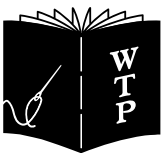
Occasional Papers on the Essay: Practice & Form

A Remarkable Orgasm, A Dying Pig, and A Scarlet Letter: Is It Truth, Fiction, or…Autobiography?

Robert Atwan

Welcome Table Press Press
Pamphlet Series



October 2010

The Welcome Table Press *Occasional Paper Series on Practice & Form* derives from talks delivered at In Praise of the Essay: Practice & Form, a biannual symposium co-sponsored by Welcome Table Press and Fordham University's English Department & Creative Writing Program.

This talk by Robert Atwan was the keynote address to the April 24, 2010 symposium.

Welcome Table Press is a nonprofit, independent press dedicated to publishing and celebrating the essay, in all its forms.

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A Remarkable Orgasm, A Dying Pig, and A Scarlet Letter: Is It Truth, Fiction, or…Autobiography?

Robert Atwan

My general topic today is one that we are all familiar with: lying. "I never seen anybody but lied, one time or another," says Huckleberry Finn in the opening paragraph of a novel that pretends to be his autobiography. In fact, Twain's first working title for the novel was *Huck Finn's Autobiography*.

I'm not an expert on the subject of lying, and I'm not even sure what academic discipline it would fall under. I'm not sure it's possible to take a college course on the subject of lying. What department would offer it: psychology, philosophy, political science? Actually, perhaps the best place to study the topic would be in creative nonfiction programs, where the issue inevitably rises and where every reader of memoir and the autobiographical essay should develop a keen sensitivity to the literary art of fabrication. Anyway, my purpose today is to stimulate more research and discussion about the connections between autobiography, truth, and lies. I'm afraid I'll leave you with more questions than answers.

Here's an interesting fact I saw reported a while back: research has shown that in conversations lasting at least ten minutes, 20% of adults will choose to lie and do so several times a day. In the course of a week, we may deceive 30% of the people with whom we interact. The motivations to deceive are obviously numerous and not always for personal advantage. We may lie to others as a form of concealment. As Emerson said, "There is no terror like that of being known."

Mark Twain was a writer thematically obsessed with lying: the difference between a cat and a lie, he once said, is that a cat has only *nine* lives. When Twain's brother once decided to write a memoir, Twain gave him some advice: he encouraged him to "try to tell the straight truth…and to refrain from exhibiting himself in creditable attitudes

exclusively and to honorably set down all the incidents of his life…including those which were burned into his memory because he was ashamed of them." Twain reminded his brother that no writer had ever done this before, and that if he could pull it off, his "autobiography would be a most valuable piece of literature." Twain's brother did write one, and Twain was very disappointed with the result. Then Twain tried to write one himself and he realized that he had given his brother impossible advice: "I have been dictating this autobiography of mine daily for three months," he said. "I have thought of fifteen hundred or two thousand incidents in my life which I am ashamed of but I have not gotten one of them to consent to go on paper yet."

Twain realizes one way that writers typically distort their autobiographies—they find it extremely difficult to present themselves in unflattering ways. But today I'd like to discuss another way fabrication and distortion find their way into memoir—how the very act of composition itself affects what we say and how we say it.

In a lovely essay called "Think About It" that appeared in the *Best American Essays 1989*, the novelist Frank Conroy attempts to make sense of episodes from his past that he didn't understand at the time. Recalling one incident from college days that ended in a mundane, indecisive fashion, he says parenthetically, "The writer in me is tempted to create a scene here—to invent one for dramatic purposes—but of course I can't do that." Conroy puts his finger on a central literary conflict—by "the writer in me," he means the novelist, and the reason he can't give in to the novelist's temptations is that he's writing an autobiographical essay. His inner novelist would prefer a better ending—sharp, memorable, dramatic—but if he wants to be true to what actually happened he must squash the novelist's creative urge and settle for the essay's unexciting inconclusiveness. What he did in his ground-breaking memoir *Stop-Time* is, however, another story.

Before I begin, I'd like to point out that this talk consists of three parts. In Part I, I discuss a well-known novel that connects directly with the subtleties of memoir—a version of this appeared as my Foreword to the *Best American Essays 2006*. The second part is a close reading of a fairly well-known essay that bears directly on my topic. In the third part I conclude my speculations with a brief historical perspective on the autobiographical essay.

Part I

A few years ago I reread a novel that made an enormous impression on me when I was eighteen going on nineteen: W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. I decided to read this 1944 novel again to see why I was so infatuated with it. Why, after nearly a half century of "compulsive reading," did I still recall the powerful impact of Maugham's novel? To be sure, I didn't recall many of the details or most of the characters. I remembered only the vaguest plot outline. What stayed with me over the years was the intensity of mood, the way the book had riveted my late-adolescent attention.

Like most impressionable teenagers I read entirely for content, for moral advice, for a gripping story, for emotional identification. When I learned that Maugham's protagonist, Larry Darrell, spent hour after hour at the library fixated on William James's *The Principles of Psychology*, I had to find that book and read it next. Reading is like that—one book leads to another. The sturdy Dover edition of James—which I'm happy to say is still in my possession and can be exhibited to anyone who may desire to see it—turned out to be two hefty and surprisingly inexpensive volumes. I'm sure I didn't read all of it at that time, but I got far enough along to see why Larry Darrell was himself so engrossed.

In that first encounter with *The Razor's Edge*, I was fascinated by Darrell. Just a year or two older than I, a handsome war hero with a charming manner, an enviable future, and a beautiful fiancée (everything I wasn't and didn't have), he nevertheless renounces all as he pursues an apparently endless quest throughout the world to find truth and meaning. I was fascinated, too, by the power Larry had over others, a power that seemed to derive from an attitude of powerlessness. One moment in the novel astonished me: while sitting in the back seat of the car her husband is driving (with Larry in the passenger seat), the selfish and spoiled Isabel Maturin, now Larry's ex-fiancee, who remains passionately in love with him but whom he's abandoned in favor of his quest, manages to achieve a powerful orgasm while staring hypnotically at Larry's wrist and hand stretched along the front seat. And she does this while perfectly immobile, without moving so much as a finger.

On second reading, I found Larry far less appealing—a total bore, in fact—and I instead enjoyed all the peripheral characters, even those I'd entirely forgotten. One of these, the one that surprised me most on rereading, is the novel's narrator. This person is none other than Somerset Maugham himself, the famous writer, identified as such, complete with references to his previous novels and many biographical details. It's as though instead of bothering to invent Nick Carraway to do the storytelling, F. Scott Fitzgerald claimed himself to be Gatsby's obliging next-door neighbor and narrated the story as though all the events actually occurred during his time on Long Island and all the characters—Daisy, Jordan, Tom, and Jay—spoke directly to the author of the novel. So careful is Maugham about recounting Larry's spiritual journey to the best of his knowledge that he makes it his business always to report the specific sources of his information, lest we think he's making something up or filling narrative gaps with speculative information.

What I never noticed in my first reading is that *The Razor's Edge* is composed entirely as memoir. In the book's opening sentences, Maugham hesitatingly calls it a novel only because he doesn't "know what else to call it." Yet on rereading this book in what we could appropriately term "the age of memoir," I was forced to wonder whether Maugham had actually met the real Larry and Isabel—as he says he did—at a party in Chicago in 1919. "I have invented nothing," Maugham says at the outset. "To save embarrassment to people still living I have given to the persons who play a part in this story names of my own contriving, and I have in other ways taken pains to make sure that no one should recognize them." The book's opening section is written in an essayistic fashion, with Maugham carefully explaining his diligent technique and his method of verisimilitude.

Of course, by identifying himself in this manner, Maugham invited his numerous readers (*The Razor's Edge* was a spectacular publishing success) to track down the true identities of the book's characters. But though resemblances to actual people can be found here and there, it appears that Maugham did what most novelists do: he constructed his characters out of bits and pieces of many individuals he had encountered or heard about over decades of an active social life.

If we are today concerned about memoirs that may be fictionalized, here is pure fiction in the guise of memoir, fiction that fooled thousands

of readers and quite a few reviewers into believing it was based on the true stories of actual individuals. That the novel focuses on a young man's search for Truth adds a special twist to a narrative technique grounded in deliberate deception. Many novels, of course, are composed as first-person memoirs—Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is constantly referred to as a memoir by the book's artful narrator, Humbert Humbert. And as I said earlier, the working title of Mark Twain's greatest novel was *Huck Finn's Autobiography*. But Nabokov and Twain did not insert themselves directly into the book as characters in order to insinuate that we are reading the memoir of an actual homicidal sex offender or runaway adolescent boy, both of whom happen to be obsessed by lying.

The Razor's Edge wonderfully commingles two popular genres, the novel and the memoir. By doing this, Maugham, who is apparently having fun in the process, makes us aware of how indistinct the boundaries between the two can be. It's nearly impossible to establish internal standards such as voice, tone, or stylistic features that help us to easily distinguish one genre from the other. Therefore, if we are curious about the degree of fabrication, we usually need to rely on verifiable external factors—facts, actual events, people, places and institutions, dates, and so forth. Once the writer begins to disclose concrete or factual information, then other issues come quickly into play. The reader, if so inclined, can now use those details to test the writer's veracity or can begin inferential processes that can damage authorial credibility. Records can be discovered that prove someone didn't spend nearly as much time in the Peace Corps as claimed, or was never admitted to a certain psychiatric hospital, or hadn't served as much prison time as reported. According to many accounts, the publishing sensation of 2005, James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces,* was originally widely submitted (and widely rejected) as a *novel*. It was only when repurposed as a *memoir* that publishers jumped.

So anyone writing a memoir (or an autobiographical essay) needs to be careful when recounting verifiable details, or risks being called a liar, a phony, or an opportunist. Take an example: My reference earlier to Isabel's Maturin's remarkable orgasm is verifiable (*The Razor's Edge*, chapter five, part 1), but my account of reading Maugham's novel at eighteen is not. You may accept my word that I actually did read the

novel (I'm sure you had no reason to doubt me) but there's not a shred of evidence in the world that could prove I did, and so no one except myself knows whether or not it's true. What would be the point of fabricating such a detail, you might ask? My motive could have simply been to construct a shape for this personal narrative. Or perhaps I didn't want to admit that I'd never read a famous book until just recently. (I've frequently heard people say that they were *re*reading *War and Peace, Middlemarch, Walden, or Moby-Dick*.) Whatever the motive, there's absolutely no way for anyone to establish whether or not I actually read *The Razor's Edge* as a late teenager.

The unverifiable world is vast and accommodating. The classic memoir, in which a celebrated individual offers an account of his or her public life and adventures, along with profiles of the important people encountered along the way, depended usually upon verifiable details—at least it is possible to confirm whether Benjamin Franklin ever met the famous Methodist preacher George Whitefield or lived for a time in London. But the modern memoir is different, as it so often focuses on the private life of a not well-known or even an obscure person. Who's to say if Stephanie really took a life-transforming solitary midnight swim in Buzzard's Bay one summer night when she was fifteen? Or, even if the writer is as well-known as Virginia Woolf, who can say with certainty that she truly pondered the death of a moth on her windowsill one mid-September afternoon? Unless a description is biologically or physically implausible, who would bother to question it?

Perhaps a question to ask of a memoir is something the pragmatist William James might have asked: if a report of something is wholly unverifiable should we even concern ourselves with the issue of truth?

We have a thousand studies dealing with the art of fiction but very little exists on the art of the memoir, aside from a growing number of how-to books. One reason for this is that, despite its present popularity, the memoir has not yet become a fully accredited genre in our universities. Most educated readers are still uncertain about how best to evaluate a memoir or an autobiographical essay. What makes one memoir or essay outstanding and another forgettable? Does it largely depend on the quality of prose? Will the particulars of an author's life bias our aesthetic responses either positively or negatively? Why is it that the first question readers ask of a memoir is: "Is it True?" Is it a

critical error to apply modern journalistic fact-checking standards to memoirs and essays intended as works of literature? If a personal essay turns out to have some fictional elements and details, does that automatically turn it into a short story, or does it become something else: A fictive essay? A fable? An outright lie? Does the term "creative nonfiction" solve anything?

Part II

There are several key questions to ask about the memoir and personal essay: Is it the factual content alone—that is, its verifiable correspondence to actual people and events—that makes a prose narrative an essay instead of a short story, a memoir instead of a novel? Are there no internal aesthetic criteria by which these two supposedly different genres can be differentiated? Or are the two distinguished only by their factual connection to the external world?

Let me turn to a concrete example. If you knew nothing about the essayist E. B. White and you were handed just the text of his "Death of a Pig"—with no literary, biographical, or editorial context—and asked if it were a story or essay, on what grounds would you decide? As far as I can tell, the main reasons we consider it an essay are: (1) It's called an essay and it frequently appears in essay collections; and (2) We have some scraps of biographical testimony affirming the event he writes about occurred. But these reasons are external to the work. Is there anything *inside* the work itself that suggests we should treat it as factual rather than fictional?

White's short essay is a perfect specimen of the personal narrative or autobiographical anecdote, in which the writer narrates an episode based entirely on an experience. The speaker is presumably the author and the style is usually straightforward, sincere, and conversational. Usually the writer offers enough biographical detail to persuade the reader that the "I" speaking (even if not explicitly identified) is verifiably the author and not an invented narrator. (But be careful: we just saw how the novelist Somerset Maugham pretended to be himself in a work of fiction.) Despite whatever inbred skepticism I bring to such first-person narratives, there is in all of us, I believe, a strong countervailing tendency to take the writer's word and regard such personal accounts

as "true." Usually, the narrated episode is so ordinary or publicly insignificant that it seems unlikely a writer would make it up: Why would White want to invent the story of an ailing pig? And even if invented, what difference would it make to a reader? The entire episode seems plausible—so what if it didn't really happen?

Or didn't happen exactly as reported? Surely, White exaggerates the emotions he felt; certainly not every detail is reported precisely as it happened. I believe most personal narrative essays follow a similar model: the general episode did indeed occur, but many of the supporting details are highly selected, reshaped, or fabricated—not out of willful deceit but for a deeper overarching purpose. Let's give this purpose a name: literary effect. White was first and foremost a literary writer, not a newspaper reporter, and what mattered most to him were the elements of style and the aesthetics of composition. In today's fact-checking environment it's easy to forget that the personal essay is a literary form, not a signed affidavit.

As you can see, personal narrative is the problem. We have little trouble identifying philosophical, reflective, or critical essays as essays. Their truth is an internal matter; we can evaluate the reasoning, the strength of evidence, the quality of idea. We don't doubt that Emerson's essays are essays. Emerson didn't have a narrative bone in his body. The last thing he is is a storyteller. We may not agree with his thinking but the truth of what he says does not require historical or biographical corroboration. In the discursive essays of Bacon, Johnson, Emerson, or Bertrand Russell, we may find fallacies but not fictions.

Let's return to White's pig. I asked if, in the absence of any critical or biographical context, one could decide whether a piece of prose should be considered an essay or short story. Is there anything inside the text to indicate its genre? I'd like to suggest one characteristic of first-person narratives that indicates we are reading an essay as opposed to fiction. The essay usually contains some distinct statement of its literary intention or its occasion. The editors of the *Best American Short Stories* invite contributors each year to write a brief statement explaining how or why they happened to write their stories. I once thought of doing something similar for the *Best American Essay* series but then realized the writer's explanation about motivation or occasion would often be redundant because that information is very often contained in the essay itself. Let's look at the opening of White's now classic 1947 essay:

> I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died at last and I lived, and things might easily have gone the other way round and none left to do the accounting. Even now, so close to the event, I cannot recall the hours sharply and am not ready to say whether death came on the third night or the fourth night. This uncertainty afflicts me with a sense of personal deterioration; if I were in decent health I would know how many nights I had sat up with a pig.

White begins right off with his motivation for writing—he feels driven to account for a "stretch of time." He's especially concerned about this indefinite stretch of time because of his inability to recall the hours precisely, an uncertainty that leads to a grim sense of personal deterioration. It is this sense of deterioration—not the death of a pig—that is the central theme of the essay. White expects that the act of writing will help him "account" for the lost time. But as the essay proceeds, with its fussiness about the hours and its nicely worked-out alteration of ritual and interruption, we see that White's compositional account still doesn't enable him to make a computational account of the lapsed time. Toward the conclusion of the essay, we learn that the pig "died twenty-four hours later, or it might have been forty-eight—there is a blur in time here, and I may have lost or picked up a day in the telling and the pig one in the dying."

This anxiety over the passage of time establishes a dominant mood for the essay and adds a sense of heightened drama to what would be a mundane event in the annals of veterinary science. White's essay offers a wonderfully concise glimpse into the literary construction of time and narrative. But here's my single and rather simple point: White was not alone on an isolated farm with the dying pig during this relatively brief episode. He calls a neighbor for advice; attends a dinner party, presumably with his wife; cares for the pig with his son; consults with a vet by phone; is visited by another vet who brings his fiancée; and then enlists the help of a laborer to dig a grave for the pig. If White were deeply concerned over the lapsed time, he could have simply gathered information from all these people and reconstructed the hour-by-hour schedule of events. Given the few days it took for the episode to transpire

such a reconstruction would have been easy.

But a careful—or, shall I say, a distrustful reader—can see that the writer in White has pretty much invented this mood for the occasion. For literary purposes, White invented a narrative self that had to remain unaware of all the pertinent information his authorial self could easily have had access to. This situation is of course a standard feature of the novel, where an author writing in the third person (say, Jane Austen) has greater information than any of her characters. But as readers of first-person essays we've grown so conditioned to identify the narrative "I" with the author—to accept these two distinct entities as one and the same—that we have become less attuned overall to the literary effects of nonfiction.

The fictional elements in White's essay are numerous: besides the fabrication of time, we have dialogue, atmosphere, dramatic action, narrative closure, and so on. But what gives the piece away as an essay, I believe, is its explicit statement of compositional purpose. A short story rarely explains or apologizes, an essay often does. In his final paragraph, White further explains, with some humor, the purpose of his writing: "I have written this account in penitence and in grief, as a man who failed to raise his pig, and to explain my deviation from the classic course of so many raised pigs." So finally it's not the death of the pig that troubles White; it's the perception of failure and interrupted routine by an obsessive individual who feels compelled to account for every moment of his time. And someone who possesses an overwhelming—I should perhaps say hypochondriacal—sense of mortality (the medical term is *necrophobia*), as he transfers the pig's ultimately undiagnosed illness to himself. To disclose that inner-psychological truth, White needed to fudge the passage of time by pretending not to know something he could easily have known. Not a big deal—you might call it a "white lie."

But my close analysis, of course, still provides no guarantee that the episode ever occurred. There's an important literary question lurking here: is it possible that a piece of personal writing can be grounded in fiction and still be considered an essay? If some determined graduate student conclusively discovered that White never owned a pig, should we then consider "Death of a Pig" a short story? Should that essay be systematically transferred from essay collections to short story anthologies? Is this also the case if Orwell never shot an elephant in

Burma or David Sedaris never took French lessons in Paris? Once again, is all that separates an autobiographical essay from a story its fidelity to fact?

Part III

Now to my main contention: I believe that we have grown too literal minded about truthfulness and factuality in a way that restricts our appreciation of the essay and autobiographical writing in general. If we possessed an informative history of reading—not of literature but of how literature has been read over the centuries—I think we'd find a greater tolerance for essayistic playfulness, artifice, and deception during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when "nonfiction" was genuinely "creative." Like many other essayists of their eras, writers like Addison and Steel, Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, Charles Lamb, and Washington Irving invented characters and situations for their nonfiction works (many of these published in the newspapers of their day) and readers found no problems with this, nor with letters to the author entirely concocted for the sake of the subject. It wasn't because writers and readers cared less for the truth then than now, but it's because they cared about a different truth.

For example, the issue of truth played a large role in neoclassic rhetorical theory.

But the issue was more a matter of conformity to nature than to fact. In his highly influential study, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, published in 1776, the Scots philosopher George Campbell put the matter rather well:

> Nay, even in those performances where truth, in regard to the individual facts related, is neither sought nor expected, as in some sorts of poetry and in romance, truth still is an object to the mind, the general truths regarding character, manners, and incidents. When these are preserved, the piece may justly be denominated true, considered as a picture of life, though false, considered as a narrative of particular events. And even these untrue events must be counterfeits of truth, and bear its image.

I can still accept this language, which allows us to argue that narrative

essays like E. B. White's "Death of a Pig" or "Once More to the Lake" are both true *and* false. The compound seems inescapable: a piece of writing may be aesthetically true, yet verifiably false; just as it can be—as is so much contemporary memoir—verifiably true but aesthetically false. Because, as I said earlier, there are so many reported incidents that we can't verify, especially in an autobiographical narrative, I think we might be better off examining the artistic means of a work and using those criteria to decide whether it's an essay or a short story, a memoir or a novel. On this compositional basis, "Death of a Pig" and "Once More to the Lake" are indeed essays, whether the events they describe actually happened or not.

I will conclude by pointing out that the literary problem I'm confronting here has been complicated by the history of genre and by our rhetorical expectations. Early nineteenth-century writers had other terms for pieces like "Once More to the Lake" or "Death of a Pig—they referred to them as "sketches" or "tales." In their evocation of atmosphere and eerie blurring of time, both of White's essays are not that different from something Nathaniel Hawthorne might have included in his *Twice-Told Tales* or *Mosses from an Old Manse*, collections that contained a mixture of sketches and tales that adroitly straddled fact and fiction.

Hawthorne called one of his finest autobiographical essays a "sketch of official life." I'm referring to the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, that remarkable blend of realism and romance, in which Hawthorne offers a realistic account of his three years of duty in the Salem Custom House in preparation for a total fabrication: his "discovery" of "a certain affair of fine red cloth, much worn and faded." The story of the embroidered letter is perhaps the only inauthentic part of the essay, yet Hawthorne expands his bold deceit even further by informing his readers that the "relic" and accompanying historical papers "are still in my possession, and shall be freely exhibited to whomsoever, induced by the great interest of the narrative, may desire a sight of them." One wonders if anyone took him up on the offer.

Phillip Roth not too long ago did something similar in an "afterword" to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Portnoy's Complaint*. He writes an essentially autobiographical essay about his student days at University of Chicago and his habit of frequenting a

cheap restaurant. While at a table there one day, he happens upon a scrap of paper that he claims turned out to be a list of all the titles he would eventually use for his novels. I've come across fans of Roth who actually believe this list is real.

But back to "The Custom House": is it an autobiographical essay or a short story? In today's terms—since we no longer critically use "tale" or "sketch"—I would regard it as an essay. But Hawthorne himself gives us a clue as to how to read his cagey introduction. In an oft-quoted passage, he describes how moonlight playing on the floor of a room creates a simultaneous effect of the strange and the ordinary: "Therefore," he writes, "the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other." Out of this fertile "neutral territory" that characterized the early American sketch and tale—of Hawthorne's, Irving's, Poe's, and Melville's—evolved both the modern short story and the modern personal essay. If they are at times nearly impossible to distinguish, it is probably because they share a common ancestor.