, rolled
in flour, grilled,
light brown, crisp.

In grade four geography
I never saw Bunga
looking back at me,

perhaps asking,
How can he eat
those tongues?

LINE FIVE: POSTMODERNISM PROMOTES UNDERSTANDING AS FRAGMENTED AND
KNOWLEDGE AS PARTIAL.

Because the art and the heart of story-making
are capacious and uncontainable,
always seeking surprising twists and twisted surprises,
the story is a neverending story,
a story only temporarily suspended
with "once upon a time"
and "ever after."
There are many possibilities in any story.
I write and rewrite,
revise and revisit many possibilities.

Ursula Kelly: "What poststructural theories forewarn of is how...to tell one story is to silence others; to present one version of self is to withhold other versions of self" (51).

Rosemary Sullivan "To write a biography, then, is to write a metaphysical detective work: looking for the clues to a life" (xiv).

Brenda Marshall: "One thing that all this 'awareness' means is that as thinkers we need to hold in our minds a space for interpretations that are other than ours" (188).

LOST MOTHER

May March once lived
alone in a shack
of tar paper mill-cloth felt
at the top of Lynch's Lane
in a triangle of tall grass
roseroot and dandelion
lined by fences of neighbours
who couldn't remember who
owned the wedge of land or
how May March came to be there

alone she spelled tales of husbands
stolen to groves of witch-hazel
where she conjured a moss child
fairied away, years away, no one
knew where, till one day he tracked
his way back in a summer blue
suit with sheila's brush erasing
the lane in still another winter burst,
and the lost son of May March
asked Nan for his mother

with each question Nan's eyes
watered as if whipped
with a blasty bough,
I don't know, my boy,
and May March's son said,

ma'am, you don't know much,
and Nan whispered, most
of the time I just make stuff up,
but this day I wish only I knew
how we lost your mother

LINE SIX: POSTMODERNISM PROMOTES CRITIQUE, INTERROGATION, AND RESISTING
CLOSURE.

Life writing is always surprising me,
unfamiliar flashes in the familiar,
holes opening up like portals
to disclose vistas never visited.

Brenda Marshall: "Neither innately positive nor negative, postmodernism is an opening, a space created for a particular awareness, interrogation" (193).

Ursula Kelly: "Seizing the importance of re-presenting and re-writing our selves as we reconstruct our visions of world communities entails deconstructing the stories we tell (of) ourselves and the desires that inform them" (49).

Paulo Freire: "Critical acceptance of my inconclusion necessarily immerses me in permanent search. What makes me hopeful is not so much the certainty of the *find*, but my movement in *search*. It is not possible to search without hope, not even in solitude" (106).

FAMILY TV

TV fathers sipped
martinis at day's end,
wore suits to work,
solved all problems
with quick quiet words,
and lived in rooms of their own:
studies dens rec rooms
bedrooms with single beds
where they wore pajamas

TV mothers read
thick novels
under bedside lamps
after sipping
percolated coffee
all day, mostly sat
around with other
mothers talking
about the mothers
who weren't sitting
with them sipping
percolated coffee
all day

watching TV
I wondered
who I could be
in another
family

my mother father
brother sister
grandmother me,
familiar and unfamiliar

I often tried
to convince
my brother
he was adopted
because I could
convince my brother
to believe anything
and I wanted
to know the limits of
anything

but perhaps in my family
we were all adopted,
strangers washed up
on Gilligan's Island,
longing for rescue,
Lost in Space,
seeking home,
Hogan's Heroes,
prisoners waiting
for war's end,
the Beverly Hillbillies,
aliens making the best
of an odd world

in my mother's house
I saw TV
cannot contain
the limits of
family

LINE SEVEN: POSTMODERNISM PROMOTES TEXT AND INTERTEXTUALITY.

In my life writing I enter
into an intertextual relationship
with a discourse community,
a world of textuality,
where my voice re/calls or convenes
the voices of absent predecessors
and present presenters,
our voices calling to one another,
echoing one another.

Jacques Derrida: "Above all it is necessary to read and reread those in whose wake I write, the 'books' in whose margins and between whose lines I mark out and read a text simultaneously almost identical and entirely other" (4).

The Preacher: "Of making many books there is no end" (Ecclesiastes, 12:12).

Michel Foucault: "When language arrives at its own edge, what it finds is not a positivity that contradicts it, but the void that will efface it. Into that void it must go, consenting to come undone in the rumbling, in the immediate negation of what it says, in a silence that is not the intimacy of a secret but a pure outside where words endlessly unravel" (22).

TRUE ROMANCE

on Lynch's Lane I had many heroes
daily watched John Wayne Matt
Dillon the Lone Ranger Tonto Roy
Rogers Trigger Huckleberry Hound
the Cartwrights Fred MacMurray
Hogan's Heroes Maxwell Smart Tarzan
Walt Disney Rin Tin Tin Lucy Ed
Sullivan Jed Clampett Quickdraw
McGraw Number 99 Batman Gordon
Pinsent the Cleavers Bugs Bunny
right a wrong world

and I needed heroes with the mad
Mercers out the living room kitchen
bedroom windows Mercers watching
everywhere round us like sharks
after old man Mercer divided
his strip from Harbour to Heights
divided it in parcels big parcels
for the sons little parcels
for the daughters and went away
to shoot a moose and never came back

leaving Billy Mercer sitting
in the dark watching black and white
television through sunglasses
afraid of ultraviolet rays

and Lil Mercer who hid in her house
all winter but danced naked
in her front yard under the full May moon
and spent summer on the fifth floor
of the Western Memorial Regional Hospital

and Sam Mercer on his verandah
drinking rum watching the world go by
wondering where the world was going
since he'd never gone further
than he could see from his verandah

and Sal Mercer who talked without end
and never said a word I can remember
using words to fend off the darkness
the terrible darkness around her

and Dougie Mercer who survived polio
tuberculosis diabetic comas cancer
for more than eight decades with words
like talismans you don't have to worry
about me I won't be here much longer

and Sylvie Mercer who spent
her widow's pension on gifts
for the neighbours a steady stream
of Avon and Pot of Gold chocolates
like a Kwakiutl or Doukhobor
protesting no earth-licking fondness
for possessions going even one better
than Jesus by giving away her only coat

and I grew up reading *True Romance*
left in the bathroom by Carrie
who spun romance out of movies
and magazines from Tom's Store
while baking bread and jam jams
and pushing wet laundry through
the finger-crushing wringer
and listening to the stories of her
neighbours like a radio hotline host
and serving french fries to sons
who thought her kitchen was a take-out

and I grew up waiting for Skipper
who always woke early with dark
still filling the windows
and walked alone to the mill
through the warm hot cool cold seasons
and all day inhaled the heat and noise
of the world's biggest paper mill
his laughter still heard
over the endless pulse of machines
and at day's end burst into the kitchen
chased by the dark his face a grin

and I grew up with Carrie and Skipper
at the center of Mercer madness
listening to Sal while Billy
watched television and visiting
Dougie and Lil in the hospital
and sitting on the verandah
with Sam and delivering
Sylvie's gifts to the neighbours
and often I asked Carrie and Skipper
why do you put up with them
their only reply they're family
and on television I saw Neil Armstrong
walk on the moon and I know it is true
even though Billy Mercer still claims

it was all a hoax

KNOWING THE CONNECTIONS BEYOND BEGINNING AND ENDING:

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the earth's rhythms,
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rooted in courage
for remembering and giving.*

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Biography

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