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WRITING AT THE END OF THE WORLD

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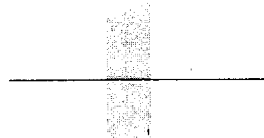

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Though they may already have faded from memory, driven off by more recent and yet more spectacular horrors, for a few short weeks in 1999, the events at Columbine High School mesmerized the nation. There was the live footage of students fleeing in terror across the green, the boy with the bleeding head being dropped from the window, the SWAT teams moving in. There was the discovery of what lay beyond the eye of the camera: fifteen dead, a cache of weapons, a large homemade bomb made with two propane tanks and a gasoline canister, the eventual disclosure of an even more sinister fantasy that involved hijacking a plane and crashing it in New York City.[1] There was the ongoing effort to present fuller and fuller portraits of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two young men who masterminded the slaughter: they were outsiders, video-game enthusiasts, members of the Trench Coat Mafia, neo-Nazis, two boys who couldn't tell their alcohol-fueled dreams from reality, a leader and a follower, a smart kid and a loser, specimens of a middle-class value system in crisis, proof of the need for stricter gun-control laws. And finally, there were the funerals, the white caskets covered in writing from those left behind, the

doves released into the air, and all those inspirational speeches about healing and hope.

Any major social cataclysm produces in its wake two responses. First, there is the search for causes: Why did this happen? Who is to blame? And second, there is an appeal to some greater authority to assist in preventing such upheavals in the future. Following Columbine, fingers were pointed at everyone and everything: inattentive parents, indifferent guidance counselors, insensitive jocks, the entertainment industry, powerful gun lobbyists, the media, the Internet, the military-industrial complex, a president who couldn't keep his pants on.[2] And then, as one would expect, there were calls both for increased external controls—new laws, regulations, supervisory agencies—and for increased internal controls—educational interventions, moral training, prayer. Surely, more laws, more education, and more religious instruction would bring these violent students back into line.

Despite heightened sensitivity and increased security, however, the schoolyard massacre has proven to be a remarkably durable and recurring social cataclysm. In February 1997, a sixteen-year-old in Bethel, Alaska, entered his high school and murdered the principal and another student. In October 1997, another sixteen-year-old, this one living in Pearl, Mississippi, killed his mother, then went to school and killed two more students. In December 1997, a fourteen-year-old took aim at a prayer circle in West Paducah, Kentucky, killing three. In March 1998, two boys, eleven and thirteen, pulled a fire alarm and gunned down students exiting Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, leaving five dead. And the list goes on with additional shootings over the past five years at high schools in Fayetteville, Tennessee; Springfield, Oregon; Richmond, Virginia; Conyers, Georgia; Deming, New Mexico; and Cold Spring, Minnesota. In March 2001, a skinny kid, whom classmates called "Anorexic Andy," walked into his high school in Santee, California, to reenact his version of Columbine. He killed two and wounded thirteen before being subdued. And in April 2002, Robert Steinhaeuser returned to Johann Gutenberg High School in Erfurt, Germany, to avenge his expulsion for forging a doctor's note: he killed two students and thirteen teachers before turning his gun on himself.

It's reassuring to think that either the work of the legal system or the educational system can reduce or eliminate altogether the threat of the unpredictable and the unforeseen. This is why we have childproof medicine bottles, penalties for not buckling up, informational literature on family planning for students in junior high school: these are all examples of reasonable responses to known problems. But the schoolyard massacre seems a problem of a different order. What legal or educational response could be equal to the challenge of controlling the behavior of so many students from such varied backgrounds? Just how much surveillance would be required to bring the marginalized fraction of the student population back into the fold? How invasive would a curricular intervention have to be to succeed in instilling a set of preferable values in those who currently feel so deeply alienated while at school? While the answers to these questions are unknown, what we do know is this: the day after Columbine High School reopened, after all the public and private soul-searching in the community about the killings, after all the media coverage and analysis, after an enormous pep rally replete with bouncing cheerleaders, enthusiastic athletes, and all the mandatory school spirit one could ever hope for, swastikas were found scratched in a stall in one of the high school's newly painted bathrooms.

Eric Harris certainly didn't accept the idea that anyone was to blame for his actions or that anything could have been done to stop him or Dylan Klebold in going forward with their plan. Anticipating speculation of just this kind, Harris wrote in his diary:

> i want to leave a lasting impression on the world. and god damnit do not blame anyone else besides me and V for this. dont blame my family, they had no clue and there is nothing they could have done. they brought me up just fucking fine, dont blame toy stores or any other stores for selling us ammo, bomb materials or anything like that because its not their fault. i dont want no fucking laws on buying fucking PVC pipes. we are kind of a select case here so dont think this will happen again. dont blame the school. dont fucking put cops all over the place just because we went on a killing spree doesnt mean everyone else will and hardly ever do people bring bombs or guns to school anyway. the admin. is doing a fine job as it is. i dont know who will be left after we kill but dammit don't change any policies just because of us. it would be stupid and if there is any way in this fucked up universe we can come back as ghosts we will haunt the life out of anyone who blames anyone besides me and V.[3]

If one accepts Harris's assertions, then the events at Columbine are largely without motive or meaning: the killing spree was a misguided grab for immortality by two young men at loose ends. If one rejects Harris's assertions, though, and persists in the pursuit for causes, one is left with the inescapable fact that the hierarchical, exclusionary environment of mandatory schooling fosters feelings of rage and helplessness that cannot be contained. The law

drives everyone into the schoolhouse; the educational system then sifts and sorts its way through the masses, raising expectations and crushing dreams as it goes. Eventually, something has to give.[4]

What is to be done? What is to be done? Only those utterly indifferent to the suffering of others can forestall asking this question for long. And, after any tragedy that involves the death of young people, it doesn't take long for someone to make the case that the problem lies with advanced technology and all the fantasy factories that it has spawned, which together have blurred the line between fact and fiction. After the Columbine shootings, Pat Schroeder, the former congresswoman from Colorado who now runs the Association of American Publishers, was among those who argued that we've reached the point where suburban kids are becoming mass murderers because we've created domestic spaces that isolate individuals in a technological sea of entertainment—the TV, the VCR, the computer, the entertainment center, the Internet, a different toy for everyone. "*This* is the beautiful family of America living the American dream," Schroeder observed wryly. "But we need some ways to relate to each other as human beings. We need to work on getting connected." Convinced that the virtual connections available in cyberspace tend to be divisive, Schroeder has committed herself to protecting the practice of reading books. Schroeder believes that book clubs and coffee bars provide a kind of embodied community unavailable on the Internet. These places where people go to discuss the printed word are, she says, "among the few civil institutions left. [They are] places to go see other people" (qtd. in Gross).

I share Schroeder's desire for a future where physical communion with others is still an option. You might say, in fact, that Schroeder and I come from the same secular faith tradition, that we share the same belief in reading's potentially redemptive power. And yet, there are dark days when I doubt the activities of reading and writing have much of a future. Indeed, after Columbine, it seems almost ludicrous to suggest that the social, psychological, and biochemical problems that contributed to this massacre might have been peacefully resolved if only Harris and Klebold had spent more time talking about what they were reading. Does reading really possess such curative powers? Does writing? Does group discussion?

Reading, writing, talking, meditating, speculating, arguing: these are the only resources available to those of us who teach the humanities and they are, obviously, resources that can be bent to serve any purpose. Harris and Klebold, in fact, wrote and produced for all different sorts of media; they read a range of material that supported their beliefs and that taught them how to put together their incendiary devices; they hung out with like-minded individuals and discussed their ideas. They relied on writing to post their scathing observations about their peers on Harris's Web site; they composed poems in their creative writing class that their teacher described as "dark and sad"; they created a video for a class project in which they acted out their fantasy of moving through the school gunning down their tormentors (Pooley 30–32). Harris even had the affectation of an English teacher, declaring on his Web site that one of the many habits he found unforgivable in his peers was the tendency to pronounce the "t" in "often": "Learn to speak correctly, you morons," he commands (Barron). They read, they wrote, they talked. And at the end of the process, they tried to kill everyone they could.

For some, it will hardly come as a surprise to learn that reading and writing have no magically transformative powers. But for those of us who have been raised into the teaching and publishing professions, it can be quite a shock to confront the possibility that reading and writing and talking exercise almost *none* of the powers we regularly attribute to them in our favorite stories. The dark night of the soul for literacy workers comes with the realization that training students to read, write, and talk in more critical and self-reflective ways cannot protect them from the violent changes our culture is undergoing. Helen Keller learning to see the world through a language traced into the palm of her hand; Malcolm X in prison memorizing the dictionary word by word; Paulo Freire moving among the illiterate masses in Brazil: we tell ourselves and our students over and over again about the power of reading and writing while the gap between rich and poor grows greater, the Twin Towers come crashing down, and somewhere some other group of angry young men is at work silently stockpiling provisions for the next apocalypse.

If you're in the business of teaching others how to read and write with care, there's no escaping the sense that your labor is increasingly irrelevant. Indeed, one way to understand the dark, despairing character of so much of the critical and literary theory that has come to dominate the humanities over the past two decades is to see this writing as the defensive response of those who have recognized but cannot yet admit that the rise of technology and the emergence of the globalized economy have diminished the academy's cultural significance. And so, to fight off the sense that words exercise less and less power in world affairs, one can declare that discourse plays a fundamental role in the constitution of reality. Rather than concede that reading as an activity has come to consume less and less time in the average person's life, one can insist that the canon wars are the ground upon which the nation's political future is being determined; rather than accept the fact that technological advances have taken control of publishing out of the hands of the few and transformed everyone with access to

the Internet into a potential author and critic, one can decry the movement of our culture's critical center from the university to the sound stage of the Oprah Winfrey Show. What is unthinkable in such pronouncements about the centrality of academic work is the possibility that the vast majority of the reading and writing that teachers and their students do about literature and culture more generally might not be all that important. It could all just be a rather labored way of passing the time.

I have these doubts, you see, doubts silently shared by many who spend their days teaching others the literate arts. Aside from gathering and organizing information, aside from generating critiques and analyses that forever fall on deaf ears, what might the literate arts be said to be good for? How—and in what limited ways—might reading and writing be made to matter in the new world that is evolving before our eyes? Is there any way to justify or explain a life spent working with—and teaching others to work with—texts? These are the questions that animate the meditations that follow. Those who have never felt the inner urgency of such questions need read no further.

THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS

> In a million millennia, the sun will be bigger. It will feel nearer. In a million millennia, if you are still reading me, you can check these words against personal experience, because the polar ice caps have melted and Norway enjoys the climate of North Africa.
>
> Later still, the oceans will be boiling. The human story, or at any rate, the terrestrial story, will be coming to an end. I don't honestly expect you to be reading me then.
>
> —Martin Amis, *The Information*

In *The Information,* Martin Amis's bleak and scorching send-up of the literary professions, the following beliefs are gleefully debunked: that reading makes you a better person; that writers of merit are driven to write by virtue of their deep insights into the human spirit; that a world filled with artistic creations is superior to one filled with the castoffs of consumer culture; that writing provides access to immortality. To stage his skewering of these cultural commonplaces, Amis pits two writers against each other: Richard Tull, the author of artistic, experimental (that is to say, unreadable) novels; and Gwyn Barry, who is vapid and soulless, but whose eventless, multicultural, utopian novel, *Amelior,* has become an international phenomenon. To the degree that *The Information* has a plot, it revolves around Tull's repeated efforts to punish Barry for having met with popular literary success. To Tull's way of thinking, Barry's greatest literary achievement is a work of no consequence: as he describes it, *Amelior* "was about a group of fair-minded young people who, in an unnamed country, strove to establish a rural community. And they succeeded. And then it ended. Not worth writing in the first place, the finished book was, in Richard's view, a ridiculous failure" (28). And yet, in the world Amis has created for his readers, pretentious, sentimental slop of this kind has adulation heaped upon it, while work like the kind Richard Tull produces—work that strains mightily to achieve a high seriousness, work that is replete with veiled literary references, work that endlessly announces its indebtedness to the earlier classics—actually physically harms the few who can bear to read it, causing migraines, seeing disorders, and even forced hospitalizations.

Tull, who is unable to find a publisher and whose previous novels are out of print, can only view his friend's success as a cruel joke the universe is playing on him, one he's determined to counteract. But, as Tull eventually discovers, there's no fighting the ways of the universe. In the grand scheme of things, he is insignificant, and what lies in store for him is what lies in store for us all—a story of increasing humiliation. In fact, *The History of Increasing Humiliation* is one of the many books for which Tull has received an advance but has yet to write, one which is to contain his theory about "the decline in the status and virtue of literary protagonists" (92). As Tull sees it, there's a direct connection between the decline in the status of heroes in the novel and the growth in our understanding of the dimensions of the universe: with each advance in astronomical studies, "we get smaller" (93). We can see the effects of this in our literary creations, Tull argues: "First gods, then demigods, then kings, then great warriors, great lovers, then burghers and merchants and vicars and doctors and lawyers. Then social realism: you. Then irony: me. Then maniacs and murderers, tramps, mobs, rabble, flotsam, vermin" (92). And indeed, Amis uses Tull as a vehicle to prove this theory, assaulting the pieties of those who would privilege the acts of reading and writing by showing artists to be indistinguishable from criminals. By this, Amis does not mean that all criminals are like Hannibal Lecter, all-knowing virtuosos who transgress and transcend social bonds at will. Rather, as Amis puts it, "the criminal *is* like an artist (though not for the reasons usually given, which merely depend on immaturity and the condition of self-employment): the criminal resembles the artist in his pretension, his incompetence, and his self-pity" (76). One could hardly say that the status of the criminal has been elevated through such a comparison.

When Tull's initial efforts to harm his rival fail, he turns to Steve Cousins, a financially secure, semi-retired criminal, who now entertains himself by pursuing "recreational" adventures in his profession: his specialty, as he defines it, is "fuck[ing] people up" for sport (116). And, for reasons that are never quite clear, "Scozzy," as his mates call him, is determined to hurt a writer, preferably Gwyn Barry. Scozzy may be motivated by his own hatred of *Amelior,* which he refers to as a "total crock" and "complete crap" (114); he may be driven by the autodidact's sense of inferiority (113); he may be acting out the aggressions of an abandoned child (Amis repeatedly links Scozzy to the wild boy of Aveyron). But to seek motivation for Scozzy's actions is, within Amis's cosmology, to misunderstand the criminal's place in the universe and our own as well. Asking why a Steve Cousins or an Eric Harris or a Dylan Klebold is violent is itself a meaningless act, not because the motivation is too deeply buried or obscurely articulated to ever be known, but because we no longer live in a world where human action can be explained. We have plenty of information; it just doesn't amount to anything. This is the logic of the history of increasing humiliation working itself out over time.

At one point in the novel, Tull's wife, Gina, is reading the newspaper in horror, trying to make sense of the actions of a child-murderer. "Words," says Gina, "—words fail me. *Why?* Won't someone tell me?" (123). Amis then interrupts this scene to introduce his own commentary on how we are to make sense of these senseless acts, the ones which rob us of speech, the ones which drive us to ask why. "A contemporary investigator will tell you that he hardly ever thinks about motive. It's no help. He's sorry, but it's no help. Fuck the why, he'll say. Look at the how, which will give you the who. But fuck the why" (124). There is no ultimate explanation for these acts of brutality, which is something the little boy, who apologized to the man who was about to murder him, could not understand: "the little boy was searching for motivation in the contemporary playground. Don't look. You won't find it, because it's gone. I'm sorry. I'm sorry" (124).[5]

As it goes with the world, so it goes with the novel: to seek out what motivates Tull to try to destroy Gwyn Barry, to try to understand why Scozzy would want to hurt Barry, to see some reason in Gina's betrayal of Tull—these are all fruitless acts in Amis's cosmos, where only the naive believe that violence is the result of some ultimately discernable act of volition. Tull understands that he lives in a world defined by random acts of violence and he is afraid, not for his own safety, but for his son's: "violence would come, if it came, from the individual, from left field, denuded of motive. The urban pastoral was all left field. There was no right field. And violence wouldn't come for Richard. It would come for Marco" (99). And, indeed, this very scenario is acted out in the conclusion to *The Information,* with Scozzy, bent on revenge for having been publicly insulted by Tull, heading to Tull's neighborhood determined to kidnap Marco. Unaware of the danger his son is in, drunkenly planning one final plot to bring Barry down, Tull stumbles into his apartment only to discover Barry in the act of sodomizing his wife. Meanwhile, outside in the park, Barry's bodyguards happen to intercept Scozzy before he is able to harm Marco. Broken and defeated, Tull belatedly realizes that he owes his son's life to the man he viewed as being in every way his inferior. As the novel ends, with Barry proudly sauntering off victorious, Tull climbs the stairs back to his apartment "working on a way of forgiving Gina. A form of words. Because if he forgave her, she could never leave him now. Who was he? Who had he been throughout? Who would he always be?" (373). Tull, "a failed book reviewer who comes on like Dr. Johnson" (286), has been shown to be a fool who can't even read the intentions and the capabilities of those closest to him. Barry, the avowed fraud and hypocrite, gets everything—fame, fortune, even "the Profundity Requital," which guarantees him lifetime support so he can devote himself to thinking about the social good.

Although Amis explicitly outlaws such a question, one can't help but wonder why a writer would produce such a scathing portrait of the literary world and its denizens. If this is Amis's assessment both of his peers and of the reading public, then why go on writing? Is he, like Gwyn Barry, just along for the ride, cynically "doing what every man would do if he thought he could get away with it" (286)?[6] *The Information* might best be read as a meditation on the fact that sooner or later all writers encounter something that robs them of their sleep, something that deprives them of feeling that what they do matters. As the novel opens, Richard Tull is crying in his sleep, crying because the night had brought "all its unwelcome information" (4). And when he wakes, he considers calling Gwyn Barry, for whom "there would be no information, or the information, such as it was, would all be good" (5). Tull and Barry are both entering their forties and the information that awaits them on this threshold communicates different messages: Gina has given Tull an additional year to complete his latest and perhaps final novel, *Untitled,* after which time—the novel's failure being a foregone conclusion—Tull will have to commit himself to more gainful employment. Barry, on the other hand, has written two best-sellers; his marriage has been featured on the BBC; he's got an international promotional tour lined up; he's been nominated for the Profundity Requital. Tull is having "a cri-

sis of the middle years," a crisis Amis himself has been through. Citing what are presumably notes from his own writing journal, Amis observes, "intimations of monstrousness are common, are perhaps universal, in early middle age" (44). One form this takes is a preoccupation with the question, "how can I ever play the omniscient, the all-knowing, when I don't know *anything*?" (43).

So the information that comes with age, the information that comes at night, brings news of futility, ignorance, insignificance, humiliation: "When we die, our bodies will eventually go back where they came from: to a dying star, our own, five billion years from now, some time around the year 5,000,001,995" (45). With the aging of the body and the foreclosing of future possibilities, all the inbound information serves to turn one's attention to mortality: "the information is telling me to stop saying *hi* and to start saying *bye*" (89). Throughout the novel, Amis concedes that he is not in control of what is happening, that events are unfolding and characters are developing without reference to any greater design on his part. "I don't come at these people," Amis explains in the middle of the novel, "They come at me. They come at me like information formed in the night. I don't make them. They're already there" (190–91). Whether Amis is genuinely haunted by these characters or is only mocking the terror that lesser writers experience when they lose control of their material is a matter of importance only to those who wish to argue over Amis's own literary achievements. For the purposes of this discussion, though, the salient point is to note the ways in which Amis's novel brings together the aging body, the activity of writing, and the inbound information to explore—and I would say produce—feelings of hopelessness. We live in the Information Age and all the information is telling us that whatever we have done, whatever we are doing, and whatever we plan to do will never have any lasting significance.

FOLLOWING THE WORD

> You know, Eric, you can read about this stuff, but you can't understand it until you live it.
>
> —Chris McCandless in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*

Chris McCandless's misadventures in the Alaskan wilderness are now well known, thanks to Jon Krakauer's best-selling account of the young man's disappearance and death in *Into the Wild*. These are the facts: after graduating from Emory in 1990, McCandless donated the remains of his college trust fund to Oxfam, burned what money remained, along with his identification papers, and disappeared. Two years later, in the fall of 1992, his emaciated body was found, along with his favorite books and his journal, in a school bus deep in the Alaskan wilds. Something about McCandless's quest and his ultimate fate captured the imagination of readers across the country. For some, the story is a tragedy, one that concerns a deadly conflict between youthful idealism and a brutal, unforgiving reality. For those reading this version of McCandless's life, the loss of a young man who wanted to commune with the natural world and the disappearance of a world untouched by the mercenary desires of human society are developments to be mourned. For others, though, McCandless's story is just another example of the foolishness of those who believe more in the power of books than in the power of the natural world. For these readers, McCandless is a stock figure, a suburban rube, a dreamer who neither understood nor respected the very forces he sought to embrace. For these readers, McCandless got what he deserved.

I am interested in McCandless not because of the debate his death has sparked, but because he provides us with an opportunity to consider a reader who differs from Amis's characters in one critical regard: regardless of whether or not Amis himself actually believes that knowledge of the size of the cosmos robs the activities of reading and writing of any lasting meaning, McCandless stands as evidence that there continue to be real readers who invest the activities of reading and writing with great significance. In this respect, McCandless is just the kind of reader that Amis's character Richard Tull (and almost every English teacher) is looking for: a reader who savors the words that others have produced, who seeks guidance from the printed page, who dreams of inhabiting the landscapes that his or her most-admired authors describe in such loving detail. While one could argue that some similar utopian longing is there to be found boiling beneath Amis's bleak account of these information-saturated times, it is much more immediately clear that McCandless actually believed that it was possible to escape the bonds of the corporatized world and reach a space of greater calm. He knew this because his books told him so.

What makes *Into the Wild* remarkable is Krakauer's ability to get some purchase on McCandless's actual reading practice, which, in turn, enables him to get inside McCandless's head and speculate with considerable authority about what ultimately led the young man to abandon the comforts of home and purposefully seek out mortal danger. Krakauer is able to do this, in part, because he has access to the books that McCandless read, with all their underlinings and marginalia, as well as to his journals and the postcards and letters McCandless sent to friends during his journey. Working with these materials and his in-

terviews with McCandless's family and friends, Krakauer develops a sense of McCandless's inner life and eventually comes to some understanding of why the young man was so susceptible to being seduced by the writings of London, Thoreau, Muir, and Tolstoy. Who McCandless is and what becomes of him are, it turns out, intimately connected to the young man's approach to reading—both what he chose to read and how he chose to read it.

After graduating from college, McCandless hopped in his car and headed west, embarking on a journey that, since Kerouac, has become a cliché for the dispossessed male. McCandless told no one where he was going or what his plans were. When his car broke down, he abandoned it and began hitchhiking. He renamed himself "Alexander Supertramp." He kept a journal and took photographs to record his adventure. He traveled to California, canoed down into Mexico, made his way toward Alaska. Along the way, he met people who looked out for him and he, more often than not, would return their kindness by encouraging them to read the books that had so moved him. To one, McCandless wrote: "Wayne, you really should read *War and Peace.* I meant it when I said you had one of the highest characters of any man I'd met. That is a very powerful and highly symbolic book. It has things in it that I think you will understand. Things that escape most people" (Krakauer 33). He took a job working at a flea market selling used paperbacks and lost himself in the pleasure of organizing merchandise and assisting in the very kind of commercial transactions he elsewhere despised. His boss reported: "Alex was big on the classics: Dickens, H. G. Wells, Mark Twain, Jack London. London was his favorite. He'd try to convince every snowbird who walked by that they should read *Call of the Wild*" (43–44). In the abandoned bus where McCandless's body was eventually found, there were books by Tolstoy and Thoreau with highlighted passages celebrating chastity and moral purity (65–66). On some plywood he had written what Krakauer calls McCandless's "declaration of independence":

> AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE. . . . NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY CIVILIZATION HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME *LOST IN THE WILD* (163; capitals and italics in original).

Like most readers, McCandless surrounded himself with books that reinforced his own beliefs—in this case, texts that confirmed his sense that he was living honorably by attempting to follow his beliefs *to the letter.* Alternately the evangelist and the pilgrim, McCandless moved through the world trying to convert others to his point of view and turning away from anyone who sought to make more intimate contact with him personally. As Alex, he was a hobo, a vagabond, the self-defined "super" tramp, someone who had neither the need nor the desire for human relationships: his books and his solo adventures satisfied his yearnings for connection. Or, as Krakauer puts it in his summary judgment of McCandless's motivations: "Unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul" (183).

As much as Krakauer admires McCandless for having embarked upon such a spiritual journey, he is careful to point out that McCandless was ultimately undone by the great trust he placed in the written word. The harshest judgment Krakauer offers in his account emerges in his discussion of McCandless's way of reading Jack London's stories about life in Alaska: "He was so enthralled by these tales . . . that he seemed to forget they were works of fiction, constructions of the imagination that had more to do with London's romantic sensibilities than with the actualities of life in the subarctic wilderness. McCandless conveniently overlooked the fact that London himself had spent just a single winter in the North and that he'd died by his own hand on his California estate at the age of forty, a fatuous drunk, obese and pathetic, maintaining a sedentary existence that bore scant resemblance to the ideals he espoused in print" (44). What most interests me about Krakauer's critique of London is its vehemence: Krakauer's rage here is for an author whose life and words don't align. Because McCandless wanted to believe in the world London invented, because McCandless wanted to be enchanted, he failed to ask the question that Krakauer believes must be of concern to all readers: namely, what is the relationship between what the author says and the way the author lives? London used his writing as a place to store his fantasies about struggling to survive, about lonely battles against the elements, about the animal within, fantasies that have trapped and—Krakauer's language suggests—even killed some of those naive enough to believe them.

While Krakauer faults McCandless for being fooled by London's prose, he goes to great lengths to defend McCandless against charges of recklessness or incompetence. It is true, Krakauer concedes, that McCandless could have taken any number of actions to avoid dying in the woods. The young man could have taken a map with him; he could have done a better job exploring the banks of the suddenly uncrossable river that prevented him from returning by the route

he came in on; he could even have started a forest fire to alert the authorities to his plight. But for those who see McCandless's death by starvation as irrefutable proof of his failure as an outdoorsman, Krakauer has another explanation: McCandless died in the woods not because he couldn't find enough food to survive, but because he ate seeds that no one knew to be poisonous. Relying on *Tanaina Plantlore* to guide his gatherings in the wild, McCandless trusted its author completely. As he grew weaker and as game grew scarcer, McCandless began to eat the roots of a species of wild potato that the book identified as nontoxic. The book said nothing about the seeds of the wild potato and it is Krakauer's hypothesis that, as he grew more desperate, McCandless took the book's silence on the seeds as permission to ingest them. If Krakauer is right, one could say that McCandless was killed off by a reading practice that placed too much faith in books, a practice that forgets that the world in all its infinite complexity and particularity will always exceed the explanatory grasp of any single text and, indeed, of all texts taken in their totality.

Whenever I've taught this book—and I've used it with first-year students, undergraduate literature majors, and advanced graduate students—the issue of trust inevitably arises as a problem. Why accept Krakauer's account when he is so obviously invested in defending McCandless from his critics? The fact that Krakauer is so openly identified with the subject of his research is a sign, I would say, that he is producing a kind of writing that can and should still matter. Because Krakauer has inhabited the same clichés that captured McCandless, because he understands their pull from the inside, he is able to offer an account of the young man's motivations that is simultaneously sympathetic *and* critical. By working on the materials of McCandless's life, Krakauer learns how to do what McCandless was unable or unwilling to do: he comes to understand and respect the thoughts of those who were appalled by his behavior. He is doing the work of making peace with his past. Thus, although Krakauer claims he is just trying to make sense of "why some people seem to despise [McCandless] so intensely for having died" in the Alaskan wilds, the truth is that Krakauer is equally interested in using McCandless as a vehicle for making sense of his own turbulent, and occasionally self-destructive, youth. As it turns out, McCandless and Krakauer had much in common. They read and were moved by many of the same authors; they fell in love, like many lonely, alienated, introspective young men before them, with a stark, unforgiving beauty that they could only find in books and in the natural world; and, finally, when the time was right, they both ran away from a world that did not live up to their expectations.

From a certain vantage point, McCandless's Alaskan odyssey and Krakauer's harrowing attempt to climb the Devils Thumb are clichés of modernity: they are the stories of young men, fed up with society, determined to get away from it all. (One version of this cliché involves heading off into the wild; a more recent version, as we've seen, involves entering the schoolyard armed to the teeth.) Now that he has safely made the passage into middle age, Krakauer can see that there's nothing particularly original about embarking on such a journey and he is reluctant to require that such adventures be treated either with reverence or with scorn. On his own journey, Krakauer discovered just how fleeting the profound and transformative experience of scaling a mountain peak can be. Less than a month after realizing his dream, he found himself back in Colorado, pounding nails into frames for townhouses. Over the years that followed, Krakauer came to a different realization: "I was a raw youth who mistook passion for insight and acted according to an obscure, gap-ridden logic. I thought climbing the Devils Thumb would fix all that was wrong with my life. In the end, of course, it changed almost nothing" (155).

Since Krakauer and McCandless moved through the same experiential world for a time, Krakauer seems to know, intuitively, where to look to find a final explanation for McCandless's aberrant behavior. Why would a young man with so much going for him throw it all away? Unlike Amis, Krakauer cannot accept a world without motive, so he continues to probe until he discovers what he believes to be the series of events that alienated McCandless from his family and friends. The ultimate cause of McCandless's disaffection, it would appear, was that his father had conducted an extended affair when McCandless was a small child. Years later, unbeknownst to his parents, McCandless found out about his father's double life and confided in his sister that this discovery made his "entire childhood seem like a fiction" (121–23). To some, it will seem that in uncovering this information, Krakauer has simply succeeded in moving McCandless from one familiar narrative to another, finding at the heart of his desire to escape nothing more than another primordial example of the Oedipal struggle. However accurate such an assessment might be, I would argue that the true significance of Krakauer's discovery lies elsewhere. Having learned this dark family secret, Krakauer is able to provide us with a glimpse of how McCandless responded when confronted with a reality quite unlike the one contained in the books he had chosen to surround himself with. With his childhood transformed into a fiction, McCandless understood himself to have received a warrant to embark on a new life. He believed he was alone. He believed he owed no one anything. He believed he was free.

ON MEDITATIVE WRITING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

> Several years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them. And thus I realized that once in my life I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences.
>
> —René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

All these unhappy men, the betrayed and the betrayers, the real and the fictional. Is there any hope for them? Or for the wasted worlds they've left in their wake? Thinking about these lives, so deeply entangled with violence, neglect, and lies; watching the news, which is forever reporting that another angry man has entered some building or schoolyard, guns blazing; feeling the weight of these stories, and knowing their inevitable movement towards death, destruction, and humiliation: such thoughts only serve to plunge one deeper into the darkness. Amis's fiction clearly offers no escape from such ruminations. And Krakauer's real-life account confirms the fact that relying on reading as a mode of escape has its own unique set of dangers. Against the backdrop of Columbine (or Kosovo or Rwanda or September 11 or Afghanistan or Iraq—the news never fails to offer up another example), there is little these authors can do. The senseless loss of life always trumps the efforts of the meaning makers. Why bother with reading and writing when the world is so obviously going to hell?

One could say that the course of Western philosophy was forever altered by an encounter with a differently phrased version of this question. When Descartes reached that point in his life when he felt that nothing he had been told in the past could be trusted, he, too, sealed himself off from the rest of society and contemplated the dark possibility that he might be doomed to live out the rest of his days in a dream world. This, at any rate, is the opening conceit of his *Meditations on First Philosophy.* To rid himself of all the false opinions that he had been fed in his youth, Descartes tells us that he waited until he had both the maturity and the free time necessary to devote to the harrowing task of self-purification. In his mid-forties, he sits by the fire, in his dressing gown, all alone. He is transported by the idea that he can attack his past and demolish it. He, too, wants to be free. And so Descartes settles down to the task of dismantling and reassembling his cosmology, a process that takes him six days to complete.[7]

On the first day of his meditations, everything collapses under the force of

Descartes' determined skepticism. There is nothing Descartes has ever thought or felt that cannot also be doubted. Since everything that comes to him through his senses is misleading, he finds it impossible to distinguish dream states from states of consciousness. He even imagines the possibility that there might well be "an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever" who whiles away his time deceiving him at every turn (62). While the first act of the God of Genesis is to separate light from darkness, Descartes' accomplishment, on his first day, is to plunge his readers into the pitch of night. In the inverted world he has created with his skepticism, one dreams in the light and fears waking to toil "among the inextricable shadows of the difficulties" that have been produced by the workings of his mind (63).

On the second day, Descartes sets out to inhabit the world of doubt he has created: "I suppose that everything I see is false. I believe that none of what my deceitful memory represents ever existed" (63). Shorn of his past, of his body with all its misleading signals and vague impressions, Descartes discovers his true essence: he is first and foremost a "thing that thinks" (*une chose qui pense*) (65). And as a "thing that thinks," he determines that the senses are not to be trusted: in the midst of this meditation, Descartes looks out the window and believes he sees men walking by on the street. "[Y]et," Descartes asks, "but what do I see aside from hats and coats, which could conceal automata?" (68). To get to the essence of any thing, be it a man or a piece of wax, we must strip "it of its clothing" and "look at [it] in its nakedness" (68): we must remove all outward appearances and get to that which does not change.

On the third day, having shut his eyes, stopped up his ears, withdrawn all his senses, and abandoned his past, Descartes surveys the world of his creation and determines that he is alone. The only way out of this bleak environment that is haunted by malicious demons and the illusory reports of the senses is to posit the existence of a firm foundation, which, for reasons we'll discuss shortly, Descartes designates "God." Descartes' "proof" or "discovery" of God's existence is well known: God is the perfection that Descartes can conceive of but does not actually possess in his thoughts. Since Descartes' thoughts cannot be the cause of this state of perfection (because "what is more perfect [that is, what contains in itself more reality] cannot come into being from what is less perfect"), this perfection must exist outside of him (73). From this, "it necessarily follows that I am not alone in the world, but that something else, which is the cause of this idea, also exists" (74).

Alone with his God in the fourth meditation, Descartes turns his thoughts to an issue that has been at the center of our current discussion: how to distinguish between truth and falsity. For Descartes, the crucial task before him is to

explain how God, who is perfect, could have created a thinking thing so defective that it struggles to distinguish fact from fiction, truth from lies. Setting to the side the question of *why* his creator elected to design him in this way, Descartes posits that his own errors result from the fact that he has been endowed by his creator with a will that has a much wider scope than his intellect. On the fifth and sixth days of his meditations, in a repetition that bespeaks a certain anxiety, Descartes once again proves the existence of God and then, after some deft negotiations, is returned to his body and the sensuous world. Before resting, Descartes looks back on where his thinking has taken him and concludes that "the hyperbolic doubts of the last few days ought to be rejected as ludicrous" (103). By doubting everything, he has found the firm ground that is necessary for going on: there is a God; everything that happens is not a lie; the mind can provide us with direct access to the truth. Descartes, it would appear, is home free.

Why should the thoughts this lonely man had more than 350 years ago warrant our attention now? Descartes contributed to the larger effort to liberate reason from the prison of religious dogma and he did this, in part, by driving a wedge between the mind, which traffics in clear and distinct ideas, and the body, which transmits and receives the innately imperfect data of the senses. Fearful of how his thoughts might be received at the time, Descartes had his meditations published first in Latin in Paris and only later allowed them to be translated into French and reprinted in Holland where he was staying. He also placed at the front of his meditations an open letter "to the Most Wise and Distinguished Men, the Dean and Doctors of the Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris," explaining his reasons for seeking to make public the transcripts, as it were, of his own encounter with the darkness. For those readers prone to skipping such front matter and jumping straight to the body of the text, it will probably come as something of a surprise to learn that Descartes' meditations, which seem like such an earnest attempt to find some solid bedrock upon which to build a life free of falsehoods, are actually a ruse. As Descartes makes clear in his letter to the faculty, he never really had any doubts at all about God or the eternal life of the soul: he's simply trying to put together an argument that will persuade the "unbelievers" (*infidèles*) of what he and his fellow believers "believe by faith" (47). So, the darkness, the radical doubt, the mind floating free of the body are all just props to add to the drama of the fiction he's created —ways of getting those outside the circle of believers to share in his illusion.

That's one way to read Descartes' opening remarks to the Faculty of Sacred Theology. There is, however, yet another possibility. (There always is.) Maybe

the letter to the deans and doctors is the sham, just Descartes whispering sweet nothings to those in power in hopes of securing a protected space where he can carry out his scientific research without threat of being harassed. And, given that Descartes is so good at creating the illusion of compliance, what can the illustrious deans and faculty do? He's poured it on so thick—he's just doing what any fellow believer would do, contributing to the cause, etc.—that they just have to get out of the way. If the God that emerges from Descartes' meditations is one more likely to be found residing in the theorems of analytical geometry than in the sanctuaries of the Vatican, what's the harm? That's how advertising works: it's just food for the infidels. It poses no threat to the believers, for what true believer would doubt the existence of God or that the soul separates from the body at death?

There's no resolving the question of whether or not Descartes was being completely sincere when he wrote to the deans and doctors of the Faculty of Sacred Theology in Paris seeking their protection. All we can know is that he had good reason to fear their powers and the institution they represented. For our purposes, what matters most is pausing to take note of the intellectual regime that has risen in the wake of Descartes' effort to break free of dogmatic belief by locating the self at the nexus of reason and the will. To resolve his crisis in certainty and construct a working space that is not contaminated by the lies of the past, Descartes established an internal hierarchy that gives primacy to the mind and its universal truths—truths that, like the properties of a triangle, are clear, distinct, and without a history. The body and its voyage through time are without interest: nothing is to be gained by exploring what happens to the body as it moves through the social institutions that govern life. These are just accidents of time and place. The mind is where the action is.

Whether Descartes himself learned anything as a result of writing down these meditations isn't clear. We know only that Descartes' meditations were designed to provide their author with a method for protecting himself from being deceived by the world and its denizens. Encased in this regulatory mechanism, Descartes is, I believe, more alone at the end of his meditations than when he started. For now that he has rid himself of his fictions and screwed himself into the real, he has no need to consider these fundamental matters any further: "I will say in addition that these arguments are such that I believe there is no way open to the human mind whereby better ones could ever be found" (48). True to this claim, Descartes spends much of the rest of his life defending the veracity of his proofs and the cogency of his line of reasoning. He wanders off into the dreamy world of argumentation.

JOINING THE LIARS' CLUB: WRITING AND THE GENERATION OF HOPE

I never knew despair could lie.

—Mary Karr, *The Liars' Club*

It's safe to say that the spirit of our time differs markedly from the spirit of Descartes' time. While he wrote to banish the particular and to revel in the universal, now that we inhabit the age of the memoir, we find ourselves surrounded by those who write to distinguish themselves from the crowd by capturing the deep particularity and pathos of their own past experiences. Frank McCourt describes the grueling poverty of the Irish immigrant; former Princeton professor, Michael Ryan records having sex with his dog; Kathryn Harrison, sex with her father; David Denby, sex with himself (while reading the Great Books no less); James McBride, what it's like to grow up black while having a white mother; Susanna Kaysen, what it's like to be institutionalized. The list goes on and on, because every shoe salesman and waitress, every schoolteacher and cop, every politician and pundit has a story to tell and wants to share it now via the Internet, on some television talk show, or on the printed page. The chosen media doesn't seem to matter. The stories will out.

While there has been much fretting in the critical community about this "turn to the personal" and all that it may be said to signify, the memoirs just keep coming, flooding over the outstretched arms of all those who would like to contain the spread of this genre. That the memoirs, in general, return to scenes of violence and violation is worth pondering, for here one finds evidence of one way in which writing continues to matter at the current moment: the memoir allows one to plunge into the darkness of the past; it provides the means both for evoking and for making sense of that past; and it can be made to generate a sense of possibility, a sense that a better, brighter future is out there to be secured. When judged by these criteria, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* stands out as one of the most remarkable representatives of the genre.

The Liars' Club opens with fragments of a recovered memory, "a single instant surrounded by dark": Karr, at seven years old, being inspected by her family doctor; the Sheriff and his deputies moving through her house; the backyard on fire; her mother being taken away; the concerted effort to find a place for the children to stay (3). One of the central projects of *The Liars' Club* is to make sense of these fragments, to relocate them in a more coherent, more comprehensive account of Karr's past. What happened that night? Why did no one ever speak of it again? To answer these questions, Karr has to wade through the faulty, inexact evidence that her family—which is its own liars' club—makes

available to her and then find a way to tell not only her story, but also the stories of Pete Karr, her father, Charlie Marie Moore Karr, her mother, and Lecia, her sister.

By the middle of Karr's memoir, she has succeeded in finding out what led to the appearance of the police and the firemen in her house. She eventually remembers being with her sister, hiding in the dark, their mother in the bedroom doorway holding a knife and then, moments later, her mother in the hallway calling the police, saying, "Get over here. I just killed them both. Both of them. I've stabbed them both to death" (157). But to get to this moment, Karr must first detail: life among the working poor in Leechfield, Texas; the odd union of her father, an oil worker, and her mother, a highly educated woman with artistic aspirations; her parents' spiral into alcoholism, the violent fights, the long separations; the slow, agonizingly painful death of the grandmother; her own rape by a neighborhood boy. She is participating in a form of revelation, a ritual of purging and purification. She is telling the family secrets, pulling the ghosts out of the closets, waking the dead, and she does so with no overt sign of shame.

At one point, in retaliation for a beating she received in a fight with the boys who lived next door, Karr credits herself with going on "a rampage that prefigured what Charles Whitman—the guy who shot and killed thirteen people from the tower at the University of Texas—would do a few years later" (161). She got a BB gun, climbed a tree, and waited for her victims to walk out into a nearby field. And when the enemy clan appeared, Karr opened fire, hitting one of the children in the neck before the family fled out of range. When one of the boys hid behind his father, Karr reports that her response was as follows: "*You pussy,* I thought, as if Rickey's not wanting to get shot were a defining mark against his manhood" (162). For this activity, Karr received a whipping. She notes, as well, that her "morning as sniper won [her] a grudging respect. Kids stopped mouthing off about Mother" (162). Violence silenced her tormenters and it kept the enemies at bay. Within the psychic economy of the world Karr inhabited at the time, this doubtless seemed the only rational response available to her.

Eventually, Karr recovers the psychically charged world surrounding her memory of that dark night. Trapped in a life she never wanted serving as a "hausfrau" to an oilman in a "crackerbox house," surrounded by people she despised, Charlie Marie Karr tried to set her world on fire. She burned down her studio. She made a bonfire of her paintings, the children's toys, their books, their furniture, their clothes, their shoes.

As Mary and her sister mutely look on, they are transformed by the experi-

ence: they are ready to be led into the fire themselves. "We are in the grip of some big machine grinding us along. The force of it simplifies everything. A weird calm has settled over me from the inside out. What is about to happen to us has stood in line to happen. All the roads out of that instant have been closed, one by one" (152).

They are doomed.

No neighbor intervenes to stop what is happening. No one calls the police. The children don't run away to save themselves. The father doesn't appear to rescue them. The mother is not restrained by some maternal instinct. On the familial level, this is the apocalypse: this is a time without hope. And yet, for reasons that are never explained and perhaps never can be, Charlie Marie doesn't actually go through with murdering her children. She only thinks she has. The disaster passes. The mother is institutionalized. Mary takes her BB gun into the tree. And eventually Charlie Marie comes back home.

From a certain vantage point, this would appear to be the logical place for Karr to end her meditation. She's cast light into her memory of that dark night in the bedroom and now knows what happened. Why keep *The Liars' Club* going for another two hundred pages? What else is there to know? The story continues, I would argue, for two interrelated reasons. First, Karr only knows the *how* and the *what* regarding that night; she does not know *why* her mother went over the edge. Second, Karr's writing has not yet delivered her from those memories because she knows only the facts, not the truth of what happened. At the age of seven, thinking magically, she understood only that her mother had tried to kill her for failing to clean up her room. By the middle of the book, she recognizes the inadequacy of such an explanation. Without the *why* she has nothing, just information coming in the dead of night.

Pursuing the question of motivation takes Karr into still darker waters. After her mother's psychotic episode, her parents move to Colorado and eventually divorce. Her mother remarries and sinks deeper into a drunken stupor. Karr walks in on her mother having sex with another man; Karr is raped again; Charlie Marie tries to kill her new husband, buys a bar, stays up late reading French philosophy and "talking in a misty-eyed way about suicide" (230). Eventually, Charlie Marie puts the girls on a plane back to their father, but it's the wrong plane and they end up flying to Mexico. The calamities continue without ever exposing the cause of all this senseless, self-destructive behavior. Why is it that no one seeks help? What is it that fuels Charlie Marie's all-encompassing sense of despair? Why is it that Pete Karr seeks refuge with the other members of "the Liars' Club," a group of men who drink together and tell tall tales that keep their pasts shrouded in darkness?

When Karr finally finds the key that unlocks the mystery of her family's past, it is long after she has grown up and moved away. Her parents have reunited. She has watched her father's steady decline after a stroke, sat by his side during his final days, listened to him ramble on about his life in the war, a time he never before mentioned. She discovers that he was wounded twice, one time stuck with "a bayonet through his forearm, leaving a scar [she'd] seen a thousand times and never once asked about" (307), the other time left for dead under the rubble of a bridge he'd helped to explode. This last news sends Karr up to the family attic in search of military papers that might be used to get her father additional medical assistance. While moving amongst the family's remains, she discovers four jewelry boxes, each containing a wedding ring. She has, quite unexpectedly, found her mother's hidden past and she then finds the strength to use this material evidence to compel her mother to speak. As Karr confronts her ever-reticent mother, she observes: "Few born liars ever intentionally embark in truth's direction, even those who believe that such a journey might axiomatically set them free" (311).

Karr uncovers the systemic violence that defined her mother's past—the sudden, inexplicable disappearance of her first husband and her first two children, the years she spent trying to find her first family, the reunion where she was convinced to leave the children with their father and return to her studio apartment in Texas—and as she does so the fragmented pieces of her own life begin to fall into place. In the end, the mystery is not so mysterious: "Those were my mother's demons, then, two small children, whom she longed for and felt ashamed for having lost." The explanation for Charlie Marie's years of silence about her past is both simple and profound. She tells her daughter that she kept these events a secret because she was afraid that, if Mary knew, she "wouldn't like [her] anymore" (318).

It would be easy to ridicule such an explanation. After all, Charlie Marie has done much in her life that her daughter did know about that would have justified rejection. She neglected her children, placed them in harm's way, tried to kill herself, tried to kill them. Karr herself finds her mother's reasoning to be "pathetic" (318). However one judges Charlie Marie's excuse, though, the fact that she cannot produce a satisfying or reasonable account for her silence is compelling evidence of just how much power stories *can* exercise over the lives of individuals. By clinging to her silence, by keeping her story trapped inside, she invested her untold story with such a monstrous power that she came to believe that speaking it aloud would make her essentially unlikable. Left alone with this story, Charlie Marie transformed a series of events where she was outmatched, unprepared, and cruelly victimized into irrefutable proof of her

own unworthiness as a mother. Without some other connection to the world, without some other voice to counter her interpretations, Charlie Marie was left to suffer her own perpetually punishing judgments. Within this psychic economy, the only possible way for Charlie Marie to remain likable was to keep her story a secret. To remain likable, she had to lie.

The revelation of Charlie Marie's story did not produce the anticipated effect, though.

As Karr puts it: "what Mother told absolved us both, in a way. All the black crimes we believed ourselves guilty of were myths, stories we'd cobbled together out of fear. We expected no good news interspersed with the bad. Only the dark aspect of any story sank in. I never knew despair could lie." As the book ends, Karr escapes the darkness that has defined her past and contemplates "the cool tunnel of white light the spirit might fly into at death." Acknowledging that this description of what it's like to die may simply be an account of "death's neurological fireworks, the brain's last light show," Karr insists that this is a lie she can live with. She is content to at least entertain the possibility of a future communion with her loved ones, a time when "all your beloveds hover before you, their lit arms held out in welcome" (320).

In Karr's hands, the memoir thus becomes a vehicle for arriving at an understanding that produces forgiveness. Writing, as she uses it, is a hermeneutic practice that involves witnessing the mundane horrors of the past in order to make peace with that past. And, as the preceding account makes clear, it also becomes, however briefly, a means for gaining access to the light of the universal. While the other writers and events I've discussed here have turned our attention to death and decay, Karr offers an encounter with the prospect of one's mortality that leads neither to despair nor cynicism nor violence nor suicide nor escape. Even if it's a lie, the lie Karr tells herself at the end of *The Liars' Club* is a lie that keeps her inside the realm of social relations, helping her make what she can of what life has put before her.

AN EXPERIMENT IN INSTITUTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

It might seem that, by organizing these readings in this way, I've been building up to a spirited defense of the social and therapeutic value of writing one's memoirs. After all, this kind of writing worked for Karr, why shouldn't it work for us all? But the genre of the memoir is no more likely to compel a writer to make peace with the past or to find some sense of connection with others than is poetry, fiction, the meditative essay, the policy statement, the well-honed critique, the bulleted memo, the forced confession, the suicide note. When Martin

Amis composed his memoirs, for instance, the genre didn't force him to shift his world view: he ends *Experience* with atrocity, Auschwitz, ruminations on the murder of one of his cousins, and "the usual articles of faith for a man of fifty . . . : that the parents are going, the children are staying, and I am somewhere in between" (371). When Eric Harris began his diary with the statement, "I hate the fucking world," he wasn't laying the groundwork for a transformative inner voyage; he was girding himself for battle.

If we accept Amis's bleak view of the future of publishing—and I think we should—then the challenge, for all whose lives are inextricably bound to the literate arts, is to make a compelling case for why writing might be said to matter in the twenty-first century. Amis taking the long view, Alex Supertramp running into the wild, Descartes alone with his thoughts: it is clear that these men knew that writing could be used to articulate and extend one's sense of despair and one's sense of superiority. What isn't clear, though, is whether these men knew what Karr knows—namely, how to use writing as a practice for constructing a sense of hope and optimism atop the ruins of previous worlds. Is it possible to produce writing that generates a greater sense of connection to the world and its inhabitants? Of self-understanding? Writing that moves out from the mundane, personal tragedies that mark any individual life into the history, the culture, and the lives of the institutions that surround us all?

In working my way up to this set of questions, I have unexpectedly found myself relying on words and phrases that immediately produce religious connotations: the dark night of the soul, the generation of hope, the power of forgiveness. While I did not set out to consider religious matters, the language I've fallen into using has inevitably led me to a set of concerns that tends to be avoided by those who share my secular sensibilities. Under normal circumstances, I might find other, less volatile terms. But these aren't normal circumstances. There will never again be a book that can credibly be labeled "great," not because outstanding books are no longer being produced, but because the world is now awash with writing that no one reads, with last year's blockbusters ending up in the dump next to this year's most insightful critiques. If one is in search of fame or truth and one has placed all one's hopes on the activity of writing, this fact can be a devastating blow. But, however painful it may be to admit, it is clear that those of us who remain committed to books are part of a residual culture whose days are numbered. The fetishization of the written word is coming to an end and in its place one finds a fascination with moving what is known from here to there in the shortest amount of time and with the elusive pleasures of religious conviction. One finds as well a haunting sense of disconnection, as one tightly wound individual after another hatches a plot to

make others pay for these ambient feelings of placelessness. The world as we have known it is passing away and the world that is emerging is one that appears to be fraught with danger.

What to do? These concerns about the diminishing power of reading and writing serve as the launching point for a sustained investigation into the value of humanistic inquiry at the present moment. In fashioning the oxymoronic phrase "institutional autobiography" to describe the collection of meditations that follows, I mean to highlight a brand of intellectual inquiry that is centrally concerned with what might best be termed "the felt experience of the impersonal." The course of any given individual life cuts through or around a set of institutions charged with responsibility for nurturing both a sense of self and a sense of connection between self and society—the family, the school, and, for some, the church or the house of worship. It goes without saying that the relative influence each of these institutions has on any given individual depends on a number of variables, including race, class, and gender. By linking the institutional with the autobiographic, my goal is not to draw attention away from our individual differences, but rather to show that we all internalize institutional influences in ways that are both idiosyncratic and historically situated, open-ended and overdetermined, liberating and confining. We all go to school, bringing both our minds and our embodied histories: what happens there is both utterly predictable and utterly mysterious, the circumscribed movement of a statistical norm and the free flight of aberrant data.

Historically, schooling in the United States has served as the battleground where the nation works out its evolving understanding of social justice—through, for example, busing, affirmative action, the student loan program, the multicultural curriculum. What has changed recently, though, is the power of weaponry that students bring to the schoolyard and the magnitude of the notoriety that accrues to those who show up ready for a fight. The police investigating the actions of Harris and Klebold concluded that the two young men were driven, above all, by a desire for fame: "[A]ll the rest of the justifications are just smoke. They certainly wanted the media to write stories about them every day. And they wanted cult followings. They [were] going to become superstars by getting rid of bad people" (Cullen, "Kill Mankind"). We might say that Harris and Klebold wanted what all writers are said to want, what Richard Tull and Alexander Supertramp dreamed of and what Gwyn Barry, Amis, Krakauer, Descartes, and Karr have all, to varying degrees, achieved. The costs of such fame are quite high and the benefits fleeting at best.

Can writers learn a different set of desires? Can writing itself be made to serve some other function besides aiding in the search for fame and immortality? Can secular institutions of higher education be taught to use writing to foster a kind of critical optimism that is able to transform idle feelings of hope into viable plans for sustainable action? These are the questions that animate the meditations that follow. Violence, suicide, war, and terrorism recur in these discussions, as do fraudulence, complicity, and woundedness. If there is to be lasting hope for the future of higher education, that hope can only be generated by confronting our desolate world and its urgent, threatening realities. The only way out is through.