

Autobiography and the Quest for ... *Nothing*



published in

JCT: The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing
(Spring/1997)

Gregory M. Nixon
SUNY @ Geneseo, NY, USA (in 1997)

Autobiography and the Quest for ... *Nothing*

We must lay in waiting for ourselves.

Throughout our lives.

Abandoning the pretense that we know.

(William F. Pinar, *Toward a Poor Curriculum*, p. viii)ⁱ

§1. Birth & Restance.ⁱⁱ Only everything remains to indicate the nothing from which we have come. Being forever remains curled around its empty centre, its gaping wound. Like the black holes around which swirl spiral galaxies, this null point both sucks energy into nonbeing and expels it out into being. It neither *is* nor *is not*.

Those in the curriculum field who have been working to recover the suppressed memories hidden within institutional jargon have found no source, no fountainhead within the labyrinth of self from which all truth flows. The Absolutely Other (Derrida, 1992; Otto, 1973) before/outside wordworlds eludes language and must do so. If I am but a concatenation of words, is there any use looking within, before words, for whatever it is I might be?

Autobiography cannot *tell* what the life *is* that is being written, it can only use the self to express the *trace*ⁱⁱⁱ of its unspeakable end, absent-presence, and origin. Such a trace is of a past, as Merleau-Ponty (1978) has said, which has never been present. Krell adds: “To envisage such a past, however darkly, is to have experienced the failure of the traditional model for memory” (1990, p. 7). Once narration begins, the autobiographer can only gather the scattered bits and inferences of the already-spoken everything in a vain attempt to transcend the wordworld’s closure.

We emerge into everythingness. The senses mingle incestuously. Nothing is distinct or differentiated. Everything is no-thing. How is it we come to be as distinct entities? Let me personalize: In what manner did I become an I? Is the motive force behind this much-maligned, much altered, much-abused body my soul? my genes? ***me?***

I remember remembering when I could have gone back. That is to say, I can no longer remember a time when I did not remember a time before (just as the “ancients” always memorialized previous ancients). They and I cannot recall beginnings, or the non-time before time. But I remember articulating (in some manner) to myself that I could recall feeling that I need not “come out,” that I need not follow the seduction of the smiles encouraging me to eat, to hug, to smile back. I remember thinking that I had felt that I could go back/before/within/*out*—and what a tingling of bliss danced around such

dissolutive potential! I could just shut off the synesthetic sensory bother and fall back to oceanic bliss. Oh yes: “*Not in entire forgetfulness.../But trailing clouds of glory do we come...*” and all that. Earth may “*fill her lap with pleasures of her own*” (Wordsworth, 1807) but nothing like the transpersonal joy that urged me back, senseless but serene.

Unease crept through: Some inkling that I who was on the verge of making such a momentous decision (Good Lord, it’s “To be or not to be...”) would not be there for the next decision. Such a thought could not arise from the blissful nowhen of absolute memory: I was already attached to the dis-ease of self. I remember remembering that I would embrace the “*inevitable yoke*” so I would not dissolve. It was bliss or being: Why choose being?

Perhaps it has to do with double glance of Hermes, the god of boundaries, looking both ways at once, to being and nonbeing (López-Pedraza, 1989). Only one “way” chooses, however. With the act of choosing, being is aware of being: both ways become duplicity.

The secret bliss of nonbeing transmogrifies into omnivorous horror. I fear I will be lost. The terror stalks when the senses darken and desperately I seek to sunder identity from its *unspeakable* source. One flees into the world, but it is a chaos of multiple selves in such action which is expressed by Beckett in his possibly autobiographical novella, *Company* (1980): “What visions in the dark of light! Who exclaims thus? Who asks who exclaims, What visions in the shadeless dark of light and shade! Yet another still? Devising it all for company” (pp. 59-60).

One becomes “one” by entering the stories of others—company—and, through naming and subtle allusion, learns who one is. There is an existence aware of itself existing which “enconceptualates” a self from the concepts projected by the world: “I’m in words, made of words, others’ words. . . .” as Beckett wrote in *The Unnameable* (1983). The words congeal until we find ourselves shrouded in Graves’ “Cool Web” (1927): “*There’s a cool web of language winds us in, / Retreat from too much joy or too much fear. . . .*”

Now I know: “I,” “me,” “mine,” refer *only* to my secret being: the unified entity inferred by reference. This in-ferred singularity of differences isolates me but fills me with the power of secrecy: I now nurture yearnings that will strengthen my *place* in this realm of denial. I now know the name for the bliss/threat of unbeing and I will never forget it: They call it **Death**.

I lie alone in my oblong room at night aware that falling to sleep is like falling into the abyss. I do not close my eyes until dreams take me without consent or knowledge. Instead, I listen and look in fear—the fear is *of* me. I recognize it and hold it to me.

There are rage and desire, as well, but they are the stuff of the shifting shadows behind the always partially open door of my clothes closet. They swirl in the darkness under my bed that seeks to draw me in. They are not *of* me.

I hear the voices of my parents rise in the next room, the pat of my sister's bare feet as she sneaks to the bathroom. Silence. Then I hear insidious whispers and muffled laughter that I cannot comprehend. I feel compelled to an attuned intensity.

Who is talking? More mysterious still: Who is listening? I am the self who loves the world so the world must love me ("*If I should die before I wake...*"). I am good. I shall try not to *strain* into the dark or listen to its fearful suggestions in the thunder, in my dreams. The whispers, sighs from my parents room are not compelling, are they? I wish no harm on anyone. The rustling, breathing dark places are evil and seek release in *the act*. But why do they attempt to draw me to them? I? *I am good*. Desire: the shadows straining for freedom from the hidden corners of my room are not me—*Not ME!*

I am told of death—it is explained—but it is an abstraction no more real than that "God" who watches me at night. Death is for others. I exist. And there are I things I want. I learn to bargain with the dark whisperers and allow them to eke out their needs through the subtle social sanction of sexual fantasy. Wordsworth's "clouds of glory" dissipate in compromise: Duplicity. Rationalization. Narrative.

My secret, private world grows until the day comes when I doubt the existence of others. Am I the only one with inner thoughts, emotions, and dreams? *Why are their eyes always so veiled?* My solipsistic enormity begins to imagine the world as a vast test existing only for me. How fortunate I did not objectify others as only moving matter, to be manipulated as I so chose—the hell-trip of psychopathology: *objectivity sickness*.

Even Narcissus leaves the mirror-stage at some point: I had been telling Clyde about what I had learnt about the size of the universe. We looked at the arching night-sky over the Saskatchewan prairie while I described with growing awe the stars that were planets, and the Milky Way in which our sun was but one star among billions, and other stars which were actually other galaxies, also numbering in the billions. Clyde ran home in primitive horror. I lay back and picked out one distant blue star and let it study me as I tried to comprehend.

Of course, I could not. But I fell back—fell *before*—as the hypnotic blue light enlightened me as to my utter insignificance—an insignificance so incomprehensible as to be astonishing. I was silent for days after that, never able to explain why I was quiet for days. Nor can I recall today. The bliss abyss tells no tales. Somehow the impossible vastness of space had been revealed to me as but a curtain before the

Nothing, and the cold air blew in through the rent in my soul. Time, however, did not cease.

The years of self-construction again are poised over an action. Now my boyhood self hungers for something *vital* missing, which must, I assume, be in the world. The world seems a mystery, but with a prize within. All the tales I have been told since infancy and the Greek myths I have just been absorbing seem to unite into an urge to seek some great treasure. School has stolen the adventure, but now I have discovered a better use for language than phonics or grammar: writing! Writing whatever is imaginable, whatever my fancy damned well pleases.

There is a complacency to self when it learns its script, when its stories have become memorialized and relegated to ritual. Ah, the sweet contentment of those who have named the abyss, placed it, and filed it. For such, writing is always labour at least, and sometimes a serious threat. I found great liberation in my adventure stories, a liberation through the *limitation* of writing. At this early stage, I had to forget who I had memorized I was, and listen darkly or in the air for all that I imagined I could be:

As though in order to begin writing one did not have to forget or otherwise suppress most of what memory and reminiscence have meant; as though the entire matter of memory, reminiscence, recall, recollection, revery, and repetition were not an endless overture arising out of an absolute past and capable of infinite development; as though one were not always writing on the verge of both remembrance and oblivion alike. (Krell, p. 1)

At this stage, all that "I could be" was still idealized from the memory of the world with its opening for a hero of one face or another. Writing opened the world and gave me a more realistic place within it (than thinking it was me). A quest, however envisioned, becomes a con-quest unfulfilled when the imagination roams like the wind, unattached, ungrounded. All the holding-pens for heroes awaiting the cattle call, heroes that will never be, become the overcrowded bins of braggadocio. The dream fades, and even Ulysses must look for novelty:

*Little remains; but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things ... (Tennyson, 1833)*

Other dreams come, no longer of conquest, but of a *return*. The scene changes. The body ages. Desire becomes a relentless dominatrix. Frustration, itself, is not enough to keep me going. My attention wavers, but the self-collection urges me on through my meagre accomplishments. I want *more*. I want the beyond. I read of other worlds. I want transcendence. I want out. Yes, drive on. Yes, I dream...

*Of driving alone, without luggage, out a long peninsula,
The road lined with snow-laden second growth,
A fine dry snow ticking the windshield,
Alternate snow and sleet, no on-coming traffic,
And no lights behind, in the blurred side-mirror,
The road changing from glazed tarface to a rubble of stone,
Ending at last in a hopeless sand-rut,
Where the car stalls,
Churning in a snowdrift
Until the headlights darken.*

(Roethke, 1964)

I have become a being fearing his demise, desiring his predominance: fearing his desire and (O anxiety!) desiring his fear. I am tensed in extension. I re-collect the mystic art of veiling my soul: *persona*. Run from selflessness. Fulfill selfishness! I am *one* for and to the world.

One interacts. One becomes a subject—which is to say an object. One rationally orders one's self-tales for immediate delivery, available on call. At last, one succumbs to history, a larger totality of one. One seeks to find one's place, to embed one's narrative in the Grand Narrative. The private motivators of fear and desire become compressed, repressed, and, finally, sublime-ated into the Grand Fear, the Grand Desire. One putrefies in blandness and dares not question why one continues at all. One slinks into unity. One forgets one's story. How can one go on?

I don't know, perhaps it's a dream, all a dream, that would surprise me, I'll wake, in the silence, and never sleep again, it will be I, or dream, dream again, dream of silence, a dream silence, full of murmurs, I don't know, that's all words, never wake, all words, there's nothing else, you must go on, that's all I know, they're going to stop, I know that well, I can feel it, they're going to abandon me, it will be the silence, for a moment, a good few moments, or it will be mine, the lasting

one, that didn't last, that still lasts, it will be I, you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (Beckett, 1983, pp. 190-191)



§2. Self-Shapes. From the “gaping wound” of blissful non-existence, my story has unfolded outward bound. It seems to describe the dream of a linear trajectory from the terror of losing the self ascribed to me to the uniting of that self with its source in the semiotic totality of culture. The symbols of this *Lebenswelt*, primarily language, camouflage the secret yearnings of divergent memories and less sociable selves. The *Lebenswelt* describes not just a space but aspires to control time, as well.

Can I recall my bliss? No. Can I expect such bliss to await me? No I cannot. If there is only the “going on,” it is a journey into the same timeless void which precedes existence. “Timeless voids” can hardly be compared as merely “similar.” What reality can there be between poles of the abyss? What are these dancing electrons of life? What can we imagine suspended, like a Chinese painting of a distant bridge, between nothingness and nothingness? All that may exist are what Paul Veyne calls the “palaces of the imagination”: “These palaces are not built in space, then. They are the only space available. They project their own space when they arise. There is no repressed negativity around them that seeks to enter. Nothing exists, then, but what the imagination, which has brought forth the palace, has constituted” (1988, pp. 121-122).

It is in the richest of ironies that Beckett suggests imagination's imperturbability: "No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine" (1965, p. 7). Reality, it seems, is a creation of experience, of images.

The world of primordial images, group fantasy, imagination—call it what you will—cannot be subverted by turning from the world. As in Jung's famous dictum: "The gods have become diseases" (1953 ff. 13§54)—and our angels may become demons. It was in my twentieth year that I awoke from the dream of self to the awakened dream of the world; it was that same year that I began the plummet into all the hells the whisperers can conjure and the further hells a culture without wisdom can devise.

What is the shape of the self? Whatever shape it must be, I would presume, as long as it can function as a formidable container. It is a self made of words, made of directions and restrictions. It is a self which subliminally plays its identity for the listener, around and around on its recycling turntable. It is a self which denies death, denies fear, and certainly denies transcendence. But a self transcended *in spite of itself* blackens its sky with the maddened furies of vengeance.

With the help of a heart full of love and the sacred sharing of purple microdots, I found myself plummeting into the Earth. "I've lost my soul," I said to no one. "I have no soul. I might as well live for others..." At that moment, however, when I was "trembling with tenderness," I did not project beliefs to save me and "form prayers to broken stone" (Eliot, 1925). Nor did my lips kiss. I ran. I ran up a steep embankment and burst into the sunshine. And burst. And I was out. Was out of my head, beyond me self, no longer imprisoned behind my eyes. Oh, I saw and heard and felt—more than I had ever seen or heard or felt—but it was from a position "whose centre is everywhere." Nature sang; my thoughts were silent. The circle of I had opened back into the see-through // and reunited its spiral in rapture with the spiral of the absolutely alive world which I am. Life itself was an ecstatic double helix.

I returned, of course. I awoke. I wondered. In time, the doubts and accusations of the spherical self-container began to be heard. In time, I learned to imagine that my awakening had horrible implications, that it was evil, and it must never happen again. In time, I relearned the art built of fear that I had first learned as a child: Cling. Identify. Work harder. Seek success. Seek security. After a few years of thought-plague, I returned from Greece and began to march in the grand parade of history.

Post-transcendence, I find myself signed up on the grand tour of "maturity." Freud's "reality principle" kicks in and I can now put away the illusions of childhood for the *real* illusions of adulthood. But our scientific/consumeristic metanarrative tells me

nothing: I live, I talk, I *process*, I die. The well-advertised proclamation is that by identification with the omnipresent Grand Narrative that a kind of immortality is attained. No longer need *oneself* worry about personal memories, about unfinished stories, about unnameable fear. “*Objectify, objectify/Identify, identify...*” The whispers are now those of the Grand Stage’s promises: “Get ahead.” “Hold on.” “Forget.”

I have learned and listened and now I know personal memory is nothing but historical memory and am assured that we are on the grand train to revelation. We strive together for given ends. We imagine that by being certain of our facts we may control our destiny. Even my life story becomes literalized as a *résumé*, memorized for easy identification. Autobiography becomes auto-matic.

Does knowing the truth—as in a chronicle—add to our awareness in the present? Can we look back and see the path we have taken? To catch an accurate backward glance reveals only the illusion of our sense of controlled direction. Without clinging to our narratives, the crazy mesh of “roads” behind reveals only present bewilderment.

We become listeners only to our own semiosis, caught in our own cycles of repetition and *forget to remember to listen for nothing*. We become concerned with righting the past and seeking the chain-link causes for the present just as we predict the future and attempt to make it so. Without a sense of *presence* we become caught in the nothingness of symbolic time and can no longer apprehend even a trace of the timeless nothingness, like Wallace Stevens’ “Snow Man” (1923):

*For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

In this land of forgetting, the “official” timeline is just that: a *line*. From the womb to the tomb, we march on in our dutiful progress and it is considered to be in the utmost bad taste to dwell on personal deaths. In the time of our lives, death is only a vulgar imagining. My death lies “ahead,” awaiting me in raiments of marble and dirt. The less I wish to think of it (by, say, working for “the good of society”), the more the awaiting tomb drains life of all savour, the more purposeless seem my palaces of the imagination, and the more I feel the weariness of the social procession:

*“O plunge your hands in water,
Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare in the basin*

And wonder what you've missed.

*"The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the teacup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.*

(W. H. Auden, 1940)

"The lane to the land of the dead" or "the nothing that is" is the inevitable result of living a linear narrative to world without end. We have no preconceptual memory to postconceptually project. Try as we might, we do not remember how to die. (Certain religions, of course, indicate that life-choices make a difference in the afterlife—"Heaven or Hell, baby"—or in the metempsychosis into the *next* life, but such results are very much *their story*.) Our story, absurd as it seems, imagines death as the same for all—no matter how expanded the concentric ripples of awareness have grown.

Our pseudo-scientific metanarrative position seems to be that death is simply one character's departure from the grander story. Death may be a place or state, but that state must be inalterable and final (in one way or another), so it is certainly *unconscionable*. Whether ethereal gratification (for all) or oblivion (across the board) or spiritual transmigration (automatic), our metanarrative lie of brass is: "*Life has nothing to do with death!*" It would seem the way we have lived matters not at all in the dark pool of oblivion. There is only this pointless growth, this meaningless clinging.

We are here (but do not remember how) and our private existence does not matter in the slightest, except as it impacts on "the time of our lives." My own story can be nothing more than "a tale told by an idiot" (Shakespeare, 1969: V. 5. 26-27). What possible purpose, then, for autobiography in education, for research in teachers' stories, for *lifewriting*? One's appearance on the stage of time is so brief and meaningless, in itself, that it must be asked whether teaching, itself, has any purpose other than the furtherance of the larger goals of society for expansion or preservation, or however they may be perceived. Is it true? Is education merely training to productively *kill time*?

As I succumb to the socially linear, my life becomes *delineated*. But my deep memory suggests my life as a circle, an eventual return to the pre-self. Where am I amidst this shapeshifting? Is a life a meaningless round, a meaningless line, or a shifting palace? What is the shape of a life? What is the shape of this life?

After saying each life has "its own particular delineation, its distinctive form and direction, its own 'teleological unity,'" thus suggesting a line, autobiography scholar

James Olney (1972) admits that, finally, “no one can foredraw the exact shape of destiny.” Our experience in the life surrounding us, on the other hand, where presumed self meets presumed self (and they elide into unheard harmonies and imperceptible presences), Olney describes more as a ripple effect: “The self of each of us, that one source at which we experience life, is surrounded by a complex and sometimes, no doubt, bewildering series of concentric circles: those greater and greater abstractions derivable from the single concretion and the final reality of individual being” (p. 326).

The circular shape of life has been assumed by our species since we were driven to periodic rituals of cosmic renewal, as Mircea Eliade (1954, 1963) has explained. Since Gilgamesh sought eternal life, narratives of the hero’s journey created the individual quest, described by Joseph Campbell (1949) as beginning with “The call” and ending with “The return,” a circle despite the changes to the adventurer and the narrative quality of the tale. Many have considered the seeker’s journey as an archetype of everyperson’s life-journey, sometimes paradoxically leading beyond life (e.g., van der Leeuw, 1964). In the latter case, the circle must not be understood as inevitable, for would-be heroes are sometimes overcome by the trials and the temptations of the quest—one of the greatest threats being forgetfulness of purpose, such as when the seeker forgets herself by *eating* from the lotus-flower or *drinking* from the waters of Lethe. (Defeat by consumerism?) Further, if we all die and all memory is immediately extinguished, then life does not matter. The final quest may be for memory.

For the greater tales of myth, life clearly matters. The choices we make here and now in this veil of tears and illusions will affect the way we die, will affect those who follow us. Finally, the awareness we have lived may even determine the potential for the retention of life-memories as we shake off our existence—our ex-essence—and return to the Great Memory of essence-tial nothingness. Is life a heroic struggle to overcome the imprisonment of the world-created self? If so, what happens when this ego-self steals the intention of the quest and coddles itself with a hero’s identity?

Heidegger and Hillman have been interpreted as having the similar project of forgetting or seeing-through the heroic ego as a kind of soul-making journey to nowhere (Avens, 1982). Mary Doll similarly understands Beckett’s central characters to be an inversion of the heroic ego: “Beckett’s quest by male questers begins a far more difficult task for modern consciousness—the task of undoing the ego in an attempt to rediscover the soul, or psyche” (1988, p. 20). Perhaps this more nearly suggests a circle than the journey into victory of the mythic hero.

In either case, the wonderful faith remains that a lifetime of individual integration, or egoistic disintegration, affects the whole (“we go through the world for the sake of *its* soul-making...” Hillman, 1989, p. 70) and radiates Olney’s “concentric circles.” Roethke (1964) expresses the universal reverberation of a vital memory this way:

*The pure serene of memory in one man—
A ripple widening from a single stone
Winding around the waters of the world.*

§3. Elliptic Associations. Much depends on the interpretation of that “single stone” or the sense of memory here employed. Could the single stone be autobiographical intention? Autobiography or an artistic representation can never *enconceptualate* a self or the truth of life. I live a story. I am creating my story—tragic, nihilistic, or mutant—right here before you. But there are larger circles of stories around me. Much of this action enmeshes my being with those of others, like expanding ripples from thrown stones—meeting, overlapping, yet still retaining individual patterns.

I was deceived from the beginning when I learned I and imagined I was alone in my private sphere of awareness. How can language created thoughts be isolated? I did not know that this was part of my cultural heritage—the myth of the individual. I did not know my desires and fears were so obvious to others and so shared with them, their form implied and given in language.

I find I am both teller and listener. The teller summarizes: *Self is constituted in and through relations with others. Relations are culturally determined. Culture’s form is narrative, built with language. Memory takes form through narrative. Self takes form through memory. Self as persona is a linguistic construct adapted to cultural demands. Culture, language, and self are sublimations/expressions of desire (or, more nicely, concern). Autobiography, lifewriting—written narrative—is relational as well as being self-constitutive.*

The unnameable no-thing at either end of life (or so we linearly imagine) cannot itself attend to the harmonics of being since it is always absent as *presence*. The same unnameable as an empty centre from which being arises and to which it returns (or so we circularly imagine) is always present as *absence*: “The hidden harmony is stronger than the visible” (Herakleitos, in Freeman, 1983, p. 28).

This ghostly, timeless self-silence—a nothing which listens—seems to draw from the creations, repetitions and memories of time but is not drawn (of itself) into the prison

of time. This Absolutely Other must be of the same void within memory I had morbidized under the grim concept of death. But concepts are *in time* and are *real*. With a *concept* like death before us, no wonder we seek to control the future! But what I had called death is Other and *not* conceivable. It is *altarity*.^{iv}

I could say I have eased away from the sales pitch of “the time of my life” by changing my relationship to death. But it is not at all clear that any sort of relationship can be said to exist with an Absolute Other that cannot be said, *in itself*, to exist! Both silent reverie (back) and creative action (toward) involve large doses of anxiety because of the uncertainty of relating to anything whatsoever.

The active imagination, the active listener, the active memory: all imply *action* in the here and now—the eternal present—not passive adsorption in the self-affirming narratives offered by the culture-industry or in complacent relationships. Ginette Paris (1990) connects the active memory to the prenarrative image as the relation between Mnemosyne, the goddess Memory, and her daughters, the Muses of the arts: “It’s an active memory which breaks into consciousness through archetypes, dreams and myths, fantasies, symbols and artistic work. ... But it is not just of the past, a taped recording; it is constructive, evocative, poignant, and the beginning of musing as Mnemosyne was the mother of the Muses” (p. 121).

This “musing” is akin to reverie and has for its material all the microversals^v of memory. The hint here is that creative action—possible only with a non-self-centered memory—may take one through the portals of fear and desire, take one beyond the finitude of the socially-constructed subject, take one into the realms of microversals piercing past and future. Bachelard pierces my verbosity: “*Poetic images condense infinite meanings in elliptic associations*” (1987, p. 28).

Poetic reverie seems to take the particular phenomena of existence (and this means phenomena remembered, if perception is understood as time-delayed through memory) and folds them back upon themselves in “elliptic associations.” Autobiography—since we all have lives, no matter how limited the attention our living may receive—must be one of the first motions toward such reverie. Autobiography may attain to a reverie which finds the archetypal past projected into the future as epistrophe: a resembling *or re-assembling or disassembling*. Or, as Taylor interprets Nietzsche, as *eternal return* or repetition: “In repetition, the past that is never present is reversed and appears as the future that is always deferred. The guise of this future is death. Death ... is the present absence or absent presence that forms the ever approaching-receding horizon of human experience. The ‘beyond’ of death opens with repetition” (1987, p. 96).

A folding-back or elliptic association is not merely a repetition, however. It suggests the power to (ap)perceive through attuned memory. The (ap)perceiver must be a self whose centre has been replaced (through a kind of death) by a shifting (and shifty) transparent door: a “nothing.” In such “ecstasy”—an exit from stasis—Heidegger infers that “for the most part we *are* our own having-been” (in Krell, p. 331). The creative core is nowhere and no-thing and so everywhere and all.

§4. Seven Photographs. #1 (1977): Namiko waves goodbye, overdressed indoors in her winter coverall. Did she know it was goodbye? “You and your kids,” Setcha, her mother my wife, had said, referring to my drama students, “When are you going to grow up?” She was a businessperson. She was adult. I, however, hung out with high school students. Setcha turned her back on me and “my kids”. I joined my kids in an ever-increasing spiral of atavistic participation. We did plays, we partied, and I irrevocably crossed forbidden boundaries. Desire refused institutionalization. Setcha left, taking our daughter with her, and, after four years, reputation rent, I left to sporadic thrusts of activity in the Vancouver theatre scene and finally deckhanding on a salmon trolling boat. Namiko waves goodbye forever far far away within me.



#2 (1980): It's a picture of me, cutting wood near the square log house by Kootenay Lake in which I live alone. Sadder but wiser, as they say, I am attempting to leave the theatre of Dionysos and to embrace the inhibitions demanded by the institution. I teach a wide variety of subjects, including social studies, in the local K-12 school. The students often hate the institution. It's part of that which closed the mines, closed the mills, stopped the logging. But I have heard the whispers of vague rewards

like security and, more important, a place in the world. They will learn what I want them to. Alas, the position is temporary and, finding I like my log house and even the round of classes, it is bitter to leave after one term. It seems the system is no more reliable than the dark waters of unleashed emotion. Which is real? Which is necessary? Which is sufficient?

#3 (1981): It's me again, but this shot's in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. I am wearing an outfit consisting of a red smoking jacket, black tuxedo pants tucked into cowboy boots, and topped by a white Arabian desert keffiyeh (headwrap) with the emblem of Alberta emblazoned on the forehead. I am on my hands and knees. Astride me is a voluptuous bleach blonde in high heels and a black corset, wielding a riding crop. Desire seems indeed to have become a relentless dominatrix. Her name is Casey and we're on stage acting in a play, a satirical farce on Calgary's oil wealth. I'm playing the premier, the "Sheikh of Cornucopia."^{vi} We had been banned in Calgary itself so we had gone on the road. Dionysos was reasserting himself. Casey's demand for extra rehearsals was murder.



#4 (1982): It's Julian, the drama teacher from Crowsnest Pass, standing atop the Tower of Babel prop in our production *Babblerap*. Fat and frazzled with a handkerchief on his head, he frantically pounds nails. The play is ending and I am at the foot of the stairs, smoking a questionable cigarette, having given up the attempt to scale the heights. I was two years teaching junior high English at the Crownest Consolidated

High School and during that time my pedagogy changed from a quest for meaning to a conquest for control. This time, my own experience was to be firmly exiled and my time was to be sold in its entirety to the system. I didn't go out. I dated rarely. Time, my precious time, was given to the weightroom and to reading stacks of science fiction. I was not going rouse "those obstinate questionings" and wonder again just what I was doing in this classroom, in this system, in this world of unconscious ritual. I now worked to maintain order and teach what I was told. I have never had more trouble with students in my life. Rapport was made impossible by my horror at their intransigent resistance. Didn't they realize that they had to plan now for their future security?

#5 (1985): Five college instructors standing by their Lethbridge Community College van in the unincorporated village of Brocket on the Peigan Indian Reservation. All smiles, all big coats; the cold prairie wind whips hair and blows away time. My misery at CCHS and Debby at the university had taken me into the southern Alberta city. I had signed on as one of the annually contracted instructors of "Adult Native Upgrading" for LCC to teach on one of the smallest, poorest Reservations in Canada. Thirteen years previously, I had flunked a university course called The North American Indian because I had thought it unnecessary to write the term paper. It seemed my appointment was penance. For seven years, I was yearly rehired to teach on the torporous prairie to students who had little intention of ever leaving their security of poverty, isolation, and resentment. Cornelius, one of my students, phoned me at 3 AM from a highway phonebooth. He was drunk and suicidal and I could hear cars hiss ominously by. It seemed to save him to have me admit that I had absolutely no understanding of his reality. Running out of advice, I had hopelessly admitted my ignorance. For years I had been importing ideas into a backwater subculture of which I knew nothing. Nothing.



#6 (1987): Richard and I in a laughing locked-arm toast at Bergamo after presenting my skit "Effulgence and Effluvium" about teaching in Brocket. Now that I realized I knew nothing, Richard's autobiographical graduate curriculum class at the UofL gave me the

chance to write of it. It changed the direction of my life to realize that my wayward life of dream, desire, and dedication was a story. With Richard's encouragement, I awoke to the strange notion that "my life" was in fact many stories, many narrative connections, and I was not the central character in many of them. After writing a play to fulfill the requirements for my M.Ed. creative project, I left Canada and fell south.



#7. (1997): Sitting outdoors in the miniature Greek Theatre by South Hall surrounded by enthusiastic future teachers in the spring sun. Bright and beautiful, the students shine, good people willing to work at whatever they are directed to do. Though I am urging them to awaken—to examine the sources and intentions of their own thoughts and feelings—they are happy to linger outside and allow me to think for them. Geneseo is a safe, secure island in the cultural mainstream. They have no wish to whisk back the curtain lest they find behind it nothing at all. The Nothing nihilates silently.



§5. **Labyrinth.** We act and create a past in expanding ripples from an empty centre. We cannot recall such an "empty centre," of course, since it is not a part of memories (or self), but in moments of deep nameless yearning—Heidegger's anxiety—we may

recoil from our natural unfolding to an infolding—that “remembering (which does not remember)” the self, as Taylor (1987) phrased it.



Remembering against the uncoiling of nature brings with it anxiety and dread (but not the terror and horror of denial). Remembering beyond our personal histories requires active imagination, but imagination cannot exceed itself, cannot create its own archetypes: “Every psychic process is an image and an ‘imagining’, otherwise no consciousness could exist” (Jung, 1953 ff. 11§889). Even the primordial images of collective memory are limited by their mode of representation—the empirical world of our senses (though there may be non-represented, intuitional feelings of the “sixth” sense). We may re-member the roots, or we may re-collect the debris in the rootcellar of our palace (choose your metaphor), but we cannot imagine or remember specifically nothing.

Yet, this recoil suggests a (painful) return of self-consciousness from the outer rim of the spiralling of time. Carrin Dunne (1988) suggests that a sort of archetypal remembering—an imaginative reverie or epistrophe—has its source, here and now, in that centre which is everywhere. Archetypal remembering, creative action toward, or listening in the silence is not a choice of self-consciousness but a need of the soul to see through self-consciousness. Epistrophe seems not to concretize the self but to drain it of its refrains and colours and its semblance of substantiality: A certain anxiety seems to be unavoidable!

Forgetting the self but using its *materia prima*—alchemy’s earthy materials—the imaginative autobiographer allows the unnameable to glimpse itself. In this sense, autobiography is the fount of all literature. Its purpose is not to recollect and harden the self, but to forget the self and begin a strange journey in an archetypal wilderland. As Eliade expresses this threshold: “A strange amnesia, full of surprises—for in the void left by forgetting, all sorts of unreal personages creep in and incomprehensible events take shape” (1977/92, p. 21).

What journey is this that partakes of both the coil of time and the recoil of memory? It can only be that age-old “pathless path” first ventured upon by those shamans who dreamt while awake: The Labyrinth: “Since the Labyrinth pattern describes a certain combination of two opposing spirals (one centripetal and one centrifugal), in general the symbol represents a relationship between involution and evolution. The myth manifests a principle of exclusion and selection” (Conty, 1992, p. 5).

The labyrinthine journey of the soul through time is here represented by Patrick Conty as the maze where creative memory opposes (yet finally augments?) synchronicity with nature. Conty continues, however, not satisfied with that image of the quest for awareness: “But is that not a prevalent theme that we can find in most myths? This sort of interpretation obtained from above does not answer the underlying question: what is there?”

What is there indeed? In the centre of the labyrinth? Outside of it? Why, nothing. I am not going to suggest that the potential self who listens—forever deferred—somehow hints at a kind of eternally returned “eternal life.” All I know is the journey through time, but “Only through time time is conquered,” as Eliot (1944, p. 16) oracles in *Four Quartets*.

“Conquered” may have suggestions of self as self-conquistador, but this “nothing” is just that: there’s nothing there to conquer! The question is as meaningless as when we ask “cosmologists” what is outside or what was before the universe. All there is is space-time; and I would add that our knowing even this is because of our dwelling in the aforementioned “palaces of the imagination,” which exist in “the only space available.”

This is, of course, one of the abstractions of Eliot’s *Four Quartets*; In our journey through time, we may find a centre of timelessness.^{vii} By maintaining a trace (or thread) of self-awareness, I enter the labyrinth to seek the nothing from which I was first expelled. Using the unique jewels and *les fleurs du mal* of my own life experience—and the microversals of time—that nothing uses me for “its” awareness:

We shall not cease from exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time. (1944, p. 59)

This is eternal return: Yes, of course! But our crazy trail back has left its wondrous music and shapeshifting. We followed our Muses and heard the cries and whispers because we cared. We cared from our empty core. To care in this way is to “forget the self” and allow the empty place in the heart to speak. To listen in this way seems to me to be an act of love, and just as replete with uncertainty. Our labyrinthine journey may bring back to the void the unique, once-in-a-lifetime bargain-basement deal of living—this life: the *materia prima* through which the Unnameable listens: “The very act of listening initiates communion with other living things. My own hunch is that some such patient listening gave birth to human language, to music and poetry, to vision and to joy” (Dunne, p. 122).

So autobiography in my life and in my classes has meant more than a mere recounting, as though some psychoanalytic truth were awaiting discovery. Oh, such recounting may have its place, especially for those complacent or youthful selves who have never yet realized their stories. But others are ready to permeate the ego and expand the palace of the imagination in which they dream a life. “The labyrinth, or maze, is also a dance; the dance of life,” aphorizes Brown: “The dance of life, the whole story of our wanderings; in a labyrinth of error, the labyrinth of this world” (1966, p. 40).

This before you, I submit, is autobiography—more fantasy than fact, no doubt. Yet it is such written fantasy that I am suggesting deepens and nourishes life by connecting us to the epistrophe of archetypal memory.

By remembering to the edge of our wordworlds, to the abyss “Wherefrom words turn back, / Together with the mind not having attained...” (Tattirīya Upanishad 2.9, in Campbell, 1968, p. 6) there is the possibility of bringing some life-energy to the seam between two worlds (only one of which can be said to exist). That trace to which the artist of a life is drawn is what I have flamboyantly called an ectoplasmic listener. The term suggests both the deferment of actual presence and the cessation of resistance to the “pure serene of memory” which becomes without content. Dunne opens out the implications: “If we equate the lowering of resistance to the process of remembering,

then what we remember is not only the past but all of time (past, present, and future), not only time but also eternity” (p. 116).

Dunne suggests above that eternity itself may be epistrophically remembered, much like the bliss—later named death—that I, however, cannot “bring to mind.” Autobiography is worthwhile indeed if such remembering is possible! Can the listening trace transcend life? The paradoxes only multiply when attempts are made to encompass the “circumference which is nowhere.” Nonself-centered memory is ghostly, ectoplasmic: Eternity is the nothing already forgotten.

Perhaps D. H. Lawrence, always a literary autobiographer, expresses the paradox best by describing this self-revenant as “The Ship of Death” (1932):

We are dying, we are dying, so all we can do
 is now to be willing to die, and to build the ship
 of death to carry the soul on the longest journey.
 There is no port, there is nowhere to go
 only the deepening blackness darkening still
 blacker upon the soundless, ungurgling flood
 darkness at one with darkness, up and down
 and sideways utterly dark, so there is no direction any more.
 and the little ship is there; yet she is gone.
 She is not seen, for there is nothing to see her by.
 She is gone! gone! and yet
 somewhere she is there.
 Nowhere!

The labyrinth contains and is contained by this “nowhere.” Do I enter it to rediscover timelessness then return into time, or do I journey in creating time, only to return to timelessness? You, the listener, must tell me your version. It is only between us that the thread can be unwound as I disappear into self-forgetfulness. And it is only with you on the other end that I can ever hope to return to the awareness of nothing again: for the first time, of course.

References

Auden, W. H. (1940). “As I walked out one evening.” In Allison, A. W., Barrows, H., Blake, C. R., Carr, A. J., Eastman, A. M., & English, H. M., Jr. (Eds.). (1983). *The Norton anthology of poetry*, 3rd. Ed. New York, London: W. W. Norton.

- Avens, R. (1982). "Heidegger and archetypal psychology." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 22 : 183-202.
- Bachelard, Gaston (1987). *On poetic imagination and reverie*. (C. Gaudin, Trans.). Dallas: Spring Publications.
- Beckett, Samuel (1965). *Imagination dead imagine*. London: Calder & Boyars.
- Beckett, Samuel (1980). *Company*. New York: Grove Press.
- Beckett, Samuel (1983). *A Samuel Beckett reader*. J. Calder (Ed.). London: Picador.
- Brown, Norman O. (1966). *Love's body*. University of California Press.
- Campbell, Joseph (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Bollingen Series XVII. Princeton University Press.
- Campbell, Joseph (1968). *Creative mythology: The masks of God*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Conty, Patrick (1992, May). "The geometry of the labyrinth." *Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition* XVII (2). 4-14.
- Derrida, Jacques (1978). *Writing and difference*. (Alan Bass, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1992). "The gift of death." Louisiana State University lecture. 06/05/92.
- Doll, Mary Aswell (1988). *Beckett and myth: An archetypal approach*. Syracuse University Press.
- Dunne, Carrin (1988). "The roots of memory." Spring 1988. 112-128.
- Eliade, Mircea (1954). *The myth of the eternal return*. (Willard R. Trask, Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- Eliade, Mircea (1963). *Myth and reality*. (Willard R. Trask, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Eliade, Mircea (1977). *No souvenirs: Journal 1957-1969*. (F. H. Johnson, Jr., Trans.). San Francisco: Harper & Row. Excerpted as "Journey to the center." *Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition* XVII (2) (1992, May). 18-21.
- Eliot, T. S. (1925), "The Hollow Men" (reprinted at website <<http://www.pmms.cam.ac.uk/~gjm11/poems/hollow>>).
- Eliot, T. S. (1944). *Four quartets*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Freeman, Kathleen (Ed. & Trans.). (1983). *Ancilla to the pre-Socratic philosophers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press. Original 1948.
- Graves, Robert (1927). "The cool web." In Allison et al.

- Heidegger, Martin (1968). *What is a thing?* (W. B. Barton, Jr., Trans.). Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway.
- Hillman, James (1989). "Back to beyond: On cosmology." In D. R. Griffin (Ed.). *Archetypal process: Self and divine in Whitehead, Jung, and Hillman* (pp. 213-232). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Jung, C. G. (1953 ff.). *Collected works*. (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). Bollingen Series XX, vols. 1-20. Princeton University Press. §Paragraph nos.
- Krell, David Farrell (1990). *Of memory, reminiscence, and writing: On the verge*. Indiana University Press.
- Lawrence, D. H. (1932). "The ship of death." In Allison et al.
- López-Pedraza, Rafael (1989). *Hermes and his children*. Switzerland: Daimon Verlag.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1978). *Phenomenology of perception*. (C. Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Original in French 1945.
- Olney, James (1972). *Metaphors of self*. Princeton University Press.
- Otto, Rudolf (1973). *The idea of the holy*. (J. W. Harvey, Trans.). Oxford University Press. Original in German 1917: *Das heilige*.
- Paris, Ginette (1990). *Pagan grace: Dionysos, Hermes, and Goddess Memory in daily life*. (J. Mott, Trans.). Dallas: Spring Publications.
- Pinar, William F. & Grumet, Madeleine. (1976). *Toward a poor curriculum*. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt.
- Roethke, Theodore (1966). "The far field." In *The collected poems of Theodore Roethke* (pp. 193-195). New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday. Originally published 1964.
- Shakespeare, Bill (1969). *Macbeth*. In *The complete Pelican Shakespeare*. New York: Viking. (Original Folio, 1623).
- Stevens, Wallace (1923). "The snow man." In Allison et al.
- Taylor, Mark C. (1987). *Altarity*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tennyson, Alfred, Lord (1833). "Ulysses." In Allison et al.
- van der Leeuw, G. (1964). "Immortality." In J. Campbell (Ed.). *Man and transformation: Papers from the Eranos yearbooks* (pp. 353-370). Bollingen Series XXX - 5. Princeton University Press. First published in *Eranos-Jahrbücher* (Zurich), 1950.
- Veyne, Paul (1988). *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?* (P. Wissing, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
- Wordsworth, William (1807). "Ode: Intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood." In Allison et al.

The Nothing that is quested?



Endnotes

- i The quotation is from Pinar's Introduction to the mutually authored Pinar & Grumet (1976).
- ii A Derridean neologism: resistance plus the inevitable remainder (Derrida, 1978).
- iii Another Derridean (1978) neologism suggesting a remnant felt by its absence.
- iv "Altarity" is Taylor's (1987) neologism whose suggestions are complex, but the mingling of "alterity" with the silent awe evoked by the empty "altar" may suffice.
- v *Microversals* as opposed to *universals*: all the discrete and discordant phenomena of past existence and perhaps existing unbound in the future as well. Qualia? Spacetime-independent "quantum fluctuations"?
- vi The play was *Death Certificate*, written and directed by my good friend Douglas Hinds, award winning Calgary playwright.
- vii Compare Heidegger's (1968) transformative path: "a circular happening through which what lies in the circle becomes exposed" (p. 18).