The Memoirist and Her Reader:
Dialogic Disclosure and Camaraderie

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> *It is with a kind of fear that I begin to write the history of my life. . . . In order, therefore, not to be tedious I shall try to present in a series of sketches only the episodes that seem to me to be the most interesting and important.*—Helen Keller

Through the comprehensive analysis of the literary women's memoir in both "style and substance," this research investigates the genre from its definition and construction to its intentional dialogic quality. The communicated episodes within each memoir converge with readerly understanding to dispatch dialogue, linking the memoirists' narrative voices and the readers' interpretive voices. This discourse illuminates patterns of identity both captured by the narrated experiences of the memoirist and discovered through interpreted meanings by the readers. Disregarding caveats against intentional fallacy, the objective is to reveal a deliberate camaraderie between memoirists and readers; this project reflects on such intentions as disclosed through the dialogic memoir and explains the theory supporting this thesis.

From its Old French origins the term *memoir* represents a "document containing [either] the facts in a case which is to be judged . . . [or] instructions on a certain matter." This early meaning finds footing today as the core of what a memoir accomplishes. The memoirist authenticates the details of her life, and the memoir becomes a deposition of sorts, a lesson, so to speak, to all those who read it. Through one person's "autobiographical observations" and "reminiscences" ("Memoir," def. 2b), or perspective of experiences, the memoir provides directions for understanding another's. The memoir is a teaching document. It not only teaches the memoirist about herself, but also instructs readers as they learn from the text by communicating with the memoirist. The memoir author has written "an essay or dissertation on a learned subject closely studied," and she is defending her work before an audience of readers ("Memoir," def. 3). These readers listen to her "testimonial" and respond in thought, and even in action ("Memoir," def. 1a). This memoirist's narrative voice is an "expansive voice, the musing, reflective voice that is willing to share an experience in all its fullness" (McDonnell 136), and it speaks openly to the active reader who listens.

While the active reader hears the narrative voice of the memoirist, she annotates, debates, reflects, judges, reasons, feels, tastes, touches, and concludes meaning. This interpretive dialogic process begins with the author's purposeful use of language. Dialogue is taking place between the memoirist and her reader, and this contact allows the memoirist's patterns of meaning to be interpreted by her reader. The memoirist foresees this readerly participation, a connection she had fully intended. The author sets out to substantiate details about herself before an audience of readers willing to engage with the particulars in order to learn things about themselves. She anticipates and encourages the interaction. In fact, a memoirist arranges her lifewriting for the edification of her reader as well as herself. In *The Role of the Reader* Umberto Eco emphasizes this idea of "model reader," and suggests that in order for a "text [to be] communicative, the

author [or memoirist] has to assume the ensemble of codes [s]he relies upon is the same as that shared by [her] . . . possible reader"; therefore, the memoirist must "foresee a model of the possible reader . . . supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way" as she "deals generatively with them" (7). For my purposes, these "codes" are noted as patterns of meaning that the memoirist relates to her reader through her memoir. The idea that "most writers actually create their audiences," as Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford claim in their collaborative essay "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy," complements Eco's assertion. Eco suggests (7), and Ede and Lunsford both agree (160), that authors give readers implicit intimations on how to interpret meaning, but predicting a potential reader and "fictionalizing" one are two different processes. Readers are real human beings who share experiences with writers; they cannot be fully realized in ideality. A memoirist has something to say about what she has experienced, and she writes to her readers, telling them what she has learned, as if talking to a close friend. These experiences are shared not only through literature, but also in a reader's real existence, which cannot be "fictionalized." No writer can predict exactly a potential reader's experience with her text, nor can a writer assume that she is creating a reader; the reader does exist in reality and will interpret what is given based on her own experiences and how those can be related to those episodes that the memoirist chooses to include. The memoirist writes her reality for someone authentic. This actualized reader reads to assess what she finds valuable that she can relate to and learn from her chosen memoirist, communicating closely with her on a concentrated level of intimacy.

Furthermore, a memoirist's willingness to share such private information opens lines of communication with her reader, allowing the reader to feel close enough to correspond by sharing her own experiences through interpretation as she analyzes those within the memoir. Thus, the relationship between the memoirist and her reader is fluid and continual, and the dialogue between the two endures as long as that reader elects to open that book. The alliance formed creates lasting rapport. Harold Bloom's text *How to Read and Why* confirms this communicative intention of reading:

> Imaginative literature is otherness, and as such alleviates loneliness. We read not only because we cannot know enough people, but [also] because friendship is so vulnerable, so likely to diminish or disappear, overcome by space, time, imperfect sympathies, and all the sorrows of familial and passional life. (19)

Bloom maintains that reading is for "weighing and considering" what the text "shares," adding that it "strengthen[s] the self" (22). Just as the memoirist pursues this interested attendant, the one who selects the dialogic memoir as a genre for reading and interpretation seeks both this kind of camaraderie and communication and this desire to self-evaluate through literature. This is not to say that all readers of memoirs lack the ability to communicate outside of these texts, but rather to suggest that when a reader prefers this genre, she looks forward both to relating to someone in experience and to uncovering subjective meaning about herself through the meanings disclosed in the dialogic memoir.

> *Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't hear. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen to it. . . . The sound of what falls on the page begins the process of testing it for truth, for me.*—Eudora Welty

Dialogism is "the discussion of a subject under the form of a dialogue, to the personages of which the author imputes ideas and sentiments" ("Dialogism," def. 1). It is "a conversational phrase or speech; a dialogue, spoken or written" ("Dialogism," def. 2). The dialogue between memoirist and reader is permanent, is conversation with each reading, and is continually novel. As long as the reader continues to live, to experience, and to read the memoir, something new will be disclosed by the memoirist each time the text is examined.

The memoirist communicates her life to multiple readers, but she never exchanges information in the same way with them. The episodes remain identical, but the connection between the memoirist's voice and the reader's interpretive voice always starts from unique patterns of dissimilar meaning. Each reader who becomes a part of the conversation will read subjectively the memoirist's intention. The memoirist wants to correspond with as many readers as she can so she can impart an intended wisdom, but she does not limit herself in the number of connections she makes or in how she links information to her readers. These connections weave together through the episodic fabric of the memoir, yet the significant threads that readers identify with are not always the same. The memoirist's dialogism continues to renew itself with each new reader, and her objective to network, to distribute meaning, and to edify never ends.

In his essay "Discourse in the Novel" from *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin theorizes that "verbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every [one] of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning" (259). Bakhtin argues that "social dialogue reverberates in all aspects of discourse" (300). This project proposes that textual discourse, especially sustained discourse through memoir, is social as well, as the communication between memoirist and reader is eternal; potential model readers are unrestricted and outside of time's confines.

The Bakhtinian definition of *dialogism* supports my theory that the memoir is both a dialogic and a social text. Bakhtin explains that:

> Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. [Therefore,][d]ialogue may be external (between two different people) or internal (between an earlier and a later self). (Bakhtin 426-27)

Considered in this way, the memoir becomes dialogic between not only the memoirist and reader, but also the memoirist and herself. The voices in a text layer and fold together. The dialogue begins at the level of the memoirist with how she works her ideas into her text, how she communicates what others have said to her in her memoir, and how she sets up her dialogue with her reader who will, in turn, add to the dialogue, bringing even more discourse into the conversation. The memoirist intends this fusion of ideas. She uses a dialogism of her life to impart meaning, but the meaning defers with each reader. She is not endorsing that the reader needs to experience particular events from her life, but rather she is communing with a host of ideas that will elicit her meaning—patterns of meaning that will be understood and extracted by her reader no matter how distorted or enhanced they become during reader synthesis and analysis.

> *I realize how difficult it is to put yourself in someone else's shoes and find the right answer. . . . We're all alive, but we don't know why or what for;*

> *we're all searching for happiness; we're all leading lives that are different and yet the same.*—Anne Frank

The reader of memoir is not a fact-checker, but rather a seeker of patterns of meaning that she can relate to, which teach her more about herself and her own truthy stories. In other words, memories formed from subjective experiences function so that events are retained the way one wants to remember them, preserving whatever meaning particular incidents infused into life at the time of encounter. With her memories, the memoirist is navigating her reader through patterns of meaning, and the reader's own familiarity with such patterns is what creates the dialogic connection between the two so that an exchange takes place. In regards to patterns of meaning, Susan Lanser points out in *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, "that both narrative structures and women's writing are determined . . . by complex and changing conventions . . . produced in and by relations of power . . . [, and] these . . . include . . . race, gender, class, nationality, education, sexuality, and marital status" (5-6). Since women experience life based on particular perspectives granted by these so-called *relations of power*, the patterns of meaning that form their narrative constructions develop from these platforms. These platforms originate in the social roles that women adopt in life. These become the topics for how identity is shaped in the women memoirists, as well as in the women readers of memoir. Nevertheless, women memoirists begin to break from such enclosed perspectives, and they write in patterns that transcend these blocks of narration. By refusing the mould the standard *relations of power* allocate for her, the memoirist allows her patterns to branch out and circulate without specificity and rigidity dictated by predetermined demographics. This essay is not alleging that she omits conservative topics, such as those topics that sociocultural demographics would entail, from her work, but rather that through the memoir she is able to control meanings these patterns relate that are unyielding to conventional expressions.

Most noticeably, the memoirist is confident enough and comfortable enough with her identity to disclose significant events, ideas, and people for the sake of enriching her reader in some way. Her narrative intends to reveal patterns of meaning about real subjects that interest real readers. The memoirist is both creating nonfictional stories that will reveal information about herself and probing her reader by innovatively urging her to analyze her own stories that mimic or relate, so that the reader, in the course of this examination, develops a stronger assertion of self through her relationship with the memoirist.

What this essay establishes is that the memoir is an intimate form of writing that forms an intentional relationship, or camaraderie, between the memoirist and her reader. As these women memoirists share their ideas, opinions, experiences, and feelings, their readers learn to relate to another time and place, to empathize with the experiences these women have had, and to recognize themselves and their own experiences through patterns of meaning. Though the patterns of meaning are not always from the same platforms, or as Lanser put it, *relations of power*, meaning is still interpreted clearly. The memoirist intends to communicate this way. The memoir is a speaking text, and is, therefore, dialogic. Readers listen to what the memoirists share in language—and speak back in thought and action. In this contact, determining fact from fiction is not the reader's purpose—and it is not the memoirist's intention in communicating, either—but rather the focus is becoming involved with "a good subject" that "sheds light on our . . . experience" (Wharton 24). Because these memoirists have documented themselves in this sincere manner and through such a personal form of writing, and because every reader of memoir on some level is seeking her own understanding of self, it is important to consider what is being

exchanged between the two upon impact, no matter how truthy. The camaraderie between both memoirist and reader that forms during this dialogic process is deliberate and lasting.

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