

Writing as Self Discovery

James E. Miller, Jr.

James E. Miller, Jr., (b. 1920), American educator and author, has served as a professor of English at the University of Chicago since 1962. The editor of College English from 1960 to 1966, he is the author of numerous scholarly works on Fitzgerald, Whitman, and Melville. In this excerpt from his book Word, Self, Reality (1972) Miller develops his thesis that by means of language we "proclaim our identities, shape our lives, and leave our impress on the world."

"I speak; therefore I am."

Though this declaration may seem a little strange at first, it can be supported by considerable evidence. The individual establishes his individuality, his distinction as a human being, through language. He *becomes*-through language. Not only does he proclaim his existence, his being, through speech, but also his identity-the special and particular nature that makes him *him*. The declaration may then be rewritten: "I speak; thus, I am."

The creation of the self must, by its very nature, be a cooperative affair. The potentiality for language acquisition and language-use appears to be granted as a birthright. But the accident of birth will determine whether the language acquired will be Chinese, Swahili, Spanish, or English. And the same accident will determine the nature of the dialect acquired within the language. These "accidents" assume the presence of people and a culture that together bring the language to the individual.

If, then, the individual creates himself through language, it is only with the help provided by a sympathetic environment; a mother who encourages him to babble, to distinguish sounds and consequences, and then to utter sentences; and a host of other people who act and react linguistically around him. Gradually as the individual develops, he acquires not only language but what might be called a "linguistic personality," a set of language behavior patterns that make up a substantial part of his identity as a person different from other persons.

This *creation of the self*-in the sense of the self's development into a distinctive person with distinctions that are in large part linguistic (or asserted or fulfilled through language)-is a creation of the self in a kind of gross or obvious sense. Few would quarrel with the rough outline sketched above, though some might want to express it in a different set of terms. But there is another, more subtle sense in which we can speak of the creation of the self implied in "I speak; therefore I am." This profounder sense is implied in Alfred North Whitehead's assertion that "it is not going too far to say that the souls of men are the gift from language to mankind." Where a nineteenth-century divine, or a twentieth-century philosopher, might refer to "souls," the modern psychologist might refer to the sense of an enduring self. This sense is generated, sustained, and preserved in language.

One way through which the sense of self is generated appears in the basic human impulse to sort through one's thoughts, or to think through the day's (or a lifetime's) experiences. To follow this

impulse throws the individual back on his language resources. The experiences and thoughts that make up one's life are, in some sense,

... the mentality of mankind and the language of mankind created each other. If we like to assume the rise of language as a given fact, then it is not going too far to say that the souls of men are the gift from language to mankind. The account of the sixth day should be written, He gave them speech, and they became souls.

-Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 1938.

. . . the fundamental human capacity is the capacity and the need for creative self-expression, for free control of all aspects of one's life and thought. One particularly crucial realization of this capacity is the creative use of language as a free instrument of thought and expression. Now having this view of human nature and human needs, one tries to think about the modes of social organization that would permit the freest and fullest development of the individual, of each individual's potentialities in whatever direction they might take, that would permit him to be fully human in the sense of having the greatest possible scope for his freedom and initiative.

- Noam Chomsky, "*Linguistics and Politics- Interview*," 1969.

the essence of the individual, the things that are uniquely his and that make him what he is. In the process of sorting through his thoughts, or of disentangling and examining his tangled experiences, he is in effect defining himself, outlining himself, asserting and proclaiming himself. There can be no more vital activity for the individual: the results and the actions (new thoughts and new experiences) proceeding from it will further define his identity, not only for him but for the world he inhabits. In the old vocabulary, he is in this process revitalizing, reconstituting, refreshing, renewing his soul.

To live an aware life, the individual must begin with an awareness of self. He must conduct a running examination and periodic reexaminations of the self in language, the medium of furthest reaches, deepest diving, most labyrinthine windings. The sorting through might well begin with the ordinary, everyday experiences of life. A diary or journal enables one to sift through and evaluate experiences, as well as to come to understand them and their significance-or insignificance. Most of us do this sifting and evaluation in moments of reverie or in that state of mental vagabondage just before sleep. There is some (even great) advantage, however, in subjecting ourselves to the discipline of written language, in which the vague and the mushy and the muddled must give way to the specific, the firm, the clearly formulated.

For writing is discovery. The language that never leaves our head is like colorful yarn, endlessly spun out multicolored threads dropping into a void, momentarily compacted, entangled, fascinating,

It is language . . . that really reveals to man that world which is closer to him than any world of natural objects and touches his weal and woe more directly than physical nature. For it is language that makes his existence in a community possible; and only in society, in relation to a "Thee," can his subjectivity assert itself as a "Me."

-Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 1946.

I did not exist to write poems, to preach or to paint, neither I nor anyone else. All of that was incidental. Each only one genuine vocation-to find the way to himself. He might end up as poet or madman, as prophet or criminal that was not his affair; ultimately it was of no concern. His task was to discover his own destiny-not an arbitrary one-and live it out wholly and resolutely within himself. Everything else was only a would-be existence, an attempt at evasion, a flight back to the ideas of the masses, conformity and fear of one's own inwardness.

-Hermann Hesse, *Demian*, 1925.

elusive. We have glimpses that seem brilliant but quickly fade; we catch sight of images that tease us with connections and patterns that too-soon move on; we hold in momentary view a comprehensive arrangement (insight) that dissolves rapidly and disappears.

Writing that is discovery forces the capturing, the retrieving, the bringing into focus these stray and random thoughts. Sifting through them, we make decisions that are as much about the self as about language. Indeed, writing is largely a process of choosing among alternatives from the images and thoughts of the endless flow, and this choosing is a matter of making up one's mind, and this making up one's mind becomes in effect the making up of one's self. In this way writing that is honest and genuine and serious (though not necessarily without humor or wit) constitutes the discovery of the self. It is not uncommon, before the choices are made, before the words are fixed on paper, to be quite unsure of which way the choices will go. Most people have experienced the phenomenon of their opinions or feelings changing, sometimes markedly, in the process of writing a paper which forces confrontations with language and choices among expressions. All people have experienced the clarification of their views and perspectives as they have worked through the process of placing them on paper. It is not at all unusual to find an individual who is uncertain and unclear about his feelings on a subject or an issue, but who, on discovering his attitude in the process of writing, becomes committed, often dedicated, and sometimes even fanatical: he has come to know himself. When this happens the individual is not being insincere, but is simply experiencing the discoveries of writing-discoveries that are often surprising and frequently exhilarating.

As suggested earlier, in setting forth on this voyage of self-discovery, it is best to begin, not with the problems of the universe, but with what appear to be the trivia of everyday events. Indeed, it might turn out ultimately that the big is somehow indirectly connected with the little. The self-examination which requires simply the writing of an account of one's life for a single day might bring unexpected illumination. Such an account would necessitate reviewing in detail and reliving imaginatively moments of pain and fun, joy and sobriety. A list of the events of that day (or week, month) would require consideration as to what, for an individual, constitutes events. Presumably they left some kind of mark-intellectual, emotional, imaginative. What kind of mark, how deep, how long-lasting? There might be public events and private

events—events for which there were some, perhaps many, witnesses, and events that had no witnesses at all.

The list of a day's events in an individual's life might be posed against a list of the general public events and happenings—in the community, town, state, country, or world. Where do the two lists intersect, if at all? Did any of the world's events leave any mark on the individual, or did they reach him remotely or impersonally through the mass media, newspapers, radio-TV, and then fade into the distance? A third list might be composed of a close friend's perspective on the personal events on the first list, some of which he will have witnessed (but only externally), and others of which he will be totally unaware. Compilation of these lists, either in fact or imagination, may enable the individual to see the narrative of his life as marking a circle, around him, with him—absolutely alone—at the center.

This circle marks the individual's personal turf, material for his intellectual and imaginative use or growth that is his and his alone, impossible to share totally with anyone, no matter how close. One who begins to feel a sense of the preciousness of this material,

Interviewer: Is there anything else you can say to beginning writers?

Simenon: Writing is considered a profession, and I don't think it is a profession. I think that everyone who does not need to be a writer, who thinks he can do something else, ought to, do something else. Writing is not a profession but a vocation of unhappiness. I don't think an artist can ever be happy.

Interviewer: Why?

Simenon: Because, first, I think that if a man has the urge to be an artist, it is because he needs to find himself. Every writer tries to find himself through his characters, through all his writing.

Interviewer: He is writing for himself?

Simenon: Yes. Certainly.

—Georges Simenon, *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*. 1958.

this segment of life that is his and no one else's, is in fact feeling a sense of the self. If he begins to discover sequence and sense—a kind of unified narrative—in the events of his life for a day, he is making the discovery of self that the process of writing brings about: the unification must come from the individual's unique sensibility and identity.

Henry James had something of all this in mind in some advice he gave to young writers: "Oh, do something from your point of view; an ounce of example is worth a ton of generalities . . . do something with life. Any point of view is interesting that is a direct impression of life. You each have an impression colored by your individual conditions; make that into a picture, a picture framed by your own personal wisdom, your glimpse of the American world. The field is vast for freedom, for study, for observation, for satire, for truth."

Questions to Consider (discuss the answers to these questions among class peers using the online discussion board; be prepared to discuss in class.)

1. In earlier sections of his book *Word, Self, Reality*, Miller defines language as a form of creation whereby we create both our world and ourselves. With what details does Miller support his belief that it is through language that we create ourselves and our world?
2. What role does environment play in enabling the individual to create himself or herself through language?
3. How does sorting through one's thoughts or thinking through one's experiences relate to self-definition? What role does choice play in this process?
4. Miller implies that we would have no sense of self without language. Try imagining yourself without a name, not just in the legal or technical sense of having no confirming documents, but having absolutely no name. What differences would this condition make in your self-image? Could you even make a self-image without a name?
5. Is Miller's claim that writing is a way of making up our minds, and that making up our minds is a way of making up who we are (para. 9), equally true of all writing? When people deliberately write things they do not believe or know to be false, are they also making up themselves? Are their selves separate from what they write because they deliberately created a distance between them and their words? Or, in choosing to use words that evade, conceal, or lie, do such writers become evasive, secretive, or deceitful—regardless of their intentions?
6. How do you distinguish the writings of lies from the writing of fictions? Must we agree that novelists, story writers, and film writers lie? If so, how do we distinguish their works, which we admire, from the kinds of lies we detest? If it is not fair or accurate to call their works lies, why not? Give your reasons.
7. Does Miller's simile, "the language that never leaves our head is like a colorful yarn, endlessly spinning out multicolored threads dropping into a void" (para. 8), accurately capture your own experience of how thoughts pass through your mind? Is your mind ever completely empty of words? Is there not always some flow of language going through your head, like continuous background static, regardless of how deeply absorbed or distracted you might be?